Heavy Metal Music in the Caribbean Setting: Politics and Language at the Periphery.

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Scholarly attention to Heavy Metal music has increased steadily in the past decade. Along with several conferences on the topic, and numerous books and journal articles, we seem to be witnessing a systematic interest on this musical genre, its participants, and culture. This burgeoning interest and academic endeavor has been labeled as Heavy Metal Studies (or Metal Studies) by engaged scholars. This endeavor, in general, represents good news for all interested in the subject of Heavy Metal. Still, just as with any emerging field of inquiry, initial steps need to be taken with precaution in order to avoid the pitfall of conceptualizing this emerging interest and academic work as a uniform field of inquiry, or even more problematic, addressing the multiple expressions of Heavy Metal music throughout different countries or regions as a continuum. Our chapter in this collection aims to shed some light on the particularities of a metal scene or community in the Caribbean setting as a contribution to the diversification of Heavy Metal Studies and its areas of action/research.

Wallach, Berger & Greene, in their edited volume entitled Metal Rules the Globe, make an excellent argument for addressing the manifestations of Heavy Metal music across the world through the lens of plurality, and not focusing exclusively on the commonalities of its manifestations throughout the globe. Metal music, even when anchored in common definitions, is experienced differently in varied settings. Therefore, the authors suggest that there is a need to expand research on metal scenes outside of Anglo-American contexts, in order to explore the nuances fostered by sociocultural forces in these different settings. That suggestion perfectly reflects the main objective of our study, which aims to document the sociocultural and political challenges faced by an emergent metal scene in the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. But before we can...
reflect on Metal in Puerto Rico, we need to elaborate on the Island’s social context.

The Context of Puerto Rico: A Breeding Ground for Metal Music?

Puerto Rico is one of the Greater Antilles located in the Caribbean. It is 114 miles long and 42 miles wide with an estimated population of almost 4 million. The social scenario in Puerto Rico is dire, to say the least. Almost 60% of families live in poverty and unemployment has surpassed 16%. This situation worsened in 2010 when approximately 30,000 government jobs were lost in just one year. Nearly 40% of the population receives aid from the United States’ Nutritional Assistance Program and 64% receives aid for medical care. To make matters worse 15% of the population is illiterate. Poverty is pandemic, although heavily buffered by illegal economies. This fosters an epidemic of violence with more than 1,000 violent deaths per year.

Puerto Rico’s political scenario is also problematic. The Island has never been politically independent. From 1493 to 1898 it lived under Spanish rule, which explains why its traditions are predominantly Hispanic and its everyday language is Spanish. In 1898 the island became a non-incorporated territory of the United States at the end of the Spanish-American War. U.S. Congress, even today, withholds total control over areas such as the applicability of federal law and jurisdiction of federal courts, citizenship, commerce, currency, migration, patent laws, communications, mail, customs, air and sea transportation, military service, international relations, and treaty development. There have been massive efforts to forcefully incorporate Puerto Ricans into the American ethnic “melting pot”. Methods used for this purpose include: the imposition of English as the official language of the education system for over 40 years, systematic political persecution of nationalist and pro-independence advocates, biological experimentation without consent, and compulsory participation in U.S. military conflicts. The colonial nature of the US-Puerto Rico relation has been widely researched and documented in social sciences literature and reflects a country with distinctive Hispanic influences, confronted with its vague integration into the US. Puerto Rico is deeply embedded in what academics have labeled the “colonial dilemma”. It is a Caribbean community existing as a non-incorporated territory of a larger and culturally different nation.

Considering the proposition made by Wallach and his colleagues that “metal music answers the question of how ethics fit into a disenchanted universe by offering a promise of community”, Puerto Rico’s problematic social scenario would seem like a perfect breeding ground for this music. And yet the metal community in Puerto Rico, although present since the early 80s, is very much an underground phenomenon to which the general population does not pay atten-
In fact, the small metal community that does exist is constantly challenged by multiple factors including lack of access to economic resources for music related activities (e.g. limited establishment of sustained metal concerts from non-local bands), a shortage of physical spaces for communal actions (e.g. shortage of metal specific clubs or venues), and lack of participation in locally developed events (e.g. events that are more costly to organize than what is generated through ticket sales), among others. And yet, even while facing these challenges the local metal community is ever-present, even in small numbers.

A Metal Community in this Small Caribbean Island

As social scientists we are always intrigued by the use of the concept of “community” to describe a group of individuals. Although the concept is frequently used to describe groups of people, it can vary widely depending on the field of study that uses it. For example, psychology is usually concerned with the cognitive connection of the communal experience and addresses “sense of community” as a variable of interest. Computer scientists have been more concerned with the pragmatic aspects of the communal, specifically its practical and common practices. Sociology, based on the work of Benedict Anderson focusing on nations as communities, has paid more attention to the “imagined” qualities of the communal. A community is “imagined” because although its entire population will never actually meet each other face-to-face, a sense of connectedness exists between them fostering camaraderie even in light of the potential differences that exist between its members, and hence the emergence of the communal. Heavy Metal studies, have gravitated more towards the sociological approach focusing on the way participants in metal scenes around the world share commonalities in identity discourses, imagine their local scenes and international interconnectedness. Social scientists such as Sam Dunn and Deena Weinstein, have stated outright that such a community exists at both the global and the local levels. Still, research needs to systematically address how local sociocultural and political factors shape, or at least influence, the emergent local communities in varied places in the world. This is particularly important in settings that are peripheral, both geographically and culturally, to long-established metal scenes throughout the world. Such is the case of Puerto Rico, which is perceived by many as a tropical paradise deeply entrenched in its Hispanic roots and traditional music, such as bomba, plena, and salsa. Although few would associate Puerto Rico with Heavy Metal music, it is ever-present in an underground community. It is our aim to document the sociocultural and political factors that exert influence over the emergent metal scene in the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico through systematic social research.
Method

In order to achieve the aim of our study, we implemented an ethnographic research design with both observational and in-depth qualitative interview techniques. We selected this design in order to become better acquainted with a sector of the population in Puerto Rico that manifests itself as an underground movement, almost completely out of the public eye. Furthermore, these qualitative techniques allowed us to become participatory agents within the community as part of our data gathering procedures.

Our ethnographic outings were carried out from January to July of 2012 in venues at which the metal community usually meets in Puerto Rico throughout the year. These included mostly small clubs that are used as concert halls or meeting places for communal interaction (e.g. multiple concert events, a flea market specializing in metal merchandise, among other spaces). Our team totaled 104 hours of field observation through this period. All ethnographic outings were summarized through extensive notes, which were then shared and discussed among members of our team. Our discussions addressed commonalities in these observed experiences, while also exploring different interpretations of events in which team members expressed disagreement.

As part of the ethnographic component of our study, we also invited members of the community to engage in individual in-depth interviews. If they were interested in participating, their contact information was exchanged in order to establish a time and place for the interview that was to their liking. We provided participants with our phone numbers in case they had doubts about the study. Consent was acquired orally upon initiating the interview. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. A total of 30 individuals participated in our in-depth qualitative interviews. Their socio-demographic data can be seen in Table 1. With this gathered data we engaged in our analysis.

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In order to ensure the quality of our analysis, we started with a supervised transcription process to ensure fidelity. Team members were trained by the investigators on the appropriate way to transcribe an audio interview. After transcriptions were carried out, the team read the transcriptions while listening to the audiotapes in order to identify inconsistencies between them. The team met and corrected all errors in the transcriptions. Once this process was completed for each audiotape, the data analysis procedures began.

The research team met on a weekly basis to identify themes or patterns that emerged from our transcriptions. The team developed a list of these themes to keep as a master list for the analysis. These themes continued to be modified throughout the reading of all the transcriptions. Once those general themes were identified for all the interviews, the team searched for texts that evidenced them in the transcriptions. All selected texts for each theme were discussed in weekly meetings to ensure that they were appropriately selected by all members of the team. This consensus-based dispute resolution procedure will generate an inter-rater reliability of 100% for the analysis. This step was carried out in order to ensure that the analysts agreed on the final interpretation of the coded passages and to avoid the inclusion of verbalizations that are unclear in their phrasing or overall meaning. The text selection and coding process was carried out with the use of qualitative analysis computer software HyperResearch (V.3.). Throughout the process several steps were taken in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data.21,22 These included: (a) supervising the overall transcription process of the audio taped interviews and focus groups, (b) meeting with members of the research team to discuss the quality of these transcriptions, and (c) establishing group discussions throughout the data collection and analysis process so that team members could discuss concerns and findings throughout the data analysis process. The results from this process are presented in the following section.
Results

For the purpose of this book chapter we will concentrate on two particular issues that became present throughout our ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews, and that reflect the role of the Island’s social and cultural context in the process of building a metal scene. The first is the role of the Island’s political relation to the United States, and the second is related to the challenges of language and identity in this context.

Social Dynamics, Politics and Puerto Rico’s Colonial Dilemma

Our initial ventures into the underground metal scene in Puerto Rico yielded what could be interpreted as conflicting, and yet co-existing, interpretations with regards to the very existence of a metal community. While some participants described the existence of a communal perspective and a local metal scene, others seemed to focus on the dilemmas and tensions within it. It was clear from our ethnographic observations that communal practices were present. Some of these included collective events (e.g. concerts), shared histories (e.g. related to bands and previous events), and group specific venues of communication (e.g. through locally generated metal related facebook pages). And yet, the existence of this metal scene was sometimes described as tense with regards to its social dynamics, and suffering from lack of support from its own members.

This perceived lack of support manifested itself in several ways. First, there were manifested concerns over the lack of participation in local events. In fact, our ethnographic outings revealed that shows from local bands could have as little as 25 audience members, and even when international bands participated in the underground scene,’ at no time did we witness more than 200 audience members. Second, community members voiced their frustration over the presence of small sectarian groups within the scene, which used loyalties to specific promoters to boycott other communal activities. Third, and probably most concerning, was that social interaction during concerts was described as potentially problematic at any given moment. Initially, lack of solidarity seemed to be a pervasive theme. For example, a local fan with long-standing ties to the metal scene described his participation in the Wacken festival in Germany. He stated the following:

I was at Wacken and there were five people around me. One was Norwegian, one Polish, an Italian, one person from France... it was the like the UN! You looked at them, they looked at you, and they would raise their arms as if to say ‘look at us brother, we are here!’ You do that in Puerto Rico and they would say, ‘What the fuck are you looking at?’
This perceived lack of solidarity and support for a local metal scene or a community was also evidenced in interviews with musicians and recording artists. The few Puerto Rican bands that record their music can face challenges in accessing the resources to develop quality products to disseminate among their fans. These challenges seem to take a toll on a potential sense of community, as lack of support seems to drown out feelings of interconnectedness to a local scene. A local musician echoed these feelings and experiences, when he told us the following:

As a fan, I feel part of a larger international community. As a musician, I feel trapped in this Island where there are few spaces to take our music to. That has changed with the Internet… but I have yet to see that impact here.

The problem of sharing local metal music throughout the Island was also addressed by an independent label owner when he stated that Puerto Ricans had a hard time consuming locally produced music. There seemed to be a feeling of a constant devaluation of the local scene and its output.

Puerto Ricans here… I know people, and I can point them out to you, that won’t buy a CD from a Puerto Rican band. Sometimes this place is like a bucket of crabs… when one tries to get out, another pulls him back in.

In light of these descriptions of lack of support and vague feelings of connectedness without specific communal actions, we decided to ask participants for their explanations to this phenomenon. Participants described the legacy of colonialism, specifically the Island’s political status, and its negative outlook on what is considered “local” as a potential explanation. They established direct links between the current state of the metal community and the political dimensions of colonialism. Participants described how local efforts made by metal bands were not supported, as they were not perceived to “measure up” to the musical quality of output in other settings. Although, this might be empirically true due to lack of funds or musical experience, among many other potential variables, it seems revealing that informants would be so keen on addressing the Island’s colonial status as an explanation for their perceived lack of support and rejection of output by local bands. Their verbalizations echo research literature on the way the “colonial dilemma” influences how identity discourses and practices are negotiated in the Island.

Based on the works of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, scholars have pointed to how the colonial situation fosters the de-valorization of the history and culture of local people. This leads to negative self-perception and self-portrayal. The colonial process promotes a sense of inferiority among the colonized. Everything associated with them is deprived of worth and a negative perception of the individual, group, and society as a whole is constructed. Although the colonial debate in Puerto Rico might seem unrelated to Heavy Metal studies,
the members of the local scene that participated in our interviews drew links between them. Although manifested in our interviews, participants were quick to point out that most bands avoided talking about the political situation of the Island through their music. One of them stated that “talking about nationalism in Puerto Rico is like talking about Satanism (…) When you talk about the political in Puerto Rico you might as well be crucified”. A political analysis of the Island’s current relation to the United States seems to be an ever-present discussion among members of the metal community, but few bands integrate it to their musical or lyrical output.

One might argue that the Island’s political status is an unimportant subject when trying to describe the local metal scene in Puerto Rico. We wish to stress the opposite side of that argument, and highlight how the Island’s social and political context shaped how community members describe and explain the challenges they face, how they interpret their situation, and provide meaning to the difficulties they confront as a group. Therefore, the colonial dilemma needs to be taken into consideration as an existing cultural and political explanation within the community as to why there is lack of solidarity among its members. Still, this described lack of solidarity in no way should be interpreted as a manifestation of the non-existence of a metal community. In fact, active participants in the community stressed that their actions (e.g. manifested through self-funded radio and internet programs) aimed to foster and strengthen that existing community. For example, for the past year the community has actively engaged in a weekly web based live broadcast under the name of “RockSpot”. It is hosted by four local fans who discuss general metal news in Puerto Rico and the world. Our research team had the opportunity to visit one of the live broadcasts of the show and sit in as the “unofficial audience” for the night as part of our ethnographic observations. At first glance, the show seems to be purely done for the fun of it, enjoying music and company. And yet, in-depth interviews with the hosts revealed a more specific agenda behind their effort. One of them explained: “That is why we are doing the show, to stop stereotypes and help people see that we contribute to society, and maybe more than they think. We have never been a threat to anyone. We just like a particular style of music”. What seemed to be a fun based effort, quickly turned into a more serious agenda, in order to reduce stereotypes and strengthen the metal community in the Island. It is evident that even while challenges exist, local metal fans continually work in the development of their community.

Participants frequently discussed the Island’s colonial dilemma and the subsequent devaluation of the local. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the negative interpretations of insular identities do not go unchallenged. Although the discussion on the colonial seems to be muted in the local bands output, there are other instances in which Puerto Rican national identities seem to be manifested as a source of pride within the community. For example, in several of our ethnographic outings we have been able to watch a local metal band called
Death Arrangement (DA) perform as part of the programmed shows. DA is a band that emerged in Puerto Rico in 2008 and combined multiple genres of metal (i.e., death, thrash, and progressive) into a coherent sound that is quite distinct in the local scene. They have made a name for themselves through a highly professional ethos, which is manifested through the use of quality backdrops in their concerts and having released two videos through web-based outputs. In fact, DA is probably one of the very few bands in Puerto Rico to have ever filmed a professional video for their songs.

What is interesting about DA for the purposes of our analysis is the manner in which they start each and every concert. Before beginning, the bass guitarist plays the first 13 notes from the “Borinqueña”. The “Borinqueña” is Puerto Rico’s national anthem and is widely held by the vast majority of Puerto Ricans as an important song representative of a local national identity. We understand that this practice is an important piece of analysis for the local metal scene with regards to two dimensions. First, it serves as a mechanism to anchor the foreign (e.g., metal music) to a local national identity, as a way of expressing that Puerto Ricans can also engage in the creation of quality Heavy Metal music even when their surrounding culture seems to foster the contrary. Second, the “Borinqueña” has two co-existing versions that are politically used by locals as a reflection of their positioning on the colonial dilemma. The official version has lyrics describing the beauty of the Island, while the revolutionary version mentions the need to extract oneself from colonial rule (from Spain at that particular moment in time) and engage in armed revolt. The second, of course, is widely used by political movements that highlight Puerto Rican national identities and separation from the colonial relation to the United States. We had the opportunity to interview DA as part of our study and learned that the use of the “Borinqueña” emerged quite naturally as part of their band practices, and was initially brought forth as an idea by their bass player who politically self-identifies as a pro-independence, and therefore anti-colonial, individual.

Although participants described Puerto Rico’s political status and colonial relation to the United States as a problematic situation that influences the local scene, it became readily apparent in our ethnographic outings that bands such as DA challenged such notions, even if for only a few moments in their sets. Although the band members are the first to make it clear that they do not wish to be political activists through their music, they also recognize the influence of Latin American artists in their musical upbringing. Still, it should be mentioned that challenges to the colonial discourse have been present in the last two decades in the local metal scene. For example, Puya is a native band that was born in 1992 out of the remnants of a trio of local virtuoso players entitled Whisker Biscuit. With the addition of a singer, Puya became the most salient Puerto Rican metal band of the decade. Based in Florida, they made extensive contributions to highlighting the potential sounds that a Puerto Rican metal band can achieve when integrating traditional metal with local instrumentation and national related themes. Puya came to be known as one of the few metal bands to
integrate a discussion on Puerto Rican national identity issues throughout their music. This was achieved sonically through the use of local instrumentation (e.g. percussion and string instruments such as the Cuatro⁴) and lyrical themes related to identity issues faced by Puerto Ricans embedded in the colonial dilemma. Puya sounds like a metal band on Latino infused steroids. We can’t think of a better way to describe it. Their initial album shows the Island of Puerto Rico behind chains, which could be interpreted as a manifestation of oppression over the nation. And yet, upon closer inspection it can be seen that joint hands, in a potential reflection of local solidarity, form the chain. Even their early artwork reflected the tension between impact of the colonial and the emergence of a solidary community. The lyrics to the song “Oasis” from their 1999 album *Fundamental* continue to evidence a strong concern for interpreting the local in a positive light.²⁵

I have been doing time all this time throughout the dry lands, looking for a path that was already written in my hand. Because what goes around must come back around to the first place it was found. Borinquén my friend is where it’s at, and my beat will always tell you that.

After Puya’s hiatus, its lead guitarist Ramón Ortiz went on to create Ankla²⁵ which continued the Latin infused metal direction. Still, it is his most recent solo album entitled *Ortiz* in which his fusion of Puerto Rican traditional instruments and songs are seamlessly intertwined with metal music. In summary, through Puya, Ankla, and now his solo career, Ramón Ortiz has managed to bridge the gap between local culture, national identity, and metal music. One listen to his musical output and it almost seems to point towards a new direction to follow, one now full of pride, for a local metal community that is concerned over how the colonial process influences their development and survival. This concern over the political, and its manifestation through metal music, was described by one participant as a catalyst for a critical examination of Puerto Rico’s relation to the US. He stated:

One thing that is important for me is that metal open the doors to have access to particular knowledge and specific political positions in my life. I have to say it was due to my listening of metal music (…). I believe in the Independence of Puerto Rico, and I believe in Socialism. How did metal lead me to that? Well if you listen to a Megadeth song, it is clear that the context of Puerto Rico is different, but you start to question that discourse which has been passed on to you that Americans are good. It is Americans criticizing their own system! They are supposed to live in a much better situation than us! Then you start to think…

As it can be seen through the verbalization of our participants, observations from ethnographic outings and lyrics from influential bands in Puerto Rico, the colonial dilemma seems to be ever-present for the metal community in the
Island and it is not farfetched to position it as an important theme for analysis when explaining their challenges and aspirations. Although sometimes used as an explanation for the devaluation of the local and national, the colonial has also been systematically challenged through metal music. It is in this dichotomy that the colonial dilemma influences metal fans’ interpretations of their context, while sometimes fostering cultural resistance.

**The Challenges Posed by Language**

As we stated earlier, communal practices have an imaginary dimension to them as these are not always geographical in nature and all their members rarely know each other face-to-face. Still, these imaginary practices can also become materialized in communal actions. Throughout our study it became readily apparent that some local metal fans had historically shown interest in surpassing the symbolic nature of communal life, and engaged in concrete actions in order to materialize the Heavy Metal experience. Still, these experience are also embedded in the local social, cultural and political context of the Island. Therefore, they are also influenced by debates regarding politics and national identities. The metal community is therefore not imagined in a vacuum, and it therefore reflects its context. This was particularly evident in discussions related to language issues within the metal community. At *prima facie* the debate seems quite simple enough and is manifested through a tension between the use of Spanish and/or English in metal related practices. Upon further examination is reveals itself as a more complex phenomenon in which national identities seem to be at play. Let us examine one particular example.

The Puerto Rico Metal Alliance (PRMA) is a group of local musicians, fans, and promoters who have established a joint web-based effort via Facebook and Myspace to “provide services that contribute to the development of a community of persons interested in metal music in Puerto Rico”. Their vision mentions the need to establish “channels of communication” between its members. The Alliance even has a set of core values which include: “honesty, commitment, respect, and service”. The PRMA’s facebook page has become a frequently sought after space to find out about upcoming concerts from local and visiting international bands. Probably more important, it has become a space of group socialization in which older metal fans inform younger ones of Puerto Rican metal bands that are currently disbanded.

One would think that the creation of such a communal venue would be unproblematic, and yet the sociocultural and political realities of the Island’s context manifest themselves in the process. For example, one of the main debates regarding the creation of the PRMA was its name. While it is currently used in English, some founding members seemed to resent that Spanish was not used to correctly name the “Alianza Metalera de Puerto Rico” (Spanish for PRMA). One organizer explained:
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The political issue (i.e. Island’s political status as a US colony) always gets in the way… the fact that it’s called the ‘Puerto Rico Metal Alliance’ was an incredible debate topic. ‘It has to be in Spanish!’ ‘It has to be in English!’ people would argue. You could see the political clash. (…) That is something that maybe makes us different from the rest of the world metal community (i.e. language and political status). We are talking about a market, and English sells more than Spanish, like it or not. We had to take it to a vote, and finally English won out.

English truly won out, but not without members of the group feeling like it was a battle for a piece of national identity (manifested through language issues), rather than the name of the Alliance. In fact, the PRMA’s logo shows an indigenous symbol of the “coquí,” which is a small frog endemic to the Island, and is named after the sound they make at night²⁰. This symbol is commonly used by sectors of the population who are proud of the Island’s cultural heritage including those that promote political separation from the United States. Therefore, in the PRMA’s logo we can see the tension between the need for internationalization and fostering the local, with its implications for the value placed in language and local identities. Although they coexist on their Facebook page, our research evidences the ideological tension based on the colonial dilemma and its manifestation, in this case through language.

Still, the debate over language and its meaning for the metal community in Puerto Rico seems to be ever-present. A singer for a local metal band described how he preferred to sing in English, and perceived the push for integrating Spanish into local bands was a consequence of the emergence of the “Rock en Español” (Rock in Spanish) movement characteristic of the 90’s throughout Latin America. While describing this process within his band he mentioned the following:

We always sang in English. At that time we didn’t think about it. In the late 90s we discussed singing in Spanish. That was when the boom of ‘Rock in Spanish’ was in. Everyone here started playing in Spanish. I am not sure if it was because a nationalistic movement was brewing… If you didn’t sing in Spanish you were a sell-out. Some members wanted to do so… and I said no. I won’t sing in Spanish. It’s not that I have anything against it… I speak Spanish. I just can’t see Heavy Metal in Spanish. That’s like singing Salsa in English.

This sentiment was not shared by all participants. A host for a local web based metal related show linked this type of position on language issues that emanate from the colonial experience. He stated:

I have had a friend of ours say, ‘Metal can’t be sung in any other language other than English’. Therefore, metal in Spanish is an aberration’. That is the position of the colonized! They are colonized! Latin American has great bands…
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Argentina has great bands… Many of their bands criticized dictatorships. They used metal with feeling… as musical protest. Island life…

Of course, as with so many other cultural debates, answers are not simple or straight forwards. From these initial verbalizations it would seem that a crude equation was being implemented in which Spanish was a symbol of national pride, and English a manifestation of cultural subjugation to the colonial power. Although this might be true for some individuals, a look at the experiences of established bands seem to point towards the use of both languages as a reflection of being embedded in hybrid spaces. For example, Puya used both Spanish and English in their albums even while fostering an almost nationalistic perspective in their music. This in itself is a reflection of the strong migration history of Puerto Ricans towards the United States. Another example, the case of the band Dantesco, requires further examination.

Dantesco is an Epic/Doom metal band that emanated from Puerto Rico in 2003 and is still active on the local scene. From our perspective, and based on our ethnographic research, this is perceived by local fans to be the most important current band on the Island. They have achieved ambitions to which other local bands can only aspire, they have released five CDs, toured Latin America, several states in the US, and countries in Europe. Their case is interesting for the debate regarding language issues as they have released albums in both Spanish and English. Their first full-length release, entitled De la Mano de la Muerte (Holding Death’s Hand) was historic in the local metal scene both due to its professional musicianship and the use of Spanish as its main language in a metal release.

The band’s singer, who goes by the artistic name of Erico Dantesco, is a key component to the bands sound having cultivated his tenor style voice throughout tours with opera companies in Europe. He holds a master’s degree in philosophy from the University of Puerto Rico, which serves to make the band’s lyrics complex, thoughtful, and saturated with historical references, far exceeding other local bands in beauty and depth. When interviewed about their use of Spanish for their first CD, he stated the following:

I started to write the first songs in Spanish because I had a vision of doing something really poetic. May Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky forgive me, but there is nothing like Spanish to write with passion. The strength it has, and the passion, allows you to write in an intense manner. That helped us. When people heard that they said wow! If we had done it in English, we would have been just another band.

Subsequent records have included songs in both English and Spanish. When asked if they were concerned that this might be interpreted by fans as unusual, he explained that language was not a barrier for them. He stated the following:
The logic is that we do things like we want to. The next album (entitled *We Don’t Fear your God*) will be in English. But afterwards we will continue to sing in Spanish as we have already given fans the satisfaction (of having a CD in English). But singing in English is not done for exposure. Our first CD was in Spanish and it was the one to take us to Europe, and had people listening to us in Japan and Russia.

The importance of Dantesco’s reflection on the use of Spanish and English is dual. On the one hand, it stresses the importance placed on Spanish as a beautiful and poetic language (and therefore valid) that can be used by a local metal band. On the other, it systematically uses English as a way of expanding a fan base and communication with non-Spanish speakers. Still, the interchange between both languages does not seem to be anchored to the political and the perceived loss of a national identity is not at play. Although this might seem contradictory to the verbalizations presented before, it evidences how the debate over language among the metal community in Puerto Rico is quite complex and interpreted from different perspectives, just like one would expect from other cultural phenomena. It can be both politically sensitive at times, and a manifestation of acceptable hybrid practices at others.

### Aggressive Music at the Periphery

For an outsider, Heavy Metal music can be an intimidating entity to deal with. Its volume, speed, and sheer emotionality allow it to be systematically criminalized as a catalytic agent for aggressive practices. In this process, the concept of “aggression” in itself is ascribed a negative connotation as a potential challenge to social order. After all, most of us aspire to live and coexist in peaceful societies. Still, as the emerging literature on aggressive music suggests, it is the role of academic research to examine the underlying meanings and practices of this genre of music in order to describe the significances ascribed to it, and the message that those who create and enjoy it wish to transmit through it. This is no simple task, as social convention would suggest that we simply label it as violent and unneeded behavior.

This critical examination needs to take into consideration that the social meanings of Heavy Metal music will vary depending on the social setting in which it is created and manifested. Heavy Metal Studies, as an emerging field of inquiry needs to avoid the pitfalls of engaging in academic imperialism, and neglecting to examine how metal scenes, which are not part of “traditional” metal scenes (e.g. particular cities in USA and Europe), have existed in the past decades or are currently emerging.

The Caribbean setting, characterized by experiences of hybridity in terms of language, race, religiosity, and nationality due to its histori-
cal/geographical positioning, needs to be included in this research venture. Puerto Rico in particular, being the only traditional colony still left in the Caribbean, needs to be part of the emerging research ventures that academics are addressing as part of the study of Heavy Metal and other forms of aggressive music. Its particular context, as we have aimed to show in this chapter, brings forth the challenges created by its political relation to the US and the multiple meanings ascribed to language selection for creating metal music. As we have shown, individuals in the local metal scene use this political situation as an explanatory starting point for some of the particular challenges faced by the community and the manner in which metal is produced and consumed. The complexities of building a metal scene at the periphery of traditional epicenters of aggressive music should not be ignored, in order to have a truly encompassing understanding of the role of Heavy Metal throughout the world. In the case of the underground metal scene in Puerto Rico, debates over nationality and culture in light of the colonial situation shape how the community imagines itself, and therefore how it interprets and produces its practices related to heavy metal music.

**Notes**


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1 We use the concept of “manifestations” in its most ample sense in order to describe all the practices, individual and collective, that are part of the
metal experience. These can be as varied as listening to metal music, participating in concerts, building a local scene, and/or describing the emergence of a particular subgenre, among other activities.

ii Although the social situation of the Island is unavoidably negative, Puerto Ricans have been found to be among the happiest countries in the world on several surveys carried out by recognized international organizations. This has been attributed to the importance placed on family and social support in Puerto Rican culture.

iii Just as with any politically controversial topic, arguments can be made about the Island’s benefits of its colonial dilemma. For example, Puerto Rico receives federal aid for housing, nutrition, and education that make it different from other Caribbean islands by increasing quality of life and access to goods. Still, for the purposes of our analysis, we will focus on the cultural implications of the US/Puerto Rico relation and how members of the local metal scene interpret it.

iv The exception to this rule might be when international bands visit the Islands and rile up the religious right in moral panic. This was the case of Lamb of God as recently as 2010.

v Three examples of such events include visits from Alcest (France), the Absence (US), and Havok (US) during 2012.

vi Although descriptions of the communal in our interviews seemed to focus on the challenges faced, we should stress that upon observation an evident sense of community was present as manifested through engagement in local events, Internet forums, and verbalizations of concern over the future of the scene.

vii These individuals are fans, some of which at some point have been involved in the development of local concerts as promoters and have ties to local television outlets. They are: Rafa Bracero, Elliot Diez, Lechón Atómico (stage persona for Juan Solá Sloan), and Hugh Lynch.

viii Although this might seem like a normal process for established bands, this is one of the very few groups to have such graphics in the entire Island. In a setting with very little resources, such a “minor” detail is interpreted by local members of the scene as an important step in having a professional band.

ix DA also developed a metal version of Celia Cruz’s song entitled Bravo (DA covered the adaptation made by Enrique Bunbury and Nacho Vegas of the original song). Celia Cruz is a famous Cuban-American singer who was known world-wide as the “Queen of Salsa” or “La Guarachera
In referencing her music, DA show their links to Caribbean inspired music, even when their audience may be unaware of it. In our interviews, they also listed Silvio Rodriguez (Cuban folk singer) and La Lupe (Cuban-American salsa singer) as influences, both controversial figures in Latin American music for their political opinions (e.g. Silvio) and performance style (e.g. La Lupe).

x The “Cuatro” Puerto Rico’s national instrument. Shaped like a small guitar, it has ten strings separated in five courses. It is commonly used to play Puerto Rico’s traditional music which is closely linked to life in the countryside or inner part of the Island.

xi This symbol has been used by bands like Puya and Nonpoint, to reflect their strong Puerto Rican roots even when residing within the continental US.

xii This last sentence was mentioned with disdain. It should be noted that the participant linked this issue to “Island life”. This is a very insightful comment as the same debate is being carried out by the metal community in the Island of Cuba. This was the subject of a web-based poll during June 2012 at the metal site http://www.cuba-metal.com. The options for the survey were Spanish, English, and Spanglish.