

# REMIXING REGGAETÓN

The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico Petra R. Rivera-Rideau



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The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico **Petra R. Rivera-Rideau**

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**For Ryan**

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# INTRODUCTION

## REGGAETÓN TAKES ITS PLACE

It was a curious omission. By 2005, one could hear reggaetón's steady "boom-ch-boom-chick" dembow beat blasting from cars and windows throughout the United States and beyond. Daddy Yankee's rapid vocals on his massive hit "Gasolina" appeared to reach every corner of the globe. Radio stations dedicated exclusively to reggaetón broadcast all over the United States, and mainstream television stations like MTV included "Gasolina" in their regular rotations. And yet, not one reggaetón artist was nominated for a Latin Grammy for Album of the Year.

"Gasolina" received a nomination for Record of the Year (but lost to Alejandro Sanz's pop song, "Tú No Tienes Alma"). Besides that, only the "Best Urban Music Album" category contained any reggaetón nominees or winners (Daddy Yankee's *Barrio Fino* won that year); but, "Urban Music" was created specifically for hip-hop, rap, and reggaetón albums. And it wasn't just Daddy Yankee who was left out. Many people were shocked when the "Producer of the Year" category excluded reggaetón production duo Luny Tunes. "Producer of the Year" nominee Sebastian Kryz commented, "I thought Luny Tunes should've been nominated for Producer of the Year. Their productions are changing the landscape of radio, of television, of everything."<sup>1</sup> The ghettoization of reggaetón within the Urban Music category prompted Kalefa Sennah of the *New York Times* to proclaim, "Luckily, exciting new genres don't typically wait for statuettes before they set about

taking over the world . . . By the time reggaeton stars start winning Latin Grammys by the armload, they won't need them."<sup>2</sup>

Still, the Latin Grammys could not completely ignore reggaetón. Despite the absence of reggaetón in the list of nominees, the broadcast featured some reggaetón sets, including a historic performance by Los 12 Discípulos, a group of reggaetón artists convened by Eddie Dee (incidentally, one of the cowriters of "Gasolina").<sup>3</sup> It began with veteran artist Vico C singing his salsa-reggae inspired song "No Aguanta Pela," in which he donned a white suit and hat and performed a choreographed dance routine. After his performance, the stage went black as the sounds of the Fania All-Stars song "Quítate Tú" played over the speakers. Suddenly, the music ended, and the audience could hear Eddie Dee saying, "They were the masters, and we are the twelve disciples."<sup>4</sup> Beginning with spoken word artist Gallego, reggaetón artists Vico C, Eddie Dee, Tego Calderón, Voltio, Zion, Ivy Queen, Johnny Prez, Tito el Bambino, and Lennox, took the stage one-by-one to perform their verses to the dembow beat laced with the salsa sample from the Fania hit. Each of the artists wore baggy black jeans, white sneakers, a black T-shirt, and a sparkling chain. Emblazoned on the front of each shirt was a photograph of a renowned salsa artist from the 1970s, such as Héctor Lavoe, Ismael Rivera, Cheo Feliciano, Rubén Blades, Celia Cruz, and others. The verses were classic *tiraera*—a battle in which the artists boasted of their lyrical prowess. For the last thirty seconds of the performance, the artists gathered together on stage and repeated the line borrowed from Fania's original song, "¡Quítate tú pa' ponerme yo!" [Get out of the way, I'm taking your place!].

There was something powerful about the group of reggaetón stars standing on the Latin Grammys stage, repeating "¡Quítate tú pa' ponerme yo!" in unison. The T-shirts, and the Fania sample, linked reggaetón to one of Latin music's most beloved genres, salsa, despite critics' attempts to paint reggaetón as "inauthentic" and not "real" Latin music. In typical *tiraera* fashion, the performance responded to an organization that had dissed reggaetón when it excluded the genre from the most prestigious awards.

But the repeated exclamation, "¡Quítate tú pa' ponerme yo!" extends beyond the Latin Recording Academy's snubbing of reggaetón that year to respond to more insidious forms of exclusion faced by many of reggaetón's artists and fans. The artists involved in Los 12 Discípulos are from Puerto Rico, often recognized as the epicenter of reggaetón.<sup>5</sup> On the island, reggaetón has long been associated with working-class, urban, and nonwhite



FIGURE 1.1. Eddie Dee performs “Quítate Tú Pa’ Ponerme Yo” with Los 12 Discípulos at the 6th Annual Latin Grammy Awards on November 3, 2005. Note the image of salsa artist Willie Colón on his T-shirt. *Credit:* Michael Caulfield Archive/Wireimage/Getty Images



communities. These communities have been subject to persistent racism, despite hegemonic discourses that define Puerto Rico as a “racial democracy”<sup>6</sup> in which everyone lives in racial harmony. Moreover, dominant definitions of Puerto Rican national identity<sup>7</sup> privilege whiteness and Spanish cultures as the most influential in the island’s development. In this context, reggaetón has served as a space for expressing a “race-based cultural politics”<sup>8</sup> that both points out the continued presence of racism and devaluation of blackness in Puerto Rico, and foregrounds Puerto Rico’s connections to other sites in the African diaspora. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Raquel Z. Rivera state, “[R]eggaetón calls attention to the centrality of black culture and the migration of peoples and ideas in (and out of) Puerto Rico, not as exotic additions but as constitutive elements. If Puerto Ricans and other Latin Americans have celebrated Spain as the ‘motherland,’ reggaetón redirects the gaze towards Africa’s diasporas.”<sup>9</sup> In this vein, we might understand Los 12 Discípulos’ performance as part of reggaetón’s larger insistence on the full recognition of those communities whose cultural practices are not only considered too “unrefined” for spaces like the Latin Grammys, but also those who are systematically excluded by racist and classist discourses that inform dominant definitions of Puerto Ricanness.

What are the possibilities reggaetón offers for countering the persistence of social inequalities such as racism and classism, not only in Puerto Rico, but also elsewhere in the Americas? What are the limits of reggaetón’s contestatory politics? These questions are at the heart of this book, which examines reggaetón events and figures from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s<sup>10</sup> in order to provide a window into the shifting entanglements between blackness and Puerto Rican identity. Many scholars have shown how Latin American and Caribbean popular music serves as a site for the negotiation of black identities.<sup>11</sup> In Puerto Rico, reggaetón builds from genres of popular music like bomba,<sup>12</sup> salsa, and others that unveil the contradictions within Puerto Rico’s so-called racial democracy and produce new ideas about blackness and Puerto Rican identities.<sup>13</sup> However, reggaetón’s newness is often linked to its reputation as a uniquely transnational phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> Transnational processes of migration and cultural exchange not only influenced reggaetón’s sound, but also its aforementioned “race-based cultural politics.”<sup>15</sup> Musically, reggaetón incorporates beats, vocal styles, and other aesthetics from several genres popular in the African diaspora in the Americas, especially hip-hop and dancehall. But beyond the musical, reggaetón artists and fans also relate to the experiences of racial exclusion often described in



Figure 1.2. Los 12 Discipulos perform at the 6th Annual Latin Grammy Awards on November 3, 2005. *Credit:* Vince Bucci/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

hip-hop, dancehall, and other musical genres that, in turn, provide opportunities to express connections between the island and other African diasporic sites. *Remixing Reggaetón* details how reggaetón integrates aesthetics and signifiers from other sites in the African diaspora to produce new understandings of Puerto Ricanness that center blackness and diasporic belonging, and to articulate Afro-Latino identities on the island and elsewhere.

### “We Can All Say That We Are Black”

“We can all say that we are black,” Adriana, a college student I met in San Juan, told me.<sup>16</sup> She continued, “it would be illogical to be racist against a black person, but it happens. And it’s stupid. It’s stupid because it doesn’t

make sense because we are all partially black, even if a person is white, albino, *jincho*,<sup>17</sup> blond with green eyes, blue eyes.” Adriana’s assessment of the simultaneous recognition of blackness in Puerto Rico (“we are all black”) with the existence of racism on the island reveals one of the fundamental contradictions of dominant discourses<sup>18</sup> of racial democracy in Puerto Rico—that is, the persistence of racism on the island despite official rhetoric that purports that a history of race mixture has produced a racially harmonious society.

Dominant discourses of racial democracy and *blanqueamiento* in Puerto Rico share many characteristics with other sites in the Americas. In places where the majority of the population was classified as nonwhite, elites often deployed discourses similar to racial democracy in an effort to affiliate their respective Latin American and Caribbean countries with European modernity.<sup>19</sup> Although such moves attempted to unify diverse racial and ethnic populations under an all-inclusive national and/or regional identity, they were also committed to *blanqueamiento*, or whitening, which involved considerable efforts to culturally whiten populations and “Europeanize” national cultures throughout the region.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, discourses that proclaim a racial democracy throughout much of Latin America and the Caribbean generally reproduce racial hierarchies that devalue blackness and indigeneity and fortify structural racism that adversely affects black and indigenous communities.<sup>21</sup> Despite their embrace of *blanqueamiento*, it is important to recognize that discourses that promote racial democracy do not entirely eliminate blackness from their depictions of national identity. Rather, they entail the “strategic inclusion”<sup>22</sup> of certain constructions of blackness into their definitions of national identity while simultaneously rejecting other conceptions of blackness. This strategic inclusion furthers the racial inequality inherent to discourses of racial democracy because, often, problematic stereotypes of blackness as primitive become emblematic of the African influence within a specific place.

Historically, comparisons between race relations in the United States and Latin America have played critical roles in portraying Latin America as a “racially harmonious” region. Assumptions about the leniency of slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the absence of de jure segregation in the region served as evidence of its allegedly raceless societies. This comparison is particularly important for Puerto Rico given the island’s colonial relationship with the United States since 1898. Not only does this situation hinder many overt discussions about racism, but it also frames the

adoption of a black identity on the island as the influence of U.S. imperialism (e.g., see chapter 1). In this way, blackness is continuously represented as foreign and fundamentally incompatible with Puerto Ricanness, even though hegemonic depictions of Puerto Rican national identity integrate other, very specific constructions of blackness.

Representing the United States as the locus of all things racist fosters the development of a sort of historical and cultural amnesia regarding the perpetuation of racial hierarchies under Spanish colonialism and the ways that Puerto Ricans themselves have been complicit in keeping them intact. Like other places in the Americas, Puerto Rico also had slavery and, in fact, did not abolish it until 1873. Although Puerto Rico did not develop as robust a plantation economy as other Caribbean countries, the island's population still consisted primarily of people of color, including not only enslaved Africans and Afro-Puerto Ricans, but also a substantial group of free people of color from both Puerto Rico and the surrounding islands for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>23</sup> However, the perception of a relatively small slave economy has contributed to the idea that Puerto Rico has more "lax" race relations than the United States.<sup>24</sup> It also furthered popular assumptions that the Spanish were somehow more racially tolerant than other colonizers (namely the British and, subsequently, the Americans), ignoring the ways that the Spanish contributed to the production of racial hierarchies that valorized whiteness and demonized blackness.<sup>25</sup>

This "silencing"<sup>26</sup> of blackness and of racism continued after 1898, albeit in a revised way that presented the United States as the primary site of racial strife as opposed to the allegedly raceless Puerto Rico. The promotion of racial democracy discourses took on particular intensity with the writings of the *Generación de los 1930s*, a group of intellectuals whose work is central to definitions of Puerto Rican racial democracy and national identity.<sup>27</sup> By the 1930s, the United States had firmly established Puerto Rico as one of its colonies, with U.S.-appointed leaders (a practice that would not change until the 1940s) and economic control of crucial industries such as sugar production by U.S. corporations. As a result of the "Americanization" of the island, many elites, who felt "a loss of power, cultural and political authority, feelings of outrage at a loss of legitimacy with respect to their perceived right to lead the nation, to serve as models of civility," sought to establish a new national identity that would distinguish them from the United States while still affiliating the island with the ideals and standards of European modernity.<sup>28</sup> The result was a vision of Puerto Rican national identity that

celebrated a whitened, Spanish heritage even as it propagated the image of Puerto Ricans as racially mixed.

Among the proponents of the racially mixed (but conceived of as white) Puerto Rico were authors such as Antonio S. Pedreira and Tomás Blanco, whose work is often considered typical of the arguments promoted by the *Generación de los 1930s*. Interestingly, Pedreira and Blanco disagreed on the impact of race mixture in Puerto Rican society: Pedreira argued that it resulted in a “con-fused” people and thus led to the perpetual colonization of the island,<sup>29</sup> while Blanco claimed race mixture proved Puerto Ricans’ moral superiority and therefore discredited U.S. colonialism.<sup>30</sup> However, both men shared profoundly problematic views of blackness and valorizations of Spanish culture. Each of them identified Spanish contributions to Puerto Rico as the most important in the island’s development, both culturally (such as when Pedreira declared that the Spanish brought “intelligence and planning” to Puerto Rico<sup>31</sup>), and biologically (for example, when Blanco proclaimed that race mixture progressively whitened Puerto Rico through the “dilution” of African blood<sup>32</sup>). Despite these commitments to *blanqueamiento*, both men professed that racial prejudice did not exist in Puerto Rico.<sup>33</sup>

Several scholars have critiqued the works by the *Generación de los 1930s*, pointing out their problematic depictions of blackness and promotion of racial stereotypes.<sup>34</sup> A later generation of scholars and writers, the *Generación de los 1970s*, also sought to define the racial dynamics of Puerto Rican national identity; however, they did so in part by emphasizing certain aspects of black culture and identity in Puerto Rico that had been ignored or distorted by theorists like Pedreira.<sup>35</sup> Two authors in particular, José Luis González and Isabelo Zenón Cruz, produced theories that upended the typical Hispanophilia of the *Generación de los 1930s*. Zenón Cruz’s two-volume *Narciso descubre su trasero* presented myriad examples of persistent racism on the island and highlighted the contributions of Afro-Puerto Ricans to Puerto Rico’s history and culture in order to assert that blackness was equally important in defining Puerto Rican identities.<sup>36</sup> José Luis González made a similar claim when he characterized Puerto Rico as racially mixed, but that of the “three roots the one that is most important for economic and social—and hence cultural reasons—is the African.”<sup>37</sup> As members of the *Generación de los 1970s*, Zenón Cruz and González challenged the emphasis on whitening and Spanish culture in dominant discourses of racial democracy, although they remained committed to race

mixture as the basis of their own understandings of Puerto Rican national identities.<sup>38</sup>

Since then, many scholars have discredited the dominant discourse of racial democracy in Puerto Rico.<sup>39</sup> Through her analysis of the island's "slippery semantics," or the ways that individuals speak about race, Isar Godreau demonstrates how ambiguity around racial identification and racism in Puerto Rico coexists with a racial binary that distinguishes blackness and whiteness.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the attachment to black/white racial binaries within Puerto Rico's so-called racial democracy is not surprising given that the celebration of race mixture requires the identification of "pure," original groups that mixed together. Here, ideas about place are particularly important, for they provide another way to understand the simultaneous, and contradictory, attachment to specific stereotypical tropes of blackness and the promotion of racelessness as the basis of Puerto Rican national identities.

### Mapping Blackness(es) in Puerto Rico

As scholars have documented, blackness is tied to specific places or regions within many Latin American countries that, like Puerto Rico, ascribe to discourses comparable to racial democracy.<sup>41</sup> Assumed to be the sites of "authentic" black life and culture, such regions serve as geographic symbols of the African component of these countries' national identities. Similar processes occur in Puerto Rico. Mapping the island's racial topography shows how multiple ideas about blackness have been emplaced within very specific and bounded places. Some constructions of blackness symbolize the African branch of Puerto Rico's racial triad, while other images of blackness are considered the complete opposite of whitened Puerto Ricanness. Although they sometimes contradict each other, understanding how these various constructions of blackness operate in relation to one another illuminates how discourses of racial democracy are kept intact in Puerto Rico and elsewhere.

I term the construction of blackness that is generally understood to represent the African branch of Puerto Rican racial democracy *folkloric blackness*. Symbolized by such cultural practices as the Afro-Puerto Rican music and dance bomba, the narratives surrounding folkloric blackness consistently depict blackness as the "least" influential element in the racial triad that comprises Puerto Rican identity by positioning blackness as a historical



and almost archaic relic of the island's plantation era. Isar P. Godreau argues that this "folklorization" of blackness enables the incorporation of blackness into constructions of Puerto Rican identity while still depicting the island as "Spanish" through a process of "spatial/temporal distancing."<sup>42</sup> In this vein, Godreau points out that racial democracy "not only encourages, but also enables dominant, romantic representations of black communities as remnants of a by-gone era."<sup>43</sup> Besides relegating blackness to the past, this distancing also involves locating it within specific places in Puerto Rico (for example, the town of Loíza [see chapter 3]), imagined to be distinct from the rest of the island. Confining folkloric blackness to restricted places and times implies that blackness is irrelevant to contemporary Puerto Rican society, while simultaneously acknowledging the African heritage that is part of Puerto Rico's racially mixed identity.

However, this folkloric blackness does not account for the realities of other black populations that live throughout Puerto Rico, including in the urban areas where reggaetón developed. The mere *existence* of self-identified black populations outside of the emplacements of folkloric blackness undercuts the restriction of blackness to rural and "pre-modern" geographies. In an attempt to manage the potentially destabilizing impact of these visible black communities elsewhere, other images of blackness also circulate in Puerto Rico, including one which I term *urban blackness*. Urban blackness perpetuates common stereotypes of blackness, such as violence and hypersexuality, that are attributed to the residents of working-class, predominantly nonwhite, public housing developments called *caseríos* (see chapter 1). The emplacement of urban blackness within *caseríos* also foregrounds the intersections of race and class; for example, Zaire Dinzey-Flores demonstrates how *caseríos*' portrayal as sites of blackness coalesces with their status as low-income housing.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, urban blackness links blackness to stereotypes of urban poverty, violence, and hypersexuality.

Although these images circulated in both the United States and Puerto Rico throughout the twentieth century, they were cemented during the 1990s anticrime initiative known as *Mano Dura Contra el Crimen* (Iron Fist against Crime). During this time, images of young, predominantly black male *caserío* residents accused of crimes ranging from robbery and drug dealing to homicide pervaded the Puerto Rican media. *Mano Dura* thus depicted *caseríos* as sites of abjection, the loci of an urban blackness defined by various "immoral" characteristics that differentiated them from

the presumably more “respectable” Puerto Rico, all while ignoring the larger structural policies that produced the adverse conditions affecting *caserío* residents. Gates constructed around the perimeters of *caseríos* that were intended to “contain” criminal activity signified both ideological and physical boundaries that distinguished urban blackness from the rest of the island, situating it only within select and limited geographic areas. As a result, urban blackness became the identifiable counterpoint to hegemonic constructions of whitened Puerto Rican identity.

Although they may appear antithetical to one another, folkloric blackness and urban blackness work together to maintain racial democracy discourses. Folkloric blackness allows for the integration of blackness into the Puerto Rican nation without compromising the image of Puerto Rico as white(ned) due to its spatial/temporal distancing. On the other hand, urban blackness supposedly encompasses those values considered to be the “opposite” of normative, respectable Puerto Ricanness. Urban blackness thus symbolizes the internal black “other” against which Puerto Ricanness can be defined as white(ned).<sup>45</sup>

In the eyes of many detractors, reggaetón typifies the stereotypes associated with urban blackness. Mayra Santos-Febres argues that reggaetón is associated with “rap territories,” or the very same urban neighborhoods targeted by *Mano Dura*.<sup>46</sup> Although reggaetón sometimes appears to reinforce the stereotypes associated with urban blackness, it also exposes the contradictions within dominant discourses of racial democracy in ways that allow for new imaginings of blackness to emerge.

### Reggaetón as a Cultural Practice of Diaspora

In its current iteration, reggaetón is marketed as Latin music, a category that elides the substantial differences between the musical practices it encompasses.<sup>47</sup> Although *Latin music* supposedly incorporates styles and practices popular among Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos, the concept is primarily a U.S. construction that is consistent with the homogenizing impulse behind the label *Latino* itself.<sup>48</sup> As a category that denotes an ethnoracial group in the United States, Latino includes individuals from diverse geographic and racial backgrounds. U.S. Latinos have therefore been imagined as a distinct group that is located at various points between the black/white racial binary depending on shifting political and economic contexts.<sup>49</sup> As a result, *Latinidad* becomes distanced from blackness, which



is instead primarily associated with U.S. African Americans. The music industry similarly relies on discrete, “unambiguous racial and ethnic categories” considered to align with specific markets such that Latin music is tied to a “Latino” audience understood to be distinct from both “black” and “white” audiences.<sup>50</sup> As Deborah Pacini Hernández notes, such rigid distinctions problematically neglect the cultural hybridity of not only Latin music (which includes countless examples of cultural exchange between Latinos and African Americans, among other groups), but also popular music more generally.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, such classification schemes within the music industry could potentially divorce genres marketed as “Latin music” from their African diasporic connections in the popular imagination, especially given the stringent divisions between blackness and Latinidad already prevalent in the United States.

Reggaetón’s commercial entrance in the United States began in 2004, with songs like Daddy Yankee’s “Gasolina” and N.O.R.E.’s “Oye Mi Canto” circulating regularly on radio stations and television programs. However, unlike the crossover Latin Music Boom from the late 1990s that was affiliated with mainstream popular music, the U.S. press presented reggaetón as similar to hip-hop. Within the Latin music industry, reggaetón has been labeled *música urbana* [urban music]. The term *urbana* carries with it racial and class connotations that speak to the music’s affiliations with blackness. Indeed, not only does the term *urbana* imply reggaetón’s ties to urban blackness in Puerto Rico, but also ideas about urban Puerto Rican communities in the United States that historically have been linked to African Americans in the popular imagination both on the island and the mainland (see chapter 5). Therefore, while many people may consider reggaetón as yet another genre encapsulated by the Latin music category, its associations with hip-hop and urban culture bring to mind specific ties to blackness that extend beyond the race mixture that presumably forms the basis of all things “Latino.”

On the one hand, some media outlets such as MTV reproduce stereotypes of blackness when representing reggaetón’s connections to hip-hop. At the same time, these links are also critical to reggaetón’s African diasporic aesthetics. As Marc D. Perry argues, hip-hop offers possibilities for new self-fashionings among marginalized groups around the globe precisely because of its international commodification.<sup>52</sup> For those individuals who also identify as black, Perry claims that hip-hop can “mobilize notions of black-self in ways that are at one time both contestitive and transcen-