

## FOREWORD

### What's All the Noise About?

My late friend Johnny Ramírez used to call it “racketón.” “Apaga ese racketón” (Turn off that racketon) he would shout as the thumping cars shattered the peaceful quiet of his little house, *campo adentro* in the hills of Puerto Rico. For him, music was El Trío Los Panchos, *Ramito*, a little salsa maybe, an occasional tango, and a lot of boleros, Daniel Santos, Pedro Flores, Rafael Hernández, and of course, Felipe Rodríguez, “La Voz.” Even after spending forty of his seventy years in New York City, Johnny’s whole system was geared to “la música de ayer,” the trusty old melodies and familiar cadences of yesteryear. The insistent boom and incoherent vocal gibberish of reggaeton was a “racket,” nothing but meaningless, ear-grating noise. It’s just not music.

Reggaeton is to this extent no different than other new styles or modes of popular music as they take hold among the young generation and conquer the soundscape of its place and time. The history of emergent genres and practices of music making illustrate time and again how the new language is greeted with widespread disdain among those with a stake in perpetuating what’s been accepted and taken for granted as “the real stuff.” Often what is at stake is social privilege, the wealth and power of the tastemakers and gatekeepers. But in the case of Johnny, who spent his whole life poor and uneducated, it’s obviously not about privilege or wealth or power. His rants against “racketón” were backed by another kind of power, the weight of tradition and generational authority. Music is what music has “always” been. The rest is simply not music; it’s noise, a racket.

Of course music is never just about music, and the social judgments it faces are always about the people who create it and love it. Johnny’s responding not only to the sounds he hears but to the wayward, good-for-nothing young

people these days, with their drugs and sex and the contaminating influence from outside, in this case meaning from the inner-city jungles of the United States. The sonic intrusion he feels is the invasion of generational degeneration, the moral decline of young people today “que no valen ná” (who are worthless). Again, this is a familiar clash, the story of modern-day popular music, a story with countless examples around the world.

What is new about reggaeton—and the editors and authors of this anthology point up this novelty in multiple ways and from many angles—is how it came into being. Previously, what made the new style “popular” and immediately recognizable in all its novelty, was that it was rooted in a certain place, whether that local point of origin be defined in terms of geography, ethnicity, nationality, or simply grounding in certain ancestral traditions. Think of jazz, tango, blues, *plena*, reggae, salsa, samba, hip-hop—we can trace with some precision where the form started and by whom and why then and there. All those styles diffuse throughout the country and around the world, but it is always possible to say from where and how they spread and became relocalized in the many settings where they take hold. Controversies generally swirl over proprietary rights and issues of authenticity and corruption, but the power of roots and local groundedness, the “down-homeness” of the emergent style, remains decisive in establishing its place in music history.

Reggaeton may well go down in that history as the first transnational music, in the full sense of the term. Not only that it becomes transnational by its massive and far-flung spread in the world, a process that has become more rapid and intensive with every new generation of technology and global shrinkage. Hip-hop, in that sense, has outpaced and surpassed even rock, salsa, and reggae in becoming a musical lingua franca of world reach and proportions. But reggaeton kicks that remarkable process up still another notch by being an eminently popular form of music without any single specifiable place of origin, with no *cuna* (cradle) in the sense of a “hood” or even national setting from which it sprang. The contention over whether it’s Panamanian, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, or Nuyoricán will most likely seethe on, since it seems to be a style brewed in a multilocal, transnational cauldron from the beginning. All of these parental claims are valid, yet none of them are, because the “location” of origin in this elusive, perhaps unprecedented case is at the very crossroads of many diasporic, migratory, and circulating communities of taste and generational solidarity.

The twist, though, and what belies this seemingly disembodied, unrooted genesis, is that reggaetón (and here I use the accent mark) is in Spanish. Unlike hip-hop, whose English-language lyrics attest to its South Bronx birthplace

even when it finds expression in Turkish, French, Swahili, Hebrew, or Cantonese, the Spanish rhymes of reggaetón (or is it “reguetón”?) signal a reassertion of cultural and national specificity within a thoroughly trans- (not to say post-) national field of musical and poetic expression. It’s almost like a kind of Latino revenge against the doggedly Anglophone nature and official narrative of early hip-hop, with its erasure of the powerful Boricua (Puerto Rican) presence and input from the outset. And it’s an in-your-face at the nervous gatekeepers of “Hispanic” culture who would deny the overriding presence of hip-hop in the lives of a whole generation of young Latinos, a massive public that will not stop insisting that “this is the culture I grew up with, it’s *my* culture.” This anthology opens a chapter in hip-hop history that brings it all back home, back to our transnational Afro-Spanish-speaking countries and diasporas and ’hoods where young people are going through their hip-hop ecstasies and traumas, but in their own language, and in their own unique and hitherto-unknown style. And let’s be clear: some of these lyrics are also vibrant, fresh poetry as well. Check out Gallego’s street-corner chronicle, “Chamaco’s Corner,” included in this pioneering book, for a good example.

Maybe what freaked out “old Johnny” the most, even more than old-school rap ever seemed to bother him, was just that, that it’s in Spanish, his own language, too close to home and too undeniably Caribbean to be waved off as “de allá” (from over there). A reappropriated sound that was incubated somewhere else finally comes home to roost. Such is the blast that shattered Johnny’s rural tranquility, not “racketon” but “raquetón”!

Bring on the Racket!