

Most Campy Objects Are Urban: Transgression in Villano Antillano's “Muñeca”

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*no soy una chica normal, todo' saben que yo soy
una muñeca*

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. The third beat slurs across the pentagram with an imperfect, sensuous drag. The note quivers, as if caught between two noises, as if tripping and stumbling forward. The treble soars on its uncanny, unique structure. And, over it all, Villano's rapped flow beckons us. The body responds: breath and heart rate 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.

la muñeca

Villano Antillano rose to prominence in the local Puerto Rican Urban music scene in 2018. As of 2022, her discography consists of one album and eighteen singles. Her music has been described as having the “powerful and aggressive” rhythmic attributes of rap, trap, reggaeton, and electronica.¹ Most of her collaborations have been with fellow queer, female artists like Ana Macho, Tokischa, Young Miko, or Paopao. Despite being an emerging artist in the Urban scene, Villano has been making large strides forward toward infusing the genre with a queer sensibility.

Villano's polyvalent expressive practice 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,

¹ “Quién es Villano Antillano, la Primera Artista Transfemenina que Colaboró con BZRP,” *Infobae*, June 9, 2022. <https://www.infobae.com/america/entretenimiento/2022/06/09/quien-es-villano-antillano-la-primera-artista-transfemenina-que-colaboro-con-bzrp/>.

imagery, and uninhibited transfemme subjectivity moves through Urban Latin traditions with a keen, self-assessing authority. She is both within the conventions and outside of them. She reproduces imaginaries regarding trans women while parodying them with Caribbean campiness. Her artistic practice 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 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. To occupy the space for me is activism and representation.”² Underground music—now including rap, reggaeton, and trap—is the avenue through which socially disenfranchised artists are able to speak truth to their experiences and insert their subjectivities into a broader, often hostile, site of cultural discourse.

In the case of her 2021 single “Muñeca,”³ Villano uses rap to center the experiences and aesthetics of transfemme people. As described in the official music video for the single, *muñeca* is a term used in 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. In this sense, *muñeca* is used to indicate levels of “passability” within cisheterosexual standards of femininity. In Spanish, the term carries an additional connotation associated with sex work. Yet terms used as pejorative signifiers within dominant linguistic norms can be reclaimed by groups who are subjected to verbal brutalization. Naming folds itself into a variety of mobilization and agency strategies regarding identity. Through playing on the image and idea of the *muñeca*, Villano self-reflexively challenges the imaginaries that exist in Puerto Rican society regarding trans 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).

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. In

her 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].

ya tengo la tiara como Plastique

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 celebrates 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.” *Gradi* “to walk, step, go,” or even “to wander” amongst the bodies that surround you.⁴ Through them. As them. On the dance floor, listening queerly, I am *trans* because I am already beside myself—euphoric and undone—beyond the boundaries of myself. When we transgress—from the Latin verb *transgredi*, meaning to “step across”—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 Villano’s queer world, which is both speculative and referential to the realities that trans women face in the labor market. Yet the framework of the whole narrative 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.

2 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>.

3 Villano Antillano, “Villano Antillano x Ana Macho - Muñeca (Video Oficial),” June 17, 2021, YouTube video, 3:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10-zLAMIEE>.

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

Scholar José Esteban 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶ However, as a form of queer parody, camp extends beyond the aesthetic. Camp can be harnessed as a political tactic or strategy of resistance that imbues signifiers with new meaning and exposes the inherent artifice and contrived nature of dominant ideology.⁷

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

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.⁸

Aesthetics, for Villano, 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.

Todo’ dicen que me veo enticing

Shortly after Villano enters the building, we see her working behind the counter with other employees, all dressed in similar uniforms (fig. 1). The muñecas of this video bring to mind sexy, coy candy-shop workers, baby dolls, drive-in roller skaters, or maids. The design of the uniform flounces through the lurid landscapes of fetish and fantasy, making it difficult to align it with one specific referent. The viewer is made all the more aware of their own biases or referents. The uniforms do not instruct or make



Figure 1a. Villano Antillano, “Muñeca”, 2021 (still). Music video, with sound; duration: 3:10 min.



Figure 1b. Villano Antillano, “Muñeca”, 2021 (still). Music video, with sound; duration: 3:10 min.

⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction: Feeling Utopia,” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 7.

⁶ Muñoz, “Introduction: Feeling Utopia,” 7.

⁷ Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

⁸ 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/>.



Figure 2. Villano Antillano, "Muñeca", 2021 (still).
Music video, with sound; duration: 3:10 min.

assertions about what a "positive or productive representation" of trans-femininity constitutes. Instead, they become fixed as a signal toward historical attempts to reify the appropriate boundaries for the female body.

However, the uniform is also another way to establish a new form of sociality within the music video. When Villano enters the shop, she joins a community of women who are visually equalized. Instead of having a homogenizing effect, the similarity of the uniforms imbues all of the trans-femme employees with equal importance. The camera never once deviates from capturing the joy, play, and care that the women behind the counter offer each other.

It must be noted that despite formal moves to enfold or invite trans-femmes into the music video, Villano and fellow "Muñeca" collaborator Ana Macho are some of the lightest-skinned femmes on-screen. Both artists have been vocal about their experiences with poverty and the lack of accessibility within the industry, but their proximity to whiteness and

normative beauty standards may have a role in their burgeoning commercial success. It is additionally unclear if the collaborative message espoused on screen reflects the dynamics during production. The director and producer of the music video may have had a significant sway over its development. One would hope that the behind-the-scenes ambiance was one of equal collaboration and perhaps even inclusion of emerging queer artists.

Yo soy la arma letal, yo soy la femme fatale

A key frame that activates campiness, queerness, and humor is in the instance of the shrine to the horniest employee of the month (0:37–0:36). This moment from the music video, with all of its visual richness, excess, extravagance, and careful aesthetic arrangement is one of the moments where I see Villano's interjection of queer subjectivity into Urban culture made startlingly clear. "Bellaca del mes" is a whimsical play on words that examines the corporate trope of "employee of the month" in light of sex work. The spectacle of enshrining the employee of the month is re-created (fig. 2). Each of the objects arranged in this scene exude an artificiality inherent to their form, again pointing to the visual code of camp. The gaudy cheapness of the clutch purse and fan, for example, calls back to a refined brand of traditional femininity whose legacy lingers in the Puerto Rican imaginary. The aesthetic preoccupations of the music video function as part of an intellectual exercise that considers the social constructions of the feminine.

Additionally, in the video for "Muñeca" the plastic gun is both innuendo and impotent threat. 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 artists in their viewfinder and call out their self-fabrications—their mythologizations as part of their street cred. 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. Lastly, they may promise and advocate for self-defense, or even empowerment, within a cultural context of heightened anti-trans legislation and hostility.

Empujo lo' botone', yo me atrevo

As articulated in both the song and the video, "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, 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 embraces multiple meanings in one verse and facilitates an expansive, sometimes playful way of articulating the many nuances of gender, desire, and sexuality. Even Villano'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.'"⁹ 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"¹⁰ 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. These trends 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.

Villano'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 living. Through the very medium and distribution of a music video or song, the women on screen inhabit a life and sociality beyond their own potential lifespan.

"Muñeca" uses a distinctly queer, hyperfemme, coy humor as a strategy to hold all. We are held in all our manifold selves and emotional states. All our desires and imaginative capacities. All our intra-community laughter, dance, and revelry; the pleasures and pains conjoined. When Villano 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.

9 Sara Ahmed, "Introduction: Find Your Way," in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

10 J. Jack Halberstam, "Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies," in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 13.