Contra La Pared: Reggaetón and Dissonance in Naarm, Melbourne

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Cultural Studies, Diasporic Sound, Ethnographic



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In "Asesina," Darell opens the track shouting "Everybody go to the discotek," a call for listeners to respond to the catchy beat and come dance. In this series on rap in Spanish and Sound Studies, we're calling you out to the dance floor...and we have plenty to say about it. Your playlist will not sound the same after we're through.

Throughout January, we will explore what Spanish rap has to say on the dance floor, in our cars, and through our headsets. We'll read about trap in Cuba and about femme sexuality in Cardi B's music. And because no forum on Spanish rap is complete without a mixtape, we'll close out our forum with a free playlist for our readers. Today we continue *No Pare, Sigue Sigue: Spanish Rap & Sound Studies* with Lucreccia Quintanilla's essay on reggaetón and Latinx identity in Australia.

Liana M. Silva, forum editor

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The first time I heard Cypress Hill was at my fellow Salvadoran friend's house in the outer suburbs of Brisbane, Australia. She was wearing big baggy clothes and announced that we needed to go in her room the very minute I arrived. So, we left our parents to talk in the lounge room and we sat on her bed and listened. Latin rap had arrived in my life! In the world of pop and the Latin American classics we kept hearing at quinceañeras, here was something new and energetic for us. It was our language, our people: in this way it provided a much needed connection to the outside world for us who existed in what was then quite a small and freshly arrived Latinx community. The place we found ourselves in was particularly racist, and for a moment we felt acknowledged and could just be proud of being who we were. The trumpets and snippets of familiar sounds mixed in with hip hop activated the familiar. But these Latinxs did not even try to be "good" migrants like we did. This was so refreshing to me.

It has been a long time since I was a fifteen-year-old, freshly arrived in Australia, in a classic story that involved fleeing from the Salvadoran Civil War and a period of migration to New York before finally landing in Australia. Pretty soon after arriving, I realised that Australia was not the place that I had seen in the documentary back in El Salvador about Indigenous people here. The one where thousands of years of culture were acknowledged and respected. Slowly, I came to the understanding that I too was a settler on this land at the expense of its indigenous people. Colonisation remains a continual process, and the effects of The White Australia Policy, which excluded non-European migrants until the late 1970s, is still clearly evident in the current political climate, epitomised by the treatment of asylum seekers coming from mainly Afghanistan, Iran, and Sri Lanka to these shores.

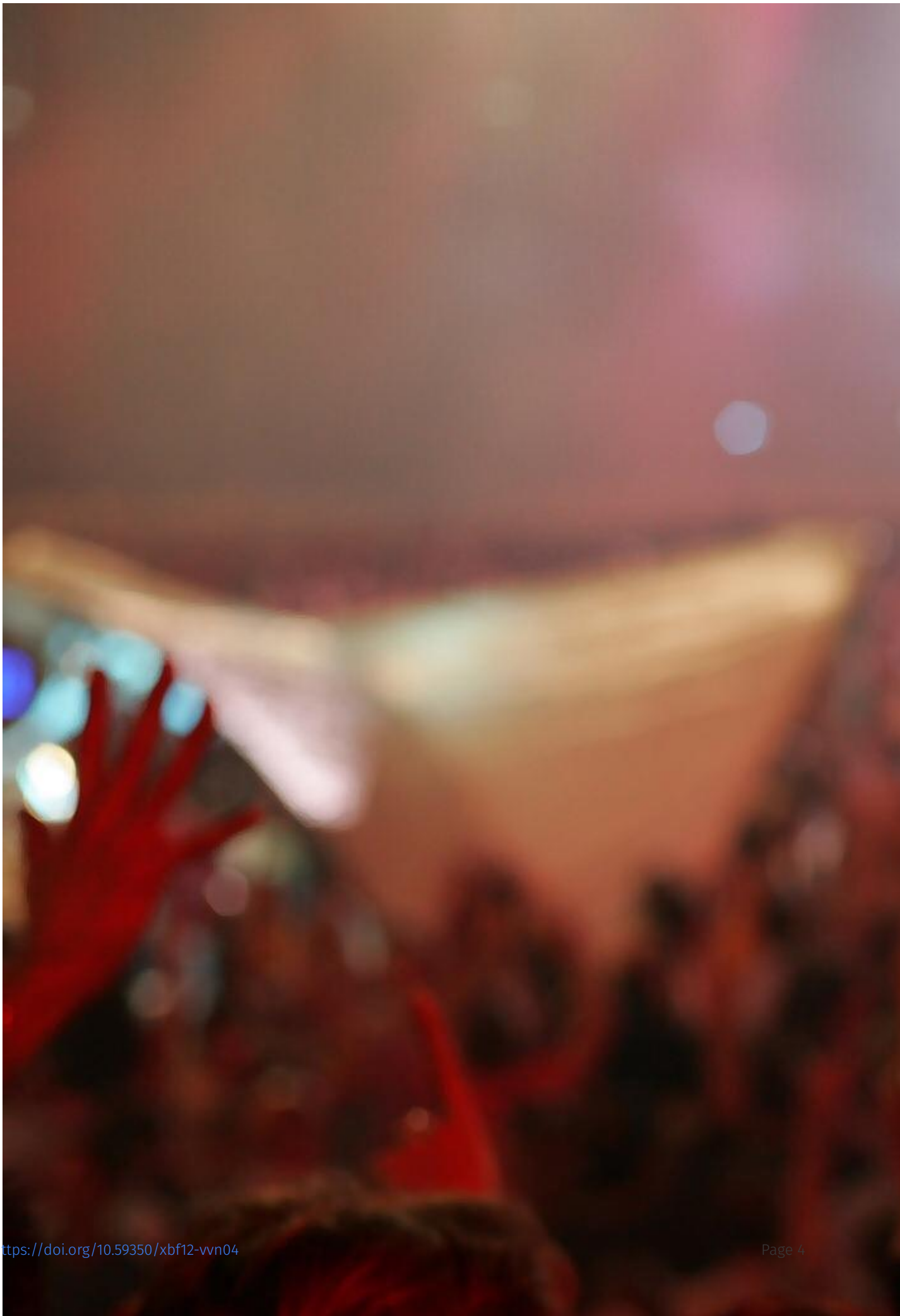
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Because of Australia's geographical and cultural disconnect it seemed rather difficult to find a space that was not an oversimplified or commodified version based on stereotypes of "Latinness" because of the relatively small communities where they played the old classics and followed traditions nostalgically closer than our relatives back home. As for me, back in El Salvador, I listened to the live music–which were mostly salsa and cumbias–playing in the party hall behind my house while I slept, which had an obvious and subliminal impact on me. I spent years humming Ivy Queen's "Muchos Quieren Tumbarme" to myself until the day a decade later I sat down determined to find the original on Youtube. With all the might one has to muster to not be swept up by the broom of assimilation, I was exhausted and I had not found the time to listen to the music that was present in parts of my mind—and those parts were beginning to lose patience.



https://youtu.be/erZnBhZ29BA

Until recently, World Music held Latin music as part of its domain at Multicultural events and festivals in mainstream Australia. Listen, there is nothing Latinxs love more than having our culture appreciated. We love it when non Latinxs also rush to the dance floor, liquid spilling out of their drink glasses, unable to keep up with the rush of the body that happens when Daddy Yankee's "Gasolina" comes on. However, my focus here is to bring those who are ancestrally implicated in the music to the front. Music is where the multiplicity of Latinx cultural narratives converge, past, present and future all at once. This is what propelled me to finally take up DJing in my mid-twenties: I wanted to explore this way of telling stories at a time when I remembered how my body wanted to dance and I didn't hear the right music for it around me. I spoke to some people who are engaging with and making space for themselves and others around reggaetón and Dembow. What follows are snippets of our online conversations.



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"EDM / dance / festival" by Flickr user Patrick Savalle, CC BY-SA 2.0

In a place, haunted so actively by the cruelty of colonialism and so suspicious of difference it makes sense that music like reggaetón with its relentless beat becomes a disruption to a muffling veneer of politeness and civility. It is our punk! Peruvian– Australian writer, DJ and event producer Triana Hernandez aka Airhorn Mami sees a politics of disruption in the music she plays. In response to some questions I posed she writes:

> *Music has historically always been a healing and therapeutic experience, and this continues to be the case today. I think about how White Australia has a huge disease called National Amnesia, a mental illness mostly enforced by silencing and lacks of moments of self-expression I think perreo/dembow/etc. have a really Caribbean or sun-filled, upbeat mood and bass-heavy nature so it is somehow like feeding Vitamin D into people. It's just really liberating and playful sounds.*

For me, finding my own voice within the music of La Hill, Ivy Queen, and lately Tomasa del Real and Amara La Negra, amongst others has been a really exciting feminist moment. It is a feminism very far away from the offensive lyrics that have given the genre a bad name, but also from the prevailing privilege that infuses Western feminism here. Within a mainstream charged with expectations of emotional and sexual repression, music like reggaetón presents another possible way of existing as a woman: as one who tells it like it is, is proud of her sexuality and aware of her body, her community and her culture.

Argentinian/Australian community worker and DJ Rebeca Sacchero founder of Nuestro Planeta, a queer, feminist collective, describes her experience of navigating the contradictions that exist within reggaetón:

> *Eliza and I really wanted to make a femme-energy heavy party where people who are female, non-binary, trans, or queer would be able to feel welcome to enjoy music that isn't always welcoming in its lyrical content or in the spaces it dominates. Being Latinx for me is fraught with contradictions, for example my staunch feminism and then deeply held cultural values which view gender and sexuality in ways which depart from western conditioning. I see these tensions and contradictions as beautiful yet difficult and I see the same things play out in the music I enjoy.*
>
> *...That said, a lot of the music we love comes from unsafe spaces and is born from resilience and tension, so we appreciate and honour the magic that comes from having a diverse crowd and try to have patience and love for everyone and understand that knowledge about how to behave in a club space is a privilege. My work as a youth worker has also had a huge impact on Nuestro Planeta. I work in Fitzroy, running graffiti and djing programs mostly with young people from the housing estates in the city of Yarra and young people in and out of home care. Skating, graffiti, rap music, clubbing and art are all ways young people resist oppressive structures and I think that they are all beautiful and important, so my events need to be a space that offer an alternative to an oppressive structures not mimic one*

On a more experimental front Galambo, the solo live project by Chilean-Australian Bryan Phillips who works with beats such as Dembow and Cumbia as well as experimental sound production, poetically describes the conversation that takes place as he performs:

> *Doing the Galambo is a process where composing and performing occur at the same time—specific to site, time and people. My joy is trying to join with people in an embodied experience—a sonic ritual—through electronic dance music. Electronica de raíz, embracing electronic music from its material roots.*
>
> *Sound like river. Son las vertientes—the streams of altered states of consciousness, that meander and bifurcate and join waters. The main body being the sonido rajado—the torn sound of the Bailes Chinos of the southern Andes—el sonido originario. The loud and dissonant flutes or pifulcas that resonate through the valleys, from the highest altar¬—Andacollo. The Andean dissonance that resists and brings difference to the coloniser culture of taming the sound through equal tempered pitches and harmony itself. That performing involves everyone present, en el presente.*

These are narratives articulated via sounds and fragments that activate memory while becoming new. Importantly, these sounds give voice to an ongoing mythology, to a landscape that has seen and interacted with generations of the artists' ancestors to be transmitted via echoes across the ocean thousands of miles away and as Galambo puts it in the "present."

There has been a surge of reggaetón and Latin trap on the mainstream charts all around the world; not only are these beats "spicy" and contagious but they are also a type of living cultural archive. Latinx people find ourselves there in the indigenous tempo, Africa via the Caribbean, the undeniable middle eastern presence via rhythms, and in there is also colonisation in the Spanish lyrics and the U.S. twangs amongst other things. We don't need to read books for this. We know and feel these stories. There are more experimental artists working in the genre all over the world that want to highlight different aspects of this history, namely the indigenous and Afro-Latinx artists Kelman Duran and Resla, and Tayhana, and producers and DJs like Riobamba. Thank you, Soundcloud!

It has been hard over the years to imagine creatively generative discussions around reggaetón in Australia as community building that also acknowledges both its negative and productive aspects and that engage with ideas around gender and experimentation. Reggaetón is even entering the club scene being sprinkled over the techno sets of Melbourne. As an artist, it has been completely worth the wait because in an art world still largely focussed on an inclusion/exclusion binary, experiencing people creating space around culture via music is pretty exciting. By doing so, artists on the margins of a Western mainstream are not waiting to be let in but creating our own space on our own terms, outside of presenting generic stereotypes. Instead this is a dynamic alive and growing space. Bryan Phillips expands on his creative process and his role as creating music in Australia:

> *I converse in a process of embodiment of sound, en el presente, that allows for the voice to emerge, that sings in huaynos, punk rock and cantos a lo humano, somehow always in español. I speak with el Pueblo, through Violeta Parra and the lineages of poetas populares. La Nueva*

> *Poesía Chilena-La Nueva Canción. Cecilia Vicuña, shamana poeta, the songs that teach us so much. That teach us to care. That performing is a subversive political act in itself. That performing involves everyone present, en el presente. That it sings in a voice that is indígena and feminista.*

Phillips is right, it is political and life-giving to play and dance to this music. Perhaps the misogynist 'catch cry: 'contra la pared' – against the wall- can mean something new to the Latinx community in this far away diaspora. It can connote something of solidarity and identification with our siblings and cousins in Latin American and the U.S.A. who are enduring tougher times.

Editor's note: tune in next week, when we will release a mixtape by Lucreccia Quintanilla to accompany this post.

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Featured image: "DJ" by Flickr user Ray_LAC, CC BY 2.0

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***REWIND!*...If you liked this post, you may also dig:**

"How Many Latinos are in this Motherfucking House?": DJ Irene, Sonic Interpellations of Dissent and Queer Latinidad in '90s Los Angeles—Eddy Francisco Alvarez Jr.
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Unapologetic Paisa Chingona-ness: Listening to Fans' Sonic Identities–Yessica Garcia Hernandez

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