

Sol, Playa y Arena: The “Tropical Flavour” of Reggaeton Music

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Introduction. Reggaeton: From Puerto Rican Underground to Global Mainstream

Reggaeton emerged as a distinct musical genre and underground cultural movement in the early 1990s in working class, predominantly Black neighbourhoods in Puerto Rico. In the early 2000s, amid various changes in its sonic, visual, and lyrical aspects (LOUD E5), reggaeton moved from the underground into the mainstream – first in Latin America, but very soon also in the US. Immediately after this, major US labels started taking over the local reggaeton industry, with the expectation of selling this Afro-Caribbean music to wide international audiences. For a music style which is aesthetically, culturally, and linguistically grounded in Puerto Rican marginalized experiences, this meant being adjusted to fit global listeners’ expectations, as shaped by the long domination of white Anglo pop (*cf.* Cepeda 2000). At the same time, the ‘upgraded’ version of reggaeton had to include a dash of ‘exoticism’, as expected from any Latin cultural production that aims to go global. This exoticizing is particularly evident in the visual imagery of reggaeton performance, which has undergone tropicalization.

Tropicalization of Latin America in Latin popular music

According to Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, to tropicalize “means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values” (1997: 8). In other words, to tropicalize means to evoke a specific set of stereotypes. A number of non-Western forms of musical and cultural expression have been subject to hegemonic tropicalization by international (read: Western) cultural producers, who (re-)present geographical and cultural regions and their populations as “the exotic, primitive Other, [...] through particular discursive strategies” (*ibid.*).

With many reggaeton music videos not only reproducing but also reinforcing various stereotypes about Latin America and Latin Americans, tropicalization has become one of the key strategies for the genre’s success in the global mainstream. Notably, despite Latin America being very diverse in geographical, cultural, and linguistic terms, its depiction in various types of cultural production tends to be primarily based on the stereotypical imagery of only one region – the Caribbean. This stereotypical imagery tends to consist of the following components: recreation, feeling, spontaneity, indulgence, and community (León 1997: 214). Importantly, these qualities are typically in stark contrast to ones associated with the Western lifestyle: work, intellection, planning, self-restriction, and alienation (*ibid.*). This representation of the Caribbean – and by extension, the whole of Latin America – as an exotic tourist destination that offers an escape from numerous restrictions and responsibilities appears in various Latin music styles once their production becomes regulated by the mainstream Western industry (Alleyne 2009). In the following, I will explore the visual elements of the hegemonic tropicalization of Latin America and the Caribbean in two reggaeton music videos.

I draw upon Denis Cosgrove’s (1984) framework of representative landscape elements, which was adapted by Balaji and Sigler (2018) for the analysis of music videos. Cosgrove suggests that landscape is by no means merely a geographical concept but rather a socio-cultural and ideological construct. He thus distinguishes between symbolic and ordinary landscapes: while symbolic landscape elements contextualize a place and reflect its various social and cultural meanings, ordinary elements decontextualize the place and reveal the homogeneity of globalization. Balaji and Sigler apply this categorisation to music videos, as seen in the table below:

Table 2. Representative landscape elements.

Video element	Symbolic	Ordinary
Background landscape	Hyperlocal setting	Studio/green screen
Geographic setting	Recognizable elements	Generic elements
Narrative setting	Plantation, slum, outdoor market, city street	Night club, house/home high-rise building
Dress	Folkloric, vernacular	Cosmopolitan
Location	Local, Miami, etc.	Generic skyline or beach
Symbols	Flags	US sports apparel or imported cars
Role of women	Protagonists, family members, love interests	Dancers, objects of desire

(source: Balaji/Sigler 2018: 101)

Notably, the same landscape element produces various meanings for different audiences. For insiders – for example, national communities, viewers who belong to and/or identify with this particular musical subculture, as well as artists coming from the same region and/or performing in the same or a related genre – a certain setting is likely to be loaded with symbolic meaning(s). However, since internationally popular styles of music – including contemporary reggaeton – attract wide audiences of diverse cultural and subcultural backgrounds, most of their listeners are (sub)cultural outsiders. Reggaeton outsiders perceive and interpret symbolically loaded settings as ‘just another’ Caribbean beach or ‘one of many’ Latin American neighbourhoods. As a result, music videos of contemporary mainstream reggaeton increasingly rely on generic settings and ordinary landscape elements that fulfil the expectations of newcomers to the genre. We now take a closer look at how this strategy is adopted in two reggaeton songs’ official music videos.

Fantasías (Remix)

This song is performed by four Puerto Rican *reggaetoneros* – Rauw Alejandro, Anuel AA, Farruko, and Lunay – and a Dominican *reggaetoneira*, Natti Natasha. The official music video was released in March 2020 and received over 75 million views on YouTube in the first month alone. It was directed by internationally-acclaimed Colombian filmmaker and music video director Gustavo “Gus” Camancho, who is known for revolutionizing the audiovisual production of reggaeton and vallenato (a musical genre originating in Colombia).

The music video takes place on a tropical island. The two generic depictions of the island in the very beginning of the video are largely based on ordinary landscape elements: the first image includes mountains with lush vegetation surrounded by sand beaches and blue water, while the second shows palm trees on a sunset background. These two landscapes are not locally grounded and serve as a tropicalized, stereotypical emblem of all tropical islands – not even necessarily in the Caribbean.

The narrative setting of the video is “Fantasías Village” – very much the typical tourist village with wooden cottages constructed at the edge of a ‘jungle’ just few meters away from the beach. Such villages promise their guests escape into nature, away from the fast and noisy modern world. Remarkably, in this village, various elements of interior (furniture and speakers) are located not inside but outside the houses, among exotic plants. The large speakers are apparently an indispensable accessory for 24/7 parties organized by the locals for their guests, as may be inferred from the video. Interestingly, at some point, these ‘locals’ – certainly very unexpectedly for the viewers – start performing complex choreographies to the dembow beat, embodying the stereotypical image of Latin Americans as having dancing “in their blood”. Thus, the Fantasías Village setting materializes a typical Western conception of the Caribbean as a place that combines close communion with nature, contemporary comfort, and Latin American *joie de vivre*, all of which strongly reflect the centuries-long economic and cultural consumption of the Caribbean (Sheller 2003).

On YouTube, comments to the video reveal that the viewers are rather fascinated with Anuel AA’s wearing a winter jacket and a beanie at a tropical party. This outfit may be explained by the fact that winter clothes usually function as a status symbol in year-round hot regions such as the Caribbean, as not many can afford to travel to destinations that require warm clothing. By contrast, the only female performer in the video, Natti Natasha,

is scantily clad and thus is depicted as an object of desire. This sharp contrast between semi-naked women and fully clothed men is generally common in reggaeton, which has a long tradition of objectification of women and their bodies (see e.g. Martínez Noriega 2014). These specifics, however, are likely to remain unknown to viewers unfamiliar with the Latin American and/or reggaeton social and cultural contexts.

China

The song is performed by Puerto Rican *reggaetoneros* Anuel AA and Daddy Yankee, half-Puerto Rican and half-Dominican *reggaetonero* Ozuna, and two Colombian *reggaetoneros*, J Balvin and Karol G. The music video was released in July 2019, and as of March 2023 has just over 2 billion views on YouTube. The music video was directed by Dominican film director Marlon Peña, who had previously collaborated with numerous reggaeton stars.

The video setting moves back and forth between five locations: a high-end night club, a winter-themed party, a night club with a jungle aesthetic, a jungle, and a seaside. The first four settings are interconnected through the motif of partying as well as the performers (Anuel AA, Daddy Yankee, Karol G, and Ozuna) and dancers. The visual transitions between the parties are accompanied with shifts in the visual aesthetics and the participants' imagery, which is arguably the most fascinating aspect of the "China" music video. The 'conventional' party in a sophisticated night club and the winter-themed party with artificial snow depict generic interiors with no symbolic elements, and therefore do not gesture towards any particular locale. Notably, I initially interpreted the white-themed party as a foam party; however, such details as ice sculptures and frozen glass suggest that the party is rather winter-themed. This uncertainty of mine reveals one of the key peculiarities of reggaeton, namely its openness to different interpretations, which should be regarded as equally acceptable (Mykhalonok forthcoming).

However, these two non-specific locations are constantly mixed up with two other narrative settings, which are slightly more grounded geographically. What I wish to label "a club with a jungle aesthetic" includes (predominantly female) dancers in diverse animal prints and furs, surrounded by various tropical plants in pots. Remarkably, a dark-skinned female dancer with curly hair in a leopard-print dress is repetitively foregrounded. The fourth party takes place in a jungle, where the animal-print clothes become real animals (a snake) and the plants migrate from the pots into the ground. Similarly to the "Fantasías Remix" video, various details of interior design (e.g. a disco ball and huge speakers) are placed in the middle of the jungle. In the course of the music video, the viewers are thus continuously transported in between the 'modern and comfortable' and the 'exotic and wild' Caribbean; however, none of the settings is entirely modern or exotic, as each of them contain details that remind the Western viewers that the Caribbean/Latin America can be both.

The final location differs from the previous ones because it presents J Balvin without the other artists (but, as one would expect, surrounded by several female dancers) in an open-space location. The Wikipedia article dedicated to the song explains that Balvin's part was filmed separately. The Colombian *reggaetonero* appears at a seaside with clear waters, white sand beaches, lavish tropical vegetation, and mountains. This ordinary landscape does not contain any visual cues that would index the viewers towards a particular location; yet, in his verse, J Balvin indicates that "We changed the setting from the Dominican Republic to Cartagena" in Colombia. Importantly, unless the English subtitles to the video on YouTube are activated, it is only Spanish-speaking viewers who understand that the very generic settings of the music video are supposed to represent these locations.

Conclusion: Visual means of tropicalization in the two videos

The two videos analysed introduce the motif of partying as an escape from everyday routine. This motif is one of the most common in reggaeton, which emerged as a genre that helped young, poor Puerto Ricans (and later, Latin Americans) to escape their harsh everyday reality (see e.g. Dinzey-Flores 2008). Now, after becoming globally popular, reggaeton offers a different kind of escape and for a different category of listeners/viewers: a tropical vacation with a variety of sensory and sensual hedonistic experiences (Bishell 2020) to entertain bored Westerners. Reggaeton music videos affirm that this 'typical' Latin American entertainment includes partying and dancing with the 'locals', who are clearly depicted as they are imagined in the global West: always cheerful, dancing, and enthusiastic about entertaining their guests. These locals usually represent various ethnic heritages, which apparently symbolizes reggaeton's "pan-Latino" character (*cf.* Kattari 2009).

Both videos rely exclusively on generic landscape elements and ordinary locations largely based on external perceptions of the Caribbean. Even though the flora and fauna do narrow down the geographical setting to the

world's tropical regions, they are still not specific enough to point towards the Caribbean or even Latin America. That said, some viewers may know about reggaeton's Caribbean roots, and the use of the Spanish language continues to imply a connection to Latin America and 'exotic' Hispanic cultures, despite its being a global lingua franca and language of transnational music (Schneider 2015).

My analysis shows that contemporary reggaeton music videos reproduce various hegemonic tropes and tropicalized imageries of the Caribbean and, by extension, of the whole of Latin America. In doing so, they play to Western audiences' most common expectations about the region and its population, which is an effective way to market Spanish monolingual songs internationally. The vivid visual imagery turns listeners of any cultural and linguistic background into participants in a musical event, suggesting that present-day reggaeton is designed not only for listening to but also for watching.

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Discography

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