

Most Campy Objects are Urban:
Transgression in Villano Antillano's *Muñeca*

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Abstract:

This paper argues in favor of a practice of queer optimism, joy, and revelry in the face of ongoing grief and violence. I assert that the work of Puerto Rican artist/performer Villana Santiago Pacheco (“Villano Antillano”) operates as a polyvalent expressive practice that transgresses the sonic, visual, and social traditions of the Urban Puerto Rican musical scene through campiness, friction, and blatant sexuality. I examine how she explores ideas of perception and identity by teasing, questioning, and undoing the linguistic and visual semiotic imaginaries that exist in Puerto Rican society regarding trans women/folks, while also pointing to the different registers of labor that she and, more broadly, trans women perform (including, but not limited to, sex work). Villano ultimately shows us new ways of creating and maintaining sociality, of paving forward through the dancefloor, through the street, through the conditions that seek to keep us dispossessed.

Keywords: *rhythm, camp, semiotic, Urban, vernacular, refusal, transgression, joy*

Preface

“You don’t understand music: you hear it. So hear me with your whole body.”

Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*

June 2021: the tarmac burns the soles of our islander feet. We swarm the beaches. Pride month energizes the humid Puerto Rican breeze, and we are frenetic for the next big musical hit—for the next *temázo* to sweep our airwaves. Enter nonbinary transfemme Puerto Rican artist Villano Antillano. Syn-co-pa-ted beats rumble and chime. And, over it all, Villano’s rapped flow beckons us. The body responds: breath and heartrate juddering and swaying alongside the rhythms—reoriented and diverted from “normative” cycles into a wholly queer way of understanding time. We are interpellated into a *feeling* that may be conducive to an alternate way of navigating the world. Suddenly, it is Summer. Suddenly, we have our anthem.

Me ubico—I position myself, assert myself within this text as voice but also as body, also as a feeler of frequencies and bass-treble beats. Music is a felt thing—an assortment of tones, pitches, bass beats, vibrations down to the marrow. Music—reggaeton music—invites dance and ecstatic revelry. It is hips orbiting, pelvises grinding, and sweat dripping. Bodies close together, feeling the jolt of subwoofers, seeping into all the narrow crevices in their lives. When one encounters reggaeton in the dimly-lit clubs or during impromptu street festivals, it is a haptic experience—embodied and full and lush. The urban milieu is transformed by these beats. Cars shake as they cruise down the road buzzing with a dembow syncopated rhythm. We drink coffee

in the morning mouthing along to these frequencies that carry the stories of unrest, of resistance, of uninhibited and unapologetic rude-speak.

The quivers of subwoofer disruptions transgress a moment and place. The boundaries and difference between our bodies become obsolete. We are hailed, compelled to wander across the porous dwellings of selfhood. They invite us into some “intimacy of bodies”¹ and so reorient us towards a space where apertures into new realms of thought are made possible.

As the Snack Syndicate remind us, we need simply “wait for an echo to return from a space [we] have not yet inhabited. [We] listen for ghosts that haunt our present and usher us to new futures. I place a hand to my ear or I place your hand on the back of my neck. I listen for how the sounds that move you are moving me.”²

¹ Sara Ahmed, “INTRODUCTION: Find Your Way,” in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

² Snack Syndicate, “Groundwork,” accessed November 27, 2022, <https://snacksyndicate.net/protocols/texts/groundwork/>.

Introduction

The discursive fields of representation, semiotics, and language within the Puerto Rican context are well-exemplified in the body of work of the queer Puerto Rican artist/performer Villana Santiago Pacheco (“Villano Antillano”). I assert that her work operates as a polyvalent expressive practice that transgresses the sonic, visual, and social traditions of the Urban Puerto Rican musical scene through campiness, friction, and blatant sexuality. Her usage of playful lyricism, imagery, and uninhibited transfemme subjectivity moves through Urban Latinx traditions with a keen, self-assessing authority. She is both within the conventions and outside of them. She reproduces imaginaries while parodying them with Caribbean campiness. The situated knowledge in her artistic practice is an interjection that disrupts the public sphere and acts with agency—proclaiming transness as an embodied resource for knowledge through experiences of love, sex, joy, humor, grief, strength, and solidarity. She moves us, bodily, to the friction of *el perreo*, *el jolgorio*, or *la jayaera*.

Villano Antillano is a nonbinary transfemme Puerto Rican artist that rose to prominence in the local Urban music scene in 2018. As of 2022, her discography consists of one album and eighteen singles all within the Urban genre. Her music has been described as having the “powerful and aggressive” rhythmic attributes of rap, trap, reggaeton, and electronica.³ Most of her collaborations have been with fellow queer, female artists like Ana Macho, Tokischa, Young Miko, or Paopao. Most recently, she worked with prominent Argentinian Urban music producer Bizarrap. Though, compared with other artists on the scene, she is still an emerging voice, she has been making large strides forward towards infusing the Urban genre with a queer sensibility.

³ “Quién es Villano Antillano, la Primera Artista Transfemenina que Colaboró con BZRP,” Infobae, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://www.infobae.com/america/entretenimiento/2022/06/09/quien-es-villano-antillano-la-primera-artista-transfemenina-que-colaboro-con-bzrp/>.

Some of her previous work like “Pato Hasta La Muerte” and “Pájara” were created as responses to homophobia within the broader Puerto Rican culture and in the musical scene.⁴ “Pájara” is an instance where the artist reclaims homophobic slurs that are commonly used.⁵ “Pato Hasta La Muerte” [Fag Until Death] is a play on rapper Anuel AA’s tagline “Real Hasta La Muerte” [Real Until Death].⁶ Her song is a sharp retort to Anuel’s 2018 diss track titled “Intocable” where he criticizes fellow rapper Cosculluela through homophobic, ableist, and misogynistic remarks.⁷ As Villana’s musical history evidences, she is eager to be in conversation with the cultural and social environment that surrounds her as an artist. She is no stranger to wordplay and reclamation in order to address the pressing controversies of the musical scene. This theme continues in her 2021 single “Muñeca.”

This paper looks at the music video of “Muñeca” as a key object and examines it in light of queer theory that examines the body politic, queer aesthetics, identity-formation, and gestural signification. I aim to position Villano’s work within a larger set of discourses that engage postfeminist criticism, affect theories, linguistic and literary analysis, cultural politics, and quantitative statistics regarding gender-based violence. I likewise make a point to situate and contextualize her work within “the language of barrios and bars”⁸ where I find her doing the work of crafting alongside fellow prominent queer figures in the Puerto Rican LGBTQ+ scene. These encounters, as well as the work generated, are informed by the material, socio-political, historical, and cultural conditions specific to la Isla.

⁴ Lucas Villa, “Villano Antillano Is Claiming Her Space In Latin Rap,” *MTV News*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.mtv.com/news/odu427/villano-antillano-interview-muneca>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad*, 23.

As Villano Antillano embarks on her first ever musical tour across South and North America, she is following the steps of artists in the genre that have similarly undergone a transmigrational process to distribute their sounds. One need only consider the popularity of Bad Bunny's music, or even that of Luis Fonsi's "Despacito." While this paper focuses on Villano Antillano's contribution to the industry, the scholarship on Urban Puerto Rican music is currently festive and productive ground that can only benefit further from taking a close look at Villano's queer audiovisual sensibilities.⁹

1990's to Now

Life in Puerto Rico has never been free of precariousness. Indeed, the state of living in a colonially-occupied territory has ramifications in all aspects of life and this is further exacerbated by neoliberal capitalist projects in conjunction with the advent of new technologies and socioeconomic forms of colonial extraction. The concerns and issues that were prevalent in the 90s have not only persisted into the second decade of the 2000s—they have become increasingly complicated. Rap and Urban music have been particularly productive forms of expression for Puerto Rican artists reflecting upon and witnessing their historical environments. The foundation for what we know as the *sounds* and *looks* of the Urban genres today was undergoing a transformative movement during the '90s. The Urban genre became a way of reinvigorating local economy due to its commercial success all over the globe.¹⁰

However, the government, expanding upon previous initiatives (such as Mano Dura) to crack down on spiking violence and crime rates, linked the increase in crime to the genre's burgeoning popularity: "...officials accused underground of undermining and complicating their

⁹ Scholars Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, Deborah Pacini Hernandez, Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, and Alejandro Nava have written extensively on the racial, national, and historical nuances of the contemporary Puerto Rican Urban musical scene.

¹⁰ Marisol LeBrón, "Underground," in *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico*, (University of California Press, 2019), 150.

successful efforts by promoting deviance, drug use, and violence among Puerto Rican youth.”¹¹ As a consequence, police raids were executed upon record stores, clubs, and other venues where disenfranchised communities would gather.¹² Young raperos, many of whom were living the realities of public housing and the strain of colonial capitalism, faced governmental surveillance and police intervention.¹³ Profiling, censorship, and discrimination were the products of a culture war during the mid-1990s in Puerto Rico.¹⁴

The genre also received heavy scrutiny from the public and police during the era due to its unapologetic championing of aggressive sexuality.¹⁵ At the time, the “Mano Dura” project strove to suppress openly expressed sexuality.¹⁶ Police intimidation tactics included arresting sex workers and harassing LGBTQ people.¹⁷ Strip clubs and gay bars were raided for minor infractions.¹⁸ Trans women sex workers in the areas of Santurce and Condado were particularly targeted.¹⁹

Due to the legacy of criminalization and state-led stigmatization, many Puerto Ricans still hold onto the belief that rap and reggaeton music are manifestations of a “violent cultural pathology.”²⁰ In truth, the genres often offer a view into the lives of youths whose interests remain sidelined within mainstream public debate.²¹ Villano herself sees her artistry as part of a tradition of activism: “I feel like trap and rap are weapons in social movements. If you look back, those artists have been agents of change in social movements. Rap is a weapon of consciousness.

¹¹ LeBrón, “Underground,” 177.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ LeBrón, “Underground,” 187.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

To occupy the space for me is activism and representation.”²² Underground—now including rap, reggaeton, and trap—is the avenue through which artists subjected to harassment and stereotyping are able to speak truth to their experiences and insert their subjectivities into a broader site of cultural discourse. They enter into a project of social consciousness-raising. To reject underground entirely and solely associate it with crime, drug trade, violence, sexism and queerphobia ignores how it has been utilized as a device for social mobility and income generation within populations that regularly encountered institutionally-sanctioned stopgaps when seeking employment in the formal labor market.²³

Reinstatements of colonial conditions in the contemporary landscape, such as the current Puerto Rican debt crisis, function through the distribution of violence and precarity in varying intensities across a slew of social sectors.²⁴ This systemic, deterritorializing method of wealth extraction updates the violent conditions under which hierarchies of gender, class, and race are formulated and reproduced vis-à-vis power, authority, and subjectivity.²⁵ In addition, it works in concert with 1) pre-existing colonial imaginaries that have served as the scaffolding for the disenfranchisement of varied identity positions; and 2) the series of back-to-back crises that have afflicted islanders for more than three decades.

Mired in the ongoing, dynamic effects of social relations of power within a colonially-infringed-upon state, the conditions of livability come under scrutiny. Judith Butler’s “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy” speculates upon the nature of grief within a social tissue that has been marked by great loss. Butler’s text exists alongside fellow scholars within queer theory that analyze queerness through the lenses of negative affect, antisociality,

²² Villa, “Villano Antillano Is Claiming Her Space.”

²³ LeBrón, “Underground,” 150.

²⁴ Rocío Zambrana, “Subversiones Caribeñas de la Deuda,” *Eídos*, no. 34 (2020): 61. <https://doi.org/10.14482/eidos.34.190>.

²⁵ Zambrana, “Subversiones,” 61-62.

and the rejection of a futurist stance.²⁶ Within my own project, I ruminate about the power of Villano's work in a territory saturated by the effects of state-violence or negligence, hate crimes, and climate catastrophes. So many of the consequences of the afore-mentioned social conditions of island living result in a sort of material and economic dispossession. Sometimes, that dispossession has mortal consequences. Of course, there is grief in the wake of loss. Of course, we maricones cannot help but carry that into our work—into our artistry and our radical practices.

However, an allegiance to an antisocial socio-political practice or framework delays us from acknowledging the crosspollination of subjectivities, communities, and states of being that work together to seek out a path forward—to meander across each other. It is helpful, then, to think of how “grief displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.”²⁷ Relationality, Butler insists, is crucial. Not merely in the act of grief, and not uniquely then either. Butler encourages us to summon selfhood through community—through a consciousness that embraces ecstasy as a transportation outside of the self or a provocation through passion to be “beside oneself.”²⁸ I, myself, am reluctant to succumb to a framework where isolation, weariness, nihilism, shame, melancholy, and mourning are the most influential encounters with the self.

Throughout the grief, tragedy, political strife, and natural disasters, I have seen the mesmerizing perseverance, ingenuity, and artistry that has kept us Puerto Ricans alive. We have

²⁶ The scholarship of Lee Edelman, Michael Warner, and J. Jack Halberstam has delved into these perspectives at length.

²⁷ Judith Butler, “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” in *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

had to come together to repair and attend to the needs of our communities. Our anger, trauma, and grief have been animated on the streets during marches, parades, and festivals. Citizens of all ages continue to challenge the current conditions of living under colonial rule by drawing upon the folkloric and artistic traditions of our people.

Puerto Ricans enter into the shared culture across the Caribbean of turning to the arts for protest. Puerto Rican protests may sometimes resemble street festivals or carnivals with the way we meander down the street dancing and singing until we are hoarse—lugging our instruments into the scorching sun that melts the soles of our shoes. It is a party that exclaims in the face of police batons, pepper spray, rubber bullets, tear gas, and kettling. In the face of mounted regiments and army reserves. In this way, Puerto Ricans know, intuitively, the value of art as a political tool. We are forever looking towards new forms to inhabit and possess as both a balm and an interjection.

Some of the ways emerging scholarship²⁹ is keen to analyze cultural forms of production is in relationship to the colonial status between the United States and Puerto Rico, or political discourses such as pro-independence of nationalist ones. My own work as a scholar does not exist in opposition to these approaches. Instead, I wish to supplement them by arguing in favor of the transgressive potential within queer futurity, joy, community, and optimism—and how these nodes are manifested through the arts. Like Michael Snediker, "I'm riveted by the idea that joy could be a guarantor of truth--differently put, that joy could be persuasive."³⁰

²⁹ See: "Music: an Instrument of Protest in Puerto Rico" by Julio Vigoreaux, "Music as a form of resistance: A critical analysis of the Puerto Rican new song movement's oppositional discourse" by Aixa L. Rodriguez-Rodriguez, and "'There was Also the Music': A Literary Analysis of Puerto Rican Identity in the Works of Sandra María Esteves and Judith Ortiz Cofer" by Keyla Robles for

³⁰ Michael Snediker, "Queer Optimism." *Postmodern Culture* 16, no.3 (May, 2006). <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.506/16.3snediker.html>.

Snediker's concept of queer optimism considers "the possible permanences of optimism" and complicates what queer optimism might entail by arguing for optimism as an intellectual venture that seeks to unpack the demands and conditions of happiness.³¹ Snediker compels us to think of optimism without estranging misery or pessimism. Within this framework, queer joy may serve as a transgressive strategy that responds to and elaborates on social conditions of ongoing grief and violence. Because of my inclination to move across and challenge the constructions of discrete boundaries, I do not want to reproduce the binaristic extremes that dominate queer scholarship and our society at large. Rather, the ability and willingness to hold or validate all is far more compelling. The ways we orient ourselves toward relationality, after all, influence the ways we recount or attempt to articulate ourselves.

Naming

Articulation does not always lead to clarity. The abyss, the slippage, the site of contradiction or contention is that moment of possibility where we may examine the transformative sphere of alterity. Villano Antillano's stage name, for example, is an activation of this site of contention. As a self-identified transfemme person, she nonetheless uses a masculinized stage name. Her name, Villana, is at odds with her stage name, Villano. Because of this discrepancy, there is a certain fricative delight and ambiguity that happens in the mouth. No matter how you gender her name, it is correct and in the same sentence one might slip between the masculinized or feminized version with ease.

I turn to language as an example as it is one of the primary forms of attempting to make the world and ourselves mutually legible to each other. For Glissant, the creation of language and, by extension, naming practices are a necessary act following great loss or dispossession.³²

³¹ Ibid.

³² Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 40.

The abyss, the unknown—the rupture of communicability—is what triggers the urgency for a language that can attempt to encapsulate the shared experience among a population.³³ The tender act of trying to find language for something is a social project—one that stretches across difference and embraces cultural cross-pollination. La Isla is a nexus of ebullient linguistic innovation as a consequence of its ongoing cycles of migration and the lasting influences of the indigenous and African languages that form a part of the phonetic, lexical, and semantic banks Puerto Ricans draw upon. Puerto Rican speech is heavily inflected with elided phonemes, sound substitutions, and borrowed words. The very prosody of Puerto Rican speech carries ancestral traces of the historical and continued language contact so particular to the region. Puerto Rican articulations and linguistic arrangements are, whether self-reflexively or not, full of “counterhistorical meaning” that forms “the sediment of culture.”³⁴

Juana María Rodríguez provocatively suggests that Spanish’s gendered linguistic attributes are perhaps not an inhibitor, but a space for play: “[it] creates the possibility of code switching between masculine and feminine forms of address as a spontaneous critical and imaginative practice of queering language.”³⁵ Villano’s very name explores this imaginative practice. She states:

I think it’s evolving, but initially it was just a word game, I like how both words [Villano Antillano] collided with each other, it sounded interesting. It is also very masculine, and now that is definitely not what I am giving, but I still like it and I find that it is something

³³ Glissant, *Poetics*, 42-43.

³⁴ Daphne A. Brooks, “Introduction,” In *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021) 42-43.

³⁵ Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad*, 26.

that I would keep because it confuses people a little bit more and it makes them ask themselves, why would she have a masculine name?³⁶

The ambivalence of being both Villano and Villana actually illuminates not only how gendered languages can be manipulated, but also how they hold the capacity for wide experimentation regarding gender. The articulation and formulation of gender identity may be enriched by working through the conceit of a gendered language.

I see her names as part of a multimodal attempt at personal self-articulation, and as a move to incorporate her fans or audience-members into a practice of opacity or ambivalence. The right to or practice of employing opacity is defined by Glissant as an ethical and political claim.³⁷ Can we truly be beholden to reductive names or categories? When we are given a name, the assumption is that we are being invited to *know* a person. But being in the opaque state is moving transgressively—beyond categorization—*through* boundaries: a status of beingness that exceeds beyond cut-and-dry legibility. Even an allegiance to a particular term—like *transfemme* or *muñeca*—cannot possibly communicate the diversity that exists within these generalized labels. For the purposes of this paper, I, too, will be shifting between Villana’s two names as part of my investment in a transgressive practice of opacity that eludes the assumption of or desire for full disclosure.

Clocking In

Puerto Rican identity configurations and terms, specifically are generated within a nexus of colonial impositions and they must equally navigate an array of imaginaries that implicate Puerto Rico and the broader Caribbean. In this context underpinned by multiple vectors of power

³⁶ Shirley Reynozo and Eduardo Rolle, “Meet Villano Antillano, Puerto Rico’s Role Villain Who Defies Heteronormative Values Through Music,” *Galore Magazine*, February 4, 2021, <https://galoremag.com/villano-antillano-role-villain/>.

³⁷ Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” In *Poetics of Relation*, Translated by Betsy Wing, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 189-194.

that demand our dispossession, naming folds itself into a variety of mobilization and agency strategies regarding identity. On the strength derived from shared identity terms, Villano says:

With "Muñeca," we take it even further, and we play with the term. Only the girls could do it. It just had to be us. In the video, it's all girls who are my friends. It's all trans people. For me, it was very important that everything surrounding this song is trans and of the trans experience. It's very empowering.³⁸

Particularly, subjects that are simultaneously queer and racialized may find themselves in need of an array of vernacular terms to capture their experiences or as an attempt at accurately naming themselves.³⁹ The process of naming or self-identification may also be further compounded by the act of appropriation and re-signification.⁴⁰ As evidenced with “muñeca,” terms that, within dominant linguistic norms, are utilized as pejorative signifiers can be reclaimed by the groups that are subjected to verbal brutalization.

As stated in the description under the official MV for “Muñeca,” the term is one utilized within the Caribbean and Latin America to refer to a certain kind of trans woman. The term “doll” has likewise been a popular moniker within anglophone circles of trans women to refer to particularly beautiful, effeminate trans women. To some degree, the term is used to indicate levels of “passability” within cisheterosexual standards of femininity. In Spanish, the term carries an additional connotation associated with sex work. On an array of different registers, Villano self-reflexively challenges the imaginaries that exist in Puerto Rican society regarding trans

³⁸ Villa, “Villano Antillano Is Claiming Her Space.”

³⁹ Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, “Translocas: Migración, homosexualidad y travestismo en el performance puertorriqueño reciente,” *e-misférica 8.1: Performance ≠ Life* 1, no. 1, (2011); Pedro José Javier Di Pietro, “Decolonizing Travesti Space in Buenos Aires: Race, Sexuality, and Sideways Relationality,” *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 23, no. 5 (2016): <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1058756>.

⁴⁰ Di Pietro, “Decolonizing Travesti Space,” 10.

women/folks, while also pointing to the different ways that she and, more broadly, trans women perform labor (including, but not limited to, sex work).

While we confront the different associations we make with the term “muñeca” on the title card at the beginning of the film, a voice hails us: calls us into the workplace. It says: “¿Qué te pasa—que como eres la Bellaca del Mes, te crees que puedes llegar tarde a tu turno? Y a poner ese culo a calentar que tengo muchos clientes por atender—atrevida.” [What’s wrong with you—do you think that because you’re the Horniest of the Month you can arrive late to your shift? Put your ass to work because I have lots of clients to satisfy—shameless.” These are the very first words we hear, before we see any person on screen to be on the receiving end. Are we implicated? Are we the late employee? Instantly, the scene is set within the first eight seconds of the video and we receive all the elements that form a part of Villano’s critical engagement with dollhood, neoliberal capitalism, and sexuality/sexual fantasy.

To start, the witty phrasing of “Bellaca del Mes” directly mirrors the typical Employee of the Month awards so common within corporate or service jobs. The humor of suggesting that sex workers might receive similar “gold star sticker” type recognition for how many clients they service is true to the continued tongue-in-cheek tone that pervades the rest of the video. Yet, the sassy chastisement reveals an argument for the valuation of sex work as precisely that: work. *Labor*. Work that one might even be late to, or need to clock in and clock out of just as any white-collar worker does. Further, the phrasing sheds light upon Villano’s own work as an entertainer. Her performance labor within an industry that commercializes her artistry, image, and body comes into relevance.

At a later moment of the video, there is a visual reproduction of the typical shrines to Employees of the Month that one might find in service industry type workplaces and around it

there is an arrangement of candles and offerings. The candles introduce a spiritual element and nuance into the video. They bring to mind domestic shrines to saints, orishas, or offerings in the traditions of espiritismo. Villano is deified in her position as sex worker of the month. The candle can also orient us to think of the variety of commonly-accepted rituals that exist in the workplace environment in order to encourage productivity

To follow, the verbal emphasis on the employee's lateness is a curious detail. As a public figure with a rapidly-growing audience, Villano virtually has no time to clock in and out. To extend this argument, trans folks—with specific emphasis on trans women—cannot clock in and out of the prescribed notions about how they should look, behave, sound, or perform gender and sexuality. The labor of the workforce and the labor of daily living under such increased scrutiny are all folded into the first few seconds of a three-minute-long video.

This theme is a continued motif throughout the rest of the MV and the song. Notably, one lyrical instance where Villana critiques the idea of clocking comes at the very end of the song. Villano very proudly announces, “No me interesa ser una mujer / porque creo y entiendo que represento a la mujer / con el mayor de lo' respetos / no quiero ser una mujer más / quiero ser una trans diferente” [I'm not interested in being a woman / because I believe and understand that I represent womanhood / respectfully / I don't want to be one more woman / I want to be a different trans person]. Not only does Villano eschew any presumptions about what a woman is or is not—what a *trans* woman is or is not—but she also refuses to be “clocked” or made legible in any way by the cisheteronormative public. She exposes the incongruity of a scripted formulation of gender.

Camp

The music video opens to a plain coral background with the word “Muñeca” splashed across the center in Barbie pink. The font is glossy and chrome-like, runny in a playful way reminiscent of logos used for popular toy doll brands. The visual cue is open with possibility—heavy with duplicitous promise. The syrupy font seduces with a coy wink: are we thinking of icing or bodily fluids? Are we thinking of girlhood dolls or are we making a more salacious and irreverent cognitive leap? And—are these options mutually exclusive? Regardless, the plastic artifice of the font drops us immediately into the abundant aesthetics that dominate the whole video. We are transported to the lush campiness of Villano’s world from the very beginning.

Campiness is a queer sensibility that may offer us strategies of mobilizing queer joy, futurity, and optimism. As a political strategy and sensibility, campiness operates as a hermeneutic that is the antithesis of tragedy.⁴¹ It “proposes a comic vision of the world”⁴² and is “an optimistic space where the categories of gender and forms of desire are expanded.”⁴³ Susan Sontag’s examination and attempted definition of camp focuses on the artifice, exaggeration, and aestheticization that is employed within this sensibility. Sontag also acknowledges the ways contrast, conflict, and juxtaposition complicate the essence of what makes something campy.

Critics of camp doubt its transgressive capacities since camp is “a zone of indistinction”⁴⁴ that necessarily relies on a system of oppressive relations to form signification.⁴⁵ This discourse takes up camp as a flawed practice due to its ambivalent nature.⁴⁶ However, camp’s power is

⁴¹ Sontag, *Notes on ‘Camp,’* 11.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Anna Kłosowska, “The Eastern Western: Camp as a Response to Cultural Failure in *The Conqueror*,” in *Queer Movie Medievalisms*, edited by Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Tison Pugh, (Farnham England: Ashgate, 2009), 98.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See “For Interpretation: Notes Against Camp” by Andrew Britton & Jonathan Dollimore’s “Post/modern: On the gay sensibility, or the pervert’s revenge on authenticity.”

⁴⁶ Helene A. Shugart Catherine Egle Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*, (University of Alabama Press, 2008), 38.

precisely in its ambivalence—its opacity and elusive nature. Camp, as a form of queer parody, extends beyond the aesthetic. Camp is an intertextual political tactic of opposition with cultural and ideological reverberations.⁴⁷ When skeptics focus on how camp utilizes the vernacular of the dominant order, they overlook how marginalized and disenfranchised communities transgress these structures of signification by manipulating and activating alternative codes.⁴⁸ Camp is a nimble, veiled, fugitive practice that will always embrace a trickster's eye-view of multiple signification.

Like a counterfeit, camp resembles one thing while in essence being a "recitation" that is full of "regressions, perversions, and alternatives opening out from the gaps and spilling over from the excesses of repetitive gestures."⁴⁹ The queer appropriation of signifiers—an act of repetition or recitation—becomes a way to both imbue these signifiers with new meaning and expose the inherent artifice and contrived nature of dominant ideology. An example of reiterative practices being a venue for apertures is found in the act of play.

The word muñeca carries the weight of “Being-as-Playing-a-Role”⁵⁰ far preceding our apprehension of Villano’s music video. To play with dolls is to play pretend, and this act of imagination itself is intervened upon during childhood by a distinct dismissal of socially-constructed identity roles. While playing with dolls has been marketed as an activity for girls, the actual dynamics during play challenge cisheteronormative norms of behavior. So-called “female” barbies might change sex, enter into lesbian relationships, or be used to approximate what few things girls know of sexual acts.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

⁴⁸ Meyer, *Poetics of Camp*, 4-5.

⁴⁹ Lex M. Lancaster, “The Wipe: Sadie Benning’s Queer Abstraction,” *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 39, no. 1 (2017): 96-97. <https://doi.org/10.13110/discourse.39.1.0092>.

⁵⁰ Sontag, *Notes on ‘Camp,’* 4.

⁵¹ Erica Rand, “Older Heads on Younger Bodies,” in *Barbie’s Queer Accessories* (Duke University Press, 1995).

To be a doll (a “muñeca”) in the most colloquial of senses is to be the receptacle for all desires, aspirations, fantasies, fears, and disgusts. Dolls must carry the burden of materially imitating human form, suggesting it, while proportionally adhering to a caricature of this same form. A doll is a site of projection and self-fashioning; and play is a sphere of exploration with little consequence. Both the doll and the act of playing with a doll are aligned with a distinctly Campy sensibility, harnessing “the love of the exaggerated” and “the ‘off’ of things-being-what-they-are not.”⁵² As part of an imaginative practice, playing with dolls can actually serve as both a hermeneutic for understanding the world we inhabit, and as a tool for projecting future worlds.

Gaze Refracted

After the opening title card of the video for “Muñeca,” we quite literally watch Villano clock in to work. In this moment, the grit of the street is left behind in favor of the high saturation of the interior of the corner store—children’s toys and sex toys intermingle on the shelves, glitter and sequins call to the viewer.

When Villano steps across this threshold in the music video, we are invited into a speculative world that celebrated the transgressive potential within queer futurity, joy, community, and optimism. This moment of *trans-lation* across space is the *trans-gression* of space. *Trans* from Latin as prefix—meaning “across, beyond, through, on the other side of.”⁵³ *Gradi* “to walk, step, go,” or even “to wander”⁵⁴ amongst the bodies around you. Through them. As them. On the dancefloor, listening queerly, I am *trans* because I am already beside myself—euphoric and undone—beyond the boundaries of myself. When we transgress—from

⁵² Sontag, *Notes on ‘Camp,’* 4.

⁵³ *Etymonline.com*, s.v. “Transgress,” accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/transgress>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the Latin verb “transgredi,” meaning to “step across”⁵⁵—we are already on the other side of definition. Instead, we are mired in the site of potentiality.

This doorway is an invitation into the colorful boudoir where the viewers look over the shoulders of a carousel of customers and meet the smirking, unwavering gazes of a cast of transfemme folks behind the counter. This indoor space is a world of desire, gender, and exaggeration. The abundance of playful objects and saturated colors is an instant indicator that we are in Villana’s queer world that is both speculative and referential to the realities that trans women face in the labor market. Yet, the framework of the whole narrative in the video is decidedly comical—we are invited to laugh at exaggeration and ridiculousness, but the trans women are not the victims of the joke. Instead, we are enthralled and compelled by means of campy aesthetics. We are invited to be delighted.

Scholar José Estebán Muñoz makes a case for queer aesthetics as the doorway to “a kind of potentiality that is open, indeterminate, like the affective contours of hope itself.”⁵⁶ This potentiality is articulated as “indispensable to the act of imaging transformation” as it provides us with the opportunity to “glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic.”⁵⁷ Potentiality often exists in the ornamental, Muñoz states, and camp’s preoccupation with the ornamental makes it a perfectly suitable sensibility with which to imagine some sort of social change.

Villano’s concern with the ornamental is notable by means of the high level of self-adornment, accessorization, or decoration in her music video. She is also thinking about how aestheticization aligns with the kind of life and world she wants to inhabit:

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Muñoz, “Introduction: Feeling Utopia,” 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

As queer people, I feel like we have to work extra hard to have happy lives. A lot of times, our lives are a constant choosing of, 'OK, I'm going to be happy, despite everything.' I like literature a lot too, and magical realism — how sometimes we can decorate reality with fictitious or fantasy elements in order to make it prettier. I feel like I do that a lot with my music because I do it with my life.⁵⁸

Aesthetics, for Villana, is inherently linked to creating “happy lives.” This quote also allows us to see how she is engaging with multi-genre Latin American traditions of exploring a speculative worldview.⁵⁹



Fig. 1, Villano Antillano, *Muñeca*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10-zLAMI1EE>.

Shortly after Villana enters the building, we see her working behind the counter with other employees all dressed in similar uniforms (fig. 1). The design of the uniform flounces through the lurid landscapes of fetish, making it difficult to situate or readily identify. The

⁵⁸ Jhoni Jackson, “Villano Antillano Isn’t Looking For Acceptance—Nor Fitting Into Your Conventions of Gender Identity,” *REMEZCLA*, June 22, 2021, <https://remezcla.com/features/music/villano-antillano-muneca-trans-representation-music-interview/>.

⁵⁹ *Las Malas* (2020) by Camila Sosa Villada published by Tusquets is a recent example of a book that draws on both personal experience regarding transfemme living, and delves into more speculative modes like magical realism.

muñecas of this video bring to mind imaginaries of sexy, coy candyshop workers, babydolls, drive-in rollerskaters, or maids. This stylization does not shy away from coquettish flashes of skin or from arousing the semiotic pathways of the mind that remind us of all the ways the transfemme form is objectified and exoticized. By not aligning the uniform with one specific, clear referent, viewers must put in extra work—must consider multiple realms of fantasy.

Nicole Fleetwood's theorization on the performative strategy of "excess flesh", an enactment that enables us "to see the codes of visibility operating on the (hyper)visible body that is its object,"⁶⁰ is particularly insightful for expanding our analysis of the role of the uniform in the video. The mischievous approach to signification works both within and against the dominant systems of visibility. The visual code invites the viewer to get lost in spectacle, in visibility, but the gaze "refracts... back upon itself."⁶¹ The ambiguous nature of the uniform means that the viewer is made all the more aware of their own attempts to categorize, identify, confirm this external presentation laden with implication.

The uniforms do not instruct or make assertions about distinguishing what a "positive or productive representation" of transfemininity constitutes. Instead, they become fixed as a signal towards historical attempts to reify the appropriate boundaries for the female body. As a surface-level symbol, the uniform becomes an identification marker. It is akin to a costume in that it is referential and contextual. We are all too aware of our location in the fantasy of the shop, and we are confronted with employees that are dressed to flag a spectrum of constructions of desire.

However, the uniform is also a way to establish a new form of sociality within the realm of the MV. When Villana is out on the street, walking past a line of clients as the only one

⁶⁰Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Excess Flesh: Black Women Performing Hypervisibility," in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visibility, and Blackness*, (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 112.

⁶¹ Ibid.

wearing a uniform, she stands out starkly against the bland colors and casual clothes. When she enters the shop, she joins a community of women that are visually equalized. Instead of having a homogenizing effect, the sameness of the uniforms imbues all of the transfemme employees with equal importance. This strategy contrasts with how male Urban artists often dress to stand out from the dancers and performers—as well as how these men are frequently spatially estranged from the women back-up dancers that serve as ornamental, objectified set-pieces.

It is initially difficult to identify where the gaze is directed, what the gestures, motions, movements in the video mean. Clearly, the interactions between the customers and employees are transactional, but *what* is being purchased remains oblique for much of the video. The shop is such an eclectic amalgamation of objects that one gets the sense that objecthood is elevated to a greater level of importance. What is the form, or the substance of things? How do we read into the visual celebration of such vulgar excess where sex toys co-mingle with rosaries and femininely-coded tchotchkes?

Along the duration of the video, customers walk into the store and point to the object of their desire—whichever employee is their pick—before they disappear into a backroom with their selection. The scenes of customers are intercut with closeups on Villano and other employees mouthing along to the lyrics of the song. Though the customers traverse the space, occupying a role that should grant them power or influence, the camera never once deviates from capturing the joy, play, and care that the women behind the counter offer each other. The clients are largely superfluous compared to the massive scenic presence of all of the employees.

However, the clients play a crucial role. As actors, they perform the gesture, one after another in an endless and featureless stream, of embodying the public sphere that objectifies and places a range of expectations on women and, more specifically, transfemme folks. These

expectations or conceptions span notions about desirability, morphology, occupations, sexual proclivities, and even as transglobal citizens. The audience is not permitted to escape implication. The cyclical, repetitive nature of the gesture, the signal, the selection, renders the customers archetypal and analogous. Their visual unimportance and displacement by means of the camera makes them perfectly suitable as vessels for the audience's subjectivity.

For the audience member that knows the queer social circuits well, there is a catch—a semi-humorous twist with bite. That the customer role is taken up by a variety of folks that are well-known and very active in the queer Puerto Rican scene further complicates analysis. As a role, the customer may act as a placeholder for the viewer's own subjectivity, but the identities of the actors can also contribute to the insinuation of how commonly-held beliefs about transfemme folks do not solely come from members outside of the queer community. Within the LGBTQ+ community, it is also our responsibility to self-assess how we might be playing into or allowing these potentially essentializing ideas to proliferate.

Villano herself also lyrically troubles what being a transfemme person might entail. The narrative of “Muñeca,” the song, fits in well with the preexisting tropes within Puerto Rican Urban music. Villano’s sultry voice fluctuates between languidly unspooling vowels across the track and switching to a punchy delivery of rapped lines that boldly and self-assuredly declare her presence in the musical scene. Villano situates herself as both rapper and muñeca with bragging rights due to her sexual prowess and her success as an artist. In this song, she points to the ways in which people are obsessed with monitoring or following her on social media. “Están en mi perfil desde junio hasta may / Siempre dando zoom en mi boom-boom-hey; [They’re on my profile from June to May / Always zooming in on my boom-boom-hey]” she says. The issue of the gaze, perception, apprehension is unpacked for all its good and its bad. In the lyrical world

of “Muñeca,” Villano is “appetizing” but she also receives comments saying she “has a banging body with a man’s face.” Ultimately, Villano is not interested in entertaining transphobic assessments of her physicality. Instead, she advocates for a queer horizon where transfemme, muñeca, or womanhood does not look any particular way.

Her chorus returns again and again enacting a critical recitation reminiscent of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. It reiterates: “No soy una chica normal / Todo' saben que yo soy una muñeca” [I am not a normal girl / Everyone knows I am a doll]. This cyclical process of the return, enabled by the conventions of song structure, fixes the chorus with the affective power of emphasis. The core messages of the song reside here as “blueprints and schemata”⁶²; the foundations for Villano’s process of worldbuilding. While it could seem that the use of *normal* in the verse refers to a differentiation between cis and trans womanhood (as inherently linked, vernacularly, with dollhood), Villana lyrically proceeds to complicate what the constraints of dollhood might even contain throughout the duration of the rest of the song.

Examples of her lyrical refusal make reference to surgery and gender presentation or self-fashioning. Without denigrating any dolls that might choose to undergo surgery, she questions why *she* would get surgery when she is already “thick” enough, thus challenging the presupposition that a trans woman must always get surgery to feasibly transition. She affirms that she remains a doll even then.

Her lyric about self-fashioning is an intriguing one within the world of the song because she makes an explicit effort to highlight and mention sexual, romantic, or social relations with women but men remain a mysterious variable depending on one's reception of her lyricism. The line “Aunque me tire machito con mujere' por deleite” presents a semantic conundrum. Due to the multiple vernacular meanings of “tire,” the lyric can be read two ways: 1) Though I act

⁶² Muñoz, “Introduction,” 1.

masc/boyishly with women for pleasure; or 2) Though I make out with men and women for pleasure. Interpreting this verse can get further complicated by speculating on the presence of a phantom comma: “Aunque me tire machito, con mujere’ por deleite” [though I make out with men, I do it with women for pleasure]. Villano’s rapping prosody makes it difficult to determine the breaths or pauses in a single verse. The genre she works in has an affinity for eliding grammar’s audible conventions and lyricism often leans into the ability to communicate multiple meanings in a single verse.



Fig. 2, Villano Antillano, *Muñeca*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10-zLAMI1EE>.



Fig. 3, Villano Antillano, *Muñeca*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10-zLAMI1EE>.

If we refer to the video for clarity, the mechanical monotony of customers selecting employees to be serviced by gets interrupted when a woman selects Villano mere seconds after this ambiguous lyric is introduced (fig. 2). Whereas none of the other customers got special treatment or reactions from the rest of the cast behind the counter, this woman client is an exciting and scandalous interruption. Employees start to laugh uproariously and make scissoring gestures with their fingers, speculating about what is about to take place in the intimacy of the backroom (fig. 3). The video then cuts between three separate spectacles: the check out counter where employees brush each others' hair, blow bubbles, dance, sing, and suck on candy suggestively; the smoky backroom where the protagonist and her client caress and kiss each other under blue light; and the removed space where the camera does closeups on Villano

Antillano and Ana Macho as they sing parts of the song. The video ends with a tableau of all of the employees—all transfemme folks—side by side behind the counter, arranged in a variety of poses but all of them aware of each other (fig. 4). However one chooses to read or interpret the lyric previously cited, an analysis of the content of the song alongside the video makes for a compelling argument towards desire, solidarity, and community sustained between women.

Villano shows us new ways of creating and maintaining sociality, of paving forward through the dancefloor, through the street, through the conditions that seek to keep us dispossessed. Her images exist in opposition to the images we see of trans women on the news where they are rarely afforded attention unless they have been murdered. What characterizes these women, these lyrics, these musical vibrations, is an allegiance to laughter, to boisterous queerness, to color and vibrancy that underlines the very spirit of inhabiting the world. If we listen closely, our bodies will respond to this message, too.

On a surface level, the high notes—the treble—contain a forward-drive. While the first, second, and fourth notes last for a single count, the third note is a dotted quarter note (1.5 value). The third note slurs across the pentagram with an imperfect, sensuous drag. The note quivers, as if caught between two noises, as if tripping and stumbling forward. This anticipatory form of musicality is achieved through syncopation.

It is far from uncommon for Urban genres of music, whether hispanophone or anglophone in origin, to use syncopation in their rhythms. By examining the unique sonic profile in “Muñeca,” we can see how Villano’s song exists in conversation with the ways in which the genre has historically served as a tool for the expression and mobilization of communities that otherwise experience difficulty finding space within the public sphere. This analysis also offers us further strategies for reading into the queer possibilities of Urban music’s formal conceits.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines syncopation as “the displacement of regular accents associated with given metrical patterns, resulting in a disruption of the listener’s expectations and the arousal of a desire for the reestablishment of metric normality.”⁶³ This definition operates on a system of prior knowledge where so-called metric normality is a dominant form of musical production, and it is put into contrast with the oddness, the “disruption” and “displacement” of syncopation. It exposes the kinds of “time cycles that we have naturalized and internalized”⁶⁴ and reproduces a binary where there are normative and nonnormative forms. I see the relationship between syncopation and metric normality as akin to the observations scholars Jack Halberstam and Sarah Ahmed have made on temporal logics and orientation. Syncopation, this form of musical arrangement that causes “disorientation,” can serve as an aperture into alternative ways of registering and inhabiting the world. If we are on the off-beat, the awkward asymmetry of syncopation, that unusual metric is “the point from which the world unfolds: the ‘here’ of the body and the ‘where of its dwelling.”⁶⁵ Being removed from time, dizzied within the conventions of the pentagram, not only makes demands of our musical intelligence, but it also formally contributes to the production of new “conceptions of space”⁶⁶ and temporality.

The bass rhythm underlying “Muñeca” is a counterweight to the treble—audible in the “intervals”. Yet, when analyzed on its own, it also has a syncopated beat. The treble soars on its uncanny, unique structure. Meanwhile, the bass enters into a musical lexicon of a very different register. It resembles the son clave beat—an Afro-Caribbean pattern found in popular music of other genres like Mambo, Salsa, or Rumba. It is a pattern that is two measures long and

⁶³ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Syncopation,” accessed November 05, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/syncopation-music>.

⁶⁴ J. Jack Halberstam, “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies,” in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, (New York, USA: NYU Press, 2005), 14-15.

⁶⁵ Sara Ahmed, “INTRODUCTION: Find Your Way,” in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

⁶⁶ Halberstam, “Queer Temporality,” 13.

composed of short and long intervals. The five beats that make up the clave beat are characterized as having a “metrical ambiguity” since the first three beats of it set up an expectation of a triple meter while the last two beats reveal the actual 4/4 meter that structures the rhythm.⁶⁷ The audible rhythm has a “shadow rhythm” as counterpart—as every rhythm does.⁶⁸ The shadow rhythm may not be heard, but it can still be felt and it informs the listener’s musical intelligence and their apprehension of musical patterns.⁶⁹ The clave beat’s musical ambiguity makes it particular among different forms of musical composition because of the degree of musical intelligence it demands from its listener.⁷⁰

The combined effect of dual syncopation between treble and bass leaves the listener queerly, sonically adrift in more ways than one. The deft cross-genre employment of rhythmic conceits in “Muñeca” produces a wholly new sonic landscape through its unique and specific employment of sounds. By moving across genre and meshing together rhythmic conceits—a slant ways orientation and perhaps even an intellectual exercise—“Muñeca” reminds us of the very ambivalence of genre. Rather than read the treble and bass as discrete parts in opposition, I see the polyphonic possibility in their unity. They discursively operate together, as one, to create a musical dwelling point. The body responds: breaths and heartrate juddering and swaying alongside the rhythms—reoriented and diverted from “normative” cycles into a wholly queer way of understanding time.

The anticipatory nature of syncopation produces an obvious space. It is not a space of rest, but a space of activity and unfolding possibility (the brain attempts to identify a pattern, to situate itself, to conjure meaning). The critical importance of anticipation has been elaborated

⁶⁷ Ethan Hein, “Why is Son Clave so Awesome?” The Ethan Hein Blog, December 27, 2013, <http://www.ethanhein.com/wp/2013/why-is-son-clave-so-awesome/>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

upon by José Estebán Muñoz as an affective structure manifesting a “not-yet-conscious...utopian feeling.”⁷¹ When we listen to these rhythms, dance to them, rap alongside them, we are perpetually caught in a state of forward-drive. Perhaps we are not actively conjuring utopias, but, as Muñoz states, we are interpellated into a *feeling* that may be conducive to an alternate way of navigating the world.

Villano expresses a homosocial sentiment in some of her other videos where the main narrative is in between women.⁷² Whatever space exists, musically, socially, or visually—Villano is attempting to mend the gap.



Fig. 4, Villano Antillano, *Muñeca*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10-zLAMIIEE>.

The aesthetic preoccupations of the MV are, in many ways, an intellectual exercise: an investigation into the social constructions of the feminine. Villano's uncompromising, explicitly

⁷¹ Muñoz, “Introduction: Feeling Utopia,” 3.

⁷² See Villano Antillano’s other videos like “Un Amarre” and “Hebilla”.

queer self-referential declarations, visually and lyrically about her own identity and understanding of gender present us with the opportunity to actually widen the scope of our analysis of her work in order to contextualize it within the genre of Urban Puerto Rican music.

Yet, there are elements in the MV that raise critical questions. Though “Muñeca” makes formal moves to enfold or invite transfemmes into it—both visually and lyrically—Villana and Ana Macho are some of the lightest-skinned femmes on screen. They are also the ones that have started to make their way into the music industry, alongside other lightskinned femmes like MaríaJosé. Though both Villano and Ana Macho have been vocal about their experiences with poverty and the lack of accessibility within the industry, their proximity to whiteness and normative beauty standards may have a role in their burgeoning commercial success. While it is progressive that they have managed to break out into the Urban musical scene at all, there remains much to be desired from accessibility within the industry. Just next door to Puerto Rico, in the Dominican Republic, Black and queer femmes like La Pajarita La Paul, Shakatah Astoa, La Delfi, and artistic trio MULA have been and are still likewise pushing against the exclusionary nature of the scene.

It is additionally unclear if the collaborative message espoused on screen is reflective of the dynamics during production. The degree to which the women and even Villana herself had a hand in their own styling or in the general narrative of the MV is unknown. Whereas Villano’s early-career work was with *La Maldad* (a creative studio known for being welcoming to LGBTQ artists), by the time she released “Muñeca” she had partnered with label *La Buena Fortuna*. Director of the MV, César Berríos and producer Ismael Cancel—producer for the band iLe and a former Calle 13 drummer—may have had a significant sway over the development of the MV.

One would hope that the behind-the-scenes ambiance was one of equal collaboration and perhaps even inclusion of emerging queer artists.

Enshrined

I'd like to return to the instant of the shrine to the horniest employee of the month where Villano peers at the viewer from within the confines of a picture frame with her mouth half-parted in a moue of seductive grace (0:37-0:36). This still from the music video, with all of its visual richness, excess, extravagance, and careful aesthetic arrangement is one of the most succinct, subtle moments where I see Villano's interjection into the milieu of Urban culture made startlingly clear.



Fig. 5, Villano Antillano, *Muñeca*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10-zLAMI1EE>.

The whimsy of the transformation of employee of the month into “bellaca del mes” is further compounded by the visual compositions that accompany this linguistic parody. The spectacle of displaying and enshrining the employee of the month is recreated on screen (fig. 5). Fuschia, red, and peach-colored tchotchkes have been arranged with pointed stylization. The

picture frame sits at an angle, nearly centralized in the frame of the video. This double-framing is, in itself a move towards the campy—towards the flirtily self-aware. Within the frame, Villano holds a plastic pistol nozzle scant inches from her face. Draped around the picture frame, there is a garland of pink puff balls. On the table surrounding the picture frame we see a toy gun, a candle, a trophy, jars full of phallic paraphernalia, a my little pony toy, a glass jar with a stopper, a flower, and a bright red purse with an unfurled fan. Each of these details exude an artificiality inherent to their form.

The gaudy cheapness of the clutch purse and fan calls back to indications of a refined traditional brand of femininity that linger in the Puerto Rican imaginary. The waxy luster of the flowers belies the way imitation exists with the duality of: 1) something being its own new thing while simultaneously; 2) existing relationally and referentially to another similar thing. The plastic guns carry the same ontological implication, but they are additionally vehicles for ample semiotic interpretation.

Gun violence is a common and popular topic in Urban music as a reflection of contemporary realities facing Puerto Rican communities and also as an allegory for sexual prowess. Many Urban music artists speak from a position of relative privilege where they do not have to confront the realities of street violence on the day-to-day—but these stories of hardship are harnessed in their lyricism as part of their “street-cred” and their rapper persona. The gun is an indication and symbol of authority that bolsters the rapper’s image. By even placing the gun on-screen, the music video for “Muñeca” enters into the popular visual register of Urban music.

In “Muñeca,” the gun is both innuendo and impotent threat, set in a visual and metaphoric continuity with other phallic symbols. The repeated motif of plasticity, of empty and benign promise, has implications that extend into the realm of performativity. On one level, these

plastic guns put Urban performers, musicians, and artists in their viewfinder and call out their self-fabrications—their mythologizations. On another level, these guns are also symbols that, in their translucent plasticity, shine light through the banality of violence—violence used to further self-fashioning, violence aimed at and concentrated within disenfranchised communities.

The commentary on the banality of violence is produced through sardonic friction both in the lyricism and the accompanying video. The following lyrical verses are illustrative.

Si en calle muero, guaynabicha	If I die on the street, guaynabicha
Ese es mi juego, digo lo que digo porque puedo	That's my game, I say what I say because I can
Empujo lo' botone', yo me atrevo	I push the buttons, I dare
Me encanta ser primero, mi ego e' grande igual que mi dinero	I love being first, my ego's big like my money
Siempre llego tarde porque puedo	I always arrive late because I can
Yo soy la arma letal, yo soy la femme fatale	I am the lethal weapon, I am the femme fatale

The initial verse is the first time that, lyrically, any aspect of violence is mentioned in the song and it's paired with another instance of regional vernacular: guaynabicha. A guaynabicha refers to a particular profile of woman from the town Guaynabo—a town known for its incredibly affluent inhabitants. A guaynabicha (e. g. Guaynabo + bitch) is spoiled, privileged, wears designer clothes, and speaks with a certain inflection. The juxtaposition of the mortal peril that trans sex workers face as streetwalkers and the invocation of this specific type of woman is jarring. Death and excess, richness, a perverted sort of opulence graze elbows in this verse.

The second example that illustrates the banality of violence, with specificity to the formulation of guns in Urban music, is the last verse: “I am the lethal weapon, I am the femme fatale.” This verse works in conjunction with the music video and it produces the double-criticism of the gun, and of the artist-ego-persona. The lyrical assertion matches up with a

scene of an employee whipping out a large pink dildo with a suction cup and slamming it onto the surface of the counter (fig. 6). The interplay between lyrics and image reframe the meaning of “lethal weapon”. The sex toy receives the destructive charge of a weapon and, in concert with the other narrative elements of the video, may indicate an allegiance to queer sexual liberation as a powerful tool. In turn, the lethal weapon and the artist persona’s power are nullified through humor. In this way, the video is very consciously parsing through *meaning* and how we attribute a variety of meanings, images, or associations with certain terms.



Fig. 6, Villano Antillano, *Muñeca*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10-zLAMI1EE>.

Such inversions of power function with stark humor against the stark backdrop of governmental negligence. For more than five years, community organizations like la Colectiva Feminista en Construcción have been making appeals to the government to address the

skyrocketing rates of femicides in Puerto Rico.⁷³ In 2021, governor Pedro R. Pierluisi finally declared a state of emergency, Orden Ejecutiva (OE) 2021-013, in response to the cases of gender-based violence after several protests and campaigns.⁷⁴ 2020 saw a 62% increment in femicides compared with 2019—totaling 60, 6 of which were trans women.⁷⁵ Among others that were concerned about whether the legal amendments would be inclusive of trans individuals, la Colectiva Feminista en Construcción was vocal about advocating for measures that would see to the particular violences that trans individuals face.⁷⁶

Measures to aid trans folks in the forms of legal protections or the criminalization of hate crimes come up short in an attempt to provide them with a better quality of life. The discriminatory responses to trans people seeking help are punitive cruelties that exist alongside the difficulties trans people face while seeking housing, basic living needs, or employment.⁷⁷ Villano’s shrine holds a significance beyond the parody of the work force—it also taps into the visual register of a preemptive memorial shrine.

Conclusion

“Muñeca” invites us into an imaginative process. Villano explores ideas of perception and identity by teasing, questioning, and undoing the linguistic and visual semiotic frameworks that dominate the public sphere. “Muñeca” harnesses the camp aesthetic as a strategy of transgressive humor that exposes the arbitrary, artificial nature of the social rules, conventions,

⁷³ Alejandra Rosa, Esther M. Andrade, Gloriann Sacha Antonetty Lebrón, and Raymond Alicano, “Estado de Emergencia en Puerto Rico: ¿Qué Significa Esto Para las Mujeres Negras en Todas sus Diversidades?” *Revista Étnica*, <https://www.revistaetnica.com/blogs/news/estado-de-emergencia-en-puerto-rico-que-significa-esto-para-las-mujeres-negras-en-todas-sus-diversidades>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Victor Rodríguez Velázquez, “Personas Trans Sufren el Desastre de María Desde la Marginación,” *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo*. September 23, 2019, <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/09/personas-trans-marginacion-huracan-maria/>.

and power structures that underlie our different forms of sociality. Aesthetics merge with lyricism and provide further insight into issues such as labor, gun violence, sexuality, gender, and the very culture of Urban music or musicians. “Muñeca” proudly argues for a broadened horizon of livability, self-fashioning, futurity, and agency for transfemmes.

In the world of “Muñeca,” ambiguity is not only normalized but actively welcomed. The lyrical form of rap that embraces multiple meanings in one verse allows for an expansive, sometimes playful way of articulating the many nuances of gender, desire, and sexuality. Even Villana’s employment of musical conceits like syncopation can serve as an aperture into alternative ways of registering and inhabiting the world. That disruptive metric is “the point from which the world unfolds: the ‘here’ of the body and the ‘where of its dwelling.’”⁷⁸ Being removed from time, dizzied within the conventions of the pentagram, not only makes demands of our musical intelligence, but it also formally contributes to the production of new “conceptions of space”⁷⁹ and temporality.

As a case study, “Muñeca” makes evident the larger trends in the production of cultural objects (specifically Urban music) where appropriations, samplings, and reorientations are abundant and complicate the notion of fixed, rigid categorization. We are ultimately shown a way *through, beyond, and alongside* the people, structures, and images that dominate discursive spaces.

Villana’s act of placing herself alongside other transfemmes of diverse profiles is a powerful visual commitment to solidarity across the queer community, and a statement in favor of longevity. Against a framework of disaster and violence against trans women, “Muñeca” brings together the women of the past with the ones in the present—the ghosts alongside the

⁷⁸ Ahmed, “Introduction,” 8.

⁷⁹ Halberstam, “Queer Temporality,” 13.

living. On screen, women are given a life and sociality beyond their own potential lifespan due to the very medium and distribution of a music video or song.

Longevity is reinforced by the very medium employed—the music video. A parallel exists between the presumed lifecycle of the music video and that of the queer/trans/gnc person in our society as an “intrinsically ephemeral, disposable form”. Music-video studies scholars Diane Railton and Paul Watson remind us music videos have a much more remarkable cultural longevity: “... music videos now no longer, if they ever did, come and go with the release schedule of the song they promote. Indeed, the new and the old, the classic and the contemporary, increasingly circulate and are re-circulated, alongside one another in the present moment of the screen.”⁸⁰ The transgressive, forward-seeing statements about survival and longevity contribute to a culture of continuity within the queer Puerto Rican community and to the Urban subculture as a whole.

“Muñeca” uses a distinctly queer, hyperfemme, coy humor as a strategy to hold all. The intra-community laughter, dance, and revelry conveyed through an abundant, saturated world is not a utopic bubble that alienates the difficulties or dangers of our current social system. We are held in all our manifold selves and emotional states. All our desires and imaginative capacities. When Villana looks at us through the screen, her smirk invites us in: leave behind all structures that presume to know, control, and subdue us. Become part of our party.

⁸⁰ Railton, Diane, and Paul Watson, “INTRODUCTION: THE KLEENEXES OF POPULAR CULTURE?” in *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, (Edinburgh University Press, 201), 6.

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