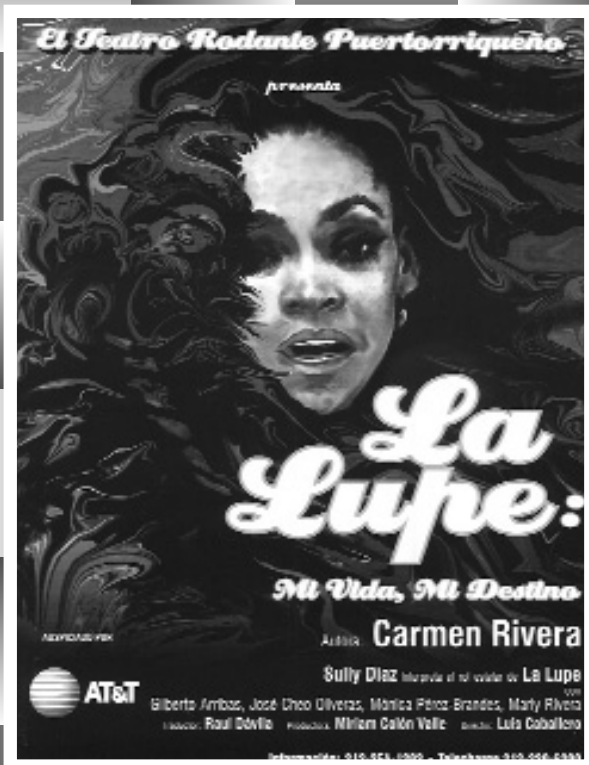


Memorializing La Lupe and Lavoe: Singing Vulgarity, Transnationalism, and Gender

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ABSTRACT

This essay serves as countermemory, as it reclaims the historical role of two late Latin singers, Guadalupe Victoria Yoli Raimond, known as “La Lupe,” and Héctor “Lavoe” Pérez, in the development of Latin music in the United States and in the construction of a Puerto Rican national identity, in the case of Lavoe, and of a Caribbean Latino community in the Diaspora, with respect to La Lupe. Most recently, younger generations of salsa singers such as Yolanda Duke, La India, Marc Anthony, and Van Lester, have “mimetically embodied” La Lupe and Lavoe, respectively, by recreating their singing styles, their repertoires, and their personae. Why are Puerto Ricans and Caribbean Latinos/as memorializing these two particular singers? While also shaped by gender politics, Lavoe and La Lupe’s countercultural positionings articulate the complex process of forming oppositional identities whereby their personal lives and stage personae remit audiences, in metonymic ways, to the constructed illegality of being a Latino in the United States. Their respective social marginalities contribute to their canonization as musical and countercultural heroes while simultaneously triggering posthumous performances of countermemory. While Lavoe has been canonized and integrated into the masculine genealogy of Puerto Rican national musical forms, La Lupe’s struggles with the industry revealed her structured secondariness as a female interpreter and artist in a male-dominated world. Transcending the mere reflexivity of music and identity, we also argue that the *act* and *process* of memorializing both La Lupe and Lavoe are re-creations and re-constructions of the Puerto Rican/Latino/a imaginary by incorporating the diasporic narrative into the traditional inscriptions of the nation. [Key words: Latin popular music, gender, transnationalism, cultural memory, Héctor Lavoe, La Lupe]



Top: Handbill of the play *La Lupe: Mi Vida, Mi Destino*. Bottom: Mural in the Lower East Side (NYC) honoring Héctor Lavoe. Photograph courtesy of Wilson A. Valentín-Escobar.

TO THE MEMORY OF
Guadalupe Victoria Yoli (La Lupe)
&
Héctor “Lavoe” Pérez

Prelude in two voices

Through countermemory, argues George Lipsitz, oral traditions and popular histories of marginalized, oppressed groups are integrated into official history. Countermemory “looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives” by inscribing “the local, the immediate, and the personal” into the totalizing narratives of official history (1990). This essay serves as countermemory, as it reclaims the historical role of two late Latino singers, Guadalupe Victoria Yoli Raimond, known as “La Lupe,” and Héctor “Lavoe” Pérez. Both were central to the development of Latin music in the United States and in the construction of a Puerto Rican national identity, in the case of Lavoe, and of a Caribbean Latino community in the diaspora, with respect to La Lupe. Countermemory is also implicit in the process of memorializing these singers after their deaths, a popular and collective phenomenon that is the object of our study and has led to the construction of La Lupe and Lavoe as cultural heroes by and for these diasporic communities. Most recently, younger generations of salsa singers, such as Yolanda Duke, La India, Marc Anthony, and Van Lester, have “mimetically embodied” (Taussig 1993) La Lupe and Lavoe, respectively, by recreating their singing styles, their repertoires, and their personae. The recent releases of their music and the resurgence of early salsa from the ‘70s among young Latinos and, in the case of Héctor Lavoe, the murals and the commercial distribution of T-shirts imprinted with his face, all attest to the ways in which the Puerto Rican and Caribbean Latino/a communities in the diaspora continue to reconstruct their sense of national identities. This constitutes the creation of popular cultural heroes through the (re)inscription of their bodies on public and private surfaces. If fans memorialized Héctor Lavoe as a cultural hero immediately after his death, and in the public ritual of the funeral itself, La Lupe, who died in oblivion in 1992, has been reclaimed through the recent releases of her music, through the dramatization of her life (El Teatro Rodante Puertorriqueño’s *La Lupe: Mi Vida, Mi Destino*), plans for a Hollywood movie, the renaming of a street in New York as La Lupe’s Way, and also through her status as a diva for gay and non-gay audiences and for queer performance artists such as Carmelita Tropicana.

La Lupe was a favorite singer and interpreter of *boleros*, *filin* [feeling], and other diverse musical genres throughout the 1940s and ‘50s in Cuba. After having performed in local cabarets in Havana, she went to Mexico in 1959 and to New York in 1961. There she performed with salsa and Latin jazz greats such as the late Tito Puente, Mongo Santamaría, and others in the Fania and Tico recording labels. Her performances were controversial, excessive in their anger, violence, and sensuality, and she was well known for major hits such as “La Tirana,” “Puro teatro,” and “My Life.” Problems with drug use, illnesses, and gender politics limited her musical career, and her personal life was marked by much personal tragedy. According to José Quiroga, “her husband fell ill and she lost her life savings paying *santeros* [Santería priests] and medical bills. And then, when he was cured, he left her” (2000: 166). Later, as a result of an accident, she ended up in a wheelchair, lost her house, and moved with her children to a shelter in New York City (Quiroga 2000: 166). In 1992, she died of a heart attack at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx after having converted to Protestantism and having shifted to singing Gospels and religious hymns.

Héctor Lavoe was born Héctor Juan Pérez in Ponce, Puerto Rico, on September 30, 1946, to Panchita and Luis Pérez. He grew up listening and studying the music of Puerto Rico’s most famous folklore and popular musicians and singers, such as

Ramito, Chuíto el de Bayamón, Odilio González, and Daniel Santos. Salsa, bomba, and plena singers whom he also admired, and who would later influence his singing style, were Cheo Feliciano and Ismael Rivera. In 1960, Lavoe dropped out of school and began singing for local bands in Ponce. Against his father's wishes Héctor Pérez left for New York City in 1963, when he was only 17 years old. Upon arriving, he quickly started singing with several bands, such as the "New Yorkers," "Kako and His All-Stars," and the Tito Puente Orchestra. Soon thereafter, the promoter Franquís christened Héctor with the nickname "Lavoe" which meant "La Voz" ["The Voice"]. Shortly thereafter, Héctor met the South Bronx-born Willie Colón, a young emerging musician who began his salsa career with the support of the late Al Santiago, the former owner, founder, and producer of Alegre Records, one of the first labels to record New York-based salsa music.

On Tuesday afternoon, June 29, 1993, Héctor Lavoe passed away at St. Claire's Hospital in New York City. Lavoe died of a heart attack, ending his struggle with HIV. Lavoe's admirers in New York City, Chicago, Puerto Rico, and other urban and (trans)national hubs conducted vigils in his name. In New York City the songs and sounds of Héctor Lavoe's music emanated from people's homes, car stereos, and boom boxes, blurring the boundaries between public and private cultures. The popular "La Mega" FM Radio Station in New York City played Lavoe's music all week long, motivating his followers and admirers to sing and dance, almost in unison, in the streets of *La Gran Manzana* [the Big Apple].

These acts of memorializing suggest a collective search for the past by Caribbean Latinos/as. Yet, rather than a mythical search fueled by a preterite nostalgia, these instances alternatively reconstitute history in ways in which the disempowered sectors also participate in, and benefit from, a constructed sense of national identity. This identity serves as a central space of belonging, precisely because it has been politically contested by the Puerto Rican colonial dilemma and by the larger marginalization of U.S. Latinos. In this (post)colonial context, popular music serves as an ideal site for constructing alternative spaces of national belonging and of a simultaneous, collective U.S. Latino/a identity. Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera have already exemplified the status of cultural heroes that black musicians and singers have held for the working-class communities in Puerto Rico and in New York.¹ The late singers Daniel Santos, El Anacobero, and Celia Cruz, the Queen of Salsa, have likewise illustrated the continental influence that one musical figure can exert in the lives of millions.² The untimely death of Selena foregrounded the need of the Mexican-American community for a cultural heroine with which the popular sectors could identify. While these singers have been and were systematically kept out of official paradigms of culture and written history, they nevertheless have become myths and legends, even adored as saints and deities by their fans.³ Figures such as Celia Cruz, Rubén Blades, and Willie Colón often displace intellectuals and politicians in their role as cultural leaders and spokespersons in a postmodern, Latin American society, where mass media and popular music have become the central sites for defining cultural identities (Franco 1994: 19). From a (post)colonial approach, silenced Puerto Ricans and Caribbean Latino/as are proactively remembering these individuals, imagining them as cultural heroes and inscribing their figures, singing, and styles in public spaces.

Like gossip and cultural artifacts, memory also travels and new meanings are produced for the figures being remembered. In the case of both La Lupe and Héctor Lavoe, why are Puerto Ricans, U.S. Latinos/as, and various Latin

Americans memorializing these two particular singers? In this essay we argue that the countercultural status of both singers informs their ensuing memorialization. While also shaped by gender politics, Lavoe and La Lupe's countercultural positionings articulate the complex process of forming oppositional identities among their listeners. Their personal lives and stage personae remit audiences, in metonymic ways, to the constructed illegality and social marginality of being a Latino in the United States. Their respective social marginalities —Lavoe as *títere* (outcast) and La Lupe's erotic excesses and *chusmería* (vulgarity)—contribute to their canonization as musical and countercultural heroes while simultaneously triggering posthumous performances of counter-memory. In terms of gender, however, differentials of power define the divergent status of each within the musical industry. While Lavoe has been canonized and integrated into the masculine genealogy of Puerto Rican national musical forms, La Lupe's struggles with the industry revealed her structured secondariness as a female interpreter and artist in a male-dominated world. Yet if gender identities are mediated by musical aesthetics and vice-versa, gender also played a major role in the discursive constructions of sexuality throughout the process of their memorialization. Transcending the mere reflexivity of music and identity, we also argue that the *act* and *process* of memorializing La Lupe and Lavoe are re-creations and re-constructions of a Puerto Rican/Latino/a imaginary because they incorporate the diasporic narrative into the traditional inscriptions of the nation. In so doing, we hope to highlight and address the multiple ways diasporas, in this case the Puerto Rican and Latino/a communities, construct and imagine themselves as deterritorialized entities through popular music.

The next three sections of our essay, each constituted by two *soneos* and a *coro* in two voices, bring together historical documentation and the voices of individuals who knew these singers and of others who were their audience and fans. Following the musical structure of salsa music, each *soneo*, which represents the improvisatory section of salsa, analyzes the specificity of La Lupe and Lavoe. Together, these *soneos* are performative acts of counter-memory. The *coro* or chorus in two voices at the end of each section is written collaboratively by both authors in order to establish comparisons and differences between Lavoe and La Lupe with respect to the topic addressed in each section.

First Section:

La Lupe and Lavoe as Countercultural Heroes

Primer *soneo*: La Lupe

"Yo soy cubana caliente"

When La Lupe died of a cardiac arrest on February 28, 1992, Guadalupe Victoria Yoli Raimond was remembered in her local Bronx community and in Puerto Rico for her active role, later in her life, as a Pentecostal preacher and singer of hymns. A former school teacher, initiated *santera*, and preacher, La Lupe's lasting fame was built on her singing *chillona* [screeching] style, her *yiyiyi* screams, and on her performative gestures, which ranged from self-eroticizing, stripping acts to moments of possession or ecstasies, much of which has been associated with possible drug abuse and *santería* experiences. Her fame was strongly mediated by her connection to Tito Puente and Mongo Santamaría, with whom she performed.

The lack of available historical documentation on her life, coupled with the silence surrounding her personal and professional struggles in the Latin music industry, has created an aura of mystery around her. Guillermo Cabrera Infante states that “La Lupe no fue una cantante, La Lupe es una leyenda” [La Lupe was not a singer, La Lupe is a legend] (1993: 19), thus discursively denying her identity as a singer and woman and socially constructing her as a legend. Her life has been described as a “performance,” a series of tragedies fit for a *telenovela* (soap opera) plot. Her own figure as a performer of feelings and passion has been described as “a turbulent, charismatic, indescribable spitfire called La Lupe” (González-Wippler 1994: 24). She has been discursively represented as “a fiery Cuban-born singer,” and as “vulgar, cheap and offensive” by her most negative critics. Many families censored her television appearances, sending children to bed or turning off the television set whenever she performed. In 1961 the Cuban revolutionary government ordered her to leave the country since *lupismo* was considered unacceptable as a “school” in revolutionary Cuba. Her first audience in New York in a concert with Rafael Cortijo applauded her, demanding *que salga la loca* [that the madwoman come on stage]. Others loved her performative excesses, as a Puerto Rican woman from New York attested in an interview: “Cuando iban a dar un show de ella, yo no me lo perdía” [I would never miss any of her shows]. In sum, La Lupe has been constructed as the embodiment of unbound passion, feeling, anger, madness, and sexuality as a result of the persona she created, sparking myriad reactions among many audiences.

In the geocultural space of the Caribbean, from Brazil to New York, La Lupe’s vocality can be defined as a self-tropicalizing gesture (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, 1997: 1–17). This phenomenon was evident since the beginnings of her career as a singer in Cuba. With the phrase *cubana caliente* she makes reference to the “hot” rhythms that she brings to her music. While this song may be a form of self-eroticizing for marketing purposes, it is also an encoded, veiled reference to her oppositional and countercultural personae. La Lupe was *caliente* because of the performative anger against her own body and the excessive erotics on stage, and because of the bodily gestures that reminded the audience of her alleged drug use.

The young Lupe worked as a teacher and also sang as a member of the Trío Los Tropicuba. Interestingly, critics writing about this early period of her career have chosen to foreground the ways in which her musical performances radically departed from the expected behaviors for female singers. It has been said that her husband then, Eulogio Reyes, also a member of Los Tropicuba, commented after her first performance that he “thought she was having an epileptic fit,” a parodic comment that indicates the transgressive style that would continue to characterize her singing. Around 1958–59, she was fired from the trio and she divorced Eulogio Reyes. La Lupe commented that “yo era la que más llamaba la atención. [I was the one who captured the most attention.] Finally he threw me out because I didn’t want to live with him anymore” (González-Wippler 1984: 25). She then went on to sing in La Red, a club where she polarized the audience into those who were “addicted” to La Lupe and those others who could not stand her. Most revealing is the possible symbolic value that her defiant and unique style of bodily movements and gestures posed at this time when Cuban society was living its transition into socialism. Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1993) recalls her performances at La Red, which he attended:

The woman would hit and scratch herself, and later bite herself, her hands, and her arms. Unhappy with this musical exorcism, she would throw herself against the background wall, hitting it with her fists and with one or two movements of head, she would let loose, literally and metaphorically, her black hair. After hitting the props, she would attack the piano and the pianist with a new fury. All of this, miraculously, without stopping her singing and without losing the rhythms of that warm calypso that she transformed into a torrid, musical zone (19).

According to Cristóbal Díaz Ayala (1981):

aside from being an intelligent and sensible singer, when she wants, she does in public what almost all of Cuba feels like doing, unconsciously, during those moments: scream, cry, scratch oneself, bite oneself, take off one’s shoes, curse, indeed, break in some way the terrible tension that the transition from revolution to socialism demanded from each citizen day by day, hour by hour. La Lupe is a mirror of those times and, as such, she triumphs, and one day in 1961 she also flees Cuba... (275).⁴

During her early years of singing, Celia Cruz and Olga Guillot influenced La Lupe, and it is not surprising that she was known then as “La Olga santiaguera” [The Olga from Santiago]. Her singing career began when she won a contest in which she imitated *la* Guillot (Quiroga 2000: 165). Unlike Celia Cruz, whose professional demeanor on stage and mainstream politics have produced a high degree of acceptability by mainstream audiences in Latin America and the United States, La Lupe’s performance and presence always triggered controversy and disavowal. These contrasting strategies on the part of Celia and La Lupe both resist the eroticizing discourse about black and mulatta bodies at the same time that they represent distinct class aspirations.

Indeed, La Lupe’s aesthetics, style, and performative excesses, a world apart from Celia Cruz’s dignified, Caribbean-baroque elegance on stage, has been described as *chusmería* (Muñoz 1999b: 182). According to José Esteban Muñoz, *chusmería* is a class-based defiance against “standards of bourgeois comportment” (Ibid). Linked to a “stigmatized class identity,” the epithet *chusma* is associated in the United States with “recent immigration and a general lack of ‘Americanness,’ as well as an excessive nationalism—that one is somewhat over the top about her Cubanness” (Ibid.). If Celia Cruz’s artistic identity and mainstream reception had something to do with her identity as a Cuban exile—as a migrant politically embraced by the United States until the Mariel exodus—then La Lupe’s *chusma* style indexed a very different social position for her listening audiences. Her subversive sexuality, along with her songs about illicit love, drinking, nomadism, and lack of social status, systematically articulated a bohemian, uncentered, and displaced identity. Such marginal location was both attractive and repulsive to many.

Segundo Soneo: Héctor Lavoe

“Ahora que yo vengo caliente...
Todo el mundo dice que yo estoy caliente,
que critiquen, que critiquen”

In 1967, Lavoe joined Willie Colón’s band, and together they recorded their first album entitled *El Malo*. Critics and musicians claimed that this record lacked the “superior” musicianship and arrangement complexity found in the music performed by more established musicians such as Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez, and Charlie and Eddie Palmieri (Rondón 1980). Regardless of this criticism, the album was a great success. The music performed by Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe consisted of salsa and boogaloo songs, which spoke to a younger generation of Puerto Ricans born and raised in New York City, signifying an element of Nuyorican culture and identity.⁵ Their music was distinguished by its brash, urban, or “street” barrio sound and philosophy that departed from the Cuban-influenced musical arrangements performed in ballroom settings.

Describing the artists as “untrained” musicians (outside of the classical musical conservatory), César Miguel Rondón portrays Colón, Lavoe, and many of their contemporaries as musicians who functioned *por el oído y no por el conservatorio* [by ear and not by their conservatory training] (Rondón 1980:50). They further flaunted this unpolished image of themselves in the title track song of Colón and Lavoe’s first album, “El Malo” [“The Bad One”]. In this song Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe express their social marginality and títère aesthetics through the strident trombone arrangements and the following lyrical commentary:

Quien se llama El Malo
No hay discusi[h]
El Malo de aquí soy yo
Porque tengo cora[h].

There is no discussion as to
Who is the Bad One
The Bad One here is me
Because I have heart.

Lavoe and Colón, along with Eddie and Charlie Palmieri, Ray Barretto, Joe Cuba, Johnny Colón, Ricardo Ray and Bobby Cruz, Larry Harlow and others were recognized as helping to create the distinctive Nuyorican sound of salsa in their 1960s and ‘70s Fania label recordings (Rondón 1980). In addition to *El Malo* (1967), Colón and Lavoe’s other popular recordings were *The Hustler* (1968), *La Gran Fuga/ The Big Break* (1971), *Asalto Navideño* Volumes 1 (1971) and 2 (1973), *El Juicio* (1972), and *Lo Mato* (1973), among others. With the success of each album, Lavoe and Colón became a “tag team” known as *Los malotes de la salsa*—the bad boys of salsa.

Interestingly, this image that Colón and Lavoe portrayed in their albums and performances may have contributed to the similar images adopted by many rap artists since the late 1970s. Once, Lavoe was introduced on stage as *el hombre que abre la boca y sale gasolina* [the man who opens his mouth and emits fire], referencing his verbally aggressive soneos and disparaging remarks that anticipated rap’s oppositional language and style. Colón and Lavoe’s album covers, many of which were designed by Izzy Sanabria, were in intertextual dialogue with cinematic representations of New York City organized crime. Prime examples include the album covers for *Guisando/Doing a Job* (1969), *Crime Pays* (1972), *The Good, The Bad,*

The Ugly (1975), and *Cosa Nuestra* (1972). In the latter, Colón reverses the syntactical order of “Nuestra Cosa” to “Cosa Nuestra,” mnemonically similar to the underground Italian-American organization often referred to as the “Cosa Nostra” (i.e. the mafia). The album cover amusingly mimics the urban myth that organized crime kills its enemies near the Fulton Fish Market on the South Side of the Manhattan Island waterfront (hence the phrase “swimming with the fishes”). Additionally, Colón may be suggesting that salsa, as “Our [Latin] Thing,” refers both to the Fania-sponsored documentary on the history of this music in New York City and to its distinction from the Cuban sound.

Lavoe’s embodiment as a countercultural figure is doubled in his personal biography. Many of Lavoe’s friends, fellow musicians, music promoters, and journalists described his life as plagued with adversity. In 1988 Lavoe attempted suicide by jumping out of a ninth floor room at the Regency Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico, breaking both his legs, one hip, and several ribs, and causing massive internal bleeding. This attempted suicide was a response to the distress that pervaded his personal life. For example, his seventeen-year-old son was accidentally shot and killed. Shortly thereafter, Héctor’s mother-in-law was brutally murdered in Puerto Rico, and a mysterious fire destroyed his home in Queens, leaving four relatives dead. Lavoe also frequently battled drug addiction, which adversely affected his professional life. His addiction often made him late to many performances and regularly aroused the anger of promoters and club owners. His tardy appearances were so common that Lavoe deflected his lateness onto audience members and fans, jokingly communicating through song and statements that they arrived too early for the performance. This partly exemplifies a rhetorical strategy through which the singer made his audience complicit in his disregard for social norms. For example, in his live performance of “Mi Gente” in the Roberto Clemente Coliseum, he positioned himself and his audience outside of the law: “si yo digo algo fresco, nos van a llevar a todos presos” [if I say something indecent, they will imprison us all].

Coro (a dos voces)

This identificatory process between Lavoe and La Lupe as countercultural figures and their audiences reveals the vicarious ways in which racialized minorities such as Latino Caribbeans in the diaspora negotiate their everyday survival through the troubled lives and controversial performances of these singers. In addition, the bodies and the voices of La Lupe and Lavoe became representative sites of the



Covers (front and back) and inside layout of the soundtrack CD for *¿Quién mató a Héctor Lavoe?* RMM Records.

colonized and racialized status of their listeners. Their performances reminded racial minorities of their own vulnerability to be always already criminalized by U.S. dominant society and the State. Both of their lives were fraught with personal tragedy and suffering, elements that allowed their Latino audiences to confront their own struggles and marginalization as a result of structured social inequities.

The common use of the epithet *caliente* [hot] signals multiple layers of social meanings and discursive constructions. For both La Lupe and Lavoe, the self-referential term reclaims the oppositional value of their performed illegality. Both singers were “hot” as a result of their disavowal of middle-class aesthetics and social norms and of their long-term use of drugs. They both played into and acted out the self-eroticizing discourse that was rooted in their well-known “sins of the flesh” and bodily consumption and abuse, thus reinscribing the “hegemonic tropicalizations” to which they were subjected (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997). For Lavoe, his marginalization and oppositionality were self-constructed as part of the gendered discourse of masculinity that characterized the early salsa period. This discourse, which appropriated the dominant images of ethnic minorities as criminals, should be interpreted as a form of decolonization in both the cultural and economic context and in the struggles of Puerto Rican musicians vis-a-vis the music industry and the debates around salsa. Similarly, La Lupe self-fashioned her own sexuality through her controversial and excessive performances. For her the consequences of this image had more negative repercussions than for Lavoe. The fact that certain sectors censored her performances and considered her sexuality menacing, intimidating, and dangerous, partly explains the oblivion in which she died and her lack of recognition as a singer/artist. While Lavoe was canonized as a salsa artist, La Lupe was systematically marginalized by the industry. Despite their common countercultural status, gender politics shaped and informed the degrees of acceptance and memorialization for these two figures.

Second Section:

Gender Politics

Primer Soneo: Héctor Lavoe

If Lavoe’s transgressive behavior created any animosity, it surely dissipated at the news of his death on June 29, 1993. Lavoe’s fans remember the urban *jibaro salsero* both as a cultural hero and tragic martyr. They constructed narratives and mythologies around Lavoe’s personal and professional life that represented stories of migration, survival, and national and diasporic formations. Masculinity was so integral to these narrative constructions during his lifetime and after his death, that fans selectively repudiated his AIDS-related death. Puerto Rican and Latino masculinity and sexuality inform this discriminatory omission and repression of Lavoe’s distress. The association with AIDS potentially disrupts the historical solidity of Lavoe as a cultural and national hero. More importantly, with AIDS still considered a “gay” disease in popular thinking, the logical inference would attribute a gay identity on to Lavoe as well. But a reworking of subaltern historiography, where competing discourses and narratives subvert and entangle official accounts of the past, allows the “unsaid” and “unsayable” to be whispered and at times publicly revealed (Connerton 1989:50). Despite this historical amnesia regarding Lavoe’s health and passing, he is both a tragic figure of urban mythology and a crowned martyr of the trans-Boricua and Latino communities.

Lavoe’s canonization as a (trans)national hero was pronounced and solidified during the funeral procession in which gender, race, and national musical forms converge to mediate this process. The funeral mass was held at St. Cecilia’s Catholic Church on 105th Street in El Barrio. As Héctor Lavoe’s body was taken out of the church and into the hearse, hundreds of his followers began shouting, “¡Que Viva Héctor Lavoe! ¡Héctor Lavoe Vive!; ¡Tú eres eterno!; ¡Se fue pero se queda!” [Héctor Lavoe lives! You are eternal! He left but remains with us!]. Others clapped and sang the plena song, “Qué Bonita Bandera, Qué Bonita Bandera, La Bandera Puertorriqueña!” [What a beautiful flag, What a beautiful flag, the flag of Puerto Rico!], referring not only to Lavoe’s Puerto Rican nationality, but also claiming him as a cultural hero of Puerto Rico. Fans continued to perform plena music and interwove salsa music throughout the funeral procession. The public performance around the hearse and throughout the procession between the church and the cemetery demonstrated the resemanticized practices of *plena* and salsa enacted during the funeral as well as the liminal social position of the diaspo-Rican community. For example, various sectors of the crowd performed and sang plena with Spanglish lyrics while other groups performed salsa. At times, the soundscape became indistinguishable because both musical styles were performed simultaneously. Marching, dancing, walking, and singing through the noisy urban streets between El Barrio in Manhattan and St. Raymond’s cemetery in the Bronx, *pleneros* and *salseros* used microphones and speakers to help carry their voices within this urban metropolis. The interchangeable performances of plena and salsa illuminate the fluid movement between both musical styles in memorializing Lavoe, a fluidity that characterizes their shared social functions within the diaspora.

The funeral procession to St. Raymond’s cemetery lasted 6 hours. During this time the crowd and those following the *caminata* [procession] played, sang, and danced to Héctor Lavoe’s music. At the cemetery, many climbed on top of mausoleums and continued to sing plena music in tribute to him during the final benediction and hours after the lowering of the coffin into the grave. One plena song, sung by those present at the cemetery, canonized Héctor as a plenero and national hero by placing him among a community of masculine Puerto Rican pleneros:

Tumbale a Cortijo

Tumbale a Ismael

Tumbale a Lavoe

Como le gustaba a él.

And:

Fuego al cañón, fuego al cañón,

Así se respeta a Héctor Lavoe

Pay homage to Rafael Cortijo,

Pay homage to Ismael Rivera,

Pay homage to Héctor Lavoe

The way Héctor would have wanted.

Fire the cannon, fire the cannon

This is how we pay respect to Héctor Lavoe

This acclamation and reclamation can be viewed and interpreted in different ways. It not only recognizes the historical significance of Lavoe in Puerto Rican music, but also elevates him onto the male pantheon of pleneros: Mon Rivera, Rafael Cortijo, and Ismael Rivera. Canonizing Héctor Lavoe into this male pantheon reinforces a masculine hegemony in plena music and accentuates the gendered construction of public culture, that is, how masculinity informs collective memory and national celebrations. Implicit in this action is a fundamental understanding of plena as the national music of Puerto Rico and of how Lavoe’s *títere* aesthetics racially influenced his inclusion in the black Puerto Rican musical tradition despite his light skin color.

This reclamation positions him as an “authentic” and “true” Puerto Rican and *ponceño* while further reinscribing him within the constructed masculinity of the national musical canon. The burial performance authenticates Lavoe through this musical tradition, creating a reversion back to homeland references that reaffirm him as a national icon. The performance of *plenas* at the funeral likewise contests the threatened masculinity of Lavoe triggered by AIDS, upholding the hegemonic heterosexuality behind this gender construct. Although deemed *El cantante de la salsa*, in the process of being memorialized, Lavoe, unlike Ismael Rivera who was recognized as a performer of plena music, crosses genres from salsa into plena. This crossing highlights the agency exercised by the diaspora through collective memory and the role of racial ideology in reconstructing meaning, historical events, and figures. Besides historical reconstruction, this crossing may be attributed to the arrangements that constitute salsa music in New York City. Because salsa is not a rhythm, but “a way of making music,” encompassing various genre elements, including plena, the reconstruction of Lavoe as *plenero* may also be attributed to his incorporation of plena music and lyrics into his live salsa performances. In addition, the hypermasculine musical arrangements, visual discourses, and song lyrics of 1960s and ‘70s salsa doubly contribute to the gendered aspects of his memorialization (Aparicio 1998). Overall, the fluidity of historical meanings demonstrates how collective memory functions to mitigate racial, class, and gender boundaries while also claiming them.

Segundo Soneo: La Lupe

“Yo soy dueña del cantar”

In New York in the early ‘60s, La Lupe appeared in La Barraca, where Johnny Pacheco and Mongo Santamaría, among others, would see her. Mongo invited her to sing coro with his band, and she joined him at Birdland and later recorded with him. A relationship with Tito Puente soon followed as he allowed her to sing as a soloist, and their collaboration will mark her professional identity relationally to him, a phenomenon that has characterized the career of other Latina singers such as Graciela, La India, and Yolanda Duke. La Lupe has stated that Puente “had a lot to do with my growth in popularity. He did not create me. I have my own talent. But he was instrumental in my becoming famous here. The man had faith in me” (González-Wippler 1984: 26). When Tito Puente in 1968 fired La Lupe from his band, he was also instrumental in her gradual disappearance from the salsa scene. He asked José Curbelo, a famous manager who represented all the big stars, not to hire her or other musicians to play with her. “Donde cante esa negra yo no trabajo” [I won’t play wherever that black woman sings], said Puente to Curbelo. Yet Maisonave, with Tico Records, defended her and arranged for her to sing with Machito’s band. This separation, ironically, proved that La Lupe could sing on her own. When Masucci bought Tico Records, La Lupe was totally marginalized from performing at concerts and from collaborating in recordings. As Louis Bauzó, an experienced Puerto Rican percussionist active in salsa music, indicated in an interview, La Lupe was absent from the Fania All Stars recordings (1996).

In the historiography of salsa, César Miguel Rondón problematically defines La Lupe’s role in Afro-Caribbean music as that of having been the singer who made the late Tite Curet Alonso’s compositions famous. La Lupe’s value in salsa music, according to Rondón, had less to do with her own talents, compositions,

and perform-ances than with the value she accorded to the male composer. While it is true that “a partir de ‘La Tirana,’ Curet Alonso se convertiría en el más extraordinario de todos los cantores de la circunstancia amorosa en el mundo de la salsa” [after “La Tirana,” Curet Alonso would become the most extraordinary composer of love songs in the world of Salsa] (Rondón 1980: 209), it is also true that Curet Alonso wrote expressly for her the trademark song “La Tirana” (Quiroga 1995, 20), thus revealing the autonomous importance of La Lupe as an interpreter and his obvious admiration for her. Rondón’s masculinist assessment also tends to erase Curet Alonso’s contributions to other themes and social issues in his music, which were not exclusively centered on romantic songs. Nevertheless, Rondón recognizes the historical importance of La Lupe in the initial stages of the development of salsa. Her particular and unique style of singing, her voice, *gritona, desordenada y falta de respeto* [screaming, disorderly, and disrespectful], marked the emerging differentiations between traditional Cuban music and the new sound of New York salsa. La Lupe embodied and voiced the “otro elemento, el del canto marginal, hiriente, algo descuidado, lleno de esas mañas y esos trucos que jamás soportó el ortodoxo del canto caribe” [other element, that of the marginal song, wounded, somehow unruly, full of those tricks that the orthodox Caribbean song never tolerated] (Rondón 1980: 46). She represents the bridge between the big band sound and El Barrio, inscribing in her performances as well as in her modulations that *grito de guerra* [scream of war] that salsa has articulated as the music of urban, marginalized sectors (Rondón 1980: 45, 47).

Despite La Lupe’s significant contributions, Rondón explains her eventual disappearance from the salsa scene as a result of the fact that her role in that transition had already been effected, that is, that once it is clear that the women’s role in music is to pave the way for male singers, there is no need to continue acknowledging them (1980:47). Richie Pérez, in a 1996 interview, also places La Lupe outside the emergence of salsa music, although he contextualizes it within a larger framework of women’s exclusion in the music industry: “La Lupe was something else. Aside from the fact that women never got that much of a play in Latin music, La Lupe had already gone down when this music was coming up... By the mid sixties she was gone already, she was not prominent” (1996). Louis Bauzó values La Lupe for her energy and emotion rather than for her skills as a singer or composer: “She wasn’t this great singer technically, but she had a lot of energy, the emotion she puts in the boleros still makes her great for somebody who’s not a ‘singer’” (1996). Joe Conzo, Tito Puente’s personal manager, has also indicated that La Lupe wasn’t very important for Puente (1996). As he noted, she would just sing with the band, but wasn’t really a member. Also, Felipe Luciano has described La Lupe as an “entertainer” and not a performer. In Luciano’s mind, the performer was Tito Puente while La Lupe entertained the audience through her body and erotic acts (1996). These displacing logics erase La Lupe as an important interpreter of salsa in its historical development and also as a feminist salsa singer in her own right. These masculinist underminings of La Lupe as a singer and cultural performer deny her any skills that would categorize her as a professional performer. The canonizing processes of Latin music have been clearly defined by male producers, managers, and distributors.

Yet all of La Lupe “smacked of retribution,” says José Quiroga in his brief article entitled “The Devil in the Flesh” (1995). Her lyrics and songs should be read in the context of her gendered marginalization from the industry. If she composed “Tito Puente me botó” right after he fired her, her songs also assert her authority as a central voice in the making of salsa music. Like George Eliot’s

heroine, Armgart, who asserts “I carry my revenges in my throat” (Pope, 10), in “Dueña del cantar” La Lupe wastes no time acknowledging her role in the development of salsa. She asserts that in the world of *sabor*, in the world of Latin music, she is *la dueña de la salsa* [owner of salsa] (1977). Through the recuperative rhetoric of poetic enumeration, La Lupe reclaims the centrality, ownership, and authority that the industry took away from her. It is ironic—or perhaps consciously orchestrated—that in the opening commentaries to the song, La Lupe reminds listeners that “estamos en la familia de Masucci” [we are part of the Masucci family], thus explaining her own vexed location as an outcast member of Fania’s family. This song can be read as an oppositional response to that particular economic relationship with Fania that eventually pushed her out of circulation. In an interview, La Lupe explains that after Tico Records was sold to Jerry Masucci

that was the end, ahí se jodió La Lupe, Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri and a thousand others. Because forget it, we didn’t even cut any records.... Finally, when we started to cut records in 1977 (so that we didn’t sue him, you understand), he did not give us any publicity.... The one album I made with Masucci in 1977, entitled “One of a Kind” was never promoted. And it was good. Modestia aparte. He just never bothered with it. And later, in 1980, when I used to go to his studio to make records, I would be told that I had to hurry up and finish because there were other people waiting to use the studio. That was really humiliating. After a while, I got tired of this treatment and I decided to go to Puerto Rico. That was in 1980 (González-Wippler 1984: 27).

When La Lupe sings that she is the voice and the owner of song and the chorus repeats “dueña del cantar” back to her in the soneo section, she is symbolically asserting the right of women singers and of female voices to be equally heard, integrated into the canon of salsa music, and remunerated accordingly.

Her feminist stance was also evident in the particular style of singing that she brought to every song. In Cuba, she had become famous for singing Spanish translations of U.S. composers like Paul Anka, a repertoire that must have satisfied the intercultural desires of the many Anglo tourists and businessmen who vacationed and played in Havana. However, this was not a simple case of colonial mimicry or assimilation. In an interview, La Lupe affirmed how she appropriated these songs, “las domesticaba, las hacía a mi manera, al estilo de La Lupe” [I domesticated them, molding them my way, according to La Lupe’s style], thus transculturating Anglo-American texts and rewriting them from either a woman’s perspective (in her performance, “My Way” takes on a strong, feminist stance) or from an Afro-Caribbean cultural vantage point. As José Quiroga observes, her rendering of “My Life” was not in the “plaintive Sinatra mode, but shouted out in the middle of the plaza for everyone to hear” (2000: 166).

La Lupe’s excessive performances, chusmería, and exacerbated sexuality on stage have been re-appropriated and reclaimed by gay audiences. Both José Quiroga and

José Esteban Muñoz have explored this reception and influence. La Lupe’s chusma style, according to Muñoz, can be seen as a pioneering form of performative art that is acknowledged and deployed by queer performance artists such as the Cuban-American Carmelita Tropicana (Muñoz 1999b: 181–200). Quiroga, in *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latin America*, argues that the poetics of the bolero and of Latin American sensuality and sentimentalism have been relocated in the figure and body of the Latino gay male. In this context, La Lupe’s highly dramatic and tragic songs, and her diva-like status—“She was a diva, but then again we like our divas taboo” (Quiroga 2000: 163)—have served to mediate the “recuperation” of the bolero by Latino gay men. Fueled by Pedro Almodóvar’s cinematic use of La Lupe in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, Latino gay men have identified with La Lupe and the bolero “in terms of positionality” and as “a kind of validation not given within the national space itself, as a quoted gesture of recognition sought after, delayed, displaced” (Quiroga 2000: 162). Thus, gender politics, as articulated through the life and persona of La Lupe, is also embedded in issues of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Much like the unacknowledged economic contributions of women’s domestic work and mothering, the industry and critics alike have sorely neglected La Lupe’s own style of singing, her repertoires, performances, and disturbing presence. The fact that she transgressively eroticized herself as a feminist act of resistance possibly remains one of the most central motivations behind the masculine silencing to which she was objected.

Coro (a dos voces)

Both Lavoe and La Lupe’s deaths remind us of the processes of silencing in our communities. The silencing of AIDS and of La Lupe’s menacing erotics reveals how gender encodes collective memory and selectively (re)constructs it. While Lavoe comes to signify nation and diaspora, and that is the reason why he is memorialized, La Lupe never achieves this level of cultural meaning and prominence. However, gay audiences and Latina feminists have reclaimed her. As socially marginalized communities, they have found in her repertoire and performativity a renewed site and model for resistance. This constitutes a particular instance of counter-memory that allows varied audiences to reposition historical narratives and cultural texts in a different context, a process that Valentín-Escobar (2001) terms *memoria resemantizada* [resemanticizing memory]. By attaching distinct social meanings and values to particular figures, local communities exercise a cultural and collective agency that produces new, historical meanings.

At the same time, this process of memorializing reveals the gendered nature of the musical canon. Differentials of power between men and women informed the unequal ways in which Lavoe and La Lupe were ranked within Latino cultural and musical traditions. Lavoe became representative of Puerto Rican music, both on the island and in the diaspora. Given the predominance of male singers as icons of national identity, he is inserted into a historical memory and musical genealogies—plena and salsa—that have been basically male and black. The public funeral of Lavoe exemplified this. In contrast, La Lupe died after years of remaining outside the limelight. As José Quiroga put it, at the news of her death, “We all remembered how much we had missed her” (Quiroga 2000: 167).

These words accentuate the memory of her absence, rather than of her presence and career. Gender played a major part in her eventual marginalization from the musical industry, her dwindling presence on stage, and the lack of recognition of her singing and art by both contemporary critics and musicians. However, the performance of countermemory continues to incarnate these two figures, resurrecting their cultural value and significance within the Latino musical imaginary. It is not a coincidence that younger *salseras* and *salseros* have mimetically embodied La Lupe and Lavoe, respectively.

Third Section: Transnationalism and Diaspora Primer Soneo: La Lupe

On Saturday, February 10, 1996, at the Hill Auditorium in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Yolanda Duke, a Dominican-born singer, performed with Tito Puente and his Band at the Latin Jazz Summit. Since she was not included in the concert's publicity nor was she the big name that everyone came to see, the unsuspecting, mostly Anglo audience may have dismissed La Duke's presence as filler, a seemingly generous gesture on the part of Tito Puente, the Mambo King, who was introducing her vocal talents to a national audience. Yet for many Caribbean Latinos there, what was most significant about "La Duke" was that she consciously enacted and embodied La Lupe. Yolanda Duke's voice, as chillona as La Lupe's characteristic timbre, filled the auditorium with the echoes of a sound associated with the brassy harshness of early salsa of the late '60s and early '70s, the sounds of the barrio, rather than with the suave jazzy sounds that middle-class audiences expected during that evening's concert. La Duke, whose very own name phonetically evokes La Lupe in assonantal rhyme, imitated her "flashy costumes and energetic style" by wearing tight black stretch pants, a flashy and glittery blouse with bright, tropical colors, and a pair of red, plastic platform shoes. In combination with her brightly-dyed neon-blonde, short hair, and a facial make-up that reminded us of La Lupe's *puta* [whore-like] looks, La Duke's mimetic embodiment of the Afro-Cuban singer opens up a number of issues regarding women's presence and canon formation in the Latin music industry, cultural and transcultural representations and mediations of Latino culture in the United States, and issues of countermemory and gender as these are articulated in the Puerto Rican and Caribbean Latino communities.

Some believe that neither Yolanda Duke nor La India—who has also paid homage to La Lupe in her songs, performative gestures, and dedications—can truly have the impact that La Lupe had on her audiences. This stance suggests that La Lupe is a cultural musical heroine, a legend in her own right, an unrepeatable act. Yet this mythification is double-edged: while it raises La Lupe to high levels of recognition, it has unwittingly erased the power struggles that she faced as one of a few women in a strong, male-dominated music industry. This particular memorialization by younger *salseras* is a means of altering the male-dominated musical canon. By "resuscitating" La Lupe, Yolanda Duke and La India are reconstructing a musical genealogy that is based on the contributions of their female and feminist precedents, repositioning them at the center of Latino musical history. This rewriting contests the sexist and traditional ways in which women's stylistic and aesthetic contributions to Latin music have been devalued. Despite the fact that La Duke has reclaimed La Lupe's

repertoire, her vexed, relational identity to the late "King of Latin Music," Tito Puente, reveals the partial failures and fissures of an exclusively symbolic reclaiming.

This memorialization testifies to the ways in which Latina women singers have tended to cross national boundaries, constructing an interlatina transnationalism that defies both masculine paradigms of national identity as well as Anglo-Latino dyads of power. What do the mimetic embodiments and representations of La Lupe's performative excesses reveal about gender and sexuality in the Latino/a community? What does it mean in growingly trans-Latino geocultural spaces (Flores 1996) for a Dominican singer such as Yolanda Duke, or Puerto Rican La India, to mimetically embody and "perform" a Cuban woman, La Lupe, who sang for a largely Puerto Rican audience who embraced her as one of her own? The fact that many Puerto Rican fans of La Lupe assumed that she was Puerto Rican reveals the inherent dialectics between national constructions of identity and their transnational circulation. Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, and other Caribbean Latinos have embraced La Lupe's music after her death and have claimed her as a major part of their national history. This reception signals the processes by which transnational borrowings and exchanges reconstitute the local. In addition, feminist politics within the Latin music industry have significantly impacted such transnational formations of identity.

It is not insignificant that Yolanda Duke's first compact disc is entitled *Nostalgias de La Lupe* (1992) and that, despite the differences in certain arrangements, there is an uncanny duplication of La Lupe's timbre, style, and modulations. La Duke even mimics La Lupe's unique sarcastic side comments throughout her songs. This mimetic embodiment is also happening through various artistic means and technological advances, such as the redigitalizing of her early Afro-Caribbean music and her being reclaimed by Latino gay listeners (Quiroga 2000: 167; Muñoz 1999b: 193), plans for documentaries on her life and music to be produced by Latina video and filmmakers, and dramatic performance pieces performed on the island, such as Julio Axel Landrón's *Carnaval y Pasión* and Zora Moreno and Tite Curet Alonso's *La Lupe Vuelve* (1994). La Lupe has returned with her characteristic passion and sense of vengeance, a "retribution" nevertheless made possible not only through her songs but, after her death, by a larger community of feminist U.S. Latinas, *puertorriqueñas*, and gay listeners who are paying tribute to her and inscribing her into our musical and cultural *herstory*.

Segundo soneo: Héctor Lavoe

Transnational imaginations operate in Lavoe's declaration that "I am the man who breathes under water" ["Yo soy el hombre que respira debajo del agua"]. This declaration is more than light banter exchanged between Johnny Pacheco and Lavoe during a 1975 performance published in the album entitled *Live at Yankee Stadium*.⁶ Rather, it serves as a prophetic commentary and takes on metaphoric dimensions for Lavoe's life and death. These transatlantic connections fuel a transmigratory imagination between Puerto Rico, Latin America, its diaspora, and other U.S.-based Latina/o communities.

Héctor Lavoe remains a cultural hero memorialized through various cultural forms including urban street murals, theatrical productions, poetry recitals, clothing bearing his image, commemorative salsa concerts throughout Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States, and re-releases of his musical recordings. In addition, he is embodied in some of salsa's contemporary singers, such as Marc



Cover of CD *La Lupe es la reina/La Lupe is the Queen*. Tico Records (TRSLP 1192).

Anthony, Van Lester, and Domingo Quiñónez. These masculine simulations of “restored behaviors” (Roach 1996) may represent a symbolic form and link to the past of musical lineage and history that entails respect for elders, predecessors, and ancestors, and are grounded in a spiritual, historical, and musical repertoire and male tradition that transcends temporal and spatial conditions.

The *style* and *forms* that these restored behaviors embody—be they oral history, song, dance, mural art, or ritual ceremonies—articulate the complexity of enacting translocal narratives of identity and memory. The previous analysis of Héctor Lavoe’s

burial ceremony demonstrated the encoded memories and gendered nationalisms embodied in this collective ritual. The ensuing struggle that followed over Lavoe’s corpse and his eventual repatriation illuminate the ways in which identity is still very much contingent on place. Lavoe, however, acts as a floating trans-Boricua who traverses disparate geographical locales, while also engaging multiple discourses regarding Puerto Rican nationalisms, identities, and historical agency. In the process, Lavoe materializes as a “performed effigy” (Roach 1996) of Diasporican alterity, trans-Boricua memories, and cultural histories, and a metonymic symbol of Latinidad.

Maurice Halbwachs, the German sociologist, considers the materiality of collective memory through popular culture as a process that is encoded by the social position of groups. The styles and forms of collective memory by socially marginalized communities are often fashioned by popular cultural mediums and icons available to them. That is, popular culture is the repertory from which many communities draw in order to engage in strategies of counter-memory. Following the scholarship of Halbwachs, Paul Connerton reminds us of the importance of material mappings and enactments of memory: “Physical objects provide us with images of permanence and stability; [referencing] a socially specific framework [of collective memory].... We conserve our recollections by referring them to the *material milieu* that surrounds us” (1989:37, emphasis added). If “our memories are located within the mental and material spaces of the group” (Connerton *ibid*), the collective mappings of Lavoe are simultaneously laced with masculinity, counter-memory and (trans)nationalism. This takes on “an aesthetic politics of representation” where Lavoe is enacted as a national hero, a trans-Boricua, and a metonymic symbol of Latinidad, collectively helping to assemble a diasporic public sphere where opposing aesthetic values and imaginations are discussed and contested (Werbner 2000: 6). Nevertheless, the semiotic signification of Lavoe—as national property and discursive subject—was central following his passing.

One of Héctor’s most popular songs, “Mi Gente” [My People] written by the Dominican born bandleader, flutist, and co-founder of Fania Records Johnny Pacheco, is considered by some of the respondents interviewed for this project as their “Nuyorican national anthem.” Despite the national identity of its composer, the song, through Héctor Lavoe’s interpretation, becomes a text for and about U.S. Puerto Ricans. The resemanticization of this salsa song allows its listeners to remember the death of Héctor Lavoe and his music and to memorialize him as a transnational representative of the nation. “Mi Gente” addresses the listeners as belonging to Héctor Lavoe, and him to them; he is positioned as the spokesperson

and signifier of the translocal nation. Again, as in the male pantheon of plena music, a *jíbaro ponceño* becomes the chosen transnational representative. Lavoe is *diasporized* by his listening audience in New York City, and *nationalized* by the community of listeners in Puerto Rico. In addition, “Mi Gente” has triggered a collective emotional affinity among U.S. Latinos and Latin Americans. This practice acknowledges how the song articulates diasporic and (trans)national identity(ies) and experiences of Puerto Ricans and other U.S. Latinos/as (Fontañez 1996, Pérez 1996, Ruiz 1996).

Similar to Alessandro Portelli’s critique of the relationship between memory, orality, industrial folk music, and labor among the working class in Italy, this song “lives in the memory of an emotion” (1991:187). The collective and historical experiences shared by many listeners simultaneously reinforce a shared emotion of solidarity (Portelli 1991:174). In this case, the collective experiences of the diaspora serve as the source for its writing and presentation, and for how it is remembered and encoded in the song and memory of its listeners. This shared agency of resignifying “Mi Gente” to the status of an anthem demonstrates the discursivity and malleability of popular culture and music, where time, memory, and locality change the meaning of the song. Although the lyrics have remained the same since its inception, the meanings attached to them by a collective body of listeners have changed during the course of Lavoe’s musical career, and more dramatically, after his death across different spaces. This anthem is resignified to represent marginalized subjects in the diaspora, the Caribbean, and Latin America. It comes as no surprise that live concerts performed by the Fania All-Stars in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia, and other Latin American countries, and within various U.S. locations, include a performance of Lavoe’s song “Mi Gente.” In this larger, hemispheric context the song is now inverted to “Que canten su Gente” [Let His People Sing], referring to Héctor’s people/community (Fania All-Stars 1994 and 1996). The audience, identified as Héctor’s community, sings in unison to the emotionally charged lyrics, creating a shared memory and emotion of the late *sonero*. What is more important, “Mi Gente” and its derivative, “Su Gente,” interpellate the imaginary relationships of individuals, which constitute them within imagined transnational communities (Althusser 1971).

Héctor is also remembered not just as a Nuyorican, but also as a *jíbaro* from the city of Ponce whose singing style embodied both Puerto Rico and New York simultaneously. His voice is described as having both a Nuyorican “brashness” and a Puerto Rican *jíbaro* [country] modulation. Interestingly, the musician, musical arranger, bandleader, and close friend Willie Colón articulates this simultaneity. In an interview with Pacifica Radio’s Nancy Rodríguez, Colón describes Lavoe’s diasporality: “Although Héctor was born in Ponce, he became a symbol of the New York salsa sound during the 1960s and ‘70s” (Colón 1996). Ray Barretto, band leader, *conguero*, and fellow member of the Fania All-Stars with Héctor Lavoe and Willie Colón, describes Lavoe’s urban and countryside doubleness: “What made Lavoe a little different from the little guys was that he was closer to the *jíbaro* thing from Puerto Rico and that’s what made him different. That’s what people loved about him. He [also] projected that Barrio quality and that was his strength” (Barretto 1993). Rubén Blades articulates it best when reflecting upon the significance, singing style, and doubleness of Héctor Lavoe: “[Héctor’s singing style], delivery, and the things that he said were more street than what my tastes at the time could understand. It was a very New York slang style, a more N[u]yorican approach. Héctor’s strength was his power in terms of inventing things. He would invent things

that reflected upon life in New York and also a dose of *jibarito* [country], of Puerto Rican in him. Héctor's gift was his New York brash, in your face style with that pristine crystal clear voice that he had. Héctor's style was more a mixture of emigrant Boricua and N[u]yoricán" (Blades 1993).

The fact that Lavoe articulated both Puerto Rican and New York identities and musical styles simultaneously alludes to the complexities that constitute the diasporality of his musical performances and identities. Héctor's orality and singing style became transmigratory with his movement to New York City, making his Nuyoricán brashness inseparable from his "jíbaro-ness." Rather than just seeing a Puerto Rican *jíbaro* singing in New York, Héctor became a Nuyoricán who transformed his identity from Héctor Pérez to Héctor Lavoe in New York City.

Coro (a dos voces)

Like music itself, musicians and singers—their bodies, singing styles, repertoires, and personae—become contested sites for the construction of national identity. A brief comparison between La Lupe and Lavoe suggests that gender politics inform the processes of canonization and marginalization for many singers. La Lupe's systematic exclusion from the development of salsa music, defined by the male-dominated industry and music historians, stands in sharp contrast to the almost mythical canonization of Héctor Lavoe as "el Cantante," the major voice representative of Nuyoricán salsa as much as of Island culture. While both singers, given their diasporic locations, destabilized traditional notions of national boundaries and reconstituted their audiences in transnational ways, Lavoe's visibility and memorialization reveal that national spaces are literally inscribed by masculine identities, a gendered construction informed by class struggles and by the colonial conditions of the Puerto Rican diaspora. In contrast, the memorializing of La Lupe by her audiences in New York, by gay listeners, and by Latina feminists, reveals the creation of an alternative, interlatino collective identity that transcends La Lupe's Cuban national origins. Yet this transnational identity, which revolves around struggles of gender and sexuality, was articulated through the staging of her performative excesses and, mostly, through her body. Lavoe's death and the ensuing struggle over his corpse and burial also illuminate the ways in which identity is still very much contingent on place, geographically speaking, and on the materiality of collective memory in popular culture. Most outstanding about Lavoe's figure is his dynamic role as a transmigrant, a role that suggests a redefinition of the diaspora as a community that produces new cultural forms that are then mainstreamed as "authentic" by the country of origin. Thus, diasporas do not just reproduce culture, they are also spaces of dynamic cultures in the making and of counter-memory.

NOTES

- ¹ The role of the popular musician as cultural hero is developed in Puerto Rican literature. See Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's *El entierro de Cortijo* and Tato Laviera's poem "El Sonero Mayor," dedicated to the late Puerto Rican singer Ismael Rivera in *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* (1984).
- ² See Luis Rafael Sánchez's fictional rendering of Daniel Santos, *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* (1988), a text in which the male singer of guarachas and boleros embodies a vexed and ambiguous masculinity in Latin America as well as the discourse of desire and the pleasures of sexuality. Umberto Valverde's short novel, *Celia Cruz: reina rumba* (1982), on the other hand, textualizes the impact of Celia Cruz in Colombian youth during the early 1960s.
- ³ Joe Nick Patoski, in his biography of the Mexican-American singer, Selena, concludes his book with the image of Selena as a saintly figure who symbolized to young people how to negotiate between tradition and modernity: "Selena was both a real person and a symbol, the poetic image of youth, beauty, wholesomeness, and family values, an inspiration to young people that they can be faithful to the old ways while embracing modern ideas. Her life ended in a tragedy that would forever be replayed in millions of minds, a senseless tale of betrayal by one who had loved her. Those circumstances are precisely why her image has become something greater and more influential than it ever could have been in life. The pilgrims were coming. The candle had been lit. As long as there were those who remembered, the flame would burn. Her spirit was alive. Through her, there was redemption for all. Eternamente."
- ⁴ This quote also appears in José Quiroga's (1995) piece about La Lupe. However, Quiroga does not acknowledge Díaz Ayala's text.
- ⁵ For a discussion on Boogaloo music, see the Boggs (1992: 261–83) interview with Johnny Colón. Also see Flores (2000).
- ⁶ Fania All-Stars (1975). According to César Miguel Rondón, the actual recording occurred during a live performance in the Clemente Coliseum in San Juan, Puerto Rico (1980:101).

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