

# KEEP IT SIM- PLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH  
TO UNDERGROUND  
MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)  
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***Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!***

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

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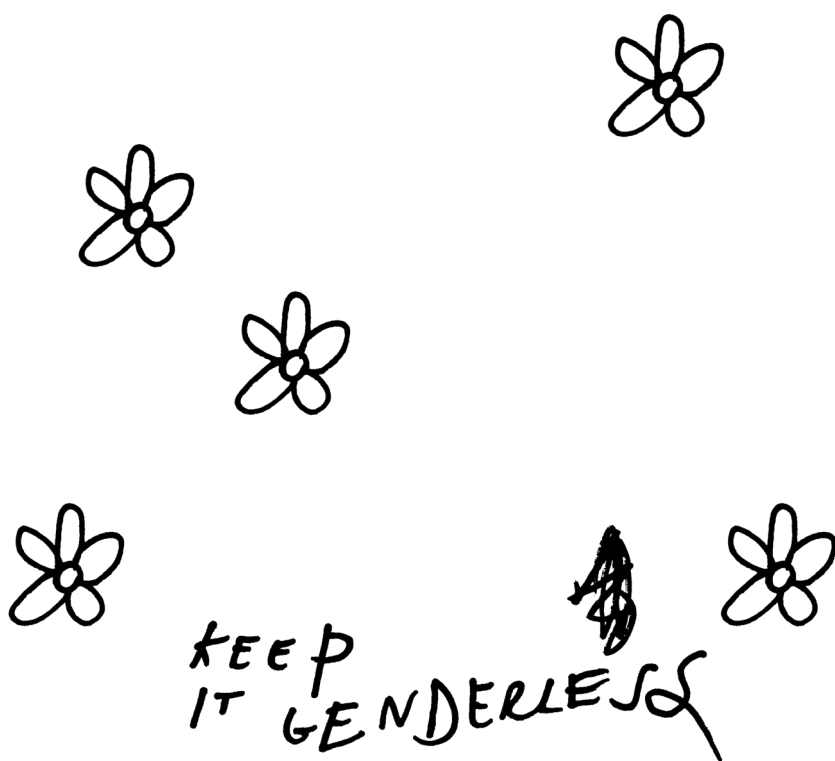
## 2.2. Is this not a world for women?

*Paolo S. H. Favero<sup>58</sup> and Ligia Lavielle Pullés<sup>59</sup>*

### A b s t r a c t

Urban music is still a marshy conceptual ground, but it is the best definition for the members of certain music circuit of production and consumption from Cuba. In the city of Santiago de Cuba, this musical circuit is structured mainly by two music scenes. Reggaeton scene is one of them. The male images and sounds of this urban music represent one of its first features: it is a male symbolic world. This paper addresses a thinking system about women in this male world within the reggaeton scene, which is based on the reproduction of the social symbolic violence. My intention is question about the experiences of musicians, dancers and any participant in the reggaeton scene in order to explore what extent this symbolic violence is expressed. This work is a part of a more general research about music scenes rap-reggae and reggaeton from the city of Santiago de Cuba.

**Keywords:** *reggaeton scene, women, symbolic violence.*



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## 1. Introduction

*Este es el lenguaje urbano, de la calle y a las mujeres además no les gusta que le den tantos rodeos, les gusta ir al grano*<sup>60</sup>. This way, a producer of urban music from Santiago de Cuba city, showed his point of view on how women are seen by people who produce urban music, especially *reggaeton*<sup>61</sup>. It is just a glimpse of some ideas within a system of symbolic thought about male and female. Precisely the roles of women within the reggaeton production and scene are addressed in our paper. We would like to highlight the gender performativity within the reggaeton scene. Behind every role, a symbolic conception of male and female are being built by the producer, consumers, and even non-consumers of urban music. A process of social reproduction has supported such ideals of gender. But, in reggaeton music, and most obviously in trap music, these incorporated thoughts have been pushed to the extreme. Maybe the most prominent issue in reggaeton music has been the extreme eroticism – or even pornographic character – which persists in woman's representation. People who are not young have called it “a moral crisis”. However, contradictorily, reggaeton is enjoined by men as well as women. Hence, the criticism (and even the superlative criticism) about the gender perceptions in this music, has not been well argued. This paper will stress some key points about gender in reggaeton music.

## 2. A general view...

Many encyclopedias refer to urban music or urban contemporary music as a genre of the 1980s and '90s “defined by recordings by rhythm-and-blues or soul artists with broad crossover appeal” (Enciclopedia Britannica, n.d). Rap music, which originated from the American black music, mainly since 1980's, is also included (Nazareth and D Amico, 2012). In Cuba, and possibly in all Caribbean islands, urban music always sounds close to Hip Hop: rap (obviously), reggae, reggaeton, the current trap, reggaemuffin, dancehall, etc.

Now, urban music in Cuba has a wider scope that includes other music genres created in private studios, independently from cultural institutions. Producers have their own ideas about what urban music is. They stress it is not only music close to hip hop culture and developed in home recording studios (private ones), but also music that needs a commercial delimitation in this category known as ‘urban’. Then, musicologists and ethnomusicologists (Cruces, 2004) describe it as a vague concept, because it entails a dialogue with the urban spaces, or in other words, with the urban determinism. Could music made in the city just be considered “urban music”? Could the rap made in rural spaces not be considered within this category? When analyzed from an academic perspective, urban music is still a muddled concept.

However, the producers and consumers do not have problems to see the boundaries. As mentioned above, currently, Cuban urban music is recognized as a wide and inclusive music scene by many producers and consumers. Reggaeton, rap, reggae, trap, electronic merengue, kizomba, and others, are framed in this category. The first of the six rhythms mentioned, is deemed among the most popular. Reggaeton musicians are entwined with rap and reggae musicians, in terms of visual and musical issues, but at the same time, the former is separated from the latter because of different lifestyles (Bennett, 1999) and extreme discourses.

<sup>60</sup> Translation: “This is urban language, of the street, and also, women don't like the beating around the bush, they like to get to the point.”

<sup>61</sup> In Spanish language it can be written ‘reggaeton’ or ‘reguetón’.

In the city of Santiago de Cuba, the urban music scene is divided, at least into two close, but different music scenes: rap-reggae and reggaeton. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, an entwined and common history characterized the creation and consumption of reggae, dancehall, reggamuffin, rap, and reggaeton. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, these musical genres were divided by their musicians (especially by MCs) into two symbolic and not symmetrically separated scenes. I have called this symbolic separation “the first schism of Cuban urban music”. As a part of this history, rap and reggae music from Santiago have been closer to each other, compared to other rap scenes developed on the island, at Havana city, for instance. Moreover, the rap roots came from the reggae made in Jamaica around the 70s; hence, an historical link between both music styles is demonstrated, not only regarding the music, but also concerning cultural processes of marginalization and exclusion. However, in Santiago de Cuba, and also in Guantánamo city, this relationship is stronger than in any other part of Cuba.

The rap-reggae scene is sustained by young people (and not so young) involved in Hip Hop and Rastafarian cultures. Then, a mixture of both cultures is rendered by the visual, musical, and oral discourse of songwriters, singers, DJs, and others involved in rap and reggae music. The main performative characteristics of this scene are the stress on ego, mutual challenging, the criticism toward racial discrimination and social criticism. Alongside, other topics such as the pride of blackness and songs about love and spiritualism are introduced. Therefore, it is not strange to find phrases like: *I don't believe in Babylon*, within a rap discourse.

Reggaeton is an extension of rap music and other music components. During the first years of the twenty-first century, reggaeton music was created by the same young people from Caribbean cities like Panamá and Puerto Rico, involved in the production and consumption of rap, reggamuffin, and dancehall (Wayne, Ziquero & Paccini, 2010; Ziquero, 2003). Rap music is the most popular expression of Hip Hop culture and the latter rhythms (dancehall and reggamuffin) were a more danceable extension of reggae music. Hence, the same visual and music codes of rap music were exposed by reggaeton singers, because there was not much difference between genres. At the beginning of reggaeton music, for instance, baggy pants, golden chains, XL pullovers, caps, sport shoes, etc., were worn by reggaeton singers as well as rap musicians. Indeed, during the first period and at that moment, every reggaeton singer began their musical career singing rap or another close genre as reggamuffin or dancehall. Today, any good singer of reggaeton has to know how to sing in the recitativo singing style of rap.

### 3. Reggaeton in extremis... taking the trap to the extreme...

During the first years of the twenty-first century, the Caribbean reggaeton began to be more popular than rap, because the songs are more danceable than rap music. For instance, women and men commonly say: *sin reggaeton no hay fiesta, es muy rico para bailar, te mueve todo el cuerpo*<sup>62</sup>. The initial popularity of this rhythm, led to an increased interest of the Latin music industry forward the reggaeton performers, even if in Cuba the relation between the two was more problematic. In other words, reggaeton singers

<sup>62</sup> Translation: Without reggaeton there is no party, it is very nice to dance, it moves your entire body.

began to be seen as singers separated from Hip hop culture and from rap musicians. Some Cuban authors refer to this process of separation between rappers and reggaeton singers in Cuban urban music (Zurbano, 2006; Borges Triana, 2015; Jiménez, 2010; Casanella, González & Hernández, 2003), in which, reggaeton singers were represented as betrayers of the Hip Hop movement, by young people who remained in rap and reggae music.

A continuously reproduced commercial recipe has ensured the popularity of this music genre. Intertwined topics about sex, marginality, challenges among each other, and a stress on fun are expressed in its oral and also visual discourse. The first one is the most common topic, in which mostly heterosexuality or hyper-heterosexuality is emphasized. Summing up, the heterosexual relationship is the most prominent topic within reggaeton music, in terms of lyrics, as well as, in the visual representation in musical and non-musical videos. Moreover, this hypersexualized discourse has a transversal character, interweaving with all the other topics. A content analysis of the music videos demonstrated at least three ways in which the hypersexualization of the heterosexual discourse is strongly expressed by reggaeton musicians in Cuba: (1) sex and eroticism, (2) falling in love, and (3) an unhappy love affair. The first one is stressed to a much larger extent than the others.

Reggaeton visual discourse frequently points out the female body in a sexual way, foregrounding the women dancing in very short pants, showing their breasts, buttocks, hips, and at the end, showing erotic dancing in front of men, or serving (female bodies or drinks) to men. The explicit oral discourse stresses phrases and words going from seduction games to sexual relations, for instance: *tú estás rica, tú estás buena, culo de mula, sexo contigo, yo te voy hacer*<sup>63</sup>, etc. The speech is the most upsetting and criticized element in reggaeton. But an emerging question is concealed in this music: To what extent is the relation between male and female put forward in these lyrics and visual discourses, part of daily life?

If we look at a Cuban woman's daily life, we can find some similar words, phrases, and attitudes in her social relations. For instance, if you are a woman walking down the street, it is usual to hear "piropos"<sup>64</sup> about your beauty or your "coolness". But it is as frequent to hear about your breasts, buttocks, and in the worst case about your female private parts. Women are most often desired because of their body, and not because of themselves. The sexualized relation between men and women is part of daily life, we just need to learn how to detect it. Reggaeton undressed what was concealed behind the whispers among men. Reggaeton put in loud voice what a man tells a woman when she is walking in front of him on the street. *"I am not looking for a smart woman. I am just looking for a woman that looks ideal, well, "que está buena", somebody recently told me while I was in a recording studio, and he was not a reggaeton musician. In this respect, a reggaeton singers hared with me: (Vaillant): Y escribe de lo que ve. El cantante de reggaeton que es lo que ve, eso*<sup>65</sup>.

This is one of Cuban's gender problems that has not been examined in detail: the naturalization of dominant relations in terms of hypersexualization, this is, symbolic violence in gender relations. According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence conceals power relations unrecognized and naturalized by both the dominant and the dominated person; because we build our socialization relations based on the reproduction of symbolic capitals. On the first page, in the first chapter, within one of the first most important and popular books

<sup>63</sup> Translation: popular expressions: you are delicious, you are good, mule's ass, sex with you, I am going to do you.

<sup>64</sup> These are popular and spontaneous compliments on the public way, which can, however, also be obscene.

<sup>65</sup> And he writes about what he see. The reggaeton singer sees that. Interview 2016.

written by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, p. 4) , symbolic violence is explained by this French sociologist: “every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relation”. Furthermore, he adds some ideas about the process in which special social relations become eternal and naturalized. All of this was written in the early seventies, by a young and already mature classic of social sciences, even before he wrote the most classic text explaining the symbolic domination over females: *The Male domination*.

When men feel the authority to say any sexual phrase, word, or compliment to women, and even touch her without her permission, and these acts are naturalized or even enjoyed by both of them, we are facing Symbolic Violence. When women naturalize that they have to comply to certain standards in terms of physical characteristics and sexual attributes (western face, big buttocks and breasts, ethnical characteristics) to be chosen, there is symbolic violence. In this respect, I agree with Meza Márquez when she says:

*The discourse of femininity is transmitted through symbolic violence by means of words, gestures, ways of doing, and the values and attitudes expressed in the different institutions of socialization. It legitimates itself, thus, a system of relationships that privileges men over women, which is established as natural and inevitable, which shapes the desire of women and which legitimizes this exposition of the woman's body in the function of this meaning* (Márquez, 2015, p. 15).

Cuba is an island within the Caribbean geographic zone. The hyper-sexualized stereotypes are common, and urban music has reproduced these patterns, as well as other musical genres, but in a very explicit way. For instance, Ziqueiro (2013, p.116) explains about the canon of female representation which was introduced to rap discourse since 1998, but also in Hollywood discourse when Latino images and artists “had become somewhat of a fad”. On the other hand, the remarkable hypersexualization in reggaeton came from the “street” or “ghetto” culture, which is a mixture of American ghetto culture, described by Ziquero (2003), and Caribbean lower neighborhoods. According to Rosana Reguillo, the social analyst should pay attention to mediations which influence the narratives and discourses, and the social context which provides the main base for the discourse, in this case for the visual and verbal audiovisual discourse. Following Bourdieu and Foucault, the researcher of youth, Reguillo (2000, p. 12), proposes:

*Looking at the constitution of society as a dynamic process in which social actors carry out actions, produce discourses and construct a sense of the world from complex negotiating processes and always from a historically constructed and situated place, and from deep historical backgrounds -cultural (such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, social class) and elective attachments (such as the different*



*identification processes or diverse members that the actors update on the course of their biographies*  
(Reguillo, 2000, p.12).

From this point of view, the socially lower neighborhoods and a stereotypical marginality constitute an historical “anchorage” upon which the discourse of reggaeton has been built, although almost every reggaeton singer has experienced a social mobility process. Hence, the marginal “anchorage” provides a great environment, in which this explicit way of hypersexualization, characterizing reggaeton audiovisuals, is included.

In the end, reggaeton singers are lighting up the shared social ideals on women. They are reproducing the embodied and quotidian social relations between male and female, and showing it via Media circulation. However, is hypersexualized music new in the Caribbean or Cuban music? Rumba is a danceable music genre considered musical heritage. One of the styles of rumba dance consists in an erotic game of seduction, where the woman moves her shoulders, hips, and legs in an erotic way, while simultaneously avoiding the man’s pursuit. It is a simulation of the seduction game. Timba, on the other hand, has a part named by musicologists (López Cano, 2005, p.8) as the “despelote”<sup>66</sup>, which recalls the sexual climax. Then, if sexualized music is not new in Cuban, neither in Caribbean music, and is even common; if the conveyed ideas on female sexuality are considered to be normal in the public sphere, why is reggaeton seen as an aggression toward women?

First of all, the other mentioned music genres were also criticized in their time of “boom” or when they emerged. For instance, rumba was deemed under the gaze of racial and social prejudice, and marginalized as a vulgar music and dance at the begging of twentieth century. A second and maybe more important issue, has been the extreme version in which reggaeton has showed the visual and oral violence in gender relations. Woman as a sexual figure serving a man is not a new idea, but it is showed in an extreme way. Moreover, inside the reggaeton scene, there are singers who are breaking the moral boundaries even more and speak out loud about intimacy and sexuality. Surprisingly, in certain cases, women are not seen as a sexual slave, but a sexual mate, sharing exactly the same role as men. In the latter case, we could ask ourselves: can this still be considered symbolic violence?

#### 4. Y se formó la gozadera...

As we have said above, the treatment of heterosexual relations is not an isolated topic to reggaeton musicians. In 2006, Daddy Yankee said reggaeton is street, sex, and struggle (Zenit Dinzey-Flores, 2006, p. 36). Moreover, one of our interviewee’s synthesized *reggaeton: es mujeres, gozadera*<sup>67</sup>, *cosa gorda*, a phrase which is showing the heterosexual relations entwined with the widest sense of fun, associated with reggaeton. This playful character bears the hypersexualized discourse spread out by reggaeton musicians, and by this way, it is more accepted, sung, and danced between the choruses of the strong bass music. Coming back to Caribbean culture and specifically to Cuban culture, one of the most shared issues of popular tradition in Cuba is the playful character, explained in a very early essay written in 1928 by the Cuban intellectual Jorge Mañach, of which the conceptual epitome is the Cuban “choteo”. Following Mañach, this feature of the Cuban social subjectivity consists in mocking

<sup>66</sup> The higher ecstasy embodied in the dance movements.

<sup>67</sup> I am not aware of an English word that exactly translates ‘gozadera’. The explosion of fun is the closest I found.



everything, based on disrespectful feelings for things, ideas, persons, or facts traditionally deemed as “serious”, which conceals a lack of respect towards any authority or a total dismissal of this authority: *tirar todo a relajo ... no toma en serio nada de lo que generalmente se tiene por serio*<sup>68</sup> (Mañach, 2011, p. 102).

I coincide with Santizo and Meza (in press) regarding the fact that this sense of joke or mockery is essential to understand gender representation in reggaeton, because it conceals the reality of unequal gender relations. Every music producer included in my fieldwork pointed to the danceable character of reggaeton, which contributes to its entertainment value. In this entertainment, where “nothing is taken seriously”, gender relations between men and women are quintessentially conceived and are the most important issue.

***Vaillant (reggaeton singer): Mira cada cantante le da su punto de vista independientemente. Pero nunca se sale de lo que se está hablando. Sexo, fiestas, lo que puede hacer el hombre para la mujer (2016)***<sup>69</sup>.

***Luisito (reggaeton singer): Cosa gorda es fiesta en grande. Si vas por la calle y ves a una mujer que está rica le dices, oye cosa gorda. Cosa que tú contestas. La jerga callejera. Ves la mujer de la forma en la que está vestida, como se ve, es decir, todo se basa en la cosa entre el hombre y la mujer***<sup>70</sup>.

These testimonies contain the most significant issues about the gender representation between male and female:

- Sex and party. The word ‘sex’ is put alongside the word ‘party’, and this mix is not fortuitous. Sex is deemed a central issue in the playful character that characterizes reggaeton, but also in many visual representations of women in popular music. However, respecting one of the interviewees’ words, I have to note that the man says: what the man can do “for” the woman, and not how the man can “use” the woman.
- Woman as a pleasuring image for men.
- The relation between women and men as the central issue in this kind of popular music.

I consider that, within the oral and visual treatment of gender relations in reggaeton music, not everything is about joking because of the lack of authority. First of all, I consider that women, and also the heterosexual relation, have become the most important issues that are enjoyed in a music video or just audio play, and here, we may think that these issues have substituted the aesthetic sense primarily based on the music. Secondly, many other videos, not of reggaeton music, reveal this sense of fun where the visual representation of women is centralized in the discourse. Indeed, this aspect is considered by musicians an issue that makes music more commercial, more popular, and once again, more enjoyable. The difference, as I have said above, consists in the fact that reggaeton producers carry this issue to an extreme representation,

<sup>68</sup> Nothing is taken seriously.

<sup>69</sup> Look, every singer gives his own point of view to his music, but he always speaks about the same topics: sex, party, what men could do for the woman. Interview in 2016.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Fat thing’ is party. If you are walking down the street and you see a delicious woman and you say her: hey fat thing. Then you say the street slag. You see a woman in the way she is dressing. I mean, everything is about man and woman.

thanks to not only the funniest version of the “choteo”, but also because it is considered a space without law, against the traditional morality, or a space where they can or they wish to say everything they want. In this space of “apparent” freedom women are also participating.

## 5. ‘Vamo’ a portarnos mal’<sup>71</sup>

In the most extended critics about reggaeton music, the issue about female representation is one of the most common. But, has someone ever asked the women how they feel about it? As observer and also participant in Cuban parties and leisure places where reggaeton is the most played music, it is explicit how women (including myself) participate in these danceable spaces through dancing and also singing. I have to note that one of the most popular dances of reggaeton is as sexualized as the words and visual images of its audiovisuals. Moreover, outside the dancing venues, many women (children and girls included) sing the reggaeton songs every time. Then, why do women enjoy the reggaeton almost to the same extent as men?

The same playful character which is concealing the unequal relation in the oral and visual representation of this sexualized heterosexuality in reggaeton, is simultaneously providing a space of moral liberty, as Thorton (1995, p. 32) demonstrated in relation to Britain young people forming club cultures more than 10 years ago. It is a fact: many women enjoy dancing “perreo<sup>72</sup>” as well as men. This dancing is a playful representation of a sexual relation. The man, probably a young person, places himself behind the woman, and both move their hips at the same time. This ludic sexual representation is enjoined by both in this moment and at the same level, because the man never pushes or menaces the woman to dance with him. He always asks her for permission, or at least, this is the unwritten rule. If both men and women agree to do this, we can ask: Can this still be considered symbolic violence?

Finally, this could be or could not be reproducing the same social dominant process of symbolic violence. When women feel that being chosen depends only on the way she moves her hips, probably we are talking about symbolic violence. But, if women do not care about this and just move their bodies inside a symbolic and physical space of moral freedom, and at the same time, women enjoy the sexual representation as well as men, we think there is no symbolic violence. Despite this, there are contradictory moral assumptions considered by women about this music genre. During our interviews many of them exposed they do not like some reggaeton songs and artists, but at the same time, they still go to the spaces where reggaeton is the main rhythm and enjoy dancing it. Moreover, some of them, despite their criteria about the “bad music for women”, keep the music of some of these “unmoral” musicians on their phones. For us it was clear: women still unveil moral perceptions which allow them to protect themselves against dominant patterns in this music, but at the same time they enjoy much of this musical discourse mediated by a ludic narrative.

The moral prescription is even present in the dancing places, considered also symbolic freedom spaces where the simulation of sex is not problematic. When I went there to take photographs during my fieldwork, I discovered crucial differences between men and women: the first ones dance and make poses for my photos, many women stop to dance immediately when they discover me. In order to be able to take pictures, I had to explain what my work

<sup>71</sup> In English: “Let’s go bad”.

<sup>72</sup> A dance that simulates the copulation between dogs.

is about. Sometimes, it worked, but many times it did not. Nevertheless, today there are many ways to dance reggaeton, it is not only between heterosexual couples. People dance in peer groups, alone, in a circle with somebody in the middle, in front of the stage; moving the hips, just the shoulders, just the legs and feet, or the shoulder, hips and legs altogether. The body movements also change every time according to fad, and people are not always dancing in this very explicit sexual way.

## 6. Conclusions

At the sunset of the twentieth century in Cuba, a genre very close to salsa known as “timba” in Cuba, was the most criticized style of music, because the artists were showing a raw version of a damaged Cuba, a country that was surviving in the deepest economic crisis experienced after the social change of 1959. But in this same last decade, a more dangerous and disruptive rhythm was being created in the Caribbean and consumed in the western part of Cuba, first among poor people who preferred to spend their dark days (metaphorically and literally speaking) dancing and sweating without moral prescription: the roots of reggaeton and then reggaeton itself was born.

Behind the reggaeton voices (reproduced by producers as well as consumers) there is a social change (Gámez, 2011) which is known but still unrecognized by Cuban people. This music genre brought with it a lot of polemic and contrasted opinions, almost always in dual positions. On the one hand, there was the intellectual, political, moral, and even religious discourse expressed by many voices against this aggressive way of moving, singing, speaking and writing texts. On the other hand, there was the popular opinion, involving mostly young people, who did not care about it.

One of the most criticized issues inside this polemic discourse on reggaeton was the place given to women. However, why did most of the population, including women, not pay attention or care less about the place given to women in this genre? First of all, what reggaeton was saying about women and is still saying in this loud voice in every corner or popular spaces, could be heard in everyday life. These phrases about women continuously expressed by reggaeton musicians are found in the realm of our quotidian life. They just are revealing their daily experience in a very explicit way. The symbolic domination process persisting in the male-female relations and experienced in everyday life, is reproduced by people in Cuba, but the same symbolic power is thrown in our faces, in a very explicit way and concealed by a veil of luxury, ludic sense and entertainment. Hence, let's shift our daily symbolic process of gender domination together with reggaeton voices.

In Cuba, people criticize reggaeton music, the lyrics, the videos, but never question social reality. Cuban society seems to accept the existing and persisting gender relations in which men have a dominant position. The situation is not questioned; it is naturalized and integrated by everyone. This leads to a constant reproduction of inequalities and gender violence. Women in Cuba are facing structural gender violence. Regulations and legislations should be put in place to prevent these situations and guarantee women's rights and safety. However, no such instruments are available enough in Cuba.

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