Translocas: Migration, Homosexuality, and Transvestism in Recent Puerto Rican Performance

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Abstract:
“Translocas” is a queer of color reflection on contemporary translocal Puerto Rican theater and performance, specifically of gay performance artists and actors that engage male-to-female transvestism. I focus on the work of Freddie Mercado, Javier Cardona, Eduardo Alegría, Jorge Merced, and Arthur Avilés as members of a generational cohort whose lives and cultural productions are marked by migration, sexile, drag, and performance. I propose the term *transloca* as a useful vernacular critical intervention to account for the intersection of space, geography, and sexuality in their work and lived experience.

This essay brings together three distinct yet intersecting concerns: a vision of Puerto Rican culture constituted as a translocal phenomenon marked by migration (as a social phenomenon) and diaspora (as a series of interlinked communities); a queer of color analysis of Puerto Rican and Nuyorican or DiaspoRican culture, particularly as constituted in relation to class, gender, race, and sexuality; and finally, the study of particular manifestations of contemporary Puerto Rican theater.
and performance, specifically ones that engage male-to-female transvestism or drag. I focus on the work of five gay artists active in the 1990s and 2000s (Freddie Mercado, Javier Cardona, Eduardo Alegria, Jorge Merced, and Arthur Avilés) as members of a generational cohort whose lives and cultural productions are marked by migration, sexile (sexual exile), and performance.¹ I propose the term transloca as a useful vernacular critical intervention to account for the intersection of space, geography, and sexuality in their work and lived experience.²

The fact that the Puerto Rican transnation, seen as a socio-political and cultural sphere, extends well beyond the territorial confines of the Caribbean to include the diaspora, principally but not exclusively located in the United States and historically with the greatest concentration in the metropolitan area of New York, has become more widely accepted in recent times. As Juan Flores (1993, 2000, 2009) and others have shown, the links of continuity between these multiple spaces are numerous, although it is also important to recognize the particularities and differences of each.³ Inversely, as Jorge Duany (2002) and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (2003) have argued, migration to Puerto Rico from other countries (especially from Cuba and the Dominican Republic, but also from Latin America, the United States, and the French- and English-speaking Caribbean) and reverse or return migration (of U.S. Puerto Ricans back to the island) make the island itself a multi-ethnic (and to a limited extent, multilingual) society. Thus, when one speaks of Puerto Rican culture—as well as global culture—it is necessary to take into account this translocal condition: the knowledge and experience of inhabiting different spaces and of being in intimate contact with diverse communities at multiple locations.⁴ In the specific case of Puerto Rico, translocality is the direct result of North American imperialism (the 1898 invasion of the island, the establishment of a colonial regime, the recruitment of migrant workers, and government sponsored massive relocations) and of the present-day world political and economic regime, which has favored continued migration outward and the simultaneous arrival of other immigrant groups. As it is to be expected, theater and performance have been profoundly affected by this reality and have reflected on this phenomenon extensively; Lowell Fiet has even referred to Puerto Rican theater as a “puente aéreo entre ambas orillas” (an air bridge between both shores).⁵ The development of queer Puerto Rican sexualities (and of queer Puerto Rican theater and performance) has also been deeply marked by this experience, as Puerto Ricans have become part of a much broader wave of queer diasporas and Puerto Rican social formations that have been caught up in processes of globalization, including gay liberation, queer tourism, and capitalist commodification.⁶

In this essay, I will attempt to link concerns of performance, place, gender, and sexuality: to bring together transgressive sexuality to a migratory spatial analysis and question and rethink the meanings of these concepts. In fact, the very terms “gay” or “transgender” already assume unstable positions and categories, within the wide range of that which is understood as masculine, feminine, indeterminate or in between; of hetero, homo and bisexual attractions; of perversions and the most commonly accepted stereotypes and
assumptions within the sphere of the sexual. More importantly, we must consider the particularities of Boricua or Puerto Rican sexuality, with its ample repertoire of specific concepts and terms in Spanish and English (entailing greater or lesser pejorative connotations), which include *pato* (literally a duck, but metaphorically a homosexual), *maricón*, *afeminado*, *ponca*, *loca*, *vestida*, *bugarrón*, *marimacho*, *marimacha*, *tortillera*, *pata*, *bucha*, *papi chulo*, and *on the down low.*

*Loca*, in this case, stands in a strict etymological sense for madwoman, but in its slang derivation, means queer, perhaps something akin to queen. It is a common, everyday word, used as an insult but also (in some very specific contexts) as a term of endearment. It is also a folkloric category, alluding not only to every town or neighborhood’s effeminate man, but also to a very specific character in one of the island’s most famous regional/religious celebrations, the Feast of St. James the Apostle in Loíza Aldea, where the *loca* is played by ostensibly heterosexual men who cross-dress for the occasion and playfully (and aggressively) harass and tease passers-by.

**What Are Translocas?**

Translocas are many things, contradictory ones, to be sure: performers, queers, innovators, marginals, exiles, eccentrics, beauties, troublemakers, lovers, loners, friends. To be a transloca is to disidentify in the sense advanced by José Esteban Muñoz (1999): to tread a dangerous ground, make and break allegiances, and redefine meanings and sensibilities. What would the five performers that I bring together under this rubric think of such a label? There is no doubt that Mercado, Cardona, Alegría, Merced, and Avilés could not be more different from one another; that they perhaps might not be thrilled by this new-found category; that maybe it is more a critical-interpretive fantasy of mine (or a self-projection) than a novel lexical item or neologism which truly responds to the particularities of the artists. Nevertheless I find it fascinating to compare the five, in a type of Fernando Ortizean performative drag *sancocho* or stew—*por no decir ajiaco*—precisely because of their rather divergent styles, as a (queer) extension of the Cuban ethnographer’s historically important (and culturally and geographically specific) concept of transculturation. For Ortiz, cultures that come in contact do not erase or substitute each other, but rather find a dynamic balance, in which elements of each persist but more importantly, are transformed and coexist as a new formation. While Ortiz was most interested in the particular situation of Cuba, with its European, African, and Chinese elements, I will focus on a Puerto Rican context in which Anglo, Hispanic, and African elements predominate, and where new notions of sexuality and space have radically transformed people’s understandings of self. And while Ortiz clearly felt that European (and, need we say, heterosexual) culture was superior and would dominate the mix, I have the suspicion that in the Puerto Rican case, all bets are off.

I would like to suggest that the prefix “trans-” be understood as linked to these differences in the context of the translocal and the
transgender. I see that which is “trans” not necessarily under the optic of the unstable, or in between, or in the middle of things, but rather as the core of transformation—change, the power or ability to mold, reorganize, reconstruct, construct—and of longitude: the transcontinental, transatlantic, but also transversal (oblique and not direct). This transgeneric transitoriness implies several challenges to dominant notions of Puerto Ricanness that do not incorporate or accept either migration (the migrant diasporic community and/or immigrants in Puerto Rico) or homosexuality or other marginalized sexualities. I think it can also be associated to the transgression of mediums (or artistic genres) that Francisco José Ramos (1998) has identified as part of the “poetics of experimentation” in relation to the artistic production of a number of recent visual artists, including among them Freddie Mercado. It also has to do with the instability Meg Wesling (2002) has hinted at when she asks, in reference to the Cuban drag queens portrayed in the documentary Butterflies on the Scaffold, if the “trans” in transsexual (and we could add transvestite and transgender) is the same as the “trans” in transnational (or translocal), and with Marcia Ochoa’s (2008) playful ethnographic theorization of loca-ization as the confluence of queer sexuality, space and place among Venezuelan drag queens in Caracas.

Loca, in its own right, also suggests a form of hysterical identity (pathologized at the clinical level, scandalous at the popular one) constitutive of the individual lacking sanity, composure, or ascription to dominant norms: effeminate homosexuals, mad women, rebels for any cause; marginalized categories that in an ironic and playful gesture I would like to resemanticize in the style of the Anglo-American term “queer”: loca as maricón (faggot) friends calls one another, as a sign of complicity and understanding, of being entendidos (those in the know, in the life), and not necessarily as a hostile insult, joke or putdown, although perhaps that too, if one is to do justice to cruelty as an art and/or strategy for survival, or simply, as an acknowledgement of self-hatred. Loca can also be seen as the felicitous coming-together of Susan Sontag and Esther Newton’s (m/other) camp, with the good grace of Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber (and Ben. Sifuentes Jáuregui, of course), as a high camp extravaganza, or as an homage to the drag house system, the ladies of Paris Is Burning and the drag queens of Latin American literature. Or perhaps a hallucination of the radical French philosophers Gilles Deleuze (bursting in nomadic rhizomes) and Guy Hocquenghem through the filter of the Argentinean anthropologist Néstor Perlongher, which is to say, as a radical and profoundly Latin American term that engages with postmodernism and queer liberation. It can also be a loca reminiscent of Deleuze and Luce Irigaray, as read by Elizabeth Grosz, which is to say, as a radical term of destabilization and decentering; or loca as suggested by Erasmus’s In Praise of Folly (a defense of madness, precisely, as a state of knowledge), read as a foundational Latin American text (as European invention) in the spirit of Cervantes’s Don Quixote (the brilliant mad Renaissance seer par excellence) as seen by the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, who argues for the centrality of both thinkers (Erasmus and Cervantes) in our conceptualizations of the Americas. Finally, loca, like literary critics Susan Gilbert and
Sandra Gubar’s madwoman in the attic (madness as the symbol of the subjugation of women) or the novelist Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (madness as feminist liberation and anticolonial gesture), or as a theoretical and political meld of lived experience and brains, like something imagined by transgender theorists extraordinaires Susan Stryker and Sandy Stone.

The performative character of this *loca* (mad) condition is reflected in the transvestic game, which occurs with greater ease in the sphere of social interaction but also extends into theory, as the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy demonstrates in his essays on simulation. By *performative*, I am referring to verbal and bodily enactments brought forth through public repetitions (in real life and on the stage or space of artistic representation); *transvestic game* would account for the knowledge of the artificiality, or more correctly, the arbitrary nature of the classification of signs (racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, class, motile, etc.) and the possibility for their manipulations and reinventions or contestations. The five performers in question, in different ways and at different moments, allude to or incarnate tendencies, auras linked to this sphere, as gendered, sexed bodies marked by race and (unorthodox) desire, and located (voluntarily and involuntarily) in varied geographical contexts. I say *loca* in a loud voice, with a shrill tone, and without wanting to offend anyone except those unwilling to hear and accept; *loca* as the deceased Puerto Rican drag queen and Stonewall veteran Sylvia Rivera might have said the words “queen” or “trannie” or “fag,” with her unmistakably deep, scratchy, Bronx-inflected voice. *Loca*, as a celebration of liberty, as the queer Puerto Rican literary critic Arnaldo Cruz Malavé affirms in his open contestation of those great (queer) “patriarchs,” Antonio S. Pedreira and René Marqués:

Ungrateful, contemporary Puerto Rican writers have decided to speak not from the space of a stable, “virile,” and “mature” identity but from that “*patological milieu*” of castration and gender-crossing, superfluity and equivocalness that both Pedreira and Marqués display and condemn. If in the latter’s texts, Puerto Rico is imagined as a torturously closeted young man endlessly sliding toward the “normality” of heterosexuality and the recovery of a paternal order, in contemporary Puerto Rican writing this ambivalent *pato* opts instead for his *locura* and blossoms into a self-conscious drag-queen. (1995, 151)

It is this very same movement which I am looking for in the performative corpus I will analyze: literally, of a *pato* (duck) opting for *locura* (madness); figuratively, of a faggot in search of queerdom or homosexual bliss.

**Locating Translocas**

Can queer Puerto Rican male subjects (*patos*, homosexuals, transvestites, bisexuals, *locas* or *maricones*) ever fully be independent of notions of travel and diaspora? Can gender be a fixed, static notion for those male performers who question conventional notions of sexuality? Is
the diaspora like a missing limb, invisible but eminently felt, for those Puerto Ricans who remain on the island? Is it an always-present option, a safety-valve of sorts? What is Puerto Rico for gay and transgender Nuyoricans? What is New York for island Boricuas?

Of the five performers discussed, only one, Freddie Mercado, has lived exclusively on the island, although he is actually from the small rural municipality of Las Piedras and moved as a young man to San Juan; he is also the only one with a background and professional training in the visual arts. The rest come from either dance or theater or both. Three of them (Javier Cardona, Eduardo Alegría, and Jorge Merced) have had diverse transatlantic lives. While Cardona has lived in New York for a shorter period—including important stays in Brooklyn—references to North American issues already formed an important part of his early performance piece You Don’t Look Like (1996). Alegría and Merced, both born on the island, have spent considerable amounts of time in both locations; Alegría returned to the island after a long stay in New York and has performed since 1997 as one of the lead singers of the alternative rock band Superaquello, while Merced is firmly entrenched in the Bronx as a key member of Pregones Theater, a company established by diasporic Puerto Ricans in 1979. Avilés, the only one born in New York, has never lived in Puerto Rico but has presented his work there on several occasions as part of the Rompeforma festival organized by the postmodern dancer and choreographer Viveca Vázquez; of the five, he is perhaps the one (along with Merced) who most strongly and insistently articulates a New York positionality which I identify as Bronx-centric, particularly through his evocation of Nuyorico, a mythic land perhaps akin to the Chicano Aztlán, but this time located in the Bronx, as we learn in Maeva de Oz: “somewhere beyond the Bruckner Expressway,” where there is no homophobia or prejudice against Puerto Ricans.

Of the five, at least three are in the habit of regularly cross-dressing. In fact, for one of them (Mercado), female transvestism (along with animal impersonations and monstrous hybrid creations) constitutes the fundamental core of his artistic project. Merced, on the other hand, played the part of the imprisoned transvestite “The Queen of Madness” in Pregones’s El bolero fue mi ruina (The Bolero Was My Downfall), based on a short story by Manuel Ramos Otero, for many years. Avilés, when not appearing on stage naked, frequently dances in feminine clothes in a gesture which does not necessarily remind us of transvestism as illusion or parody but rather as a non-androgynous position that questions gender, occupying the place of femininity at the same time that he reveals a strong masculine dancer’s body; a position similar to that which José Rosado identifies in the work of Alegría, Cardona, and Willie Rosario.

Many have argued that it is no longer (and perhaps never was) absolutely necessary for queers to leave the island of Puerto Rico because of their transgressive, stigmatized, and persecuted sexual orientation, even when we all know that a significant number of people did feel compelled to migrate because of their personal circumstances and that thousands of Puerto Rican homosexuals live abroad. In his well-known song “El gran
varón" (The Great Male), Willie Colón, inveterate diasporic salsa singer, sang about Simón, who left his place of origin and became a transvestite, against his father’s wishes. Of course, some become “women” (or mujerts, as in women with an extra “t”) and stay right where they were born, and others leave and are the epitome of masculinity. For some, Puerto Rico is a distant geographic referent, or perhaps, a neighborhood in the Bronx. For some, gender and sexuality are nothing more than a state of mind.

Freddie Mercado’s Baroque Surreal

Freddie Mercado Velázquez, Vírgenes caribeñas, 1996.

Photo: Santiago Flores Charneco

Freddie Mercado is a great doll, the ultimate transloca in spirit and flesh, unpinnable and uncontainable; in his manner of speaking, a “constant performance”: locked up in his house, in a random space or at an art gallery, or perhaps wandering down the streets of Old San Juan, dressed in his habitual manner with tunics and his long unfurled curly hair, or perhaps transformed into a divine apparition for Noches de Galería (Gallery Nights); a mobile work of art, transportable, eternally changing; a four-hour long process of transformation in private or behind the lit window of a gallery closed to the public.¹⁴ Or if not, a baroque postmodern adornment on the stage of the now defunct rock band El Manjar de los Dioses (The Delight of the Gods), or perhaps with its ex-lead singer and always friend José Luis Abreu “Fofé” (who went on to lead the band Circo); at another moment, an apparition, a participating spectre or back-stage costume designer for a performance of the modern dance troupe Andanza led by Lolita Villanúa,¹⁵ or for the enormously talented Awilda Sterling.¹⁶ Mercado’s mostly ephemeral performance work has been only salvaged through incidental photographs, occasional videos, and the scenes choreographed for the magical lens of the Brazilian Fernando Paes and others, as Deborah Cullen points out in the catalog of a 2001 exposition at the Museo del Barrio in New York.

These are some of his multiple incarnations. There is also Freddie, the creator of monstrous
dolls, paintings, and installations that reflect his countenance and document the myriad identities of his (trans)pictorial oeuvre. His own self-portraits are sewn together and become clothes to be worn (De Jesús); at other times, garments are quickly tied together, recycled, or sewn by his uncle, who is a tailor, while Freddie mixes and matches and puts garments to all sorts of unexpected uses.

Mercado’s trans creations include monstrous or surreal figures but also famous female characters, particularly large white grande dames of the Puerto Rican collective memory such as Felisa Rincón de Gautier (“doña Fela”), the famous ex-mayor of San Juan best remembered for her intricate wigs and old-style Spanish fans who was also embodied in the 1960s by an earlier transloca, the performer Johnny Rodriguez of *El Cotorrito* fame. Mercado also appears as Myrta Silva, the divine *gorda de oro*, mythical singer of the 1960s who later became a talk show host on Spanish-language television stations in New York. This is the Freddie of the collective trance, of spiritual ecstasy, of *espiritista* channeling; the one that leads people to confuse him with the deceased when he performs at Ivette Román’s cabaret, or just walks down the street or appears at an unexpected place.

Freddie Mercado Velázquez, *Gulf War Action*, early 1990s.

Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Mercado’s other creations also include the performance of cultural quotes or appropriations: dressed as an Muslim woman opposing the war in the Persian Gulf and decorated with military green plastic toy soldiers; a historical character of the colonial West Indian baroque; an Italian Renaissance damsel; a biracial, multifaceted figure with two faces, one in front and one behind: half black, half white, as a double who rescues the experience of slavery and its traces inscribed on the body in a game of hide and go seek.

Mercado began to present his work as early as 1988 but only received greater critical acclaim towards the end of the nineties. His performative work has acquired an international
dimension through his participation in important expositions and shows in the Dominican Republic (1995), Spain (1998, 2000), and United States (2001, 2002). However, the “ephemeral,” performative and essentially anti-assimilatable character of his oeuvre makes it hard for the artist to live from his work and implies economic impoverishment, which has even included being temporarily homeless. Freddie’s “strangeness” and his importance is remarked upon in several articles by the Puerto Rican art critic Manuel Álvarez Lezama—credited with having coined the term *los novísimos* (the newest ones) to describe the group of young artists who appeared in the 1990s on the island. As Álvarez Lezama states:

Mercado cannot pass unnoticed because he is, in the context of our extremely conservative culture, a constant provocation, a disturbing work of art, a walking ‘happening,’ a celebration of the absurd, a threat to some of our deceitful moral values and our confined sexuality, and an existential tribute to the carnival we unfortunately do not have in Puerto Rico. (1995c, 16)

This proliferation of descriptive phrases (Mercado as provocation, work of art, happening, celebration, threat, and tribute) indicates the uncontainable, incommensurable quality of Mercado’s performances as seen at the local level. Álvarez Lezama also insists on the clear intentionality and purpose of Mercado’s costumes; he argues that their finality is “to amuse us, to teach us, and to make us think” (1995c, 16). The critic also acknowledges his fear and initial wariness and suspicion, or the uncomfortableness and nervousness which he experienced when confronting the transgressive figure of the artist: “At first, I was somewhat uneasy with Mercado’s exuberance, but then I became accustomed to his presence, to his parodies, to his threats. Now if he does not appear in an important activity, I feel as if something is really missing” (1995c, 16). This reaction corresponds to that of many critics including myself; I remember my initial fascination with Freddie, always accompanied by a fear of approaching his figure, perhaps due in part to my shyness and to the artist's aura and his grotesque hybridity. From source of fear to an essential component whose presence or absence is enough to determine the success of an evening: the artist as fixture, center, fulcrum, and scary underside.

Freddie Mercado and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *13 Rosas y una Lola para el amor*, 2011.

Photo: Zulma Oliveras Vega
A great deal of the impact of Mercado’s work has to do with the very materiality or corporeality of his ample androgynous body, which violates norms of weight, masculinity, and dominant order. He inserts himself within a cultural tradition of transvestism but resignifies this practice in a radical manner, since it is no longer a question of recreating typical images of female beauty but rather alluding to it in a strange and very unique personal game, one that, as the writer Mayra Santos Febres has stated, “blurs the division between the sexes” (2003). As a destabilizing agent, Mercado transforms the world around him: an inveterate cross-dresser or impersonator, revolutionary; he threatens and challenges insularist geography, and quotes in every movement a much wider, transcontinental and transoceanic world. His presence in Puerto Rico also represents a challenge for those who would prefer that he went elsewhere: that he would migrate to New York or someplace else, far away from the homeland; that he finally left them in peace.

The Exquisite Performance of Not Looking Puerto Rican

The actor, dancer, performer, and choreographer Javier Cardona is, I admit, a rather subtle transloca, but one whose complex, multimedia drag collaborations can seriously expand our notions of the term. Cardona has explored issues of race, gender, and sexuality in his one-man shows as well as in choreographic work such as Ah Men (2004), a piece with six male dancers, in which he also participates on stage. In his early and best known monologue You Don’t Look Like (first performed in 1996), Cardona engages perceptions and stereotypes which exist about blacks in Puerto Rico and how this racial system serves to exclude and marginalize those who supposedly “don’t look Puerto Rican” because they are of African ancestry.20

Javier Cardona You Don’t Look Like, 1996.

Photo: Miguel Villafañe
The performance integrates slides, spoken narration, audience interaction, parodic blackface, and dance; the verbal text, as such, only represents one part of this rich performance. The plot focuses on the first-person confessions of a black actor who is looking for work and is only offered stereotypical roles that reinforce the absurd images most often found in the common racist imaginary. His frustration is concretely expressed on stage through a series of photographs—visual images of Cardona dressed in diverse ways, including two female representations: as a Santería madam all dressed in white with multicolor necklaces, alluding perhaps to Myrta Silva or Carmen Miranda; and as a maid or domestic, looking intently at the spectator. The images are by Miguel Villafañe, a Mexican photographer and filmmaker who has resided in Puerto Rico for many decades, and they also show Cardona in a variety of masculine poses: as a tribal African; a colorful rumba musician; an urban rapper decked with the most recent communicative technological gadgets, an image associated in the racist common imaginary with that of drug dealer; a peasant who works in the coastal sugarcane field, as a spectre of the supposedly-white jibaro of the mountainside; a black Magi; a witch doctor or santero; a Jamaican reggae fan; and a basketball player; characters that can be seen as performances of race and gender. At a later moment, Cardona literally attempts to make himself “more black” by donning blackface and an Afro wig, and thus satisfying (or parodying)
demands for greater “authenticity.”

In her important essay on this piece, Jossianna Arroyo (2002) suggests the idea of “cultural drag” as a mechanism to read the piece as an exploration of race, nationality, gender and sexuality; in this sense, she differs from other readings such as that proposed by the Cuban theater critic Vivian Martínez Tabares (1997, 2004), who has generally downplayed questions of gender and sexuality in Cardona’s work. According to Arroyo, the variety of the representations of gender in the performance helps in the identification of the arbitrary nature of the racial constructs. In other words, the two female (transvestic) images create a more radical rupture of any image or illusion of verisimilitude that spectators might have. Thus racial performativity becomes that much more apparent when filtered through the lens of gender (and its possible implications for sexuality).

The title of the piece refers to a common situation undergone by many Puerto Ricans whose phenotype does not correspond to the North American culture’s homogenizing vision. In fact, “not looking Puerto Rican” to American eyes, and being told so, is a misrecognition or denial of identity that Alberto Sandoval Sánchez has identified as a racist utterance (1999, 91). In Cardona’s piece, the protagonist goes to a casting for a toothpaste ad in Puerto Rico that strongly resembles a circus where all black actors are asked to say the words “bunga, bunga, agua” (bunga, bunga, water) with an exaggerated accent that in some way is supposed to allude to their sensual, if not primitive, Caribbean nature. As Arroyo points out, the protagonist initially confuses this speech pattern for that of Nuyoricans, who are stereotypically characterized as individuals who have a strong American accent when they speak Spanish. While the protagonist quickly acknowledges and feels shame for his own anti-Nuyorican prejudice, his initial reaction reveals a rather common attitude on the island. The Puerto Rican theater critic Lowell Fiet (1999) has highlighted the linguistic struggle present in the piece, which reflects wider tensions related to colonialism and the relation between the colonizer and the colonized; the very title of the work, which is in English, is symptomatic of this, as the performance is predominantly in Spanish. Little has been said, however, about how it was during a trip to the United States that the protagonist was told “You don’t look like,” an episode which serves as the catalyst for the climax of the performance. I quote at length:

Well, if I’m dancing or performing something on stilts, there’s always someone who asks me if I am from Loíza Aldea [the town in Puerto Rico that is the center of the island’s Afro-Caribbean heritage]. If I enter a store in Old San Juan, they think I come from St. Thomas or from “the Islands.” If I’m boarding a plane, they ask me all kinds of stupid questions, looking for a “strange” accent. And if I’m in the United States, they ask me the classic question: What am I? I tell them in a straightforward, almost defensive way: Puerto Rican. Immediately, they frown in amazement and, as if they were complimenting me, say: “You don’t look like a...” Then I squint my eyes, my fangs start to grow, my head and neck turn discreetly to the left, my chest sticks out, and deep inside I ask myself: what the fuck am I supposed to look like? I don’t look... Puerto Rican, I don’t look... black, I don’t look like this, I don’t look like that. What am I
supposed to look like? (Cardona 1999, 15, trans. by Guevárez and Fiet)

In this scene, we witness a displacement of anger and frustration from racial prejudice in Puerto Rico towards the manifestation of American ignorance and racialization, specifically, that of the homogenizing vision which non-official segregation imposes on subjects in the United States. This misidentification is not exclusive to black Puerto Ricans, but occurs across the board. It is the trip “abroad,” to the colonial metropole, that suddenly activates (or consolidates) the subject’s ethno-national identity, manifest in the piece by a small Puerto Rican flag attached to the protagonist’s backpack.

In this piece, unlike in Cardona and Alegría’s more “ambiguous” dance duos in Puerto Rico, there is no explicit mention of homosexuality; however, there is a subtext of feminine transvestism, which ranges from the text at the very beginning of the piece, “Espejito, espejito, necesito saber si yo también soy” (Little mirror, little mirror, I need to know if I am also...)—which alludes to Cinderella’s “Mirror, mirror on the wall...”—to the very slide images of the madam and the maid. Later in the performance, Cardona will bring this mirror up to audience members’ faces in a provocative gesture of interrogation. Unlike the case of the dance duos, where the homosocial contiguity of male bodies (sometimes in drag) does suggest a homoerotic content and serves to question sexual orientation, most people believe that You Don’t Look Like is exclusively about race, racism, nationality and workplace discrimination. One could ponder, however, if the title does not suggest another type of anxiety: that of not looking gay. As an actor and dancer (“stereotypically” gay professions in Puerto Rico, or at least ones that carry that stigma) and as a black man (“stereotypically” virile in the popular imaginary), the performer/protagonist has to negotiate multiple preconceptions in the very formulation of who he is and how he presents himself—and the profound instability of that in a homophobic, racist, and classist environment, ones that can easily lead to translocura (transmadness). It is perhaps the end of the piece, when Cardona dances in a frenetic way, that produces the most profound sense of liberty and possibility, where the seduction of the dancing body ruptures the impasses of language and identity. A holistic reading of this performance (photos, text, bodily movement) also suggests a richer, non-assimilatable vision.

Dancing Dolls and Happy Bunnies

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Eduardo Alegría, Lucy.

Photo: Gisela Rosario

The case of Eduardo Alegría is rather special: a mass-media transloca, hip to the extreme—perhaps a transloca cyborg, oscillating in space and time, through electronic culture and very real, localized, transglobal experiences. Alegría creates a very particular universe, full of concrete and idiosyncratic cultural referents which can be seen as a creole Gen X manifesto (musical hybrids that range from rock, salsa and merengue to electronica; mass media, popular, high and low-brow culture, without hierarchies or unnecessary distinctions; and easy access to U.S. and global culture) but with a sprinkle of simultaneous brilliance and dementia; like a Puerto Rican Alice in Wonderland, in which innocence seems tied up with sexuality and madness. The talented performer, who began to dance almost by chance, has collaborated for over twenty years with artists such as Viveca Vázquez and her Taller de Otra Cosa, one of the leading post-modern dance groups in Puerto Rico, as well as with the musician Francis Pérez, with whom he formed the alternative “post-pop” rock band Superaquello in 1997. In several of his works, presented for the most part in P.S. 122 in New York City in the 1990s and in Puerto Rico in 2011, Alegría explores the varied dimensions of being a gay Puerto Rican, particularly in the Diaspora.

Following José Rosado and Rosa Luisa Márquez’s critical-theoretical postulations (particularly Rosado’s comments on a “new” new dramaturgy), the Puerto Rican critic Gilberto Blasini has pointed out the specificity of Alegría and other Boricua performers’ work, stating:

I want to propose that this “new” new dramaturgy is one not necessarily based on written or literary texts, but on an actor’s dramaturgy in which the body functions as the central axis of the performance. In this way, the body becomes the main textual terrain for the exploration of issues and politics related to politics, subjectivity, nationality, sexuality, and aesthetics, among many others. (2007, 254-55)

Blasini goes on to comment about Alegría’s technique:

Alegría’s close collaborations with artists like Awilda Sterling, Maritza Pérez, and Viveca Vázquez (particularly through her group Taller de Otra Cosa) allowed him to develop an expressive performative language for constructing characters, both corporally as well as conceptually, through representations that simultaneously weave through acting, dancing, and stand-up comedy. At the same time, this performative language permitted Alegría to deconstruct the boundaries between public and private spheres, fiction and autobiography, as well as hilarity, uncertainty, solemnity, and irreverence. (2007, 255)
Blasini also points out how Alegria captures the alienation of a certain class and generation of young Puerto Ricans; an example of this is his first monologue, called *Absorbido mismo* (Self absorbed, 1991):

*Absorbido mismo* does not establish a simple, Manichean dichotomy between Puerto Rico and the U.S. (or the rest of the world for that matter). On the contrary, Alegria exposes the inevitable dialogue that exists between the cultures of Puerto Rico and the U.S. (while sometimes including other countries that also engage in exchanges with the island), and how this dialogue is key for understanding the everyday realities of people who, like him, were teenagers and became young adults during the 1970s and 1980s. (2007, 255)

While Alegria grew up and began his artistic career in Puerto Rico, it was his period in New York and his participation in the alternative performance circuit in that city that fostered the most profound development of his work and his conceptualization of an identity as a gay Puerto Rican. Thus we have an individual who personally experiences the marginality and discrimination to which immigrants are subjected but who does not become integrated into the better-known Latino communities but rather the alternative, multicultural sphere of the arts, that of the East Village and Lower East Side of Manhattan, where other Latino artists such as Carmelita Tropicana and Marga Gómez present their work, and where John Leguizamo got his start.

An example of Alegria’s migratory explorations is *Nice Puerto Rican Nice* (1994). Blasini has remarked that this piece shows the cultural misunderstandings between a gay Puerto Rican who lives in New York and loves greasy, fried food, and his Iranian Buddhist boyfriend, obsessed with fitness and health, who has prejudiced ideas about Puerto Ricans. Another example is *Bus Boy Love* (originally staged as part of *Spookiricans*, 1997), in which Alegria presents the frustrated romance between a Puerto Rican waiter called Junior, played by Alegria, and a Mexican one called Abelardo, who is played by Jorge Merced. (The piece has been restaged in 2011 as part of *Esquina periferia* at the Coribantes Theater in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico, with Yamil Collazo as Abelardo; see Blasini, 2011; Collazo, 2011.)

Junior and Abelardo are Latin American immigrants who work together in a restaurant in New York and who struggle to overcome the emotional inhibitions that impede them from accepting each other’s solace in this hostile and unknown space. *Bus Boy Love* is characterized by the physical immobility of the actors, who remain constantly distanced while they stare at one another longingly, wishing that the frigid distance between them would disappear. This is finally achieved at the end of the piece with the help of two angels who have escaped from heaven; the angels incite their passion by singing old-time boleros, accompanied by human-size bunny rabbits.

How does transvestism appear in Alegría’s New York work? Two examples come to mind: one, the long skirts (later popularized by the philandering Dominican merenguero Toño Rosario) that all of the dancers use in *Tereke Tech*, the first part of *Spookiricans*; another, the animal costumes in *Bus Boy Love*, similar perhaps to the frequent apparitions of animals such as dogs, bumble bees, mice, and bunnies in Arthur Avilés’s work, or to Freddie Mercado’s transformation into a hermaphrodite gallo/gallina or rooster/hen. In both cases, we observe processes of estrangement that make the representation something “odd” or out of the ordinary, what Blasini (2011) describes as “raro” or queer. The central dancer of *Tereke Tech* imitates a Caribbean sway as he walks through the stage to the rhythm of a merengue, wearing a long skirt that reaches his feet; it is understood that he is in Puerto Rico, even though the piece was conceptualized and first shown in New York. The surreal bunnies of *Bus Boy Love* accompany two angelic singers (Alejandra Martorell and Gisela Rosario in 1997) who emulate Cupid and try to match up Junior and Abelardo, helping them to fall in love, or rather, accede to their subterranean passions. To my knowledge, it is only in the Puerto Rican duets with Javier Cardona that Alegría has more fully embraced male-to-female transvestism, as in these pieces both performers dance in
women’s slips.

The Repeating Island: Pregonero Transvestism


Photo: Erika Rojas

The actor and director Jorge Merced is a serious artist/activist *transloca*, profoundly Puerto Rican in an island, proper Spanish-speaking and clearly enunciating (almost didactic) kind of way, and also firmly entrenched in the Bronx as a key figure of the Pregones Theater, which he joined in 1987. He is also a generous collaborator who has worked with Eduardo Alegría and Arthur Avilés. In a fascinating case of translocal affinities and identifications, Merced offers what at first sight might seem to be the most island-centered performance: *The Bolero Was My Downfall* (1997-2002, restaged in 2006 with new sets and costumes). This one-man play, based on the short story “Loca la de la locura” (“The Queen of Madness”) by Manuel Ramos Otero, was directed by Rosalba Rolón, with a musical script by Desmar Guevara and original set design by Regina García (and later by Yanko Bakulic, based on García’s designs) and costumes by Harry Nadal (2006). The piece, which has an additional two musicians on stage and has been shown widely in the United States, Europe, and Latin America.
America, is centered on the internal monologue and the memoristic reconstructions of an incarcerated transvestite in Puerto Rico, who meditates why she killed her lover, Nene Lindo (Pretty Baby). There is no mention in the play of migration to the U.S. or of the diaspora, although there is a fascinating linguistic usage that indicates the North American presence in Puerto Rico through lexical borrowing and references to foreign products and stores that define colonial island life.

Merced has explained that the performance came about after he received the original manuscript for the story from José Olmo Olmo, a friend of the deceased author, who in fact lived most of his adult life in a self-imposed exile (or sexile) provoked by the sexual intolerance he felt on the island. The recuperation of the transvestite’s world, involving cabaret drag queens and bugarrones (manly men who sleep with other men but never assume a gay identity), is a curious juxtaposition to the more common nostalgic recollection of a tropical paradise marked by exuberant nature. We can interpret this work as a simple incursion in Latin American or more specifically, Puerto Rican matters (which is to say, as a story set in Puerto Rico, about island-based characters and social practices); however, to see it as a diasporic production implies an alternate relation to the country of origin, one where notably different phenomena and social realities are experienced, but also one whose culture is transported and maintained in the diaspora. This play attracts a varied audience: both those who are attracted to and identify with the nostalgic music (boleros) as well as those for whom the sexual/affective system portrayed is particularly well-known, attractive, or intriguing. It would seem that this work has more to do with what migration theorists such as Juan Flores (1993) have identified as early cultural stages of migrant cultural production, in which the country of origin is privileged; what is most interesting about Pregones Theater is that their repertoire is mostly made up of works closely linked to the new immigrant experience, concretely fixed in New York and the Bronx.25


Photo: Erika Rojas
In *The Bolero Was My Downfall*, the hairy, bald, somewhat ultramasculine body of the actor becomes first an imprisoned aging man, then a feminine Puerto Rican transvestite—an icon of sexualized music—and finally, a seductive, ultramasculine, soon-to-be-murdered young Latin lover. The actor thus cross-dresses both into masculinity and femininity, as both gender presentations are constructed on the grounds of a corporeal performance that is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s theorizations on the performativity of gender. It is also remarkable that this most Puerto Rican of works was produced outside of the island, at a moment when most gay works presented there were translations and adaptations of North American plays such as Mart Crowley’s awful, early 1970s *Boys in the Band* and the somewhat better *La cage aux folles*.

**Maéva’s Doll Plays in the Bronx**

![Maéva’s Doll Plays in the Bronx](image)


Photo: Richard Shpuntoff

![Maéva’s Doll Plays in the Bronx](image)


Photo: Richard Shpuntoff
Arthur Avilés is a *transloca* by default, or perhaps by willful and persistent struggle; a boogie-down, tough-love, poor/working class, queer New York-Rican, English-centric Bronx kind of *transloca*. His artistic production is a key example of a queer Nuyorican aesthetic conscience, one that has been developed in a number of ways. These have included the naked, music-less dancing of a piece such as *A Puerto Rican Faggot from America* (1996); the complex dance-theater allegories based on popular and mass U.S. culture such as *Arturella* (1996), based on Walt Disney’s cinematographic adaptation of *Cinderella*; and the diptych *Maeva de Oz* (1997) and its companion piece *Dorothur’s Journey* (1998), both of which reelaborate MGM’s *Wizard of Oz*. In *Arturella*, Arthur becomes a poor Nuyorican gay orphan called Arturo who lives in the Bronx with his evil step-mother Maëva (played by Elizabeth Marrero) and her many *childrens*, including his step-sisters Anacleta and Chancleta. Arturo dreams of going to the “princeso’s quinceañero” (similar to the prince’s sweet sixteenth); the *princeso* is played by Jorge Merced. His dreams come to life when his fairy godmother Maëva (played by the same actress as the evil stepmother) appears and gives him a dress so that he can go to the ball. In *Maeva de Oz*, an actress (originally, Elizabeth Marrero, and more recently, Rhina Valentín) interprets the roles of Maëva and Little Maëva as schizophrenic versions of a lesbian Nuyorican Dorothy, who is able to come out of the closet with the help of her faithful dog Arturoto while they walk down the Bruckner Expressway in the Bronx in their search for Nuyorico. In the second piece, Arthur becomes Dorothur, who incorporates elements of the main characters (the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion) into his own costume, all accompanied by seventies’ disco music and a giant, reflecting disco ball.

Avilés uses transvestism along with nudity as deliberate affronts to dominant conventions of gender and sexuality, particularly in the context of the Nuyorican community in the Bronx (La Fountain, 2007a, 2009c). Both corporeal strategies or practices are used as a very conscious way of challenging prevalent ideas and open new spaces. Arthur Avilés and his former partner
Charles Rice-González’s commitment to the Hunts Point artistic community has led them to create a cultural institution called BAAD: The Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, located in the underutilized commercial American Banknote Building. This space has several low-cost artist studios and a performance space with a professional sprung dance floor where theater, music, film, spoken word and dance performances are often held. Avilés and Rice-González have also been at the center of a controversy regarding censorship, as a health advocacy and AIDS prevention poster which featured a photograph of the couple was removed from New York City public transit bus shelters by the leasing company after several people complained about the ad’s content. These individuals’ commitment to their working-class, people of color community is manifested in many diverse ways, be it through the arts or through political activism in their barrio.

Conclusion

As we have seen, gay Puerto Rican and Nuyorican performers have engaged in rather diverse strategies of representation that bring forth continuities and ruptures in terms of geography, gender identity, and sexual practice; being a transloca or inhabiting the transloca state is a multiple, contradictory, polysemic affair. Other important artists who also do similar and related work include Antonio Pantojas, who for many years was the best-known transvestite performer in Puerto Rico (Laureano, 2007) and even had his own television show, which influenced Jorge Merced as a teen; Marcus Kuiland-Nazario, better known as Carmen, a radical AIDS activist in California who follows the style of the better-known Teatro Viva of Los Angeles; 27 Puerto Rican lip-synching drag queens such as Laritza DuMont or the deceased Lady Catiria (La Fountain, 2009a), who performed at La Escuelita, and of island-based artists such as Alex Soto and Barbra Herr, who in their day were well-known fixtures in the island’s gay artistic circuit at places such as the Atlantic Beach Hotel in the Condado or Krash (formerly Eros) disco in Santurce. More recently, a completely new, younger cohort of Puerto Rican drag queens including Nina Flowers, Jessica Wild, Yara Sofía, and Alexis Mateo have received major international exposure through their participation in the first three seasons of RuPaul’s Drag Race on Logo TV. The five translocas I focused on share a certain visibility as members of an alternative cultural scene, in some cases experimental, other times fully integrated or clearly opposed to the dominant currents of our times. I have explored how these artists articulate (or resist) positionalities regarding queer, homosexual and trans identities and practices; how their approach and engagement with this topic can be so diverse; how they have collaborated (at times rather extensively) with each other.

So, are we happy to call these five artists translocas? Surely, if we accept that their work moves within the realm of the translocal, transgender, and transgressive, we can clearly argue that all five do share something different, radical, novel; something very proper to our hysterical/historical moment. Evidently, each one also has his own individual characteristics, his
thematic interests, his techniques and means of representation. Yet I believe that Puerto Rican and Nuyorican gay and transgender culture (as well as Latin American, U.S. Latina/o, and world culture, broadly speaking) benefits from the convergence and divergence of these talented visions, those of artists who move between Puerto Rico and the United States; who identify with one or more points of this translocal nation or culture.

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Notes

1 On sexile see Guzmán 1997; La Fountain-Stokes 2008a.

2 For previous elaborations on translocas see La Fountain-Stokes 2008b, 2009a, 2009b.

3 Lisa Sánchez González (2001) is a particularly strong advocate for dividing the two, as she argues in her book Boricua Literature.


6 See La Fountain-Stokes, Queer Ricans (2009).

7 See La Fountain-Stokes 2007; Martorell 1993; Rafael Ramírez 1999.


9 See Arroyo 2003 for a nuanced discussion of Ortiz.

10 See the many interesting articles on this topic in the special issue on “Trans-”, WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly 36, no. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2008).

11 “Cabe también destacar, dentro de la poética de la experimentación, un pensamiento de la transgresión, en virtud del cual la demarcación de los medios desaparece: la fotografía se hace pintura, la pintura se hace signo, los motivos se tornan materiales de ingenio y construcción, las imágenes se transportan, literalmente, al acopio y conquista de los espacios, y el cuerpo propio
o ajeno se vuelve motivo u ocasión de una experiencia artística. Las obras de Antonio Martorell, Charles Juhasz, Arnaldo Morales, Ana Rosa Rivera, Teo Freytes, Freddie Mercado, Víctor Vázquez y, más recientemente, la de Paloma Todd, apuntarían en esta dirección” (Ramos 1998, n.p.).

12 For a revised version of Wesling’s talk see her essay “Why Queer Diaspora?” (2008).


15 See Juliá 2000 and Roche 2000 on Mercado’s collaborations with Andanza, especially during their trip to Spain for the First Festival of Performance sponsored by Casa de América in Madrid.

16 See de Cuba (n.d.) and Aponte Ramos 1997 on Mercado’s collaborations with the dancer, visual artist and cabaret entertainer Awilda Sterling.

17 Johnny Rodríguez’s performance as doña Fela is recorded in the Mexican-Puerto Rican co-production Puerto Rico en Carnaval (1965), starring the Mexican comedian Tin Tan. On El Cotorrito see Laureano 2007.

18 An early mention appears in 1991 in the San Juan Star, when Peggy Ann Bliss began her review of the opening of the Ninth Biennial of Caribbean and Latin American Graphic Arts making reference to Mercado, who attended the event completely dressed in black with a long veil in the style of a Renaissance courtesan woman.

19 Mercado presented the piece “Coco Barroco” in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in 1995 as part of a multidisciplinary exhibit titled “Aproximación del Caribe” at the Colegio Dominicano de Artistas Plásticos. He presented a variation of this piece at the Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo (MEIAC) at Badajoz, Spain, in 1998, as part of the “Caribe: Exclusión, fragmentación y paraíso” show. He returned to Spain in 2000 with Andanza. In 2001, he participated in “Aquí y Allá: Six Artists from San Juan, PR” at the Museo del Barrio in Nueva York. He has also performed in New York at El manjar de los dioses’ shows.


22 See Kourias 1997, La Fountain-Stokes (“Spookiricans de Eduardo Alegría,” 1997), Méndez
(“¿Cómo se traduce ‘performance’?,” 1997), and “Spooky Doings” (1997).

23 For a history of Teatro Pregones, see Vásquez 2003 as well as their website, www.pregones.org. Also see interview with Rosalba Rolón and Alvan Colón by Vivian Martínez Tabares (Rolón and Colón 1997).

24 On this piece by Teatro Pregones, see Ferrer 1999, Glickman 1997, La Fountain-Stokes 1997, 2005, and 2008b, and Méndez 1997. I am aware of the limitations of talking about this work privileging Jorge Merced and not as a collective creation of Pregones Theater, which is what it is. Also worth noticing is the work done by Pregones to promote AIDS awareness using theater-forum (inspired in Augusto Boal) and their Asunción Playwrights Project initiative geared towards promoting the writing of plays which address issues of sexual identity and orientation (La Fountain-Stokes, 2004).

25 See Flores 1993, particularly his essays “Puerto Rican Literature in the United States: Stages and Perspectives” and “Qué assimilated brother, yo soy asimilao’: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the United States.”


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