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TRANS-INSULAR IDENTITIES IN THE NORTH-EASTERN CARIBBEAN

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My research project is focused on the island of Culebra, in the north-eastern Caribbean between the islands of Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands (USVI). Culebra is constitutionally a part of Puerto Rico. The majority of people living in Culebra are ethnic Puerto Ricans who, in general terms, identify with the political and historical discourses that dominate in Puerto Rico. My main research agenda was to understand the relationships between identity and inter-island migration in the north-eastern Caribbean, centred in Culebra. A medullar aspect of my research is to incorporate audio visual material into the ethnography. During my year of fieldwork I was thinking of the ways in which audio visual material can convey notions of the body, space, and performances in relation to people's identity.

In this essay I will try to summarise the basic issues that I have been covering throughout my PhD research and reflect on the most current themes that I have come across. First, I will argue that the Caribbean region has fundamentally been represented as insular and fragmented regardless of a common historical experience and the fact that islands of the Caribbean are very close to one another. I will then introduce Culebra, which has historically had migration links to different islands of the Caribbean, as a case study where inter island experiences are an important aspect of daily life in the north-eastern Caribbean. I will then focus on music because it is one of

the most powerful ways in which inter-island experience is manifested. I will do a brief historical sketch of the four main musical groups in Culebra. Later in the essay, I will reflect on the ways in which filmmaking has been informing my ethnography. I will introduce the concept of montage as a way of thinking through and representing the paradoxes that I have encountered in my research material. Finally, I will address the issues of paradox, humour, and improvisation as they apply to contemporary Caribbean society. I recently came across these categories by thinking of the relationships between my field notes, my rushes, and my general experience throughout the year

During my fieldwork, I was looking at the ways in which islands in the north-eastern Caribbean relate to one another. I focused on the issue of island identity and the ways in which an islander's sense of identity is shaped in a continuous relation to its neighbouring islands. I built my research question on the premise that the politics, academic research, and the cultural politics that inform the Caribbean, in particular the north-eastern Caribbean, are based on constructions that appraise Caribbean islands as culture-specific island-nation units which have developed a sense of identity that is historically independent from other islands of the region. In my research proposal, I presented a body of literature and research in which the islands of the region are consistently represented as developing an identity independent from their neighbours. I did not come across texts that addressed the issue of insularity directly or that attempted to go into explaining the reasons behind the insularisms. Instead, I found that there seems to be a pervasive presence of insularity on the way that the Caribbean is engaged with. Lewis Gordon in "The Contemporary Caribbean: A General Overview" writes:

"Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, these societies have been, and for the most part still are, small island societies marked by a psychological insularity; an inward-turned communal life in which everybody seems to know everybody else. That is obvious, of course, in small island capital towns such as Bridgetown, Barbados, or Castries, St. Lucia, but surprisingly, is also a marked feature even of larger cities such as Havana, or San Juan, Puerto Rico. Whereas North American life is continental, Caribbean life is island-oriented" page 219.

Caribbean insularities have also predominated in Caribbean political and economic integrationist initiatives. Anthony Payne analysed the politics of the first years of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM). His general argument is that island national agendas and competition between the islands for access to

economic and political resources was the language that prevailed during the formation years of the integrationist initiative. Regional fragmentations set the tone during the initial stages of CARICOM when membership was only offered to islands of the “English Caribbean”. The subsequent assembly meetings of the CARICOM seemed to have been dominated by a struggle between islands with greater access to natural resources (such as Jamaica and Trinidad) and islands with more limited resources (such as the Leeward and Windward Islands). According to Payne, the regional and insular attitudes that pervaded the CARICOM proceedings contributed to the initiative’s frustrated attempts to achieve a common economic region.

Regardless of an apparent pervasive insularity in the ideas that surround Caribbean research, the Caribbean region as a whole is constructed as a novel phenomenon that exhibits a formidably dynamic character that, at times, defies traditional categories of description and texts (creolité movement). The historical narrative of the Caribbean presents a place that has been shaped by a common phenomenon of plantation economy. This plantation mode of production was set in motion by Western European global expansionism and fuelled by African slave labour. The dynamics behind the plantation economy provided a space where peoples from all over the world converged in a politically unstable but highly lucrative machinery of capitalist accumulation. The dominant paradigm of the Caribbean is a construction of a never ending process of global convergence, relations, and miscegenation. These images have facilitated an attraction to the Caribbean for its musical and literary creative possibilities. Also, the region is invested with imaginaries of sex, carnival, and tourism, yet shrouded in discourses of poverty, blackness as a positive and negative signifier, problematic governance, political violence and economic instability.

For all the common processes that give shape to the region, there is an insularist trend in Caribbean social research and cultural politics. While movements between the islands are not denied, the discourse of the island-nation-state seems to be conflated with cultural identity. Caribbean islands, with their constant incorporation of European, African, Asian, and American elements, refashioning themselves into new and complex forms¹, are nevertheless constructed as land bound.

In the historical narrative of the Caribbean, each colonial power had a different colonial agenda². The argument that there were different types of colonialist practices enacted

by representatives of competing European countries suggests that each Caribbean island or group of islands experienced a particular relation with its respective metropolis which informed the social dynamics within the plantation. This narrative insinuates that each island has been moulded under particular historical circumstances that differentiate it from the others.

In the case of the “English Caribbean”, England is reported to have a more entrepreneurial approach to the exploitation of the islands. The plantations were financed privately and ran with little or no direct intervention from the owners of the operation. This accounts for a stronger presence of so-called African elements in islands that were colonised by the English. On the other hand, Spain is reported to have a more colonising and expansive agenda towards their possessions. Spanish military and ecclesiastic presence was more dominating in its colonies than in their English counterparts. This seems to explain a whiter Spanish Caribbean person embodying catholic values as well as musical and literary expressions that are more related to Europe. The colonies are also represented as responding to, or guided by, intellectual trends in their respective metropolis (French Revolution ideas informing Haiti’s war for independence, Spanish Modernism in Puerto Rico, Anglicanism in the English Caribbean, etc).

The different racial and cultural expressions in the region are accounted for by the different relationships between the European centres of power and commerce and their respective colonies. In this case, islands in the Caribbean are constructed in relation to their colonial condition which continues to be reproduced in the post-colonial Caribbean where the category of island-nation-state takes precedence. These ideas forward the case that Caribbean islands are to be grouped according to their national linguistic discourse, and facilitate the idea that islands of the region possess distinct cultural, historical, ethnic, and experiential identities independent from each other.

My main fieldwork site was the island of Culebra, in the north-eastern Caribbean. The island is a constituted municipality of Puerto Rico. It responds to the constitutional, linguistic, and ethnic standards that shape the Puerto Rican nation. I have been visiting the island of Culebra since my adolescent years when I would go on camping trips with family and friends. For us, the island was a paradise getaway where we could go and engage in outdoor activities in a beautiful beach setting, Culebra is reputed to have one

of the most beautiful beaches of the Caribbean. My interest with the island during these visits was more of a tourist experience, where I would be able to fish, surf, turtle watch, hike, and carry out other physical activities. My curiosity was also motivated by a romantic rural image that I had of the island. Being from the capital city, I was attracted by what I understood at the time to be a rugged lifestyle, a romantic place where social relations were based on an intimate knowledge of your neighbours and where people were resourceful and inventive. These images of rurality, camaraderie, and honesty appealed to my sense of an idyllic Puerto Rico that exists outside the constraints of the San Juan metropolitan area³.

My nostalgic and romantic associations of Culebra were put to the test when I was hired to work as Coordinator of a San Juan based NGO that had liaisons with a Catholic Community Centre on Culebra. My job responsibilities required me to do frequent visits to the island. My sporadic and short visits, along with the networking that my job provided, began to reveal to me a more complicated island that broke down with the bulk of the associations that I had been shaping for myself. The observations that I found as most interesting was the performing of cultural activities that were not related to predominant discourses of the Puerto Rican nation.

I had observed that people of Culebra, culebrenses, would alternately locate important aspects of their identity in the neighbouring United States Virgin Islands (USVI) and in Puerto Rico. Initially, I did not find much interest in these manifestations. They just contributed to the added exotic and romantic vision that Culebra provides the visitor. However, based on the Culebra experience, I began to notice the presence of “other Caribbean” expressions, especially from the “English Caribbean”, in important aspects of Puerto Rican day to day life.

I began to perceive more and more how the discourses that shaped Puerto Rican identity, especially cultural politics, denied the presence of other Caribbean islands. These observations were interesting because, even though Puerto Rican imaginaries have an awareness of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, the rest of the Lesser Antilles do not seem to figure as part of the Puerto Rico space.

I figured that a common element underlining insular discourses of the Puerto Rican nation and my initial associations of a nostalgic island-bound Culebra was due to an

understanding of islands as restricted spaces that are surrounded by a non-place, the sea. It was as if a literal understanding of the word “island”, as isolated, had predominated the basic understanding of how to think about the Puerto Rican nation and, in my case, Culebra.

During my studies at the Granada Centre, I thought around ways of trying to represent with audio visuals the ideas that had provoked me in Culebra. I decided to make a film about the relationship that the community has with the sea. The main intention of making a film about the sea in Culebra was to exploit film’s capacity to convey senses of space, the body, and landscapes to expand the space where Culebra identity is expressed. I wanted to make a film that would open up the Culebra space beyond its land based experience. The end result of my film exercise was a series of scenes and interviews where different aspects of Culebra’s historical and political identity are related to the sea. In the process of making the film, I realised that an essential theme that the film brought was the paradox of Culebra’s rooted sense of island identity that operates in a process of movement in the sea.

For my PhD research I decided to continue this line of thought and expand on the issue of identity as island located, yet operating in relation to other islands. I based my research proposal arguing that the people living on the Puerto Rican island of Culebra reproduce a discourse of island identity, which is informed by daily contact with the United States Virgin Islands (USVI). The USVI is made up of three islands, St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. While each island has its own historical narrative, they are mostly associated with Danish colonialism. English is the main language spoken and the islands respond to similar associations of music and race as other islands of the “English Caribbean”.

I spent the majority of my fieldwork time on Culebra, although I travelled occasionally to the islands of Vieques, St. Thomas, St. Croix, and Puerto Rico. Culebra and Vieques are islands that are legally a part of Puerto Rico. The ideas that have dominated the constructions of Puerto Rico and the USVI follow the trend of Caribbean research that I outlined above. Puerto Rico responds to a history of Spanish colonisation hence associated with Catholicism, Whiteness in relation to other Caribbean islands, and stubbornly conflated with Latin American, while the USVI are grouped into the English Caribbean.

During my fieldwork, I paid specific attention to the ways in which daily life in Culebra relates to Puerto Rico and to the USVI. I wished to follow on a Caribbean Studies trend that values music and musical performances as important markers of Caribbean identity. In the literature that I have consulted so far, Caribbean musical performances tend to be associated with specific island identities or grouped according to islands who share common linguistic expressions (i.e. Salsa, merengue, and bachata with the Spanish Caribbean. Calypso, reggae, and socca in the English Caribbean. Biguine, compass, and zouk in the French Caribbean).

My intention with the film, as of now, is to show how musical performances in the north-eastern Caribbean operate outside national discourses of music and performance. Hopefully, the film will serve to illustrate and give meaning to how culebrense musicians embody musical performances which are associated with different and conflicting national discourses. These musical performances will contribute to my general argument of showing the ways in which islands of the north-eastern Caribbean maintain a strong sense of island identity which is shaped in relation to diverse and contradictory elements that operate in relation to one another.

In Culebra, an island where Caribbean relations are part of its daily experience, music identity is located in relation to Puerto Rico (Spanish Caribbean) and the USVI (English Caribbean). All musical groups in Culebra, whether state sponsored or driven by grassroots initiatives, incorporate elements associated with the English and Spanish Caribbean, sometimes simultaneously, at other times alternately.

The four musical groups that were active in Culebra while I lived there managed to incorporate instrumentation and repertoire that otherwise would be associated to other regions of the Caribbean. By repertoire, I mean the performing of calypso and socca, musical rhythms that carry strong historical associations with the English Caribbean Carnival. And by instrumentation I mean the incorporation of the steel drum into their line up. I will argue that culebrenses articulate a sense of unique island identity in these ways of making music regardless of the self-conscious nature of these musical mixes. I believe that culebrenses are aware of the regionalisations of musical instruments and rhythms.

The steel drum is a melodic percussive instrument invented in Trinidad. Throughout the instrument's history it has become a symbol of the Trinidadian national identity. The steel drum has become a global instrument with professional steel bands springing up all over the world. For all its versatility and mass popularity the steel drum, and its sound, is still very much associated with English Caribbean music.

Steel drum music in Puerto Rico has not competed favourably with the main types of popular music listened to on the island. The most popular types of music heard in Puerto Rico are salsa, merengue, bachata, and, more recently, reggaetón⁴. The most recent global pop music hits that come via the United States are also popular. Interest in steel drum music in Culebra arises from a historical relationship of trade and migration that the island has had with the USVI and with the British Virgin Islands, where music associated with the English Caribbean dominates the airwaves.

Throughout the mid 1980s a Culebra based NGO called Fundación Culebra, Inc. began a campaign to acquire the necessary number of steel drums to put together a full orchestra steel band, around 50 individual instruments to be played by 20-30 musicians. The acquisition of a steel band was preceded by other cultural initiatives that Fundación Culebra, Inc carried out. Most notably, the Fundación took it upon itself to raise funds for the restoration of the Culebra lighthouse. The Fundación has also put together, "Los Moko Jombes", a calypso dancing troupe that features stilt walkers. The coordinator of Fundación Culebra, Inc. explained to me that a steel band would not only function as a pedagogical program to establish music education on the island, but more importantly, it would reproduce culebrense identification with West Indian symbols of cultural identity.

The drums were acquired in the early 1990s from an artisan in St. Croix⁵. Victor "Cucuito" Felix Munet, a culebrense musician, was hired to offer steel drum classes, but the project fell through quickly when he left Culebra. The steel drums were kept in storage for years and were damaged by the passing of Hurricane Marilyn in 1995. The project was abandoned after the coordinator of Fundación Culebra, Inc. left the island last year. The coordinator passed the custody of the drums over to Ramón "Papo" Gómez, a mechanic by trade but musician by vocation.

In 2002 the Municipal Administration showed interest in founding a marching band that would promote music instruction to Culebra's youth and serve as a representative of the Municipality in official events. José Peñalbert, a music teacher from Puerto Rico, was hired to start a military style brass marching band. The project of the Municipal Marching Band did not count with the sufficient funds to acquire the necessary instruments. Peñalbert started by offering music reading lessons and teaching children to play the block flute. After a few weeks, Papo Gómez approached Peñalbert and showed him the steel drums that Fundación Culebra, Inc acquired. Papo explained to Peñalbert that it would probably be more successful to try to make a steel band rather than a brass band in Culebra. Aside from the logistics and costs of having to buy the necessary instruments to make a brass band, these steel drums were already there and some might be salvaged. More importantly, Papo explained to Peñalbert that, "this is what people like in Culebra". Peñalbert claimed, that although he knew of the existence of such an instrument, he had never seen one before. Papo told me that Peñalbert's first reaction was, "does that trashcan sound?". Peñalbert took one of the drums home and figured it out. He bought books and manuals over the internet and familiarized himself with the technicalities of the instrument.

The first people to join the steel band were Papo Gómez, his son and friends, Papo's brother José, and relatives of Cucuito Munet, the first music teacher hired by Fundación Culebra, Inc. in the early 1990s. In its two year existence, the Municipal Steel Band of Culebra has grown at a steady pace and their level of technical skill has improved respectively. When I commented to Peñalbert on the progress of the band, after a few months of me doing fieldwork, he answered that it is easy for the children of Culebra to learn to play the steel drum. He argued that people in the band were highly motivated to play the steel drum and learned it quickly due to the fact that they have been listening to steel drum music all their lives, "they carry it in their blood". Peñalbert was making a powerful distinction between the Puerto Rican musical tastes and musical identity, and the culebrense musical identity which includes the West Indian repertoire. I do not think that anybody denies or questions culebrense Puerto Ricanness, but Peñalbert's comment, along with many others, problematizes a clear relationship between Puerto Rico and Culebra⁶.

The Municipal Steel Band is usually called to play at official events such as the inauguration of public works, opening the Carnival of Culebra, or exhibition

presentations in schools in Puerto Rico or guests that come to Culebra. The highest profile performances that the Band has had up to date was when they were included in the production of an upcoming big budget film that was made in Culebra, and when the governor of Puerto Rico came to inaugurate a new pier built in the town centre. They are slowly raising the necessary funds to fix the damaged steel drums and acquire new ones for the growing demand of the Band.

The repertoire of the Band is varied. Initially, Peñalbert guided the Steel Band to play calypsos and socca, genres that are commonly associated with the steel drum. The band also played classical European music with calypsonian syncopations. As the musicians and their director got more confident, they started experimenting with pieces that they identified more with. They began practising Puerto Rican traditional songs. They also practised songs that carried rhythmic associations to the Puerto Rico nation. They also began experimenting with more popular songs such as tunes from Star Wars, the theme song of the Mortal Kombat video game, and popular rock tunes. Theoretically, I think that the attempt to refashion the steel band to the Band's liking does not necessarily subvert any conception or association that might exist on the steel drum. After all, an instrument is meant to be played and experimented with. I think that the novelty of the Municipal Steel Band lies in the way in which their concept challenges the historical geographical associations that have dominated Caribbean cultural identity constructions.

The plans that the Steel Band has for its future are to continue growing in numbers, improve their musical technical skills, and acquire a degree of fiscal autonomy from the municipality. A concrete long term goal they have is to be able to play at Carnivals of "English Caribbean" islands⁷. Papo Gómez told me that he would be very keen to be accepted in the St. Thomas Carnival, but has set as a long term goal to be able to play good enough to participate in the Panorama competition in Trinidad, the world's most renowned Steel Band Competition. Peñalbert has been embarking on a campaign to make the Puerto Rican Institute of Culture, Puerto Rico's governing body of culture, accept the steel drum as an instrument that has contributed to Puerto Rican culture. His basic argument is that the steel drum has played an important role in the formation of Culebra identity. As part of his campaign, he has put himself in contact with other steel drum players in Puerto Rico. He is also working on writing a manual for the steel drum in Spanish.

The two oldest musical groups in Culebra are “La Sonora Culebrense” and “Los Isleños”. These two groups also make use of musical associations of various island regions and use these variations to stake a claim on culebrense identity. The history of both bands is intertwined and sporadic. Both groups go back to the early 1970s when the first organised grassroots initiatives to make music in Culebra started.

In its beginnings, “La Sonora Culebrense” was a typical salsa orchestra with a musical line up that corresponds to the requirements of a salsa orchestra. A brass section dominated by the trombone, a percussion section composed of a pair of congas and a pair of timbales, piano, bass, and a singer. It was directed by Milton Díaz, a trumpet player from the neighbouring island of Vieques, who lives in Culebra but was not active in the music scene during my year of fieldwork

“Los Isleños” was a smaller band founded by Victor “Cucuito” Felix Munet. Cucuito Munet was born in Culebra in the mid forties and like many of his peers was sent to St. Thomas and St. Croix in order to finish his secondary education. When living in the USVI Cucuito learned and mastered the steel drum. On his return to Culebra he founded “Los Isleños”, following his musical experiences in the USVI. “Los Isleños” line-up consisted of a steel drum as the main instrument, played by Cucuito Munet, guitar, bass, drum kit, and piano. Their repertoire mainly consisted of hits from the USVI and original calypso compositions of Munet. “Los Isleños” and “La Sonora Culebrense” broke up around the same time. I was never clear about the reasons behind the break-ups; they seemed to be due more to personal reasons and circumstances between a few musicians. Regardless of the break ups, there was a clear motivation by culebrense musicians to continue playing.

In the mid-eighties, Cucuito Munet brought together the musicians and concept of his “Isleños” and the original “Sonora Culebrense” under the name “La Nueva Sonora Culebrense”, although people continued to call it “La Sonora”. The line up of the new “Sonora” was huge. They incorporated all the instruments of a Latino tropical music orchestra and a calypso band. Their repertoire was as eclectic. They would play salsa and merengue hits of the time as well as compose their own Latino numbers using the steel drum as the lead instrument. But “La Sonora” was better known for its calypso numbers and for syncopating popular songs into calypso and socca.

“La Sonora Culebrense” was a hit. They became the staple band that played on weekends in the dancing hall of Culebra, and they toured Puerto Rico extensively playing at almost all of Puerto Rico’s Carnivals. “La Sonora Culebrense” gathered broad recognition through a series of television presentations, front page coverage on entertainment magazines, and a short tour of the Dominican Republic. However, just when the “Sonora” was getting island wide attention, key musicians left the band. In the early nineties Cucuito Munet left Culebra to move to Boston, USA where he died in 2001.

“La Sonora Culebrense” still continues to play, but at a much smaller scale. They have lost their orchestral element and consist of guitar, drum set, piano, drum machine, bass, and singer. Their compositions are inspired by the most recent hits in St. Thomas, which they then translate to Spanish and improvise additional lyrics or breaks over the original songs. “La Sonora” only plays on sporadic occasions during Carnivals in Culebra and Puerto Rico.

The name “Los Isleños” was picked up by 19 year old Julio “Yunito” Munet, Cucuito’s second cousin. Along with his father and elements of the “Sonora Culebrense”, they put together Cucuito Munet’s old songs and are re-playing them. The line up is similar to the old “Isleños” (guitar, bass, piano, and drum machine) with the particularity that almost all the musicians, with exception of the pianist, are kin. Yunito Munet learned to play the steel drum with the Municipal Steel Band. His quick progress on the drum and his uncanny similar style to Cucuito has prompted comments that the youngster has inherited Cucuito’s talent or, as a published article implied once, that Cucuito is still manifesting himself through the teenager.

The biggest exposure that the group has had has been the “Matutinos”, for which they were paid by the municipality. The “Matutinos” is a Christmas tradition that, while it borrows from old Puerto Rican traditions, is only practiced in Culebra. It began when Cucuito Munet would walk through the streets and paths of Culebra playing his steel drum during Christmas nights (from the 19-24 of December) from around 4.00 am until dawn. It became customary to join Cucuito during the serenades as he passed by your house. These nights would usually end in loud parties with dozens of people following the steel drum, playing and singing typical Puerto Rican Christmas music.

This last year's "Matutinos" was a much more elaborate and planned affair than the accounts I was told of previous "Matutinos". A small cargo truck was fitted to function as a type of carriage, commonly seen in Carnivals of the English Caribbean, where the musicians played through loudspeakers. They started at 4.00 am and people followed in their cars along an already assigned route. The parade would usually end at an agreed person's house where the revellers would be served a hearty meal of typical Puerto Rican Christmas food. After the "Matutinos" season "Los Isleños" have been receiving dates and engagements to play at private functions and at special events in hotels of Culebra.

The most recent musical group to organise itself in Culebra also arose out of the "Sonora Culebrense". Julio Enrique "Wiki" Munet and his brother Rubén Munet, Cucuito's cousins, got together with Jorge Acevedo, a local artist that has been living on the island for the past seven years, to form "La Wiki Sound". Wiki and Rubén were part of the percussion section of the "Sonora Culebrense", during the orchestra's busiest time in the mid 1980s. Jorge Acevedo learned to play the congas with various people but claims to have learned the bulk of his skill in a percussion workshop run by the Ayala Family in the town of Loíza, Puerto Rico⁸. The three of them got together in 2000 to do an all percussion ensemble.

The group started when Jorge approached Wiki, after watching "La Sonora Culebrense", about playing some time for leisure. They got together with Rubén who owns a drum machine. They began playing as "La Wiki Sound Machine" for many months, using the drum machine as a structure that would keep them in beat. During a presentation at a bar, an individual that was annoyed at the fact that they were using a drum machine disconnected the apparatus so as to taunt the musicians⁹. To their own surprise, the absence of the drum machine did not affect their playing nor did it affect the necessary communication between the drummers. Jorge says that the disconnection of the drum machine was the best thing for them because it obliged them to play listening to each other and it culminated the process of making the "Wiki Sound" fully acoustic, which is what they were striving for in the first place.

At the moment "La Wiki Sound" is the most successful musical group in Culebra. They are playing every Saturday night at a local bar in Culebra to a full audience. They have

been thinking seriously about establishing themselves as musicians. After a few presentations they did in Puerto Rico to big audiences, they have been wondering about the possibility of recording a few of their numbers with the intention of selling them. They have also instituted a uniform, designed by Jorge, and business cards.

There is a degree of improvisation in the way that the “Wiki Sound” plays (I think that this may be a necessary element to percussion music), but the type of beats they play have a solid historical precedent. Salsa, güagüanco, merenge, plena, bomba, samba, calypso, socca, and others rhythms they play, have a specific metric and beat. The “Wiki Sound” improvises over the established beats and, at times, attempts to reconcile them.

The “Wiki Sound” claims to be original by incorporating into their repertoire rhythms that are historically unrelated. The usage of these different beats becomes interesting and innovative when, in the process of improvisation (improvising within a structure), they try to reconcile beats such as salsa and calypso into a single piece. The musicians are knowledgeable of the different beats that they are doing. They work in and around the differences of the rhythms in order to express themselves creatively, provide smooth transitions from one beat to the next, or do necessary adjustments as the piece proceeds. After years of playing together consistently, the “Wiki Sound” has claimed to have composed original pieces or songs. These compositions do not necessarily imply the invention of new beats or rhythms. The music they play every Saturday is, according to the musicians, the product of organised composition that was authored by the “Wiki Sound”¹⁰. In the context of my dissertation, I would argue that the “Wiki Sound” deploys its knowledge of West Indian and Latin American beats to create a music which they can have fun playing, while at the same time gather the favours of fellow culebrenses.

Discourses of syncretism and hybridity have been commonly applied to Caribbean music (Quintero-Rivera on salsa- 1998, Guibault on zouk- 1993, Bocachica on underground- upcoming, and common discourses on the origin of socca, calypso, and reggae). But the process that the idea of syncretism and hybridity implies, does not convince me entirely in the cases of the Culebra bands. The process by which the culebrenses are making music still engages with the distinct categorisations of musical genres and their respective regions. Culebrense musicians uphold these categorisations

by reproducing the language that regionalises music and their respective islands. All the culebrense musicians that I talked to were aware of the different historical and geographical discourses that informed their musical performances. They were using their experience of the English and Spanish Caribbean music to creatively engage with their material, not claiming to create a new musicological phenomenon. Instead of a seamless mix of ingredients or a musical blend I would rather envision Culebra music more as a mosaic.

I have considered approaching these expressions by seeing them as symptomatic of an area that straddles a border region. The problem that I see with discussing Culebra as a border area is that it reinforces the national discourses of land based cultural experiences that I have been trying to think outside of. Culebrense music would then be placed on the margin of the Puerto Rican experience. This rationale would not take into account that the frame of reference in Culebra is not Puerto Rico nor the USVI, it is Culebra itself. I think that by being aware of the different types of island identities (an awareness that is mediated by an inclusion of the sea in the Culebra imaginary space, Appadurai's ethnoscape, and acted on by travelling through the region either by sail or plane) culebrenses position themselves as part of a node of interactions that originate in the southernmost island of the Caribbean, Trinidad, and work their way through the region.

Also, I think that the border discourse does not help to address the Caribbean region as a whole. If I were to think of Culebra as a border area then I must extend this same rationale to the entire region, where each island lives in boundary of two others. Since the Caribbean is basically a chain of small islands and cays, the region is then rendered to be a constant border inhabited by a population with no clear sense of central identity. This contradicts my observations on the islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, Culebra, Vieques, and published ethnography on the nearby British Virgin Islands (Maurer 1997) where it is clear that people living in islands of the north-eastern Caribbean produce and reproduce a sense of island identity, which is unique to its neighbours.

Most recently I have been thinking about the theory of montage as a possibility of engaging with my field site and as a tool of representation. Montage is a concept developed in the context of film editing. My very basic understanding of montage as of now is a proposition that a film editor place two contradictory images in relation to

each other so that in a “collision” of two contradictory meanings (juxtaposition) the viewer is presented with a new meaning, a concept. The Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein is credited with the writing and practice of montage. In his films, Eisenstein, strived use “patterns of imagery” to present the narrative, instead of linear conventions of narrative such as speech, actions, music, etc. (Neuberger 2004) ¹¹.

What attracted me to revisit Eisenstein and his thoughts on editing was the idea of having two distinct images with contradictory semiotic meaning being placed in relation to one another while still maintaining their individual meaning. According to montage theorists, the juxtaposition of contradictory images enables the viewer to understand reality anew (Neuberger 2004).

In the context of my research project, I would argue that the filming of different historical and cultural narratives, as they are embodied through music and performance, presents the filmmaker with a paradoxical image. I am in a situation where I am using film’s capacity to convey notions of the body, space, and performance to address the musical identity of an island that is informed by musical narratives from different islands. The processes that give shape to these performances do not necessarily subvert the language of categorizations that informed them in the first place. Instead, the juxtaposing of different musical narratives is a way in which the performers reconcile their performances into a new meaning (culebrense?).

A fundamental paradox that is present in my research project is the issue of locating an island identity (insular location) in a context of migration and movement (trans-insularity) and how to be able to write and edit a film where the tension of locatedness and movement is communicated. An underlining theme of the dissertation is the representation of how people create and reproduce a strong sense of located identity while style embarking on movements and travels to other islands of the Caribbean. Identity is claimed as island centred but is informed by different islands, which in turn reproduce their own island-bound identities. Following Clifford (1997), I would argue that the islands that I am looking at in my research constitute themselves in a process of movement and relations that encompass regional as well as global interactions. In the current stage of my research, I am interested in exploring the ways in which I can explore paradoxical images and contradictory situations through montage.

I believe that addressing the north eastern Caribbean with these general issues contributes to contemporary Caribbean cultural and literary research that represent the region as continuously mutable, where cultural and social relations are not shaped according to established centres of politics and institutional power. As of now, I think that in the issues of paradox, humour, and montage I have found an interesting provocation that can, eventually, serve to guide my ethnographic material and the presentation of the dissertation as a multi-media project.

Notes

¹ A stew that is constantly simmering while more and more ingredients are being added has been a common metaphor for used for Caribbean (Ortiz).

² The major players in Caribbean colonialism were representatives of Spain, England, France, Portugal, Denmark, and Holland.

³ The Metropolitan area of Puerto Rico consists of five cities, including the capital San Juan that converged to form the biggest urban space of Puerto Rico. Over 25% of the population of the island lives and works in the Metro Area. I was born and have lived all my life in the heart of the Metro Area.

⁴ Salsa, merengue, and bachata are musical genres strongly associated with the Spanish Caribbean. Salsa is a global genre but it is claimed by Puerto Rico as the national music. Merengue and bachata have a historical association with the Dominican Republic. Underground is possibly best selling type of music in Puerto Rico. Its categorisation and history is contested. I will limit my explanation to say that it carries an influence associated with rap, urban hip-hop, and dancehall. The politics of underground has been the subject of heated debates in popular and academic forums.

⁵ Although I have heard of steel drums being mass produced by Yamaha, the steel drum is still mostly manufactured and maintained by skilled artisans.

⁶ In my dissertation I will argue that Culebra's relationship with Puerto Rico fluctuated from being at the centre of the reproduction of national discourses and by being at the margins of the Puerto Rican national project.

⁷ I believe that the rationale behind this agenda is to be able to actively participate in the continuously shaping politics of Carnival in the Caribbean.

⁸ The Ayala Family is a renowned Afro-Caribbean dancing and percussion group in Puerto Rico. They are probably the most well known group of its type in Puerto Rico.

⁹ The use of a drum machine can be interpreted as inauthentic or karaoke type playing. In Culebra, a drum machine is used when acoustic percussion instruments are not available.

¹⁰ I have observed many times how the "Wiki Sound" gets annoyed at people trying to join them in an improvised manner. Rubén Munet explained to me that he understands why people would like to join them because the kind of music they play is associated with communal participation in an improvised manner. However, the three men have been playing together for so long that they have shaped a specific way of playing that is difficult for people that do not share their experience to join in and keep up. Also, the pieces that they play have set arrangements which a person that doesn't know the song will not be able to follow. That said, a professional percussionist who was visiting the island, successfully joined the "Wiki Sound" for a few numbers.

¹¹ This is as much as I am prepared to write about Eisenstein. I have yet to review carefully his articles and criticisms.

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