

DEM BOW, DEMBOW, DEMBO: TRANSLATION AND TRANSNATION IN REGGAETON

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Reggaeton has been profoundly shaped and reshaped by transnational flows of people, music, and ideologies, and one can hear and trace these movements in the very forms of the songs themselves. This essay offers an overview of the history of the genre and the shifting shapes of its forms, as well as how these forms articulate with social and cultural movements, by following a particularly audible thread through time and space. Although reggaeton's national provenance remains a hotly disputed issue, attending to particular sonic details can provide a persuasive resolution of various claims to the genre, which has been defined, by various stakeholders, as essentially Jamaican, Panamanian, North or Latin American, and/or Puerto Rican.¹ Seeking to tease these threads out, my narrative begins with a seminal 1991 recording by Jamaican DJ/vocalist Shabba Ranks, *Dem Bow*. Not only has the song been covered, or re-recorded, by performers in Panama, New York, and San Juan, but elements of the song's accompanimental track (or RIDDIM) appear in upwards of 80% of all reggaeton productions.² Thus, DEM BOW – also recorded and referred to as SON BOW, DEMBOW, and DEMBO, among others, demonstrating the mutations of translation and localization – offers a rich set of

1 I have been cataloguing such online debates, a list of which is available at the following URL: <http://del.icio.us/wayneandwax/reggaeton+messageboard+debate>. Moreover, in a forthcoming article, I attempt to tease out these various claims in great detail. See Wayne Marshall: *Música Negra to Reggaeton Latino: The Cultural Politics of Nation, Migration, and Commercialization*. In: Reading Reggaeton: Historical, Aesthetic, and Critical Perspectives (Duke University Press, forthcoming).

2 For more detailed description of what is implied by the term RIDDIM, see Peter Manuel/Wayne Marshall: *The Riddim Method: Aesthetics, Practice, and Ownership in Jamaican Dancehall*. In: Popular Music 25, No. 3 (2006), pp. 447–470. My estimate of the percentage of reggaeton songs in which elements of the *Dem Bow* riddim appear is more intuitive than quantitative, but, as I will explain below, the fact that it has become a constitutive, and often crucial, building block in reggaeton productions makes it utterly ubiquitous. Indeed, I may be understating the percentage here.

examples for understanding the transnational transformations so central to reggaeton's aesthetics and cultural politics. The changing shapes and enduring elements of DEM BOW illuminate in particular how migration and commercialization have contributed to the formation of a genre which today stands as one of the most popular youth musics across the Americas.

More specifically, an examination of the transformations of DEM BOW calls attention to some of the central political commitments underpinning reggaeton's resonance, as well as how this orientation – the very cultural politics of the genre itself – has changed rather radically over time, especially with the genre's increasing appeal to a »mainstream«, pan-Latino listenership. Since reggaeton emerged as a viable commercial product capable of transcending its initially subcultural or »underground« audience, in particular with the pop chart success of N.O.R.E.'s *Oye Mi Canto* (2004) and Daddy Yankee's *Gasolina* (2005), it has been hailed as a symbol not just of important demographic trends in the US but of an emergent pan-Latin American identity. In the process, however, reggaeton has also undergone a kind of whitening, or BLANQUEAMIENTO, and a »cleaning up« to befit the commercial aspirations of artists, producers, and other music-industrial entrepreneurs.³ During the mid-90s, artists and audiences alike referred to the music as MELAZA (molasses), MÚSICA NEGRA, and even simply HIP-HOP and REGGAE, all evoking or intertwined with symbols of blackness. But with the move toward the mainstream in the new millennium, the genre increasingly found itself promoted as REGGAETON LATINO (as powerfully projected in a 2005 hit song by Don Omar), thus dovetailing with the pan-Latino marketing strategies of such media conglomerates as Univision and its LA KALLE radio franchises. Hence, whereas the genre had previously been aligned explicitly with a cultural politics grounded in racial community, with increasing commercialization and an expanded listener base, its vistas and pistas (i.e., the underlying tracks propelling reggaeton songs) seemed to shift accordingly. This trajectory, from MÚSICA NEGRA to REGGAETON LATINO, can be heard in the changing shapes of DEM BOW: a song which begins

3 Linked to ideologies of MESTIZAJE, or race mixing, BLANQUEAMIENTO refers to the processes, practices, and ideologies of social »whitening« in the Latin Caribbean and Latin America. Often linked to individuals' desire for social mobility and/or to elite and middle-class nationalisms (with all the exclusions and internal colonialisms of such projects), BLANQUEAMIENTO has been explored by a great many observers and analysts of the region. (See e.g., Peter Wade: *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. London 1997, pp. 84–87.) For a more detailed exposition of BLANQUEAMIENTO in reggaeton, I would again refer readers to my forthcoming essay, *Música Negra to Reggaeton Latino*.

as an anti-gay, anti-colonial anthem, implicitly interpellating its audience along the lines of race and nation, proceeds to be re-recorded, translated, and adapted with a good deal of its original thematic integrity preserved, but ultimately finds itself defused and diffused, turned into a mere symbol of seduction, describing a distinctive, sexy, transnational and utterly marketable beat.

Jamaican Foundations: The Shabba Ranks Version

That thousands of Jamaicans moved to Panama in the early twentieth century to work on the Canal, maintaining family and cultural ties to the island and hence establishing Anglo-Caribbean outposts which would provide a Central American conduit for reggae's »outernational« spread in the 1970s, has become nothing less than a FAIT ACCOMPLI in the reggaeton narrative. Various accounts of reggaeton's origins, including Puerto Rican testimonials, pay tribute to such Panamanian pioneers as *Renato y las 4 Estrellas*, often cited as the first group to perform reggae in Spanish.⁴ Some of the song titles of early recordings by Renato (e.g., *Mariguana, Crítica*) demonstrate a strong affinity for reggae's central concerns, and indeed the reggae scene Panamá – where the genre is sometimes referred to, and localized, as PLENA or BULTRÓN – has remained closely connected to contemporary movements in Jamaican reggae. Not only has reggae style in Panama moved in step with developments in Jamaica, most notably with the adoption of the harder (and more hardcore), digitally-produced, hip-hop-influenced DANCEHALL sound in the mid-1980s, but reggae recordings and performances in Panama have consistently been defined by a large proportion of cover songs – of directly inspired versions and often translations of popular songs from Jamaica.⁵ This audible engagement with the sounds of Jamaica not only demonstrates the maintenance of family and cultural ties to the island, it also provides a telling set of examples of how the meanings of Jamaican reggae continue to resonate in Panama, even after translation into Spanish. For the purposes of this essay, I will examine two Panamanian covers of

4 See, for example, the following Spanish-language Wikipedia entry, which cites Renato as among the »first generation« of Panamanians to perform reggae:
[http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plena_\(Panam%C3%A1\)](http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plena_(Panam%C3%A1)) (accessed 10 January 2008). See also, the DVD *Chosen Few: El Documental* (Chosen Few Emerald Entertainment/Urban Box Office, 2004).

5 For an elaboration on the differences between roots and dancehall reggae styles, see again, Manuel/Marshall: *The Riddim Method*. See also e.g., Norman Stolzoff: *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham/London 2000.

Shabba Ranks's *Dem Bow*, but before doing so, it is necessary to review the original recording in order to get a sense of how it becomes transformed, or not, in subsequent versions.

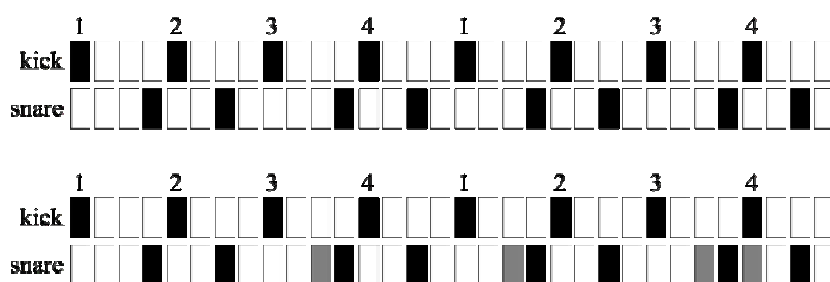
When Shabba Ranks recorded *Dem Bow* in 1990/91 he was already a rising star in the Jamaican dancehall scene.⁶ A vocalist with a gruff voice and a penchant for bawdy rhymes – well in-line with the lewd, or morally »slack«, lyrics established as central to dancehall reggae by such popular DJs in the early 80s as Yellowman – Shabba was on the cusp of international crossover success and had already established himself as one of dancehall reggae's major stars. Musically speaking, with Shabba rapping (or »toasting«) over a digitally produced riddim, *Dem Bow* is fairly representative of Ranks's recordings from this era – and of early 90s dancehall reggae more generally. The riddim, produced by Bobby »Digital« Dixon but performed by production duo Steely and Clevie, takes the standard dancehall beat pattern (Figure 1) and adds extra snare rolls to give it a more distinctive shape, as represented below with lighter boxes illustrating one set of variations (Figure 2).⁷ Interestingly, these additional accents on the snare would later be interpreted by reggaeton producers as akin to a line played on timbales.⁸

6 *Dem Bow* appeared on the album *Just Reality* (VPCD 1117, Jamaica, NY: VP Records, 1990).

7 With regard to my transcriptions, I have decided to employ box-based graphs (not unlike Jim Koetting's Time Unit Box System [see Koetting: *Analysis and Notation of West African Drum Ensemble Music*. In: Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology. Vol. 1, No. 3 (1970)] rather than standard Western notation since the rhythmic relationships I seek to illustrate are adequately represented thusly and, more importantly, because this form of notation more closely resembles the mode of composition in reggae and reggaeton (e.g., via a step sequencer). Regarding the role of producer and performer here, Dixon likely played the standard producer's role in Jamaica, not unlike that of the »executive producer« in the United States: concerned with the overall artistic direction of Shabba's album, he may also have provided specific feedback about the riddims and voicings. Steely and Clevie, however, are the musicians responsible for playing the musical lines in question. It is telling that EMI gives compositional credit for *Dem Bow* to Shabba, Steely, and Clevie (a/k/a, Rexton Ralston Fernando Gordon, Wycliffe Johnson, and Cleveland Constantine Browne).

8 Demonstrating a form of reinterpretation, the characteristic sound used to reproduce the snare pattern in the DEM BOW riddim sometimes circulates, in the form of a digital sample, labeled as a »timbal«. See, e.g., an image of a reggaeton sample-library in wayne&wax, »we use so many snares« <http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2005/08/we-use-so-many-snares.html> (accessed 10 January 2008). It is also worth noting in discussing such significations that reggae and Jamaican popular music in general bear no small traces of Latin Caribbean musical styles, such that the basic ostinato in dancehall reggae could be heard as a HABANERA rhythm.

Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton



The riddim also features a prominent, driving bassline and occasional chords, played on a keyboard and often »dubbed out« through the application of heavy echo/delay. These characteristics are features that more audibly connect dancehall reggae – most commonly and recognizably defined by its minimal 3+3+2 drum rhythms – to the harmonic and melodic conventions of the roots reggae tradition.

As has been common practice in reggae since the late 60s, Dixon’s DEM BOW riddim, as it came to be called after the popularity of Shabba’s recording, also provided the basis for several other contemporary and subsequent recordings.⁹ Another DJ, Grinds Man, even recorded a song of the same name, using the same refrain, on a different version of the DEM BOW riddim (as »relicked« by Mafia and Fluxy), while Spragga Benz recorded a song called »Dem Flap« on the Bobby Digital version, demonstrating the enduring qualities of the riddim and Shabba’s song alike. Moreover, a closely related riddim, POCO MAN JAM, again produced and performed by Dixon and Steely and Clevie, employed a similar drum line while adding additional melodic elements, hence lending itself to live mixing (or »juggling«) alongside the DEM BOW and its various versions. Propelling a number of popular songs around the same time as the DEM BOW, including Super Cat’s *Nuff Man a Dead*, Cutty Ranks’s *Retreat*, and Gregory Peck’s eponymous track, the POCO MAN JAM riddim thus served to enhance the resonance of the DEM BOW and the songs associated with it for audiences in Jamaica and its diaspora, as well as in the wider reggae listening community.¹⁰ It is no surprise that elements from both DEM BOW and POCO MAN JAM turn up in a number of seminal proto-reggaeton recordings produced in San Juan in the mid-90s, as I will discuss in greater detail below.

With regard to the lyrics of Shabba’s seminal recording, *Dem Bow* is also in many ways rather representative of a particular strain of dancehall song. The mes-

9 See the following URL for a partial listing of songs recorded on the Dem Bow riddim: www.jamrid.com/RiddimDBSearch.php?search=Dem%20Bow&type=Riddim (accessed 10 January 2008).

10 For a partial list of POCO MAN JAM versions, see: www.jamrid.com/RiddimDBSearch.php?search=Poco%20man%20jam&type=Riddim (accessed 10 January 2008).

sage of the track, for those who understand PATOIS or Jamaican creole, is difficult to miss: don't bow to oppression, in particular the (implicitly foreign) pressures toward such »deviant« sexual practices as oral sex (both fellatio and cunnilingus) and homosexuality. It may seem less than straightforward to conflate (neo)colonialist oppression with these sexual practices, but it is a longstanding charge in Jamaican public discourse – particularly from fundamentalist Christian quarters and certain sects of Rastafari – that oral and anal sex and same-sex relationships are not only taboo and proscribed by the Bible but are »decadent« products of the West, of Babylon, and are thus to be resisted alongside other forms of colonization, cultural or political. Shabba makes this connection clear in the lyrics to *Dem Bow*: after rehearsing a series of taboo acts in colorful, local terms (»man under table«, »gal a clean rifle«, »lipstick pon hood head«, »left teeth in a bottom«) all of which amount to bowing (»that mean say you bow«), he eventually connects these acts to colonial oppression, calling for »freedom for black people« and drawing as its corollary, »that mean say the oppressors them just bow.« Significantly, in issuing his imperative not to bow to foreign pressures, he also calls for audience participation. Using common phrases of the dancehall lexicon, Shabba instructs listeners to »jump around« and »push up [one's] hand« if they do not bow. He also endorses »a gunshot for them« that do.

While such sentiments may appear extreme to those unacquainted with this intolerant dimension of Jamaican public culture, homophobia in Jamaica, at least as publicly voiced, is remarkably ubiquitous. In recent years especially, Jamaican society, politicians, and especially reggae performers have come under fire from international groups advocating for gay rights and human rights. Organizations such as OutRage! in the UK and sympathetic groups in the US have led effective campaigns to discourage promoters in London, New York, Los Angeles, and other large cities from booking reggae artists for shows, have succeeded in getting concerts cancelled, and in some cases have elicited apologies from artists interested in exerting damage control over their international reputations (many of whom recant back in Jamaica, lest they lose local credibility).¹¹ Shabba Ranks saw his own burgeoning crossover success suffer severely in December 1992 when he was challenged for his anti-gay positions on ›The Word‹, a British television show, and cited Bible verses to support his views (which no doubt shored up his authenticity

11 These largely successful efforts have been widely covered in the press. For more information on OutRage!, see www.outrage.org.uk. See also, the website of JFLAG for a local perspective on anti-gay bias in Jamaica: www.jflag.org (all accessed 10 January 2008).

in Jamaica).¹² Demonstrating the pervasiveness and public sanction of homophobia in Jamaica, even prominent politicians have resorted to smearing opponents by using anti-gay reggae recordings: in 2002 Edward Seaga, leader of the Jamaica Labor Party (JLP), employed TOK's *Chi Chi Man* (like »battyman«, a derogatory term for gays) as a campaign song to insinuate that his opponent, P.J. Patterson of the People's National Party (PNP), was gay, compelling Patterson, in an attempt at sly self-defense, to publicly announce that the nation's buggery law, which makes anal sex punishable as a crime, would not be repealed; a year later the PNP adopted as their own slogan, »Log On to Progress«, a winking reference to Elephant Man's contemporary hit *Log On*, the chorus of which compels one to »Log on / And step pon chi chi man.« On a more serious note, Jamaica has been widely criticized in recent years by such organizations as Amnesty International for the high number of assaults on and severe public harassment of gays or people identified as gay, and several gay and AIDS activists, tragically, have been murdered.¹³

Reggae's anti-colonial, anti-establishment cultural politics – its reputation as »rebel music« – helps to explain how criticism of the genre and its leading artists, even if focused on such a seemingly narrow dimension as anti-gay bias, more often than not result in redoubled public support, especially if such critiques originate outside of Jamaica. Despite the lack of historical or biological arguments for the inherent »foreignness« of homosexuality, the rather real foreign pressures to cease and desist gay bashing tend to make the issue a real rallying point on the island. Appealing to what are assumed to be a set of shared morals, to a fear of double exile – not only in Jamaica rather than Africa, or Babylon rather than Zion, but pariah in Jamaican society itself – reggae artists and audiences embrace homophobia as a uniting cause. Such a stance is exacerbated by a performance aesthetic predicated on immediate, live feedback in dancehall spaces. Dancehall DJs routinely bait their competitors as gay, and denouncing taboo sexual practices remains a surefire strategy for affirmation in the context of public performance. As singer Tanya Stephens notes, »Homophobic utterances are among the quickest and easi-

12 Sheila Rule: *The Pop Life; NBC Drops Rapper and He Recants*. In: New York Times, 3 March 1993.

13 The most notorious of such attacks in recent memory are the murders of Brian Williamson and Steve Harvey, two of the island's most prominent gay activists. More mundane instances of harassment and assault are reported regularly in the Jamaican and international press. Reflecting on accumulated instances of homophobia, an article by Tim Padgett in Time Magazine (12 April 2006), for example, asked whether Jamaica was »The Most Homophobic Place on Earth?« www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1182991,00.html (accessed 10 January 2008).

est ways to get a ›forward‹ [cheers, lighters, and flaming torches].¹⁴ Concerned as artists are with seeking the approval of the audience (and gaining an edge on competitors), reggae aesthetics have thus become deeply entwined with the call and response, the impelled participation, one hears in a song such as *Dem Bow*. A communitarian ethos therefore underlies what might otherwise appear to be deeply divisive sentiments, embedded in the very forms of a great many songs. And so, built into the cultural products which circulate more widely, reggae's homophobia finds itself replicated in other reggae scenes, where similar aesthetics and performance practice styles are maintained, perhaps as much as reggae's other central themes: calls for emancipation (whether political or »mental«) and self-determination, criticism of governments and other institutions of imposed authority, affirmation of Rastafarian beliefs and practices and black pride, and, of course, more common concerns such as love and sex (between a man and a woman, of course).

Some might suspect, as Idara Hippolyte has argued with regard to *Dem Bow*, that the »sheer weight of detail begs the question of how the persona who abhors bowing became so familiar with its minutiae«, hence undermining the stability of its critique.¹⁵ But as we will hear, Shabba's message in *Dem Bow* appears to come through loud and clear, maintaining a remarkable degree of integrity and resonating powerfully across the Caribbean and Latin America as well as in post-colonial New York.¹⁶ A remarkably powerful, catchy tune, recorded over a familiar riddim, *Dem Bow* would prove to be a more broadly influential song than, arguably, any other in the dancehall reggae repertory.

Migrations and Translations: Nando Boom and El General

As described above, reggae found a foothold in Panama among descendents of Anglo-Caribbean migrant workers, and since the late 1970s reggae in Panama, also known as REGGAE EN ESPAÑOL, PLENA, and BULTRÓN, has proceeded in step with

14 Elena Oumano: *Jah Division*. In: Village Voice, 15 February 2005.

15 Idara Hippolyte: *Collapsing the ›Oral-Literary‹ Continuum: Jamaican Dancehall and Anglophone Caribbean Literary Culture*. In: Interventions. Vol. 6, No. 1 (2004), p. 90.

16 Notably, yet another version of *Dem Bow* was recorded in 1991, but originating in Guadeloupe and translated into French: King Daddy Yod's *Delbor* was, moreover, recently rerecorded as *Delbor 2006*, demonstrating the perseverance, or perhaps resurgence, of the song and its sentiments. As the efforts of OutRage! bear witness, anti-gay themes persist in contemporary Jamaican reggae. Given the maintained connections to the Jamaican scene in Panama, it is perhaps no surprise that homophobic rants remain common in Panamanian reggae as well (see, e.g., Danger Man's *Sientan El Boom* [2007], which blatantly taunts »battyboys«.)

the aesthetics and cultural politics of Jamaican reggae.¹⁷ Indeed, the practice of covering Jamaican songs for Panamanian audiences – essentially offering faithful Spanish translations – has remained a central feature of reggae in Panama.¹⁸ It is no surprise, then, that a popular song such as Shabba Ranks's *Dem Bow* would become *Ellos Benia* (as Nando Boom rechristened it) or *Son Bow* (as El General titled his remake), though perhaps it remains remarkable that these covers were both recorded in 1991, the same year as Shabba's original was released, demonstrating the rapid transit and translation of reggae recordings.¹⁹ All the same, it is not to be discounted that *Dem Bow* proved such a favorite among Panamanian vocalists (and, presumably, audiences): far as I know, it is one of the only Jamaican dancehall reggae songs to have been covered and translated multiple times. As with most other Panamanian translations of reggae songs, the covers of *Dem Bow* display a strong degree of thematic (as well as musical) integrity, once again conflating sexual deviancy and colonialism, resistance and nationalism. Little seems lost in translation. And yet, there are also some notable, if subtle, alterations worth examining, for they provide lenses into the ways that reggae has traveled and, over time, been transformed and localized into what is today called reggaeton, plena or bultrón (and sometimes, still, simply reggae).

17 Plena is not to be confused in this case with the Puerto Rican genre of the same name, with which it has no relation. For an interesting taxonomy of the differences between plena, bultrón, and reggaeton in Panama, see the following forum discussion: http://foros.latinol.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic&f=47&t=000683 (accessed 10 January 2008).

18 The compilation *Dancehall Reggaespañol* (CK 48526, New York, NY: Columbia/ Sony, 1991) presents a fine collection of Jamaican originals and Spanish-language cover versions. It is worth noting that this practice continues into the present day in Panama. For example, in 2006 one could hear Panamanian vocalist Principal proclaiming himself »El Rey del Dancehall« with the same cadences and over the same riddim that Jamaica's Beenie Man used to crown himself »King of the Dancehall« a few months earlier, or Aspirante employing for *Las Cenizas Dijeron Goodbye* the melody from Jamaican singer Gyp-tian's *Serious Times* over a reverent re-lick of the *Spiritual War* riddim that propels the original (though, somewhat atypically, Aspirante changes the text from a meditation on the state of the world to a failed relationship).

19 Nando Boom: *Reggae Español*, SRCD 07, Brooklyn, NY: Super Power Records, 1991; El General: *Muévelo Con El General*, 3190-2-RL, New York, NY: RCA International, 1991. Further discographical information for both songs, and the albums on which they appeared, can be found at discogs.com. See: www.discogs.com/release/940829 and www.discogs.com/release/1133121 (accessed 24 January 2008).

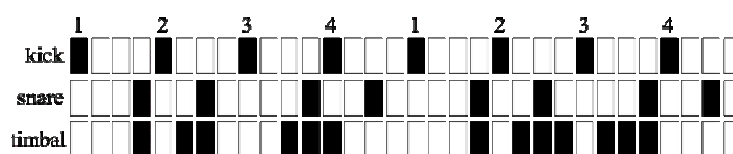
The most obvious change from *Dem Bow* to *Ellos Benia* or *Son Bow*, of course, is the shift from English (or Jamaican creole) to Spanish. Even so, these recordings offer telling examples of non-translation, representing a kind of recontextualized appropriation – in particular, the retention of the term »bow«, while transforming it from a verb to a noun.²⁰ Thus, Nando Boom, one of the earliest and most influential Panamanian proponents of a dancehall musical and vocal style, retains Shabba's resonant term while subtly shifting the part of speech. »Hombre que usa falda, ese es un bow (a man who wears a skirt, he is a bow)«, he raps, and various references throughout the song conform to this use, notably employing the same kind of imaginative innuendo as Shabba: »tragas un microfono, ese es un bow« (if you swallow a microphone, you're a bow), »hombre con bastón, ese es un bow (a man with a cane / stick, he's a bow).«²¹ Later in the song, Nando Boom adopts Shabba's calls for audience affirmation as well, again employing a refrain where »bow« stands as a novel noun, a »loanword« as some linguists would call it, for describing a gay person (and hence, a social pariah): »gritalo fuerte, no eres un bow (say it loud, you're not a bow)«; »salta y rebota si no eres un bow (jump and prance if you're not a bow)«; »alza la mano si no eres un bow (raise your hand if you're not a bow)«. The retention of certain key terms, as we hear here with BOW, not only serves as a direct and audible reference to (and localization of) a popular reggae recording, it is also consistent with Jamaican-Panamanian slang more generally. Other examples include the transformation of the Jamaican GYAL (i.e., girl or girls) to GUIALES/YALES, or the creation of LIQUIYU from LIKKLE YOUTHS. Such linguistic and musical connections foreground issues of cultural identity for Panamanians of Jamaican descent, connections which become even more important in diasporic contexts (e.g., New York) when Panamanians find themselves living alongside Jamaicans with more recent ties to the island.

Indeed, for all the impact that Nando Boom had on the Panamanian reggae scene (an influence which would also reverberate in other Spanish-speaking locales, especially Puerto Rico) it is crucial to note that the album on which *Ellos Benia* appears, REGGAE ESPAÑOL (a title which calls attention to the novelty of the translations), was recorded not in Panama but in New York. Produced and engineered

20 Here it is probably important to point out to readers unfamiliar with any of these recordings that the pronunciation of ›bow‹ in both the Jamaican English and Spanish versions is the same: i.e., employing a »strong o« (ō) as in, e.g., ›bow‹ and arrow, rather than say, the ›bow‹ of a ship.

21 Many thanks to Raquel Z. Rivera for her crucial assistance with the transcriptions and translations here and throughout.

by such veteran reggae musicians as Carlton Barrett, Scientist, and Dennis »the Menace« Thompson, most of the songs on REGGAE ESPAÑOL are covers of well-worn reggae hits, recycling familiar melodic contours and riddims and even citing the sources of inspiration alongside the song titles, making explicit the act of translation. Musically speaking, the production values and stylistic parameters are consistent with contemporary dancehall reggae. The riddim that propels *Ellos Benia*, for example, is clearly patterned after Bobby Digital’s DEM BOW, though it departs in some subtle but significant ways. The prevailing drum pattern is very similar, but the seemingly improvisatory drum rolls of the Dixon version here give way to a more strictly programmed rhythm (Figure 3):



The riddim for *Ellos Benia* not only establishes this particular rhythmic configuration as the DEM BOW pattern – as heard in subsequent versions of *Dem Bow* and reggaeton productions more generally – it also appears to have bequeathed the primary source samples for the reconstructed DEM BOW loop which now appears in upwards of 80% of contemporary reggaeton productions, including a short, recurring »drum roll« (at the end of every measure) which has become another staple of the DEM BOW, at least as reggaeton producers (and audiences) are concerned. Nando Boom’s translation of Shabba’s song is therefore arguably as influential as the original itself.

Aside from the relatively faithful transposition of Shabba’s song into Spanish, there is little else that serves as an obvious gesture to local concerns in Panama, or to Panamanians in New York for that matter. It is noteworthy, however, that Nando Boom reproduces the nationalistic tenor of Shabba’s lyrics and not only makes it more explicit but articulates the national pride of Panama and Jamaica as sites of anti-colonial (and, yes, anti-gay) resistance: »Panama, tu no eres un bow (Panama, you’re not a bow)«; »Jamaica, no eres un bow (Jamaica, you’re not a bow)«. That he makes this pronouncement from the diaspora, and in a studio setting where he is collaborating with Jamaicans, is significant; of course, given the social history of Panama such an alignment would not be out of place even back home. Along these lines, it is worth pointing out that another song on REGGAE ESPAÑOL, *Nos Llamam Imigrantes* (Call Us Immigrants), is an impassioned defense of immigrants, decrying such terms as »illegal«. A cover of the Jamaican dancehall

song, *Alien*, by Badoo, Nicodemus, and Roman Stewart, the recording reaffirms the shared concerns and circumstances of Panamanians, Jamaicans, and other immigrants living in New York, thus locating Nando Boom in a transnational space (though perhaps not significantly more transnational than Afro-Jamaicans living in Panama already experience nationhood).²²

With regard to the reggaeton narrative, and in particular the significant role that New York has played in the formation of the genre (despite the vociferous claims emanating from Panama and Puerto Rico), it is striking that El General, another influential Panamanian dancehall vocalist who recorded a version of *Dem Bow* in 1991, also ties together the plights of Jamaicans, Panamanians, and other immigrants and further locates his colorful critique of deviance and weakness in New York City with a reference to 42nd Street, a storied spot for gay cruising. El General's *Son Bow* retains the verb-to-noun appropriation of Nando Boom's cover version and continues the use of inventive innuendo to denounce any sexual practices that might be construed as less than macho:

un hombre bajo una mujer es un bow y bajo la cama, digo es un bow y bajo la sabana, digo es un bow con la puerta cerrada, se vuelve un bow [...]	a man below a woman is a bow under the bed, I say he's a bow under the sheet, I say he's a bow with the door closed, he turns into a bow [...]
te gusta mortadella, tu eres un bow te gusta salchicha, tu eres un bow te gusta el gato, tu eres un bow todos los mariflores ellos son bow en la cuarentaidos buscando el blow	if you like mortadella, you're a bow if you like sausage, you're a bow if you like the cat, you're a bow all the mariflores, they are bow on 42nd looking for a blow [...] ²³

22 There is a large and growing literature on the social and cultural dimensions of Caribbean migration to New York in the late twentieth century: see, e.g., Mary C. Waters: *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. New York 1999; Philip Kasinitz: *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race*. Ithaca/New York 1992; Nancy Foner: *Islands in the City: West Indian Migration to New York*. Berkeley/Los Angeles 2001; and for a volume focusing on music, Ray Allen/Lois Wilcken (Ed.): *Island Sounds in the Global City: Caribbean Popular Music and Identity in New York*. Urbana/Chicago 2001.

23 El General's use of ›gato‹ is likely a disparaging reference to cunnilingus, whereas ›mariflores‹ appears to be a coinage combining ›maricones‹ (a slur akin to ›faggots‹) with ›flores‹, or flowers.

In addition to such references, El General bears witness to the transnational milieu in which he was recording by praising a few other places that can take pride in not bowing, all of which maintain a prominent presence via migrant communities in New York. He begins by citing Jamaica (which he notably pronounces more as a Jamaican than as a Spanish-speaker), followed by Panama, and then, significantly, El General adds Puerto Rico and Colombia to the list.

Musically, *Son Bow* seems to take more cues from Dixon's original riddim for Shabba Ranks than from the backing for Nando Boom's version (which perhaps had not yet been released at the time of recording). A few added features seem to mark the production as a distinctive product of New York, including various effects and interjections suggestive of record scratching and hence evoking the sound of contemporary hip-hop. Although El General's version would appear less influential than Nando Boom's insofar as the latter has been sampled countless times by Puerto Rican producers, the more explicit mix of dancehall reggae and hip-hop in *Son Bow* and the more inclusive list of locales, especially the »shout out« to Puerto Rico, offer a good glimpse of the shape of things to come for REGGAE EN ESPAÑOL.

»Bailando Dembo«: Localization, Transformation, and Transnation

Although Panama remains an originary touchstone in the reggaeton narrative, Puerto Rico is generally acknowledged to be the home of reggaeton, the place where the genre crystallized in the form that today dominates Spanish-language media and youth culture. There is a direct connection, of course, between the two: New York City, where Puerto Ricans and Panamanians live and party alongside each other, and a hub from which reggae and hip-hop recordings (in English and Spanish alike), like the people who carry them, circulate to the island.²⁴ Puerto Rican pioneers of reggaeton routinely celebrate the foundational influence of such Panamanian artists as Nando Boom and El General, including DJ Negro who recounts playing instrumental versions of REGGAE EN ESPAÑOL recordings for local vocalists to perform new lyrics over them, a practice consistent with the reggae tradition of (re)voicing well-worn riddims.²⁵ It was not long, however, before hip-hop's sample-based approach was brought to bear on these reggae recordings and

24 With regard to circular migration in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean more generally, see, e.g., Patricia Pessar: *Caribbean Circuits: New Directions in the Study of Caribbean Migration*. New York 1996.

25 DJ Negro recounts this practice in the *Chosen Few* documentary.

Puerto Rico's homegrown style came into its own, laying the aesthetic groundwork for what would eventually be dubbed reggaeton. In the process, the DEM BOW riddim would undergo some rather radical, if in some sense reverent, revision.

For all the tribute paid to such riddims as DEM BOW, it may be more accurate to describe mid-90s Puerto Rican producers' creation of a distinctive hip-hop/reggae hybrid as grounded in reference rather than reverence. The primary format for proto-reggaeton recordings were non-stop, 30-minute DJ mixes, as circulated on cassette and popularized by DJ Negro's *The Noise* series and DJ Playero's eponymous, numbered releases (e.g., *Playero 37*, *Playero 38*). Juxtaposing dozens of resonant samples over the course of a single »mixtape«, the tracks, or *pistas*, driving such productions tug constantly at the strings of musical memory, often providing a suggestive, propulsive alternation between hip-hop and dancehall grooves (and combining direct digital samples of the hip-hop and dancehall hits of the day). Significantly, a chopped-up and looped version of the DEM BOW riddim came to serve as an especially ubiquitous bit of sonic glue, appearing in such a preponderance of recordings that the genre itself was often referred to – and indeed localized – as DEMBOW or even as DEMBO or DENBO (spellings which make more sense, orthographically, for Spanish speakers, but which also call attention to the loss of lexical meaning of the term, as I shall examine shortly). Adding to the allusive mix, local MCs such as Alberto Stylee, Maicol & Manuel, Baby Rasta & Gringo, Ivy Queen, and Daddy Yankee, among others, frequently animated their verses with the familiar melodic contours that Jamaican dancehall DJs have endlessly reworked since the early- to mid-80s.²⁶ Especially for San Juan youth, these deeply referential recordings thus engaged, as they directly indexed, the popular and no doubt political MÚSICA NEGRA (as it was sometimes called in song lyrics) or BLACK MUSIC which so powerfully resounded across the shared soundscapes of Puerto Rico and New York, of home and home-away-from-home (though which

26 Just to be clear here, when I refer to hip-hop/underground »MCs« and reggae »DJs« in this context, I describe an essentially equal function – that of the rapper (rather than turntablist/selector). The terminology may differ depending on local parlance, but both MCs and DJs (in hip-hop and reggae, respectively) are descended from the radio and »talkover« DJs of the 50s and 60s who inspired early hip-hop and dancehall vocalists. For more on this nomenclature, as well as an explanation of the recycling of particular melodic contours in dancehall, see Manuel/Marshall: *The Riddim Method*.

is which, of course, becomes increasingly difficult to tease out in the contexts of circular migration and »commuter nationhood«.²⁷

The dense, intertextual mix of hip-hop and reggae embodied by mid-90s Puerto Rican recordings thus supported a youth- and class-inflected cultural politics of blackness and did so, significantly, by embracing (if not amplifying) the Nuyorican dimensions of Puerto Rican culture. Taking a hip-hop hatchet to reggae's pop-will-eat-itself aesthetics, producers and vocalists crafted a rich musical fusion which gestured to New York as the cultural crucible where Puerto Ricans, Panamanians, Jamaicans, and African-Americans, among others, encountered each other and contributed to a shared, contested, and culturally-charged soundscape. Significantly, similar articulations of race and place can be seen in the promotional videos for the mixtapes. The video for *The Noise 6*, for instance, with its shots of goose-down jacket wearing MCs hopping turnstiles in the New York subway and posing in front of the Unisphere in Queens, offers a vivid illustration of what Juan Flores describes as a »notable reverse in the direction of social desire for the geographical other«:

while traditionally the translocal Puerto Rican sensibility was characterized by the emigrant longing for the beauties of the long-lost island, in some rap texts and among street youth it was the urban diaspora settings of the Bronx and El Barrio that became places of fascination and nostalgia.²⁸

In this sense, the expressive forms of reggaeton (and its hip-hop/reggae precursors) might be heard, seen, and read as embodying what Flores calls the »cultural remittances« of »transnationalism from below.«²⁹

By the turn of the millennium, around the same time the term REGGAETON gained in popularity – which, as some claim, emerged to describe the MARATÓN-like »reggae« mixtapes³⁰ – such suggestive, sample-based soundtracks receded in

27 For extensive accounts and interpretations of Puerto Rico's increasingly circular migration patterns, see: Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz/Carlos Santiago: *Island Paradox: Puerto Rico in the 1990s*. New York 1996; Carlos Antonio Torre/Hugo Rodríguez Vecchini/William Burgos (Ed.): *The Commuter Nation: Perspectives on Puerto Rican Migration*. Río Piedras, PR 1994; Jorge Duany: *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*. Chapel Hill 2002).

28 Juan Flores: *Creolité in the ›Hood‹: Diaspora as Source and Challenge*. In: *Centro Journal* 16, No. 2 (2004), p. 289.

29 Flores: *Creolité*, p. 285.

30 DJ Nelson is frequently credited, and takes credit, for renaming the genre. »In 1995 I put the name REGGAETON on one of my albums,« he told a reporter for the *Fader* magazine,

favor of synthesized productions, facilitated by the advent of music production software. The timbral and rhythmic properties of the DEM BOW riddim, however, remained central to the sound of the genre, if sometimes submerged. Whereas productions in the proto-reggaeton period were almost entirely sample-based, save for the occasional synth bass, in post-millennial *pistas* often the only audible samples are the drums. Notably, the drum loops that attained the most prominent profile in the mid-90s are those that maintain a presence in contemporary reggaeton – namely, those drawn from such favored reggae riddims as the DEM BOW, POCO MAN JAM, the BAM BAM, and DRUM SONG. A typical reggaeton production today will alternate between two or more of these loops – sometimes simply shifting the snare drum sample – in order to create a sense of form that harkens back, subtly, to the hybrid tracks of the mid-90s. In particular, the DEM BOW drum loop remains utterly ubiquitous: sounds sampled from Nando Boom’s as well as Shabba Ranks’s version of the song are traded around in sample libraries and several distinct, looped, »beefed-up« versions of the *Dem Bow* appear on such compilations as the three-volume *Pistas de Reggaeton Famosas* (each disc of which contains at least one variant of the *Dem Bow* – four out of five labeled *Dembow*, the fourth *Son Bow* – as well as, of course, containing a great many *pistas* which incorporate the DEM BOW drums).³¹

As the advent of accessible digital tools for producing and distributing recordings radically changed the sound and reach of the genre, vocalists and producers began to target new markets and audiences, often redrawing the lines of community in the process. No longer bound by Puerto Rico’s shores or even by Nuyorican and wider diasporic circuits, reggaeton artists and record labels began to address a new and increasingly diverse listenership in the expanded contexts of national and international mediaspheres. The contemporary sound of reggaeton as a slickly produced club music – indeed, as the world came to know it via the galloping synths of Daddy Yankee’s *Gasolina* – quickly assumed the sort of stylistic orthodoxy one might expect from commercial ventures. Lunny Tunes, the producers of *Gasolina* and other reggaeton pop hits, are perhaps most responsible for usher-

»I started thinking, Let me put like REGGAE MARATÓN or MARATÓN REGGAE on it. And from there I started, like, simplifying words, and then I came up with REGGAETON.« See, Francis Jargon: *DJ Nelson*. In: *Fader* 40 (September 2006), p. 158.

31 The CD collection in question was released in 2005 by Flow Music/Universal Latino. As a bit of anecdotal evidence, I was given a copy of a reggaeton sound library in 2005 which included recognizable samples from the *Dem Bow* riddim. See, wayne&wax, »we use so many snares.«

ing the genre into its commercial phase and were quite influential in pushing the genre more squarely into the realm of »Latin« or »tropical« music (to use the industry terms) by invoking the distinctive piano riffs of salsa and merengue and, especially, the trebly, swirling guitars of bachata. Imbuing their productions with a crossover appeal which eluded more hardcore recordings and tapping into a growing Hispanic-urban (or »hurban«) music market in the US, the duo's productions served as significant sonic symbols, accelerating the genre's move from MÚSICA NEGRA to REGGAETON LATINO, from a principally (Afro-)Puerto Rican audience to a pan-Latino and mainstream US consumer base.³² Such marketing strategies, as advanced by artists, producers, and music industry executives, turned out to dovetail rather well with corporate media initiatives to entice a prized demographic, the substantial and growing numbers of Spanish speakers in the US.³³

Wisín & Yandel's 2003 version of *Dem Bow*, as produced by Luny Tunes, provides an illuminating example of reggaeton's changing outlook and aesthetics, especially in comparison to the other versions of *Dem Bow*.³⁴ Shifting between snare drum samples recalling various *pistas* of the past, including a rather noticeable use of the timbres and rhythms associated with *Dem Bow*, the accompaniment otherwise employs synthesized marimbas, guitars, and orchestral strings as well as less naturalistic synth sounds, ranging from the ethereal to the plucky and buzzy. As in a great many Luny Tunes productions, there is a limited but significant degree of harmonic motion at work: the synthesized bedding moves up a semitone every other measure, or occasionally down a whole tone, to create some basic tension around the song's tonal center. Perhaps more notably, when a remixed version of the song surfaced, the producers substituted bachata-esque guitars for the synth soup of the original, capitalizing on the crossover craze. Wisín & Yandel croon over the track rather than rapping, calling attention to the incorporation of vocal styles from R&B and SALSA ROMÁNTICA, and pointing to a growing audience for the genre: teeny-boppers.

The most striking difference between Wisín & Yandel's *Dem Bow* and previous versions, however, is the shift in subject matter:

32 For an extended version of this argument, and a more comprehensive aesthetic history of reggaeton, again see, Wayne Marshall: *Música Negra to Reggaeton Latino*.

33 Univision's LA KALLE radio franchise, which employs a format heavily weighted toward reggaeton and encourages its listenership to identify as pan-Latino, is an example of such dovetailing strategies.

34 Wisín y Yandel: *Mi Vida ... My Life*. New York 2003.

Wayne Marshall

esa nena, cuando baila,
me vuelve loco bailando el dembow,
dembow, dembow, dembow,
me vuelve loco bailando el dembow,

quiero tenerte, quiero besarte,
sabes que no quiero perderte,
De aquí pa'llá, de allá pa'cá, mujer,

tu eres mi angel y yo soy tu angel,
y juntos, los dos vamo a hechar
pa'lante,

esa nena, cuando baila,
me vuelve loco bailando el dembow,

dembow, dembow, dembow,
me vuelve loco bailando el dembow,

(baila lento), si quieres que te envuelva,
(baila lento), si quieres que te toque
mujer,
(baila lento), la la la lalalala
(baila lento), la la la lalalala

that girl, when she dances,
she drives me crazy, dancing the dem-
bow
dembow, dembow, dembow,
she drives me crazy, dancing the dem-
bow,

I want to have you, I want to kiss you
you know that I don't want to lose you
from here to there, from there to here,
woman
you are my angel and I am your angel
and together, the two of us are going to
get ahead,

that girl, when she dances,
she drives me crazy, dancing the dem-
bow
dembow, dembow, dembow,
she drives me crazy, dancing the dem-
bow,

(dance slowly) if you want me to hold
you,
(dance slowly), if you want me to touch
you,
(dance slowly), la la la lalalala
(dance slowly), la la la lalalala

Obviously, there is no hint of homophobia here, nor of explicit national pride or anti-colonial resistance. Although the term DEMBOW is employed repeatedly, including in the chorus, which essentially mirrors the refrains of Shabba Ranks, Nando Boom, and El General, it has lost any connection to its original meaning. Rather, DEMBOW – and I use the concatenated spelling to call attention to its transformation – now refers simply, at least in Puerto Rico, to the distinctive BOOM-CH-BOOM-CHICK of reggaeton, a rhythmic framework (as illustrated in Figure 1) derived from dancehall reggae and specifically from well-worn riddims

such as the DEM BOW, which has long been localized as a Puerto Rican product and, in particular, as a beat associated with courtship, coquettishness, and sex.³⁵

It is worth noting, however, that for all the relative innocuousness of this version of *Dem Bow* compared to earlier versions, it still contains some connective thematic material. For one, there is an implicit national pride in the celebration of DEMBOW, which has by this point been naturalized as an essentially Puerto Rican rhythm despite its transnational character (one could argue that the same framework propels SALSA, SOCA, or KOMPA, for instance). But perhaps more obviously, one could argue that the essentially macho pose of Shabba Ranks, Nando Boom, and El General carries forward into Wisin & Yandel's version of *Dem Bow*. Rather than finding its expression in virulently anti-gay terms, however, the machismo in Wisin & Yandel's song takes a more traditional form: the objectification of women. So although one may perceive a movement from *Dem Bow* serving as a postcolonial chant to describing a transnational rhythm, machismo – the construction of a powerful male subject – remains at the center, which is perhaps not too surprising given the conspicuous, if too often invisible, fact that all the vocalists and producers discussed here have been men.

Conclusion: Indexical Allusion and Body/Bawdy Music

The underlying meanings in Wisin & Yandel's *Dem Bow* demonstrate, on the one hand, how the cultural politics of reggae (EN ESPAÑOL) have changed rather radically as the genre has moved from Jamaica to Panama to New York to Puerto Rico and back to the US. Despite retaining a close connection to reggae aesthetics in the subtle sonic genealogies the song's pista embodies, sampled snare drums shifting every several measures, it is clear that the more oppositional stance espoused by Shabba Ranks, Nando Boom, and El General has given way to the allure of commerce, demanding a kinder, gentler machismo. On the other hand, one could argue that the indexical allusion symbolized by the song's shifting snares recalls the days when performing reggae and hip-hop in Puerto Rico signified an explicit articulation of race, class, and youth, an »underground« alliance that ruffled the

35 As described above, the term DEMBOW (sometimes rendered as DEMBO or DENBO) served as shorthand for the genre throughout the 1990s, owing to the predominance of the riddim associated with Shabba's homophobic hit. It also describes the basic rhythmic framework, derived from the DEM BOW and other dancehall reggae riddims, in which a kick drum accenting a steady 4/4 pulse (landing on each beat of the measure) is cross-cut by snares marking a 3+3+2 rhythm (as depicted in Figure 1).

feathers of the status quo.³⁶ For some listeners and practitioners, no doubt, DEMBOW rhythms still signify such an alignment. For most, however, it appears that reggaeton's BOOM-CH-BOOM-CHICK now says »bailando sexy« more than anything else: experienced at a phenomenological level, it is body music; animated by lustful lyrics, bawdy music.

Whereas reggae's ribaldry could perhaps be construed as an affront to middle-class mores, as scholars such as Norman Stolzoff and Carolyn Cooper have argued, reggaeton's sexy profile and prevailing male gaze seem to symbolize less a rejection of »foreign« moral codes, than an embrace of mainstream cultural and gender stereotypes – »hot« Latin lovers – for a market that still places great value on such images.³⁷ Indeed, the same cynicism with which one might interpret the shift in the meanings of DEM BOW is sometimes applied, by reggaeton artists and producers themselves, to the genre's aesthetic practices, its tendencies toward (creative?) reuse. Thus, while Wisin & Yandel's use of the *Dem Bow* refrain in upwards of three songs in just the past few years might be heard as simply consistent with a referential aesthetic mode that emerges from reggae's »riddim method« and hip-hop's sample-based self-consciousness, some would dub it a classic example of CAR-JACKIANDO, of simply stealing musical figures (even from oneself!) in order to capitalize, crassly, on previous successes.³⁸ This points to an underlying tension in reggae/ton aesthetics, a criticism one also hears in Jamaica, where artists are ac-

36 In addition to DEMBOW, MÚSICA NEGRA, MELAZA, and other tags, UNDERGROUND or UNDER were among the more popular names for the genre in the 90s, symbolizing the music's economic and cultural position in Puerto Rican society. The genre came under attack in a number of ways before attaining commercial success and, with it, broader acceptance: the police seized mixtapes, newspapers criticized the genre as debased, and there were movements to censor the music and ban the dance associated with it (i.e., the PERREO), including hearings in the Puerto Rican senate. For a recounting of reggaeton's embattled journey to mainstream acceptance, see, e.g., Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Raquel Z. Rivera: *Reggaeton Nation*. In: NACLA News, 17 December 2007 <http://news.nacla.org/2007/12/17/reggaeton-nation> (accessed 10 January 2008).

37 See, Norman Stolzoff: *Wake the Town and Tell the People*, pp. 238–247; Carolyn Cooper: *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the »Vulgar« Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. London 1993.

38 Wisin & Yandel have employed the DEMBOW refrain in other instances as well, but always using the term to refer to the genre of reggaeton, it's characteristic rhythmic framework, and the »bailando sexy« associated with it: see, e.g., *Llamé Pa' Verte (Bailando Sexy)* (P'al Mundo; Machete Music, 2005) and the popular but officially unreleased *Deja Que Hable El Dembow* featuring Tempo.

cused of »t(h)ieving« another's melody despite the longstanding practice of reusing well-worn musical materials.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, however, it is the inherent referentiality of the riddim method, even when things get lost or mangled in translation, which has imbued REGGAE EN ESPAÑOL and reggaeton with so much of their context-specific social resonance. As the music continues to find new adherents across Latin America and the Spanish-speaking world, one wonders how such new vistas will (re)shape the pistas that provide listeners and dancers and vocalists with suggestive materials for imagining themselves and their compatriots. It is difficult to know before we hear the next version of *Dem Bow*.