

ETHNICITY, POLITICS AND OTHERNESS IN CARIBBEAN HEAVY METAL MUSIC: EXPERIENCES FROM PUERTO RICO, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC AND CUBA

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Abstract

Countries in the Caribbean region are seldom studied in detail to better understand the meanings and practices ascribed to Heavy Metal music. Such an endeavor should address the interaction between local cultures, ethnicity related discourses, and the already established tenants of Heavy Metal. Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba have a shared history. Still, particular events in their development have shaped how locals use discourses related to ethnicity. We aim to discuss how Heavy Metal music in three Caribbean countries has integrated and displaced local racial and ethnic discourses in light of their particular socio-political contexts.

Introduction

Heavy Metal music has become a global phenomenon being created and consumed in almost every part of the world. Research on the subject has begun to address the pluralistic nature of this musical genre through in-depth explorations of Heavy Metal scenes throughout the world. Research carried out in places like Nepal (Green, 2012), Israel (Kahn-Harris, 2012), Japan (Kawano, K. & Hosokawa, 2012), Malta (Bell, 2012), Turkey (Hecker, 2012), South Africa (Hoad, 2014) and Egypt (LeVine, 2008) evidence how metal has crossed national borders and is being documented through trans-disciplinary approaches (Wallach, Berger, & Greene, 2012). These efforts have helped place Heavy Metal in context by developing a deep understanding of how local and contextual factors (i.e. politics, poverty, culture) shape, foster and sometimes hinder manifestations of Heavy Metal Music.

Jeremy Wallach's work on metal and globalization has also allowed researchers to have a more pluralist approach to metal music (Wallach et al., 2012). He has called for an approach to metal scenes that highlights the role of diversity and fluidity, and avoids focusing exclusively on the commonalities of its manifestations throughout the globe. This is accompanied by a call to expand research on metal scenes outside of Anglo American contexts, in order to understand how sociocultural factors in these settings shape metal music. This call for action has helped foster examinations of Heavy Metal music through the lens of race and ethnicity as two important contextual variables for understanding these musical expressions.

Race and ethnicity are two constantly present and yet rarely addressed subjects in studies focusing on Heavy metal music. Metal is linked to race and ethnic issues that transcend common appreciations of the genre as a White Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. Its roots on musical genres as the blues and rock

tie it to the sounds of communities of African descent in the US (Weinstein, 2000). Also, musicians from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds have always formed part of the Metal music landscape (e.g. Tom Araya and Dave Lombardo from Slayer). Furthermore, some Heavy Metal artists have addressed issues of race and racism in their songs [i.e. Anthrax's *Keep it in the Family* (1990)]. Still, these are just some examples of how Heavy Metal music has integrated discussion over race and ethnicity into its endeavor.

Now that scholarly research has documented the important links between diverse racial and ethnic groups and Metal music, research questions continue to address and further discuss this relation. One area of particular importance that still remains to be systematically addressed has to do with the integration of local ethnic instrumentation and aesthetics into Heavy Metal music and how musicians and fans in those communities interpret this phenomenon. Metal bands throughout the world have pushed the traditional limitations of the genre by integrating into their sound instruments and subjects from local ethnic groups. Some examples include international bands like *Nightwish*, *Orphaned Land* and *Eluveitie*, just to name some of the better-known artists. In Latin America bands like *Acrania*, *Flor de Loto*, and *Chaska* have also incorporated instrumentation and lyrical content that are reflective of their ethnic origins.

Although these are important examples to address when examining the integration of race and ethnicity into Metal music, academic research still need to better examine how contextual factors in these non-Anglo settings can foster or impede this incorporation of racial and ethnic sounds and concepts into Metal music. The Caribbean region is an interesting setting in which to explore and document how local contexts influence this integration of the local characteristics into Metal music. As the geographical gateway to the colonization of the Americas, the region has always been a truly diverse and pluralistic scenario where individuals from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds have converged and coexisted. The Caribbean as a region has to be interpreted as a deeply pluralistic region in which multiple worlds converge. Although the region has been largely overlooked in Metal music research, recent publications from Puerto Rico have begun to document how cultural phenomena influence the genre and vice versa (Varas-Díaz, Rivera, Mendoza, & González, 2014; Varas-Díaz, N. & Rivera-Segarra, 2014). Therefore, the aim of this article is to discuss how Heavy Metal music in three Caribbean countries (i.e. Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Cuba) have strategically integrated and/or displaced local racial and ethnic discourses in light of the particular socio-political contexts of these islands.

Methodological approach

During the past 3 years our team has been documenting the local Metal scenes in Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Cuba via extensive ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with local fans and musicians. The methodological approach of the study has also integrated elements of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) (Jason, 2004; Whyte, 1991) through which local scene members have become part of our team and engaged in the process of data gathering and interpretation (McIntyre, 2008). In general, we have carried out 70 interviews in the three countries and engaged in more than 400 hours of observation. Since our team is based in Puerto Rico, this has entailed multiple ethnographic visits to the Dominican Republic and Cuba throughout 2014 and 2015. Below we highlight and discuss some findings related to issues of race and ethnicity in Metal music in these three settings.

We present our findings while simultaneously describing the historical context in which these scenes have emerged as a way to anchor our results on local culture and history. Let us start with Puerto Rico as an example.

Puerto Rico: Race and ethnicity in hiding

In Puerto Rico, the band *Puya* best exemplifies the integration of racial/ethnic and national identity discourses in local Metal music (Arévalo Mateus, 2004). From the onset, the band aimed to mix the worlds of Salsa music and Metal as part of their sound. For locals, this entailed merging sound associated to the local communities in Puerto Rico (Salsa) with those emanating from the US and the UK (Metal). *Puya* would also incorporate indigenous references in their music. They would use native indigenous images as part of their logo and would even release an EP entitled *Areyto* (Puya, 2010), the name of a pre-Columbian indigenous dance ceremony. To make the racial and ethnic merge even more salient, the band would invite *Bomba* and *Plena* musicians to open their shows. These traditional musical genres, far removed from Metal music, are directly linked to Puerto Rico's African heritage.

This focus on *Puya's* integration of racial and ethnic issues into their music would become more evident when we attended a local concert in 2014. The event was locally considered as a return to action for the band that had been absent from Puerto Rico in many years. Several songs into the concert the lead singer shouted to the crowd "*Se ven las caras. Se ven las caras.*" [You can see their faces. You can see their faces]. The crowd enthusiastically shouted back "*pero nunca el corazón*" [But you can't see their hearts]. Although some younger members in the crowd seemed unaware of the meaning of this exchange, older fans in the crowd were visibly excited about it. These phrases are the chorus to a famous song by Panamanian Salsa singer Rubén Blades, who is regarded as one of the most important musicians of that genre and loved in Puerto Rico. Watching so many Metal fans respond enthusiastically to Salsa lyrics from a 1978 album can give one a clear idea of the importance Salsa music plays in the context of Puerto Rico. *Puya* had managed to integrate that world and crowd into its genre-expanding version of Metal music.

Interestingly, although *Puya's* music successfully integrates diverse racial and ethnic elements, the local discussion over this specific characteristic in their sound rarely addresses those issues. Instead, local fans discuss their genre expanding actions as integrations of musical styles. Specifically, fans constantly describe their sound as an integration of Salsa music and Metal, but make little to no reference of issues related to ethnicity or race. As part of our in-depth qualitative interviews, we had the chance to talk about the band with local fans and musicians. When asked to describe *Puya*, participants provided the following explanations:

For me *Puya* is not a Heavy Metal band. *Puya* is a rock band that has elements of tropical music, heavy rock, progressive music, and have developed their own style. *Puya* is a style of music. (Local Fan)

Then *Puya* happens [in the 90s]. *Puya* reflected the sound, style and influence of what was happening at the time. It was that power groove Metal, that Ozzfest style Metal, that Nu Metal that was happening at the time but with a Latino ingredient. They had Latin percussion and arrangements. They had several albums. The first one was emblematic and represents a threshold in our scene. (Local Fan)

As the reader will perceive from these verbalizations, direct mentions of racial or ethnic issues were not mentioned in descriptions of *Puya's* music even though the band clearly has fused them into their music and aesthetics. Instead, descriptions focused on the integration of other musical genres into Metal music. Most conversations highlighted their incorporation of Salsa into Metal. In fact, no fans in the study mentioned the words race or ethnicity when describing *Puya*. The band has been successful in fostering a discussion in the local Metal scene on the integration of musical genres, but not necessarily on the racial and ethnic dimensions of that process. This difference has to be understood in light of the larger context of race and ethnicity in Puerto Rico.

Discussions on these issues in Puerto Rico have been mediated by its longstanding colonial status with Spain since 1493 and with the United States since 1898 (Meléndez & Meléndez, 1999). The Island has never been an independent nation and has always been confronted with the impositions of colonial rule. One particular characteristic of this colonial situation is a constant comparison with the colonizer in terms of race and ethnicity (Varas-Díaz & Serrano-García, 2003). At different historical moments Puerto Ricans have been under the rule of White political classes who considered their racial composition as inferior. For example, Puerto Ricans could never aspire to meet the ethnic and racial standards of the Spanish due to their mixed blood. More recently and yet equally important, Puerto Ricans have been difficult to integrate into the US racial "melting pot" and continue to have a distinct national and ethnic identity (Rivera Ramon, 2001). Local authorities have also done their share of harm to hinder discussions about race and ethnicity. The official government position is that Puerto Ricans are an equally balanced racial and ethnic mix of European Whites, African Blacks and Taíno Indians. This has conveniently allowed Puerto Ricans to mostly self-identify as White and forget their other racial origins. In fact, in the last United States Census 75.8% of the population in Puerto Rico self-identified as racially White (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Still, a casual stroll through the streets of Puerto Rico would serve as evidence to any researcher that this is simply not an accurate figure.

In this social and historical context it is not surprising that discussions over *Puya's* sound focus on their musical integration of Salsa and neglect to reflect on their integration of racial and ethnic elements into Metal. In Puerto Rico discussions over racial issues, particularly local ties to our African descent are almost unspoken.

Cuba: Race and ethnicity at the forefront

In order to discuss Cuba as an example within this discussion on race and ethnicity we will focus on the band *Tendencia*. The band is one of the longest running bands in Cuba having released their first demo in 1995. They have released three full-length albums throughout their career entitled *Revolución* (2002), *Rebeldes* (2004) and *Confidencial* (2009). Their sound can be described as Thrash Metal with the integration of Afro Caribbean instrumentation. Specifically, they prominently use *congas* and *timbales* as part of their rhythm section. What is most salient about the band in the context of race and ethnicity is the label used by locals to describe them. *Tendencia* are labeled as a Mestizo Metal. Mestizo is the local word to reference individuals who are of mixed racial and ethnic heritage. This entails that the band has assumed a musical identity based on the integration of different races into their sound. More importantly, their choice of instrumentation seems to highlight

the centrality of their African identity, a phenomenon that is different from the examples in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

The use of the Mestizo Metal label as part of their musical identity is an important issue to consider for several reasons. First, it seems that the emergence of this label reflects a context in which racial issues are discussed as part of local national identities. More importantly for this discussion, it represents the acceptance and celebration of the Black identities of African descent that is in sharp contrast with how other communities in the region have addressed the subject. Second, there is a decision from the part of local fans and the band members themselves to link their sound to a label that purposefully merges racial issues and Metal music. In this sense, a band like *Tendencia* celebrates their Black heritage as part of their music and performance. Both of these issues need to be explained within the larger context of racial and ethnic discussions in Cuba.

During the ethnographic work done in the Caribbean Metal scenes, specifically in Cuba during 2015, multiple conversations were held with *Tendencia's* guitarist Sergio Ernesto. He discussed how the band integrated racial and ethnic elements into their music. Sergio described their use of the label Mestizo Metal:

Mestizo Metal is a term we used because we did not want to be pushed into a box. Since we were always asked how we labeled ourselves... we decided upon Mestizo Metal in light of Cuba's mestizo heritage. Also, our music is a hybrid... a "culinary stew" of many things. Respect for the human race is important for us, and therefore we claim respect for the Latin race, our customs, music, ideas and ways of living. That is what we sing about in our lyrics.

Cuba's history with race and ethnic issues is somewhat different from that of Puerto Rico's and the Dominican Republic's. People of African descent would be saliently present in the historical development of the Island and be recognized as important individuals in the formation of the island nation. For example, as part of its fight for independence from Spain (1895), Cuban historical accounts recognize the importance Black men like General Antonio Maceo Grajales, second in command of Cuba's independence army against Spain (Zacaïr, 2005). He is better known as the Bronze Titan (Titán de Bronce) in reference to his skin color. Although, Spain would use Maceo's race as a fear generating technique to scare locals away from the idea of independence, Cubans would discursively alleviate this concern with the phrase "Cuba for the Cubans". The phrase aimed to highlight that the independent Cuba would live beyond these racial tensions. This example highlights how Cubans would address the issues of racial equality since the onset of their independence from Spain and birth as a free nation, a completely different scenario when compared to Puerto Rico. One of its most important leaders, who is still recognized today as a vital figure in Cuba's history, was a Black man (Ferguson, 2005). Interestingly, this would not be the last time race would appear as part of political changes in the Island.

The Cuban Revolution of 1953 brought yet again to the forefront the issue of racial relations. Fidel Castro was keenly aware of the toll racial and social class divisions had taken on the Island. After all, local support for the revolution stemmed in part from the people's mistrust of the current government. Fulgencio Batista was perceived as a moniker for US control over the Island, which at the time still had segregationist policies in place. Under the revolu-

tionary government a change of perspective on politics would need to emerge. The “New Man” had to be conceived as free from oppressive economical and political regimes. This entailed eliminating differences among Cuban, including discourses over racism. Cultural practices like “Nova Trova” music would reflect this desire for a new social scenario (Moore, 2006). In fact, Fidel Castro would address this issue publicly in his speeches as Cuba’s President. The new Cuba would need to surpass racism as an obstacle for its new worldview. After all, in the eyes of the Socialist perspective the notion that all men were equal and this was central to the revolutionary idea. Although a post-racial Cuba would never be achieved (González, 2015), one cannot deny that the discussion took place publically at a national level (Prevost, 2012). This would be almost unheard of in Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic, for example.

The existence of a Metal band that uses the label Mestizo Metal is an important fact when documenting the continuing spread of this music in the Caribbean. The integration of multiracial and multiethnic identities into Metal music seems to be linked to specific contexts in which racial discussions have taken place openly.

Dominican Republic: Race and ethnicity as unspoken tension

During 2013 and 2014, visits to the Dominican Republic (DR) helped us become better acquainted with the local Metal scene. Although the Metal scene in the DR is smaller and less active than the ones in Puerto Rico and Cuba, there are still long-running bands that have been active for decades. Furthermore, Internet radio shows produced in the Dominican Republic (i.e. *Avanzada Metallica*) are widely heard throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Just like in other Caribbean countries Metal music is completely an underground phenomenon, with Merengue and Bachata being the preferred musical genres by most Dominicans. The visits to the local metal scene included several in-depth interviews with musicians and metal fans as well as seeing concert sites. One salient discussion with local scene members has been the notable absence of Metal bands that integrate local instrumentation to their music. After all, examples could be found in Puerto Rico and Cuba even if they are few in number. This issue was further explored while conversing with a Metal musician from the local scene.

The informant was asked to discuss about the integration of ethnic instrumentation and rhythms into Dominican Metal music. He initially mentioned the bands *Sinesthesia* and *Altum Mortem*, who incorporated the local percussion instrument *tambora* into some of their songs. Although these bands were provided as examples of ethnic integration into Metal music, we were immediately informed that these were used in particular songs and that such instances did not define the sounds of those bands. The *tambora* was not a centerpiece of their music. Furthermore, we were informed that no current bands were known for integrating local instrumentation of arrangements into their music. When probed about the rationale behind this reported fact, the informant immediately stated that this was done to avoid having Metal music be labeled as “chopo”. This new term was intriguing, for we had not heard it even after decades of living in the Caribbean.

“Chopo” is a local slang term that emanated from the word “shopping” and is linked to the 1965 United States invasion of the Dominican Republic (Ferguson, 1998). Americans now located in the Island would use locals as “shopping boys” to carry out everyday tasks, including shopping for goods. Locals then appropriated the word “chopo” to refer to these individuals at the

service of Americans. Currently the word is used to refer to individuals who fall outside of what is considered currently cool or trendy in Dominican society. Informants used concepts like “low class”, “ridiculous”, and “servants” when probed for more specific definitions. They went on to describe how lovers of *reggaeton* music were all considered “chopos”.

It quickly became evident through the interviews that the use of “chopo” as an adjective to describe a sector of the population surpassed musical preferences. Its association to “lower classes” (i.e. the poor) and “servants” was intrinsically related to race. Just like in many places in the Caribbean, poorer social classes that become engaged in service jobs (mostly in private households) are racially Black. Therefore, the negative characteristics associated to “chopos” have an underlying thread of racism towards Dominicans of African descent. Although informants rapidly mentioned that “Whites can also be chopos”, they recognized that these “would be a minority”. Therefore, “chopos” were mostly Black.

From the perspective of our local informants, the integration of local instrumentation into Metal would immediately open the door to label it as “chopo” music. When examined in detail this entails a cognitive and instrumental distancing of Heavy Metal music from local racial issues, particularly those related to the Island’s African heritage. In order to comprehend this distancing from local racial and ethnic integration into Metal music one must understand the context in which racial and ethnic relations are assumed in the Dominican Republic.

To the untrained eye or a new visitor, most Dominicans would be considered as Black under racial standards used in the United States. Still, Dominicans have a complex process of racial categorization in which dark skin individuals may not be considered as Black. Terms like “indio” (literally translated as indian) are used to describe individuals who are of African racial descent but whose skin color is lighter than others. To Dominicans, the term Black is frequently used to describe nationals from Haiti, their neighboring country. This is complex in terms of racial identification as Haitians’ dark skin tone clearly links them to their African racial heritage. Although some dark-skinned Dominicans also recognize this African influence on their racial composition, they would rarely categorize themselves in the same racial category as Haitians. In the local racial imaginary, the term Black is almost exclusively reserved to describe Haitians from the neighboring country.

The idea of Dominicans as a mostly White society was fostered during the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo (1930-1961) (Gates, Pollack, & Petteerle, 2011). As part of his strategic representation of the nation to international visitors the whiteness of Dominicans would be highlighted via magazines and the press. In fact, Trujillo himself wore makeup in order to lighten his skin tone (Gates, Pollack, & Petteerle, 2011). These actions fostered the interpretation of Dominicans as White, or at least whiter than their neighboring Haitian counterparts. The tension between Haitians and Dominicans is also seen in the constant public debate over what is perceived as the uncontrolled immigration of Haitians into the Dominican Republic (Rosario & Ulloa, 2006). Even today, Dominicans will mention Haiti’s invasion of their territory in 1822 as a true possibility that must be constantly avoided. In summary, racial differences among Dominicans and Haitians, although sometimes invisible to newcomers, are a constant source of reflection in the Dominican Republic.

In this context, the integration of racial and ethnic local influences into Metal music is perceived as a potential devaluation of the genre and a threat to “purity of Metal”, as one informant described it. It must be noted that this discussion over racial issues is not limited to Metal music, but encompasses many other facets of life in the Dominican Republic. Still, it sheds light on the context in which Dominican Metal musicians craft their music and the limits that are imposed by the context on that creative process.

Discussion

The results from the qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations in Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic shed light into the different ways in which race and ethnicity are interpreted through the lens of Heavy Metal music. Although the integration of local ethnic instrumentation into Metal music is scarce, those bands that have been able to do so inevitably stand out among their peers for engaging the genre from a different perspective. Bands like *Puya* and *Tendencia* evidently set an agenda that surpasses musical expression through Metal, and encompasses reflections over the racial and ethnic context in which their music is being created. In this manner, these bands have something to say about their cultural context to their fans and fellow musicians. Their local and regional identities become part of the music they generate.

This venture into issues of race, ethnicity and culture is not easy or without problems. Their decision can bring into question their very authenticity in the world of Metal music. Although this integration of local sounds and themes seems to be gathering strength in the global metal scene, there is still much to be explored and understood from a research perspective with regards to its motivations, consequences and meanings ascribed by Metal fans to these hybrid experiments.

Our findings evidence the need to understand the historical and cultural context in which these bands are engaging in these hybrid ventures merging the local and the global in Metal music. In the case of these Caribbean islands, political and cultural phenomena like colonialism (Puerto Rico), political revolution (Cuba) and geographical limits with other nations (Dominican Republic) are important variables to consider when explaining the integration or displacement of racial and ethnic discourses into Metal music. Future research on Heavy Metal music and racial/ethnic issues needs to take into consideration that this perusal must not limit itself to descriptions of the racial/ethnic identities of musicians or fans. It needs to examine the contextual factors that shape how both issues are incorporated or displaced from Metal music in order to have a clearer understanding of how the genre is embedded in specific historical, political and geographical contexts.

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