

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."¹ 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."²

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").³ 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."⁴ 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.⁵ 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”⁶ in which everyone lives in racial harmony. Moreover, dominant definitions of Puerto Rican national identity⁷ 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”⁸ 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.”⁹ 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-2000s¹⁰ 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.¹¹ In Puerto Rico, reggaetón builds from genres of popular music like bomba,¹² 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.¹³ However, reggaetón’s newness is often linked to its reputation as a uniquely transnational phenomenon.¹⁴ Transnational processes of migration and cultural exchange not only influenced reggaetón’s sound, but also its aforementioned “race-based cultural politics.”¹⁵ 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 Discípulos 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.¹⁶ 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*,¹⁷ 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 discourses¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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”²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

This "silencing"²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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,²⁹ while Blanco claimed race mixture proved Puerto Ricans’ moral superiority and therefore discredited U.S. colonialism.³⁰ 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 Rico³¹), and biologically (for example, when Blanco proclaimed that race mixture progressively whitened Puerto Rico through the “dilution” of African blood³²). Despite these commitments to *blanqueamiento*, both men professed that racial prejudice did not exist in Puerto Rico.³³

Several scholars have critiqued the works by the *Generación de los 1930s*, pointing out their problematic depictions of blackness and promotion of racial stereotypes.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.”³⁷ 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.³⁸

Since then, many scholars have discredited the dominant discourse of racial democracy in Puerto Rico.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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."⁴² 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."⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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).⁴⁵

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*.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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-

dent of nationally bound, hegemonically prescriptive racial framings.”⁵³ In contemporary Puerto Rico, reggaetón constitutes a space for Puerto Rican youth to engage in practices of self-fashioning that respond to local racial politics and express an affinity with African diasporic populations.

Of course, not all reggaetón singers identify as black. Some popular artists such as Tego Calderón and Don Omar have publicly claimed black identities. Others may identify as white or one of the other racial categories in Puerto Rico that denote a position in the middle of the black/white racial spectrum. Still, fans may identify certain artists as black, or at least nonwhite, even if the artists themselves do not identify as such (see, for example, the discussion of Ivy Queen’s racial identity in chapter 4). Some artists just claim a Puerto Rican identity without ever addressing race. Considering the racial diversity within reggaetón, how exactly do these African diasporic connections manifest?

This question has implications for not only the way we study reggaetón but also the very definition of what constitutes the African diaspora. Initially, the term *diaspora* referred to the dispersal of individuals from one place to another that produced a shared longing for an imagined or real homeland. Many theorists have proposed various characteristics that define diasporas, including displacement, attachment to homelands, exclusion from host societies, establishment of a group consciousness, and feelings of connection to other diasporic groups.⁵⁴ Furthermore, diaspora as a concept can attend to both the experiences of forced dispersal as in the transatlantic slave trade, and more voluntary migrations. The problem with this conflation is that making diaspora a catch-all phrase for experiences of migration could potentially discount the very different causes and modes of dispersal as well as the unequal abilities of groups to travel or access their homelands. Still, many of the characteristics identified by theorists such as migration, development of group consciousness, experiences of marginalization in host societies, and other dynamics remain central to understanding diaspora.

Early definitions of the African diaspora emphasized the dispersal of individuals out of Africa, especially because of the transatlantic slave trade, who then recognized the African continent as their homeland. In addition, they often assumed that a unified racial consciousness linked these communities across the diaspora.⁵⁵ However, such definitions tend to position Africa as a historical and static point of origin rather than an important site for the negotiation of contemporary African diasporic identities.⁵⁶ In the

Puerto Rican context, identifying a static African origin actually supports dominant discourses of racial democracy. As I described above, folkloric blackness depends in part on the assumption that Afro–Puerto Rican cultural practices are direct transplants from Africa, a narrative that frames these traditions within a premodern, romanticized African past and denies the histories of intercultural exchange that produced them. My point is not to discount the very substantial African cultural contributions to Puerto Rican society, but rather to underscore how the concept of the African diaspora as emerging from a historical and essentialized Africa may actually further the project of racial democracy.

Several scholars have questioned the assumption that a unified consciousness connected to a static perception of Africa forms the basis of diaspora. Instead, they insist on the importance of understanding diaspora as an ever-changing process of identity negotiation that pays equal attention to differences and similarities across geographic sites.⁵⁷ Following these arguments, the status of blackness more generally as a “counterculture of modernity” produces similarities across African diasporic sites.⁵⁸ The global reach of modern European colonial projects constructed blackness as the primitive and premodern counterpoint to whiteness, and, subsequently, has conditioned the development of the African diaspora.⁵⁹ We see this process in Puerto Rico where urban blackness functions as the internal, “black” opposite to the “white(ned)” Puerto Rican population. These arguments thus connect diasporic populations via experiences of antiblack racism and misrecognition that stem from the hegemony of discourses of Western modernity.

At the same time, this understanding of diaspora also takes heed of difference across African diasporic groups. Here, attention to the local is critical. As Jacqueline Nassy Brown reminds us, diaspora is experienced in specific places.⁶⁰ How individuals perceive themselves in relation to the African diaspora depends in part on how they are positioned within their local communities. This is especially important given that different locations hold varying definitions of blackness, such that someone identified as “black” in the United States may be recognized as some other category in Puerto Rico or elsewhere. Nevertheless, although Puerto Rico and the United States appear to have starkly contrasting racial discourses, both places reproduce eerily similar and equally problematic stereotypes of blackness. This illuminates the continued salience of Western modernity across geographic boundaries even when different places hold distinct systems of race relations.

In this context, the linkages across diasporic sites occur via complex processes of “recognition” whereby individuals perceive commonalities with other black-identified communities, even if the actual parameters that define their blackness are different. Similar experiences with racial exclusion form the basis of these diasporic connections.⁶¹ The “encounter” between groups in different locations allows for individuals to recognize new possibilities for defining blackness that would otherwise be obscured in “place-bound fixities.”⁶² Individuals draw from cultural practices, symbols, and icons from other African diasporic sites, what Jacqueline Nassy Brown terms *diasporic resources*, to produce alternative definitions of blackness that respond to their localized experiences of racial exclusion.⁶³ In this way, diaspora is a dynamic process that is always in flux and distinctly articulated across sites. It also acknowledges the differences that exist within the African diaspora even though these communities are all affected by the problematic consequences of Western modernity. Reggaetón exemplifies this process by integrating diasporic resources from various African diasporic cultural practices in the Americas—especially U.S.-based hip-hop and Jamaican dancehall—to create new understandings of Puerto Rican identities that center blackness.

Reggaetón is also indebted to the long histories of migrations throughout the Americas. Despite the debate about reggaetón’s origins, it is undeniable that reggaetón is supremely transnational, emerging from multiple streams of migration and cultural exchange. Indeed, reggaetón is a prime example of circum-Caribbean music characterized by the “shared history of colonization, diasporic movement, and immigration” in the Caribbean basin.⁶⁴ For example, the (im)migration of Puerto Ricans, West Indians, Panamanians, and Dominicans (among others) to the United States was essential to reggaetón’s development, as were other streams of migration, such as when West Indians moved to Panama or Dominicans to Puerto Rico. In fact, part of reggaetón’s shift to a pan-Latino audience resulted from the ways that the music resonated with Latino youth understood to be immigrants or the children of immigrants in the United States, and the subsequent push from record companies to market products to these communities (see chapter 5).

But beyond thrusting reggaetón into larger commercial markets, these patterns of migration also introduced new opportunities for cultural exchange that familiarized communities with diverse musical practices and ideas about blackness. Juan Flores proposes the term *cultural remittances*

to account for “the ensemble of ideas, values, and expressive forms introduced into societies of origin by remigrants and their families as they return ‘home,’ sometimes for the first time, for temporary visits or permanent resettlement, and as transmitted through the increasingly pervasive means of telecommunication.”⁶⁵ In his analysis of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban migration, Flores points out that cultural remittances have resulted in the dissemination of both cultural practices like hip-hop as well as new forms of “black consciousness” in the Spanish Caribbean.⁶⁶ In particular, the embrace of Afro-Latino identities evident in these cultural remittances—either in the self-stylings and identities of return migrants or in the forms of cultural expression that travel to the islands via recordings, Internet, and other avenues—often jar with the dominant definitions of national identities in the Spanish Caribbean.⁶⁷ Indeed, fears and anxieties regarding reggaetón’s embrace of diasporic blackness underlay the Puerto Rican government’s multiple attempts to censor the music (see chapters 1 and 2). Therefore, understanding the emergence and significance of reggaetón requires attention to the ways that Puerto Rican and other Latino diasporas’ cultural remittances are integral to reggaetón’s diasporic blackness.

Reggaetón thus developed in Puerto Rico as a cultural practice of diaspora. Here, the term *diaspora* addresses both the histories of migration that are crucial to reggaetón, and reggaetón’s articulation of diasporic links across different sites, particularly between Puerto Rico and elsewhere in the African diaspora. As a cultural practice of diaspora, reggaetón must be understood in relation to both global and local factors—a music “routed” through various geographic sites that has become “rooted” in local communities as an expression of particular understandings of race, class, gender, and national identities. In Puerto Rico, reggaetón significantly departs from dominant discourses of racial democracy because it *centers* African diasporic belonging in the construction of Puerto Rican identities. Blackness becomes reconfigured as essential to contemporary Puerto Rican life, refuting both the stereotypical tropes of urban blackness and the premodern characteristics of folkloric blackness. As part of this broader aim, reggaetón includes a critique of the inconsistencies within Puerto Rico’s so-called racial democracy, not the least of which are persistent racial inequalities.

The development of this critique is not a uniform or linear process. The racial diversity of reggaetón artists and fans results in different configurations of diasporic resources within reggaetón. For example, self-identified black artists integrate African diasporic aesthetics to articulate a uniquely

Afro–Puerto Rican identity, positioning themselves as members of the broader African diaspora. On the other hand, artists and fans who may not identify or be identified by others as black, per se, may incorporate these same resources as a way to express solidarity or affinity with African diasporic populations despite embracing a racially mixed or even white identity. Likewise, female reggaetón artists or fans may select alternative diasporic resources than their male counterparts that speak to their specific gendered experiences, even when they destabilize similar structures of racial inequality. Although the results may not always be the same, what reggaetón offers to all of these groups is a set of cultural practices that can be manipulated in ways that shed light on the materialities of poor, urban, and predominantly nonwhite Puerto Rican communities. In a place where racism purportedly does not exist, reggaetón provides a language, sometimes verbal, sometimes visual, and oftentimes aural, to speak about the “unspeakable” black presence on the island.⁶⁸ And as a result, reggaetón offers an opportunity to express new understandings of Puerto Ricanness and Afro-Latinidad.⁶⁹

While reggaetón may challenge the racist underpinnings of hegemonic discourses of racial democracy, it also reinforces some problematic hierarchies, particularly regarding gender and sexuality. Many of reggaetón’s critics have maligned the music because of its misogynistic lyrics and representations. I will show how, sometimes, these criticisms of reggaetón conceal racist presumptions of an inherent black hypersexuality. However, sometimes such criticisms point out significantly troublesome elements of the reggaetón scene that must be addressed in order to imagine a truly inclusive reconfiguration of Puerto Rican identities. At the same time, it is important to remember that reggaetón is not the first popular music in Puerto Rico (or elsewhere) to have a vexed relationship with questions of gender and sexuality. One needs only look at salsa, one of the most beloved national musics of Puerto Rico, to see how patriarchal and heteronormative structures inform cultural practices from both dominant and subaltern positions throughout the island and the diaspora. Thus, reggaetón, like other forms of popular music, is best thought of as what George Lipsitz has termed a “dangerous crossroad,”⁷⁰ one that simultaneously contests and reaffirms different hierarchical structures at different times and in different places.

Of course, reggaetón is above all a commercial music, and at this point a thriving, multimillion-dollar industry. But, rather than assume that reggaetón’s marketability renders it devoid of “political” messages, I follow the

work of scholars such as George Lipsitz and Jocelyne Guilbault, who posit that while popular music may appear fleeting, it develops from entrenched historical processes and produces spaces for social transformation.⁷¹ In spite of frequent declarations by its critics that reggaetón is a mere fad destined to end in the near future, reggaetón has evolved, with new artists springing up throughout Latin America, mixing the dembow with other forms of music and producing innovative recordings that have become tremendously popular. Most important, whether reggaetón continues to be popular or not, it presents a specific moment in history where racial and national identities could be reconfigured in new and imaginative ways. By focusing on significant historical moments and figures in reggaetón, the chapters that follow reveal the various strategies reggaetón artists and fans use not only to criticize dominant discourses of racial democracy, but also to call for the realization of its promise of full equality for all Puerto Ricans. Reggaetón makes meaningful and critical interventions that center the African diaspora in redefinitions of Puerto Rican identities, a process that, while often slippery and by no means perfect, has consequences for understanding constructions of blackness throughout the Americas.

Structure of the Book

What are the possibilities and limits that reggaetón offers for reconsidering blackness in Puerto Rico? What are the challenges it presents to hegemonic discourses of racial democracy on the island, and how have these challenges been managed? How do the different gender and racial positionalities of reggaetón artists and fans impact their constructions of Puerto Rican identities? How has the emergence of reggaetón scenes in the United States impacted the music's relationship to blackness, Puerto Ricanness, or Latinidad (if at all)? As a cultural practice of diaspora, how does reggaetón intervene in the cultural politics of blackness in Puerto Rico, and what does this reveal about the contradictions of Puerto Rican racial democracy and similar discourses elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean? The following chapters address these questions in order to interrogate the cultural politics of race and diaspora in Puerto Rican reggaetón.

The first chapter, "Iron Fist against Rap," examines the development of underground, the precursor to reggaetón. This chapter takes into account a detailed discussion of both the global processes of cultural exchange and migration that led to reggaetón's development, and the local conditions on

the island that sparked its emergence. Relying on newspaper articles, song lyrics, and music videos, I examine how underground artists employed diasporic resources as part of a broader critique of persistent racism and classism on the part of Puerto Rican elites, especially government officials. These arguments expressed connections with African diasporic politics that directly countered the problematic images of urban blackness that had been attributed to underground rappers during anticrime initiatives at the time. This chapter examines the multiple arguments from both supporters and detractors of underground as an example of one way in which engagement with African diasporic aesthetics intervenes in broader debates about race and national identity in Puerto Rico.

By 2002, underground had shifted to reggaetón and made inroads into the Puerto Rican mainstream. Chapter 2, “The Perils of Perreo,” focuses on the Anti-Pornography Campaign initiated by Senator Velda González to eliminate pornographic content in Puerto Rican media. However, the campaign targeted reggaetón music videos. More specifically, González focused on representations of women in music videos, especially the impact of overt displays of female sexuality on the “moral education” of Puerto Rican youth. I argue that the Anti-Pornography Campaign reproduced problematic stereotypes of black female hypersexuality in an attempt to secure the hegemony of racial democracy in the face of reggaetón’s insertions of ideas about blackness into Puerto Rican society.

The following two chapters address the work of specific reggaetón artists who engage with African diasporic resources to produce new understandings of Puerto Rican identities. In “Loíza,” I analyze the music and persona of Tego Calderón, whose first album received critical acclaim shortly after the completion of the Anti-Pornography Campaign. While Calderón is often attributed with making reggaetón mainstream in Puerto Rico, he also embodies a distinct Afro–Puerto Rican identity and routinely discusses racism in Puerto Rico in his music and interviews. This chapter examines this provocative contradiction—that is, why would the very same elites who were so invested in racial democracy discourses readily embrace one of their staunchest critics? Using his music, media coverage of his career, and interviews, I argue that Tego Calderón’s use of diasporic resources enables him to revise Afro–Puerto Rican signifiers such as the folkloric music bomba into new expressions of a unique Afro–Puerto Rican identity.

Another artist who troubles dominant discourses of racial democracy is Ivy Queen, arguably the most widely recognized woman in reggaetón.

In “Fingernails con Feeling,” I demonstrate how Ivy Queen disrupts the associations between whiteness and respectability that undergird Puerto Rican national identities. I contend that the two aspects of her celebrity that have given her the most notoriety—her shift in her appearance and her lyrics about suffering and vengeance—discredit the assumptions of black inferiority that are part and parcel of racial democracy. Instead, Ivy Queen carves a space for groups normally cast out of Puerto Rico’s so-called racial democracy to produce a more inclusive understanding of Puerto Rican identities.

In the final chapter, “Enter the Hurbans,” I explore the racialization of reggaetón once it entered the U.S. market in 2004 with the backing of major record labels.⁷² I argue that the identification of a supposedly new Hispanic urban audience (called *Hurban*) situated reggaetón within the Latin music market by distinguishing it from blackness. At the same time, *Hurban* identity was also linked to blackness via the reiteration of historical stereotypes of Puerto Rican and African American urban communities as violent, hypersexual, and enmeshed in a culture of poverty. And yet, some artists could still use reggaetón as a space to express unique Afro-Latino identities that contest the dominant divisions of blackness and *Latinidad* in the United States.

These chapters demonstrate that reggaetón’s incorporation of African diasporic resources produces new ways of understanding Puerto Rican identity that depart from the Eurocentric foundations of hegemonic discourses of racial democracy. At the same time, I caution the impulse to consider an overarching, unitary expression of Puerto Rican identity in reggaetón. Rather, the various racial, class, and gender identities occupied by reggaetón’s artists and fans condition these contestations to racial democracy. Reggaetón thus encompasses a set of cultural practices that engages with African diasporic aesthetics in ways that challenge the dominant discourses of racial democracy and, in the process, produce new understandings of Puerto Rican identities that center blackness and African diasporic belonging.