

Pa' Los Que Bacilan: Exploring Social and Political Messages in Afro-Colombian Popular Music

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Abstract

Throughout the history of music in Colombia, there have been many expressions of identity made through popular music genres. Some of these popular music genres, specifically *vallenato*, *salsa* and *hip-hop*, have provided a medium through which Afro-Colombian artists have disseminated powerful social and cultural messages. The messages the artists are trying to communicate have strong ties to their identities and their local communities, while still revealing conditions that black people experience throughout all of Colombia. This essay attempts to unearth and draw a connection between different Afro-Colombian musicians that have used three of the most popular musical genres in Colombia to make bold claims about their identity and communicate social and political messages which often times critique, among the many injustices in Colombia, racial prejudices to people of African Descent in Colombia.

Keywords: identity, Afro-Colombians, Popular Music, Choc Quib Town, Alejo Durán, *vallenato*, *salsa*

Resumen

A lo largo de la historia de la música en Colombia, ha habido varias expresiones de identidad realizadas a través de los varios géneros de música popular. Algunos de estos géneros de música popular, específicamente, *vallenato*, *salsa* y *hip-hop*, han proporcionado un medio a través del cual artistas Afro-colombianos han difundido potentes mensajes sociales y culturales. Los mensajes que los artistas están tratando de comunicar tienen fuertes lazos con sus identidades y sus comunidades locales y al mismo tiempo revelan las condiciones que la población negra experimenta en el país. Este trabajo intenta descubrir y trazar una conexión entre diferentes músicos Afro-colombianos que han utilizado tres de los géneros musicales más populares de Colombia para hacer afirmaciones audaces sobre su identidad y comunicar mensajes sociales y políticos que muchas veces critican, entre las varias injusticias, los prejuicios raciales a las personas de ascendencia africana en Colombia.

Palabras clave: identidad, Afro-Colombianos, música popular, Choc Quib Town, Alejo Durán, *vallenato*, *salsa*

1. Black Identity in Colombian Popular Music

Popular music¹ in Colombia is commonly a genre that is used by artists to make expressions and claims of identity and culture. Colombia, because of its mixing of cultures, is replete with a variety of popular music genres. The topography of Colombia, which creates and perpetuates a variety of socio-political divides, has also created various musical styles.² Music from the Atlantic coast, usually labeled *música costeña*, has, as its foundation, African rhythms and sounds and since it is usually performed by Afro-Colombians, it sometimes carries a connotation of being labeled as *black music*. There are a number of other genres that have been labeled as black music. *Cumbia*, because of its history and development, as well as its ties to the enslaved people of Colombia, is the most notable of the popular musical genres that is immediately labeled as *black music*.³ This also happened with another popular music genre, arguably today's most popular music in Colombia, *vallenato*.⁴ *Vallenato* music was not always a popular musical genre in Colombia. It was always considered to be an inferior form of music due to its being from a little-known region, the region commonly known as El Valle de Upar, and because it was understood as being associated with the drunkenness and indecency of *juglares*⁵ who would travel around from town to town singing and playing their instruments in various parties and behave, often times, promiscuously. It was not until the 1960s when *vallenato* started gaining some national recognition.⁶ Among the names of renowned *vallenato* musicians, which include Francisco Antonio Moscote Guerra, more commonly known as Francisco El Hombre, Emiliano Zuleta Baquero, and Rafael Escalona, one of the legendary figures of the genre, who also happens to be Afro-Colombian is Gilberto Alejandro Durán Díaz, more commonly known as Alejo Durán and often referred to just by Alejo. Alejo gained notoriety by winning the first-ever national contest of *vallenato* musicians in 1968. Because of the perpetual popularity of his music, and his skills as a *juglar*, Alejo's songs are now interpreted by many contemporary *vallenato* artists and many have been revived as popular songs by Carlos Vives, who has specifically covered a number of Alejo's songs that have gone to become some of his own most renowned songs. Alejo was unmistakably black, his nickname was "El Negro Grande" a name given to him because he was a popular and great *vallenato* figure, but also because he was a tall black man. *Vallenato*, though a musical genre most specifically characterized by its mixture

and inclusion of three of Colombia's cultures, is a musical genre that is rooted in African sounds and rhythms.⁷ While *vallenato* music is now understood as *música de despecho*,⁸ being that a lot of it deals with loss, including those losses of relationships, friendships, possessions and or status, it was always a genre that expressed the particular experience of the performer. For Alejo, his experience of being one of *vallenato*'s most recognized names in the late '60s and into the '80s, during a time when Colombia was predominantly racist, was something of which he was aware. In one of his songs entitled "Lamento alma mía"⁹ (more commonly known as "Ese negro sí toca") he expresses his recognition on being black:

No crea que esto es un lamento lo que dice el alma mía
 No crea que esto es un lamento lo que dice el alma mía
 Pero sí es un sufrimiento que mi corazón tenía
 Lo que dice la gente: "ese negro sí toca"
 "Ese sí come nota"
 Eso dice la gente: "ese negro sí toca"
 "Ese sí come nota"

[Don't think that what my soul is saying is sad;
 Don't think that what my soul is saying is sad.
 But, it is a suffering that my heart has had

What people are saying: "that black man can play",
 "That one *eats* notes",
 That's what people say: "that black man can play",
 "That one *eats* notes"]¹⁰

The song is commonly interpreted as Durán suffering because he does not know who will inherit his accordion after his death. This interpretation comes from hearing the second stanza where he references a friend, "Victor Julio," as the person who will inherit his accordion and instructs his friend not to give it to anyone because it would break his heart. This would be a correct interpretation of the song if the first stanza were absent. However, when one considers the context of the song and the racial tension of Colombia in the 1970s, when this song was originally released, one understands that he is pained because of his commonly being referred to as a black man who plays accordion but not simply as a great accordion player.¹¹ One can thus deduce that his suffering is not because he is black (he lets us know in the first line that he is saying this not out of sadness) but he is troubled by the labeling he continues to receive which could be a way of disenfranchising his endeavors as a great accordion player. "Eating notes"¹² refers to an accordion player's ability to play the instrument well and hit many difficult notes with ease. It is also interesting to note that this song was played on the *puya* rhythm¹³ of *vallenato*, a rhythm that is the most the difficult to play because of its speed, but is also one of the most recognizable African rhythms in *vallenato* because of the drumming used in the rhythm. Hence, one can understand this song is not a social critique of racial inequality but a claim of identity. Other Afro-Colombian *vallenato* musicians have commonly made

references to their blackness as something to be proud of but also as something that is often trivialized and prejudiced in Colombia's racist society.¹⁴

Vallenato has not been the only popular music genre through which claims of identity are made in Colombia. In Latin Jazz, or what we more commonly refer to as *salsa*, identity claims have also been made by Afro-Colombians. In addition to various references in songs he previously sang, Joe Arroyo in 1986 composed and released his most recognizable song "Rebelión"¹⁵ in which he tells the fictitious story of a black man who defends the rights of a woman he is in a relationship with and thus starts a rebellion in Cartagena.¹⁶ The song, which is a decisive claim of Arroyo's blackness and identity before Colombia was recognized as a multicultural nation,¹⁷ seeks to inform the listening audience of what it means to be black in Colombia: "Quiero contarle mi hermano un pedacito, de la historia negra, de la historia nuestra, caballero, y dice así" [I want to tell you brother a piece of the black history, of our history, and it goes like this]. This first line is important because Arroyo is announcing that the song is not only a part of black history, Afro-Colombian history, but a history of Colombia in general. Furthermore, by him saying it is a piece of "our history" he is clearly identifying himself as black and expresses his consciousness of such by telling a story that happened long ago, a story that not many people would know. Joe Arroyo has continually made further claims of his black identity even interacting with African artists.

Another identity claim is made in a song written by Julio Varela and performed by Grupo Niche entitled "Han cogido la cosa"¹⁸, which was originally released in 1999.¹⁹ In this song, Grupo Niche was issuing a critique of racial relations in Colombia. This is not rare for Grupo Niche, its name itself means "Group of Black People," emphasizing the membership of the group and letting the audience know immediately what their claim to identity is. The song starts:

Han cogido la cosa,
 Que pa' reírse se burlan de mí
 Han cogido la cosa,
 Que pa' reírse me agarran a mí

Que tengo grande la boca y la nariz,
 Que nada bueno no me encuentran a mí
 Que yo soy prieto, que soy carabalí,
 Pero orgulloso me siento yo así.

[They have taken the habit that for laughter they
 ridicule me,
 They have taken the habit that for laughter they
 attach to me

That my nose and mouth are wide
 That there is nothing good they find in me
 That I am dark-skinned, that I'm *carabalí*
 But feel proud of being like this.]

The first stanza sets up the identity claim. Black people in Colombia are ridiculed and teased for the amusement of the majority of society, namely whites and *mestizos*. The song then shows some of the titles or words used for mocking Afro-Colombians, but the stanza ends with a claim of being proud of these words or titles, even though the majority of society thinks this is somehow denigrating. Interesting is the use of the word, *carabali*, which is a word used to describe a black person in many Latin American societies. The word, however, also has a direct reference to Afro-descendants from the Calabar region of Africa, modern day Nigeria. *Carabalis* were usually recognized as difficult to oppress²⁰ and thus the last two lines work together in creating the idea that although those who ridicule Afro-Colombians by calling them *carabali* think this is denigrating, in fact this is something that makes them proud.

The second chorus of the song is also instrumental to understanding the social critique that the song is clearly making. The second chorus says: “Blanco corriendo: atleta. Negro corriendo: ratero/ Blanco sin grado: doctor y el negrito: yerbatero” [White man running: athlete. Black man running: thief / White man without a degree: doctor and the little black man: herbalist healer]. In these lines the song communicates the views attached to black and white citizens of Colombia with blacks constantly being vilified or degraded in comparison to whites. A very telling stanza of this song is the one that immediately follows this chorus; the main part of it says:

Con eso le doy duro a los cueros (Y el negrito: yerbatero)
 Vamos a hacer la cuenta (Y el negrito: yerbatero)
 Que cuando se trata de salsa, de rumba, yo sí soy salsero (Y el negrito: yerbatero)
 Cuando suena como suena, me vuelvo sonero (Y el negrito: yerbatero)
 “Zapatero, a tu zapato” lo que yo soy es rumbero (Y el negrito: yerbatero)

[With that I hit the leathers hard (and the little black man: herbalist healer)
 Let’s evaluate this, (and the little black man: herbalist healer)
 That when anything deals with salsa or rumba, I become a salsa musician (and the little black man: herbalist healer)
 When it sounds like it sounds, I become a sonero musician (and the little black man: herbalist healer)
 “Shoemaker, stick to your shoes”²¹ but what I am is a musician (and the little black man: herbalist healer)]

The song is making a very strong claim here by emphasizing that the racist titles intended to mock black people is actually something that is countersued by black

people to emphasize their importance in society. The song asks to evaluate what people say and by doing so the song states that when music is good, then the black person becomes much more, but only when it deals with music. The phrase “zapatero, a tu zapato” is also an interesting phrase that emphasizes what the majority culture always says to black people by society’s continued racist system. The use of the phrase means that someone should stick to what s/he knows; usually it is a condescending remark that is made to people of lower classes as they try to ascend.²² The song has taken this phrase as something that is particularly implied upon black people in Colombia, but rebuts that statement by emphasizing the person’s role as a musician and a role that they are proud of. This stanza repeats the phrase that has been translated here as “and the little black man: herbalist healer” interpolated within the rest of the lyrics, and thus acts as a sort of reminder of what the black man is considered to be. This interpolation forces the listener to confront commonly held notions of black people with popular roles for black people today.

This great song has two more lines that are very interesting: “Y he quedado como un tizón y de ñapa disque me han / Puesto “el negrito bembón”, bembón” [And I have become like a burned log, and, supposedly, they have / Nicknamed me “the little big-lipped black man”]. This stanza, which begins a series of statements made more in a rapping style than in a singing style, highlight a name that has been given to black men in the Americas. *Negro bembón* was a name given to black men because the majority of society viewed all black men as having big lips. It is interesting to note that Nicolas Guillén, a widely recognized Afro-Cuban poet from the period of the Négritude movement, has a poem called “Negro bembón”²³ in which he tells the black man to be proud of being called *bembón* because he has everything he needs. Thus, the song by saying that “Supposedly, they have nicknamed me ‘the little big-lipped black man’” is again showing a statement that can usually be considered as denigrating but turning it as something that is empowering for the black man. The song’s entire claim is that black people are proud of what they are and do in Colombian society. The song is not limiting what black people are able to do, but is emphasizing that what they actually engage in doing, they do well.

2. Hip-Hop & Afro-Colombian Identity

Though *hip-hop* has been one of the most influential subcultures in the world, and though it is clearly rooted in poetry, the intellectual contributions of hip-hop are often dismissed. This is mostly because hip-hop as a subculture is counter-cultural in its being “hetero-normative, youth centered, egalitarian and global”²⁴ while bringing the reality of underappreciated youth to the forefront of popular culture. *Hip-hop* has been important in black communities throughout the world because it has clear antecedents in the culture of the African Diaspora. In particular, rapping

has been most connected to the culture since, like poetry, and other spoken word forms seen throughout the African Diaspora, it has roots in African oral traditions.²⁵ In the United States, *rap* follows the same pattern and evolution as did other forms of poetry; however, because of the perceived poor English performance in schools by the young men and women in the neighborhoods where *rap* emanated from, “literary talent is not readily acknowledged”²⁶ as something integral to rapping. In Colombia, and surely in the rest of Latin America, *rap* owes part of its development to many local poetic traditions. Obviously, *hip-hop*, and thereby *rap*, is an imported subculture that comes from the United States with its own socio-cultural context. However, in each country, *hip-hop* adapts and changes. *Hip-hop* is not an intransigent culture; it is one that is defined by ingenuity, creativity and change.²⁷

Hip-hop at its outset served an important role of informing the public of the realities and identities of youth in underdeveloped neighborhoods in New York City. Mainstream popular culture did not provide social and artistic spaces for African-American youth. Thus, *hip-hop* has always had a certain “social protest” angle to it that is purposed with informing on the tough social conditions which *hip-hop* artists live daily and giving voice to the clamor of the injustices they experience. Like *hip-hop* in the United States, *hip-hop* in Colombia has always been known for its socially conscious messages and has thus been labeled as a kind of “social protest” music. Nevertheless, all *hip-hop* artists have to deal with oppression, poverty, racism, unreasonable guilt, and marginalization in their quotidian lives. *Hip-Hop* artists, specifically those of African descent, to a much higher degree, actively experience these realities through their blackness.²⁸ Through *hip-hop*, Colombian youth, who would socially be voiceless, have a medium where they can express their political and social views, protesting violence, corruption, inequality and hardships for the marginalized and alienated people of Colombia. *Hip-Hop* in Colombia has also spawned a new type of national identity and unity, where hip-hop artists see themselves as unified through the subculture of hip-hop and identify themselves as members of “el hip-hop Colombiano.”²⁹

More so than any other social group, Afro-Colombian youth have appropriated *hip-hop*. Afro-Colombian music has always “evolved through the process of assimilation, adaptation and synthesis of African sounds with local, autochthonous musical forms”³⁰ and with hip-hop this was no different. Even though Afro-Colombian rappers were not systematically participating in the global hip-hop movement until the 1990s, *hip-hop* was present in Colombia shortly after its popularization in U.S. culture.³¹ However, it is crucial to understand that Afro-Colombian *hip-hop* is not simply a regurgitation of its counterpart, but a recreation of it. As Jordan argues, “the adaptation of hip-hop by Colombian youth follows the recombinant strategies that have produced the range of black popular cultures throughout the Americas.”³² Afro-Colombian *hip-hop* artists

have also spearheaded the efforts for Colombian hip-hop to have a unique sound by mixing Colombian folkloric music from the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Afro-Colombian rappers also claim pride in their ethnicity and celebrate hip-hop as a black genre of music. Various Afro-Colombian musical groups, including Voodoo Souljahs, Ashanty and Asilo 38, have merged traditional Colombian rhythms and genres with *hip-hop* beats and rhythms.

Flaco Flow and Melanina are among the group of aforementioned musicians who use the structure of *hip-hop* to communicate socio-political messages on a variety of topics. Dago “Flaco Flow” Ramos, and Hugo “Melanina” Caicedo, are *hip-hop* artists from Charco Azul, a neighborhood in Cali. Charco Azul is one of the poorest sections of Cali where the population is mostly Afro-Colombian. Many of their songs educate the public about the plight of Afro-Colombians in the local and national stages. Melanina, one half of this *hip-hop* duo, like Grupo Niche, is making a statement of his blackness with his name. Melanina is the Spanish translation of the word melanin, which is the primary determinant of skin color and has since classical ages.³³ One of their hit songs, “De barrio en barrio,”³⁴ very explicitly states their disgust with the current political system and structure, which they claim has only served to fool people into thinking they have a voice. One part of the song says:

[...] Sube todo menos el salario analítico Melanina
el crítico de políticos ladrones
Típicos juegan con la remesa de tu mesa vienen al
barrio te abrazan te besan
Contigo rezan prometen acabar con la pobreza
Y todo eso queda en promesas falsas patrañas
artimañas
Que al pueblo engañan cuantos empleos prometen
en sus campañas
Después nosotros sin nada y ellos celebran con
champaña.

[...] [Everything is raised except salaries, Melanina, is an analyst, the critic of the thieving politicians, typical, they play with your table top, come to the town, hug and kiss you, they pray with you, they claim to want to end poverty, and all of that stays in their absurd stories and tricks, they fool the people with the jobs they promise in their campaigns, and after that we have nothing while they celebrate with champagne.]

This spirited verse from “De barrio en barrio” highlights the injustices that Flaco Flow and Melanina faced as residents of *barrios*, neighborhoods, like Charco Azul. They now seek to educate the youth, the primary listeners of their music, to not be so trusting of politicians but to equally hold them accountable for what happens in their neighborhoods. The song’s purpose is also to communicate a shared struggle by people of African descent in Colombia by stating that these injustices happen in any neighborhood and the injustices, like the people, are the same regardless of the neighborhood.

Other songs they have written express a sense of connection with their neighborhoods but also highlight the need for equality, racial and otherwise, in Colombia. In “Día de mi suerte” they talk about improving their personal situations along with the situation of their communities. In “Hasta cuándo” they speak about the historical disenfranchisement of Colombia’s black population and discuss Colombia’s lack of progress over the past twenty years. Flaco Flow and Melanina’s music is a prime example of the types of socio-political messages in Colombian *hip-hop* but also of the awareness these rappers have of the impact this music has on their audience and how it can be used to educate and improve the lives of the listeners.

Choc Quib Town, the Grammy nominated Afro-Colombian *hip-hop* group, has been at the forefront of the movement in Colombia. Choc Quib Town is composed of three MC’s, or rappers, Carlos “Tostao” Valencia, Gloria “Goyo” Martínez and Miguel “Slow” Martínez, who have as an assumed mission to spread socially conscious music accompanied with modern rhythms and beats. Most of their songs are about the many different aspects of the black experience in Colombia and, to emphasize this, they commonly mix traditional Afro-Colombian rhythms with contemporary *hip-hop* sounds. The songs from their first international hit album “Oro” continue the socially conscious dialogue of their music, which had been known in Colombia for years prior to their global success. One of the most representative songs of Choc Quib Town’s musical intentions is “Prietos,”³⁵ which makes a definitive claim about the presence of Afro-Colombians in the national scene. The chorus states:

En los procesos culturales habrá prietos
 En espacio de intelectual habrá prietos
 Porque tenemos la inteligencia los prietos
 Ciencia y tecnología también tienen prietos³⁶

[In cultural development there will be blacks
 In intellectual spaces there will be blacks
 Because we, the blacks, have intelligence
 Blacks also have science and technology]

Choc Quib Town is trying to express the value and worth of Colombia’s black population by claiming and informing the listener that they will be present in all aspects of life. Whether it is the cultural, intellectual, or scientific aspect of Colombian life, the song is stating that Afro-Colombians will be a constant presence. The powerful message in this song surely echoes the prior claims that some Afro-Colombian poets have made, but goes on further, by appealing to the listeners to become active in the process. In another part of the song Tostao, the MC who wrote this stanza, makes a bolder claim:

Mostrándole a la gente nuestra vida real
 No la que siempre nos han querido achacar
 [...]

Pisando terreno nuestro que dicen que es ajeno
 Papi lo untas con sangre y con dinero
 Por todo lo que hiciste con un pueblo entero
 Organicemos las ideas y apúntemelas bien
 En una lucha clara por la toma de poder
 Y colémonos en los espacios apropiados
 Jugando por los que han perdido y no han jugado

[Showing people our real life
 Not the one that they have always tried to attach
 to us

[...]

Stepping on our land that they say is another’s
 While you stain it with blood and money
 Due to everything you have done with an entire
 people
 Let’s organize our ideas and let’s write them down
 In a clear-cut battle for control of power
 And let’s make our way in the appropriate spaces
 Playing for those who have lost and those who have
 not played]

In this provocative stanza, Tostao is saying many things about black identity. He starts by letting the listener know that he is highlighting the real side of life for Afro-Colombians, and then goes on to mention that part of this reality is the disenfranchisement that Afro-Colombians experience with their land, a land that is theirs. This is a clear critique of the displacement Afro-Colombians experience even though they collectively and legally have owned the lands since 1993 due to Law 70³⁷. The line that makes the boldest observation is the one where he claims that the land has been stained by blood and money. This is a clear reference to the financial benefit the country made from slavery without caring for the enslaved people themselves. This line sets up the following lines where he says that Afro-Colombians should organize and plan ways to make it into the upper echelons of power so that they can be in control of their own circumstances. This powerful message in this song surely echoes the prior claims that some Afro-Colombian poets have made, but goes on further, by appealing to the listeners to become active in the process.

Many other songs by Choc Quib Town have vivid lyrics like those found in “Prietos.” In another song, “De donde vengo yo,”³⁸ they make a claim about the town where they come from:

Característica general: alegría total,
 Invisibilidad nacional e internacional
 Auto-discriminación sin razón
 Racismo inminente, mucha corrupción

[...]
 Monte culebra
 Máquina de guerra
 Desplazamientos por intereses en la tierra
 Su tienda de pescado
 Agua por todo lado
 Es una empresa
 Que ni el Discovery ha explotado

[General characteristics: complete happiness
 National and internationally Invisibility
 Self-discrimination without reason
 Imminent racism, lots of corruption

[...]
 Snakes from the mountains,
 War machines,
 Displacement because of interest in the land,
 And your fish stand,
 Water everywhere
 It's a company
 That not even Discovery [Channel] has exploited]

These two vivid stanzas are placed one after another. Tostao, in the first stanza, describes the specific important natural characteristics of the land, but then mentions other realities of the land, including invisibility of Afro-Colombian people along with prejudice both by Afro-Colombians and against Afro-Colombians. Then Goyo, the only female member of the group, does the same by stressing dangers of the land. She starts with a common danger for the people in the "lay lands"³⁹ of Colombia: snakes, which are always a problem, but then also mentions the current violent struggle that then leads to the displacement of many Afro-Colombians. She then sings about water and anyone familiar with the Department of Chocó, the department where the members of Choc Quib Town come from, knows that Chocó has many water resources, being Colombia's only land to be connected to both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. This bountiful source of water, she exclaims, is something that not even the Discovery Channel has discovered. This reference to a particular American influence can be a representation of the imperial activities of the United States, but can also be a reference to the international invisibility of the people and the land of Chocó.

Other songs from "Oro" have similar messages. In their most popular song "Somos Pacífico" they are showing a

unity of Afro-Colombians based not only on phenotype but on culture and traditions. In "Oro" they discuss the illegal activity of stealing natural resources from Afro-Colombian lands, and in "Pescao envenenao" they metaphorically speak about government corruption and how it siphons public funds. Not only are they expressing a specific Afro-Colombian political and socially conscious identity, but press on to also inform the listener of the realities Afro-Colombians face. In this way, the hip-hop that Choc Quib Town produces, being a modern form of poetry continues the Afro-Colombian poetical tradition of communicating identity and reality while using a popular cultural genre as the medium.

3. Conclusion

The fact that different musical genres have been used by musicians, especially Afro-Colombian musicians, as a method to celebrate their identity, criticize society and communicate their injustices, is something that is seen in the stream of Afro-Colombian thought. If we connect the music, especially hip-hop, with the Afro-Colombian poetic tradition, we can see that these claims of black identity have been commonly seen throughout Colombia's popular history.⁴⁰ Music is a medium through which the artists, in this case Afro-Colombians, can communicate messages that are not always popular. The messages in the songs by Enrique Diaz, Grupo Niche or Choc Quib Town that highlight the injustices faced by black people in Colombia, are messages that when communicated through other means are muted and deemphasized. The goal of Afro-Colombian musicians when making strong identity claims is to bring to popular awareness the injustices faced by Afro-Colombians daily. The artists use the music that most of Colombians enjoy to expand the knowledge of the listener, force the listener to confront the dualities in Colombia and make the listener responsible for enacting social change. Social change does not always mean changing a law, but changing the way in which the listener considers, treats or interacts with Afro-Colombians. By making these claims in popular music, the artists thus become social activists focused on changing the praxis of the individual and making that as important as changing specific laws to force this behavior. Social change, for these artists, comes through their listeners and their change in behavior.

Notes

- 1 I will use the term ‘Popular Music’ here to refer to musical genres that have crossed topographical and cultural borders. Popular music in and of itself is not a genre, but is rather an inclusive term that is used to denote genres that have mass appeal.
- 2 A compelling argument for the role of topography and its impact on cultures can be found in Richards, Cara, and Henry Dobyns. “Topography and Culture: The Case of the Changing Cage.” *Human Organization* 16.1 (1957): 16-20. Web.
- 3 A insightful discussion of *cumbia* and its development as a popular musical genre is found in Wade, Peter. *Music, Race Nation Música Tropical in Colombia*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago, 2000. Print.
- 4 *Vallenato* literally means “from the valley.” However, prior to its use as the name of a musical genre, *vallenato* was a derogatory term used to label people whose skin carried marks for being constantly bitten by mosquitoes; this would happen more often to people who were from El Valle de Upar.
- 5 *Juglar* literally interpreted as minstrel, refers to the old European tradition of musicians who traveled from town to town.
- 6 A history of *vallenato* can be found in Wade, Peter. *Music, Race, Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago, 2000. Print.
- 7 *Vallenato* is often referred to as a musical genre that includes African, European and Indigenous influences because of its instrumentation. The three basic instruments of *vallenato* are the accordion, a European instrument, the *caja*, an African instrument and the *guacharaca*, an instrument of the indigenous Tairona people.
- 8 Literally “Music of Despair”
- 9 Alejo Durán. *Historia musical de Alejo Durán*. Discos Fuentes, 2008. CD.
- 10 All translations are mine.
- 11 Branche, Jerome. *Colonialism and Race in Luso-Hispanic Literature*. Columbia: U of Missouri, 2006. Print.
- 12 The line “That one *eats* notes” was translated verbatim because an English equivalent does not exist.
- 13 *Vallenato* has four distinct rhythms, or *aires*, as they are known to *vallenato* musicians: *paseo*, *son*, *merengue* and *puya*. They differ in speed and melodic structure but not in instrumentation.
- 14 A perfect example of this is Enrique Díaz’s song “Pobre negro” or “Poor Black Man.” Enrique Díaz is another Afro-Colombian *vallenato* musician and the song’s lyrics talk about the pain that black people, specifically black men, feel because of their blackness. “Pobre negro” in Enrique Díaz. *Grandes Éxitos*. Unknown, 2007. CD.
- 15 Joe Arroyo Y La Verdad. *Grandes Exitos*. Discos Fuentes, 1999. CD.
- 16 A very detailed analysis of this song is found in Mark Q. Sawyer’s article “Du Bois’ Double Consciousness Versus Latin American Exceptionalism: Joe Arroyo, Salsa, and Négritude” in *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line* Ed. Manning Marable & Vanessa Agard-Jones. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. Print.
- 17 The ratification of Colombia’s modified Constitution in 1991 added the recognition that Colombia is a multicultural nation. This song predates that Constitution.
- 18 Grupo Niche. “Han cogido la cosa.” PPM, 2009. CD.
- 19 A brief analysis of this song is found in Ng’weno, Bettina. “Suspect Nationals.” *Turf Wars: Territory and Citizenship in the Contemporary State*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007. 119-121. Print.
- 20 “Carabali” Def. 1. *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española Online*. Real Academia Española, Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.
- 21 The literal translation of *Zapatero, a tu zapato* is “The cobbler should stick to his last” which is an old European saying that makes reference that the person should be concerned only with what he/she knows. However, the verbatim translation opted for above makes more sense in the context of the song and thus was employed over the use of “The cobbler should stick to his last”.
- 22 Candelario Obeso, a prominent Afro-Colombian writer from the 1800’s, used this phrase as the basis of a play entitled “Secundino el Zapatero” which is the story of a shoemaker who tries to ascend socially and is reminded that he is nothing more but a shoemaker as he makes this attempt. Although not directly quoting Candelario Obeso here, it is interesting to note that even 100 years after Obeso, the same implications are made to people of lower classes, especially to black men. See Obeso, Candelario. *Cantos populares de mi tierra; Secundino el zapatero*. Bogotá: Ministerio De Cultura, 2010. Print.

- 23 Compare notes in “Nicolás Guillén, Poet (1902-1989).” Nicolas Guillen, Poet. AfroCubaWeb, n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2015. & Maguire, Emily. “Island Signifyin(g): Tracing a Caribbean Sense of Play in Lydia Cabrera and Nicolás Guillén.” *Ciberletras*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2015
- 24 Pate, Alexs D. *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2010. 2-3. Print.
- 25 Pate, *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap*, 3
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- 27 Tickner, Arlene B. “Aquí En El Ghetto: Hip-hop in Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico.” *Latin American Politics and Society* 50.3 (2008): 121-46. Web.
- 28 Flores, Juan. *From Bomba to Hip-hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000. 24-26. Print.
- 29 Dennis, Christopher. “The ‘Afro-Colombianization’ of Hip-Hop and Discourses on Authenticity.” Ed. Ignacio Corona and Alejandro L. Madrid. *Postnational Musical Identities: Cultural Production, Distribution, and Consumption in a Globalized Scenario*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2008. N. pag. Print.
- 30 Dennis, *Postnational Musical Identities*, 186.
- 31 Dennis, *Postnational Musical Identities*, 188.
- 32 Jordan, Joseph. “Afro-Colombia: A Case for Pan-African Analysis.” *Souls* 6.2 (2004): 19-30. Print.
- 33 The word melanin comes from the Greek work *melas*, which means “black or dark” referring to the color of the skin of those who had a higher level of melanin present.
- 34 Flaco Flow Y Melanina. *De Barrio En Barrio*. Polizones Records, 2006. CD.
- 35 The word *prieto* can be translated as “blackish” but it is one of the many titles given to black people in Colombia.
- 36 Choc Quib Town. Oro. Nacional Records, 2010. CD.
- 37 The passage of the Law 70 or “Law of the Black Communities” in August 27, 1993, is one of the biggest achievements of the Afro-Colombian civil rights movement. The Law emphasizes that black communities are entitled to the lands they live in. This was done as a result of armed efforts to expel people from their lands, lands that have been in the possession of Afro-Colombians for hundreds of years. This injustice continues today even though the law was passed in 1993.
- 38 Choc Quib Town. Oro. Nacional Records, 2010. CD.
- 39 In Spanish, this term is *tierras baldías*, which refers to the lands that were given to the people of African descent in Colombia during the colonial period.
- 40 Perea, Guesnerth Josué. “Alaridos e las baldías: The Role of AfroColombian Poetry in the Creation of a Black Identity in Colombia.” *Let Spirit Speak!: Cultural Journeys through the African Diaspora*. Ed. Vanessa Kimberly. Valdés. Albany: State U of New York, 2012. N. pag. Print.

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