

“Pidieron Cacao: Latinidad and Black Identity in the Reggaetón of Don Omar.”

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“Pidieron cacao [They ate crow].”
Don Omar “Intro” *The Last Don*

In the first track of his debut studio album, Don Omar positions himself in the reggaetón world through a series of shout-outs to friends and foes. Among these shout-outs he screams, “pidieron cacao,” an expression that roughly translates, “they ate crow.” This reference establishes two key aspects of his persona as a *reggaetonero*: first, the idea of eating crow answers back to those who thought he would not succeed in reggaetón as he has been able to rise to the top of the genre, second cacao (cocoa) references his identity as a black man, as well as the demand for reggaetón, which originated in the black community, beginning to reach mainstream popularity in 2003, the year of *The Last Don*’s release. Throughout his career to date, Don Omar has built his image and popularity via transnational black pride and *latinidad*, a sense of shared Latino pride and history. Thus, readings of Don Omar’s persona and production contribute to the growing body of work on reggaetón which seeks to understand its role in Latino youth identity formation.

The genre now known as reggaetón emerged as a hybrid of various musical forms originating in the Caribbean and its Diaspora including Jamaican dancehall, salsa, bachata, merengue, and hip hop, among others.¹ Its hybridity and connection to hip hop has resulted in its popularity, not only among Latinos but also fans of hip hop and urban music in general. Such is its popularity in the Latino community, that in a backstage interview with MTV Tre3 in November 2006 during his *King of Kings* tour, Don Omar stated, “El reggaetón es la bandera de muchos jóvenes latinoamericanos” [Reggaetón is the flag of many Young Latin Americans].

The term *latinoamericanos* as used here encapsulates both U.S. Latin@s and Latin Americans creating a transnational bond through the “flag” of reggaetón. Indeed, many *reggaetóneros* represent their countries, cities and towns through shout-outs in their lyrics as well as visual representations of flags and place names, particularly on T-shirts in their videos. As cultural critic Deborah Pacini-Hernández (*Oye Como Va: Hybridity and Identity in Latino Popular Music* 2010) points out, reggaetón is significant for Latino youth because it combines elements from their heritage in Latin America with their experiences in the United States.

For young music fans in general, reggaetón represents an urban experience narrated through poverty, violence and racism like that of much rap and hip hop, which enjoys extreme popularity among youth of all racial and ethnic groups.² In his essay, “On Being Puerto Rican: Report from the Eastern Front,” Puerto Rican author Abraham Rodríguez Jr. asserts that Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and Black Americans share a need to claim territory as racialized citizens but he argues that the cultural production resulting from this need has come to represent the American experience. According to Rodríguez, “...American culture has become so influenced by them that now when European kids think about being American, they think about being “black,” of hip hop music and a street tough attitude that is totally inner-city Nubian (2000: 85).” The shared “mixture of turf” that Rodríguez ascribes to Puerto Ricans, Chicanos and Black Americans, and the role of inner-city black hip hop production as a marker of mainstream American identity also contributes to our understanding of the ways that cultural production like music articulates a sense of nationalism or community. In the case of Don Omar, and reggaetón in general, this sense of community is accomplished through both highly localized, barrio-centric images and a larger pan-Latino experience embodied by language and lived barrio experiences.

The life of Don Omar bears out both the struggles of poverty and violence, as well as the search for unity beyond el barrio. Born William Omar Landrón Rivera in Villa Palmeras Puerto Rico in 1978, Don Omar literally embodies the layered tensions related to transnational constructions of race and identity in Puerto Rico and the United States. As an Afro-Puerto Rican who lived on the Island until achieving success, Landrón has had to negotiate his blackness in a Puerto Rican, as well as a U.S. context. Like other entertainers he serves as a lens through which listeners may see themselves as Black, Latino, Puerto Ricans or all three.³

As a young man growing up in Villa Palmeras and purportedly living in a *caserío*, the term used to refer to Puerto Rico's public housing system, he has often mentioned that he saw frequent violence and from a young age saw friends victimized by that violence (Cotts 2008: 16). His personal struggles as a young man include the separation of his parents when his father left the family and an ambivalent attitude toward school. Though not closely involved in any major crime himself, he associated with many who were growing up.

Two things would influence his life, and lead him in the direction toward a career in reggaetón. First, given his disillusionment with his father's departure, and the violence and poverty of his neighborhood, he left home at 16, eventually joining the church as a youth pastor in Bayamón. Through his religious work, he began to become interested in music, something he had rejected despite the fact that his grandfather was a musician. Eventually Landrón would decide to leave the church and dedicate himself entirely to a career in music after meeting reggaetón producer Eliel Lind Osorio (Cotts 2008: 17). Since reaching stardom, Don Omar has purported to combine his desire to serve and help his community with the need to tell the stories of life in *el caserío*. He accomplishes this not only through music, but also through charity work, endowing youth charities and visiting sick children (Cotts 2008: 43-45).

Landrón continues to craft the persona of Don Omar via socio-economic tensions associated with working class Afro-Puerto Ricans, African Americans and Italian immigrants of the early twentieth century which persist today among African Americans and Latinos. He accomplishes this through an oppositional discourse centered around two identity markers rooted in ethnic and racial struggle, *el negro* and the gangsta.

The constructions of both *el negro* and the gangsta are predicated upon a history of violence, racism and migration deeply rooted in the forging of the Americas through immigration and slavery. The fact that Don Omar evokes these two images as markers of *latinidad* -Latino pride-, is problematic given the masculine violence of both figures, and thus merits further consideration. Thus, I will examine the Puerto Rican cultural trope of *el negro*, deployed by Don Omar to contest the silencing of blackness on the island via the construction of “*la gran familia puertorriqueña*,” a construct originating in the eighteenth century to unify Puerto Ricans as a response to colonialism. I will additionally place blackness in a U.S. context via the figure of the gangsta of gangsta rap that uses violence and capital to oppose racism and colonialism, rooted in the Sicilian gangster figure which has come to be the a ubiquitous figure of marginalized masculinity in popular culture.

I situate my work within Raquel Rivera’s construction of the “*cosa nuestra del barrio*” as she argues that the socio-economic conditions of working-class Puerto Ricans leads them to identify with black working-class music such as rap, as opposed to traditional Puerto Rican *jibaro* music (2007: 219-220). By way of tracing the threads *el negro* and the gangsta in Don Omar’s persona and production from 2003 to 2006, I hope to shed light on the ways in which *reggaetoneros* use pride, capital and violence to contest their subordinated social position, and in turn question the extent to which such a discourse empowers their larger communities.

El Flow: “Reggaetón Latino” and the Transnational Latino Family

Don Omar’s 2005 hit “Reggaetón Latino (Chosen Few Remix)” exemplifies the use of music as a source of Latino pride and family building in the U.S and beyond⁴. The track features guest musicians Daddy Yankee, Tego Calderón, Fat Joe, N.O.R.E and LDA.⁵ Such collaborations of island and mainland Puerto Ricans illustrate the fluidity of space in Puerto Rican identity documented by Jorge Duany, Luis Rafael Sánchez, Juan Flores, and Raquel Rivera who outline the migration of Puerto Rican identity via cultural and economic flows, music being one of the most significant.⁶ Given its discourse of Latino unity and status as one of reggaetón’s most well-known songs, I would like to use “Reggaetón Latino” (Chosen Few Remix) to map issues of gender, race, and the Latino family in Don Omar’s work.

Such is its popularity that “Reggaetón Latino” has contributed to the genre’s shift from being considered a primarily black music to engaging in a market savvy pan-Latino identity.⁷ Don Omar sings the refrain “Bailen yales. Muevan. Suden. Sientan el poder del reggaetón Latino [Dance ladies. Move. Sweat. Feel the power of Latino reggaetón].” The rest of the song consists of bilingual interventions by the invited musicians explaining the origin and significance of reggaetón, supposedly introduced to Americans by N.O.R.E. Nuyorican rapper Fat Joe addresses language and bilingualism, admitting to not speaking much in Spanish, but linking himself to other *reggaetóneros* through his experiences in “New York, New York, the Bronx, mi *caserío* [housing project].” The song privileges a Latino unity through shared space and social class identity-be the *caserío* in Puerto Rico or the Bronx,-as opposed to language which is often deployed as a marker of *latinidad* and the common denominator among all Latinos. Thus the *caserío* becomes the “*bandera*” of reggaetón.

While the connection between the Bronx and Puerto Rico in such lyrics as “Del Bronx hasta Puerto Rico, papi,” abounds in the entire project, LDA’s contribution to “Reggaetón Latino” proves the most direct reference to Latino unity through race and space, couched in the work of José Vasconcelos *La raza cósmica*.⁸ LDA sings “Esta es nuestra herencia latina, la voz que representa nuestra raza cósmica. Y que me oigan en las antillas, el reggaetón latino se queda, pa’ que lo bailen desde España y Sudamérica, desde Estados Unidos y Centroamérica. [This is our Latin heritage, the voice that represents our cosmic race. May they hear me in the Antilles, Latino reggaetón is here to stay so that they may dance to it from Spain to South America, The United States and Central America].” This is indeed a powerful statement given the contested discourse of the “*raza cósmica*” as naively utopian, as Vasconcelos articulates it. Vasconcelos’ concept and its appropriation in reggaetón are fraught with contradictions as, while it does provide a template for Latino unity, Vasconcelos’ deference to whiteness flies in the face of reggaetón’s Afro-centrism.

A controversy surrounding the video for “Reggaetón Latino” further complicates it as a unifying Latino text. Landrón blasted the video’s production company, UBO, for mixing images of him singing in the recording studio with those of iconic masculine Latin/o American figures such as Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Roberto Clemente and Tito Puente, among others, claiming not to have approved the project, and expressing concern that such images might offend Cuban listeners stating; “Señores, no tengo nada que ver con la política. [I have nothing to do with politics]” (Fraticegli, 2007).⁹ This stance undermines Latino unity as Don Omar singles out Cubans who might be offended by certain images, ignoring the gendered masculinist reading of *latinidad* put forth by the video’s visual discourse of male figures taken from politics, music, and

sports. Aside from Frida Kaho and *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, women appear in the video as scantily-clad dancers.

While music does certainly unite its listeners in a community not unlike that of a nation, such an oversimplification erases individual issues of gender, race, and class that separate Latinos, not only as a pan-ethnic group but also within national groups.¹⁰ I read call to be heard not only “en las Antillas,” but also throughout Latin America, the U.S. and Spain as the use of expressive culture as a de-colonizing agent (Aparicio 2004). This is particularly true with respect to the mention of Spain and The United States, given their imperialist history with Latin America and especially the continued status of Puerto Rico as a U.S. colony. Despite its increasing construction and marketing as a pan-Latino music, reggaetón emerges and operates in part from a male-dominated context of blackness as a unifying factor in the Caribbean and in the U.S. In his aim to unite Latinos in this context, Don Omar crafted his persona in deference to one of the most potent family members of popular culture, the gangster, a subject to which I shall now turn.

“El Don del reggaetón:” The Impact of the Gangster Figure in the Persona of Don Omar

“well matón, de corazón Corleon” [Well killer, I’m Corleon at heart].

“Reggaetón Latino” (The Chosen Few Remix),

Among his various stage names, Don Omar is known as “el Don del reggaetón.” Since his emergence on the reggaetón scene, William Omar Landrón has crafted his public persona via references to gangster culture, in particular Don Corleone of *The Godfather* novel and film series. In fact, his first album, *The Last Don* shares its title with a Godfather movie.¹¹ The presence of gangster imagery in the work of Don Omar echoes the historical marginalization of

those not considered white in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.¹² For those marginalized by the dominant political and legal systems, be they in the United States or Puerto Rico, the gangster figure acquires value as a symbol of defiance and power due to the economic success of the mafia and its portrayal in popular culture and the media as a nearly impenetrable, familial institution. Thus, a reading of Don Omar's connection with the Italian gangster figure reveals how gangsters function as filters through which to read oppositional, masculinist performances by those racialized as non-white, as are many reggaetón performers.

At first glance, Don Omar may appear to have little in common with Sicilian gangsters. Sicilians, who tend to have the darkest complexion of all Italians suffer the same racial prejudices in their own country as blacks in the U.S. and Caribbean.¹³ In addition, given the nationalist trope of "*la gran familia puertorriqueña*" to occlude issues of anti-Black racism, the use of mafia family imagery would seem an attractive, if problematic, means to contest this narrative due to its celebration of violence and exclusion of women and non-heterosexual men, as cultural studies scholar Richard T Rodríguez (2009) argues with respect to Chicano rap.¹⁴

Indeed, the connection between the masculine power of the gangster, and the personas of gangsta rappers, and I would argue Don Omar, has been traced through music. In an intervention on race relations and the Italian American experience through the study of Frank Sinatra, American studies scholar, John Gennari ties the gangster and the gangsta through Sinatra's persona. According to Gennari, a *Vibe* article written in 1995 identifies Frank Sinatra as the original gangster and single most important influence on gangsta rap and the masculinity its artist perform. According to the article's author Bonz Malone, "His tough Jersey accent redefined the American language, plus he used his voice, not a gun. It made the girlies stick out them tits like it was a hold-up. Mind you, this was the 1940's when girls wasn't givin' up the

coochie” (Quoted in Gennari, 2004: 148). In this way, cultural forms such as gangsta rap and reggaetón, as well as the persistent cultural production of gangster culture inflect a fetishized image of the Sicilian underdog whom Blacks and Latinos have largely replaced in the popular imaginary, a fact certainly not lost on artists, marketers, and producers.

As mentioned earlier, Don Omar evokes gangster culture via his stage names, “el Don del reggaetón” and “Da Hitman,” as well as album titles, *The Last Don*. Da Hitman fuses the traditional “hitman” with the gangsta of African American culture as “da” replaces “the.” In addition to naming, Don Omar performs the gangster/gangsta through his use of dress and material culture. His stage wardrobe combines the baggy jeans, T-shirts, and large chains associated with hip hop with the expensive suits and fedoras and large rings of Sinatra era gangsters. The emphasis on material culture also marks Don Omar’s lyrical production and public statements. His “*blin blineo* [bling bling]” proves his potency as it functions as both a means of seduction of women and proof of his dominance in reggaetón. He establishes his identity and presence in reggaetón via money on the “Intro” to his first commercial album *The Last Don*; “Cien mil, o me borro el nombre [One hundred thousand copies sold, or I’m out].”

The current relationship to money depicted in both gangsta rap and reggaetón has its roots in the social history of Civil Rights activism and musical aesthetics of the 1950’s and 1960’s. Sociologist Imani Perry asserts that while black musicians of the 1950’s espoused a well-dressed aura of respectability in their cultural performances to prove worthiness, the late 1960’s and beyond saw a shift to a less formal dress and bodily performance marked by casual attire and large Afros in response to the changing political climate and pervasiveness of racism in the United States (2004: 4-8). Bell hooks further explains that young black men do not find gangsta identity in the streets, but rather in the media which promotes materialist, gangsta culture

and thus impels them to seek out the gangsta. Hooks further explains that the mass media sends black men the message that they will never make enough money to escape white racist tyranny (2004: 26-27).

The critiques of colonialism and capitalism of the 1960's in the U.S. and Puerto Rico would eventually yield to the complex relationship between masculinity and money expressed through gangsta rap and reggaetón.¹⁵ As cultural critic, Tricia Rose (1994) argues, the complex relationship between blackness and the U.S. culture market has led to a relationship to capitalism which both embraces capital acquisition and critiques the same as the victimizer of impoverished, black communities. American studies scholar, Todd Boyd takes this argument even further, connecting the current material conditions of wealthy Blacks to slavery; “When the same system that once enslaved you rewards you with a lifestyle that is both rich and famous, it is imperative that you take note. Pimp accordingly... Get what you can by hook or by crook... This is the cruel irony that now visits itself on the descendents of former slaves (2008: xx). Thus, the oppositional and anti-colonialist history of Sicilian and Black incorporation into the U.S. and Puerto Rican popular imaginaries as a “family” affair sets the stage for Don Omar as a hybrid of gangster and gangsta cultures.

El *negro*, el *cocoroco* and “*la gran familia puertorriqueña*”: Don Omar and Puerto Rican

Blackness

“It makes me happy to see Don Omar call himself ‘el negro’ and La Sista celebrate her blackness. Now it’s in fashion to be black and to be from Loiza. And that is awesome, it makes me so happy.”

Tego Calderón ”Black Pride”

In his statement on black pride, reggaetón star Tego Calderón underscores the tensions surrounding black identity in Puerto Rico, despite its current visibility in popular culture via reggaetón. Tensions over race, particularly blackness, in Puerto Rico have been filtered through the metaphor of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, an idea rooted in the nineteenth century to create class solidarity among landowners in response to Spanish and then U.S. colonial rule. The construction of the family as an oppositional institution ties the family of the godfather figure in reggaetón with *la gran familia puertorriqueña* as both families unify through exclusion of the Other, be that other those not considered white (*la gran familia puertorriqueña*), or those outside of the gendered masculine norms of reggaetón. Through, a reading of representative lyrical as well as key moments in Don Omar's career, we may begin to understand how the gangster family and *la gran familia puertorriqueña* inform each other to redress racism, even as they reify a patriarchal hierarchy.

Debates around the discourse of "*la gran familia puertorriqueña*" reached their height in the 1930's when a range of philosophical currents emerged which emphasized one of the three, (Spanish, Taino, or African) heritages of the mestizo Puerto Rican nation.¹⁶ Despite such attempts to present Puerto Rican mestizaje, an underlying current of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening privileged Spanish heritage over Taino or African. In her essay on black Puerto Rican identity, "La gran familia puertorriqueña 'ej prieta de beldá' (The Great Puerto Rican Family is Really, Really Black," Puerto Rican studies scholar Arlene Torres argues that the euphemisms of *buena familia* and *buena gente* occlude underlying racial tensions and become euphemisms for whiteness. In fact the term *blanquito* is applied to individuals belonging to the middle class and residing in *urbanizaciones* as opposed to *caseríos*, regardless of skin color. Conversely, the term *negro*, independent of skin color, carries a working-class connotation on the one hand, but also

serves as a term of endearment in intimate relationships, particularly the term *negrito*. Given the history of slavery and racism in Puerto Rico, *negro* can be a highly charged, and highly politicized term depending on context. Torres concludes her essay as follows, "... black Puerto Ricans are continually creating themselves anew, as they continually engage in debates about the rootedness of Puerto Rican culture, the Puerto Rican family, and the Puerto Rican nation" (1998: 300-301).¹⁷

Don Omar inserts himself into the reggaetón family as *el negro*, a term which evokes blackness as an oppositional tool of the working-class. While Tego Calderón represents a black, populist voice, akin to that of *salsero* Ismael Rivera, and Residente and Visitante of Calle 13 represent the educated *blanquito* voices of reggaetón, Don Omar crafts his persona through the performance of a potent, black masculinity. A 2006 profile piece on reggaetón in *Latina* magazine, "AmeRican Idols," similarly casts reggaetón's elite mentioned above in these same roles. The description of Don Omar indexes his masculinity as so potent as to attract both female and male fans; "He's caught between the pulpit, where he once evangelized and the stage where he belts out sensuous lyrics- between the ambition that drives him to be at the top of his game and the force that thrusts him squarely into bad-boy territory- that's precisely the tension that leads men to connect with him, women to melt, and audiences everywhere to go crazy (Cepeda 2006, 123)."

Don Omar does indeed position himself as a black man above all else via sexualized lyrics such as "el potro de chocolate [the chocolate stud], "el negro te Consuela [el negro will console you]," and "más negro que la noche [blacker than the night]." In an intimate dialogue with a female voice, when he asks "¿Má' qué tú quiere' [What do you want?]?" she responds "Que el negrito me dé fuerte [I want el negro to give it to me hard]." Thus, this most intimate

moment of sexual intercourse indexes his role as “...the mythic stud of primitivist difference (Quinn 2005: 35).” Gender relations prove crucial to the reading of reggaetón given that the men of color who primarily produce reggaetón experience and understand their masculinity through limitations of race and class placed on their black bodies, as argued by African American studies scholar Imani Perry with respect to hip hop (2004: 119-120).

Nearly all of Don Omar’s work casts him as aggressor in relationships with women, usually *la mulata* or *la negra*. Sexual conquest and gaining the attention of other men’s partners serves as a metaphor for power, and contests the marginalization of working class, black men in Puerto Rico.¹⁸ Women in Don Omar’s songs largely function as texts on which to write and negotiate relationships between men, similar to literary studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s idea of homosociality.¹⁹ In particular, Don Omar’s duet with *bachateros* Aventura, “Ella y yo [She and I],” bears this out as the song is a conversation between Omar and his best friend. When Omar confesses that he has been having a relationship with Aventura’s wife, it is not the loss of the romantic relationship, but rather his friendship with Aventura that most concerns him. Communications scholar Alfredo Nieves Moreno ties the masculinity of reggaetón to that of the gangster in hip hop in stating that the “barrio-centric” man of reggaetón shares aesthetic terrain with the gangster, citing Don Omar’s song “Dale, Don Dale” which presents a woman in heat at a club, seduced by Omar’s bling and masculine power. Omar threatens to take down her boyfriend with the help of his friends who remain in the background ready to help him (2009: 255-256).

A few of Don Omar’s songs cast women in more complicated, if still problematic social roles. In “Angelito [Little Angel],” “Pobre diabla [Poor Devil],” and “Muñecas de porcelana [Porcelain Dolls],” women suffer due to dysfunctional nuclear and social families. In an

interview in *Latina* magazine, Don Omar states that he wrote the song “Pobre diabla,” a song about a woman who roams the streets in sadness after her partner has abandoned her, a situation he claims to have seen a lot in Puerto Rico. Similarly, he explains that he wrote “Angelito,” which tells of a man who cheats on his girlfriend, causing her to seek revenge in a one night stand which leads her to contract HIV, to call attention to the high HIV infection rate among Latinos (San Miguel 2006: 34-35). In live performances, such as that of los Premios Juventud in 2006, he implores listeners to be aware of the health risks of unprotected sex.

Like the women of “Pobre diabla” and “Angelito,” the two protagonists of “Muñecas de porcelana” suffer the consequences of men’s indiscretions. The song laments the social sanction of a lesbian couple, Nilda who became a lesbian after having been molested by her father, and Marta, who became a lesbian after having been left at the altar. It is admirable that these songs do call attention to social issues and prejudices. However, the fact that women suffer the consequences of men’s actions, not only further supports the idea that women in Don Omar’s work exist within the bound, gendered context of homosocial relationships but proves inadequate to redress fissures in the Puerto Rican social family.

The other familial influence in the work of Don Omar is his association and work with *salseros*. In fact, many *reggaetóneros* view *salseros* and salsa music as the father of reggaetón, either for strategic market driven reasons or as a legitimizing discourse. In 2006, Don Omar collaborated on a project uniting *salseros* and *reggaetóneros* entitled *Los Cocorocos*. The album consists of classic salsa songs, as well as a few new compositions, performed together by *salseros* and *reggaetóneros*. This union represents an important moment in the development of Puerto Rican music in that it unites *salseros*- a group of musicians once excluded from the mainstream Puerto Rican music scene, associated with the working black poor- with

reggaetóneros- a group currently associated with primarily black poverty- only beginning to enjoy commercial success, if not the respect as musicians that *salseros* now enjoy on the island. The following comment from a reader of *El Nuevo Día* crystallizes this trajectory, "...los cocos eran la gentuza de los 70 y 80 y los reggaetóneros son la basura humana del siglo XXI." [...salsa performers and fans were the riff raff of the 70's and 80's and reggaetón performers and fans are the human garbage of the 21st century]." The album's name itself reflects Afro-Puerto Rican pride and heritage as *Los Cocorocos* refers to *el cocoroco*, an African tribal leader.

Though commercially successful, *Los Cocorocos* has received mixed reviews on the Island. In an article in *El Nuevo Día*, Jaime Torres Torres acknowledges the connection between the two genres due to the racialized poverty of the majority of their practitioners, but he also laments its more commercial, and in his view less creative aspects:

Mi opinión es que los salseros de trayectoria que intervienen en estos proyectos dejan ver sus costuras, guisar en otro género, ante la falta de taller en su expresión natural. Algunos alegan que hay que atemperarse y evolucionar con los tiempos. A la larga, sin embargo, el afán por el negocio socavará su credibilidad, sin considerar que desvirtúan la identidad de la cultura salsera que forjaron Ismael Rivera, Héctor Lavoe y otras leyendas.

[My opinion is that the *salseros* in these projects are showing their true colors, sampling another genre without experience in its natural expression. In the end, however, the affinity for business will bury their credibility, not to mention that they damage the identity of Salsa culture forged by Ismael Rivera, Héctor Lavoe, and other legends] (2006).

Such an opinion emphasizes the extent to which *salsa vieja* has become an institutionalized Puerto Rican cultural form, a far cry from the early days of its origins, when it was considered music of the black urban poor, as reflected in the comment from *El Nuevo Día* quoted above.

This Afro Puerto Rican origin of salsa and reggaetón becomes the sense of pride around which *Los Cocorocos* is centered. The name itself references Luis Palés Matos' poem "Danza negra" which mentions *el cocoroco*. The album's "Intro" cites more of Palés Matos' poetry indexing another main theme in reggaetón, the street, via Palés Matos' verse describing Puerto Rico as "la encendida calle antillana [the lively streets of the Antilles]," further solidifying the project into the Afro-Puerto Rican street canon. It also recalls the etymology of the terms *cocolo* and *caco* for *salseros* and *reggaetóneros* respectively. Both words carry a derogatory connotation which members of the musical community have reclaimed as they vindicate their African roots. The cover of the album emphasizes the equality of skin as it depicts caricatures of five of the featured artists- Tito Nieves, Don Omar, Tego Calderón, Zion, and Gilberto Santa Rosa-, all with the same *trigueño* complexion, uniting them as an ethno-racial group. This is interesting, since Santa Rosa has been seen as part of the whitening of salsa. This equality of skin also illustrates the subtlety of trying to create 'la gran familia puertorriqueña.'

The project's content further emphasizes the discourse of legitimacy of reggaetón as both an African-influenced musical form and child of salsa. The album's "Intro," spoken by poet/musician Gallego (José Raúl González), defines and contextualizes the *cocorocos* within history and the salsa family, and widens the scope of the project beyond the music industry, given his status as a cutting edge Puerto Rican poet. Each stanza ties *cocorocos* and *salseros* through images of the family, citing salsa stars Willie Colón, Héctor Lavoe and Beni Moré as precursors to reggaetón, pointing out that the *cocorocos* have been heavily influenced by the salsa of their parents who danced to it in their youth at the Caribe Hilton. The most powerful genetic reference comes toward the end of the song when Gallego states, "Decir cocoroco es decir que la salsa vieja es prima de sangre del rap y el reggaetón [To say cocoroco is to say that

old school salsa is a blood cousin of rap and reggaetón].” Such a direct reference parallels the pairing of *salseros* and *reggaetóneros* in figurative as well as literal familial, intergenerational performances

The performances that follow link *salseros*’ and *reggaetóneros*’ interpretations of salsa classics, including new compositions toward the end of the album. The album’s promoters focused on the duet between Don Omar and Gilberto Santa Rosa for the album’s release. The two interpret “Los hombres tienen la culpa [It’s all men’s fault].” This choice by “El don del reggaetón” and “El caballero de la salsa” includes a *sonéo*- improvised break- where the two speak, first about the importance of not letting that great woman get away, and second about the importance of the two artists as *cocorocos*. Gilberto Santa Rosa begins, “Oye Don, los cocorocos no son completos sin el don y el caballero {Hey Don, the *cocorocos* are not complete without the don and the gentleman}” to which Omar responds simply “tú sabe’ [you know it].” The song itself portrays men as hapless victims of their animal instincts when they see “una falda bien apreta’ [a very tight skirt]” and so are guilty “por entregarse al amor [for giving themselves over to love],” a role associated with aggression and the loss of control leading to sex common in Don Omar’s work.

The project’s most direct familial union, however, is a duet between Papo Rosario of El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, and his son Aniel, on a song written by Aniel for his father entitled “Perdona Viejo [Pardon me Dad].” In the song, the two discuss their relationship as Aniel was growing up, and seek each other’s blessing in romance, eventually discovering that they are seeing the same woman, whom they believe has duped them both. In fact, the song both literally unites a *salsero* and a *reggaetónero* from the same family, but has also caused controversy as

Papo Rosario is seen as the greatest *salsero* sell-out of the project given the status of El Gran Combo as an institution of salsa culture in Puerto Rico.

It seems that despite such actual family ties and *soneos* similar to the one between Don Omar and Gilberto Santa Rosa in every song on the collaboration, *reggaetóneros* remain marginalized from “legitimate” Puerto Rican musical production, a process that mirrors the early days of salsa on the Island. The “legitimacy” of Don Omar and other *reggaetóneros* would come not exclusively from the acceptance of their Puerto Rican blackness but via a transnational black discourse rooted in a musical dialogue with black culture in the U.S.

Negro to Nigga²⁰: Shifting Constructions of Blackness in the U.S. Context

“El rap y el reggaetón son la misma cosa, diferentes lenguas pero la misma cosa.”

[Rap and reggaetón are the same thing, different languages but the same thing].

Héctor “el father” MTV Tres Interview

In addition to the *Cocorocos* project, Don Omar has collaborated with, and been influenced by African American gangsta rappers such as Nelly, solidifying him as a member of the hip hop family. It is important to note that black music has historically been subordinated to music racialized as white in Puerto Rico.²¹ Like salsa and reggaetón, rap music has arguably been a place to reclaim a sense of black power. Debates continue to rage over the ways that rappers, particularly gangsta rappers, represent black power as a hypermasculinist, homophobic and misogynist quest for individualist material acquisition at the expense of the larger community, a criticism also leveled against reggaetón.

Indeed, cultural critics Robin Kelley Eithne Quinn, Imani Perry, and Tricia Rose continue to complicate facile readings of rap as mere violent, anti-social tirades that objectify women.

Just as Kelley (“Looking for the Real Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto” 2004) cautions against a literal reading of the violence described in rap lyrics, in *Black Noise*, Rose uses the social theory of “public” and “hidden” transcripts put forth by James Scott to argue that rap music actually criticizes dominant society through a series of “hidden” cultural codes, as well as outright social critique (1994: 100-101). Héctor el father’s assertion that rap and reggaetón are the same, except for language, indicates that the two genres share thematic elements, namely the depiction of black poverty. Additionally, bilingual and English language collaborations between African American rappers and Puerto Rican *reggaetóneros* solidify the rap/reggaetón connection. A look at the intersection of rap and reggaetón through Don Omar reveals the significance of, and historical and social tensions embedded in the black identities of both genres.”²²

The social critique related to black identity in the work of Don Omar echoes the presence of the mythical and folkloric African American figures of the badman and nigga, so ubiquitous in gangsta rap. The chief difference between the two is that the badman focuses on his role in the community, whereas the nigga realizes and capitalizes on the marketability of his marginalized persona. An analysis of the influence of the badman and nigga contributes to our understanding of how pan-black imagery based on social class operates in the work of Don Omar. The case of Don Omar and his performance of *el negro* as well as the nigga contributes not only to the study of black and Latino relations but also helps to tease out the ways in which African Americans and Afro Caribbeans perform their blackness in complex ways.²³ Thus, via an analysis of the songs “La recompense [The Reward],” “Los bandoleros {The Bandits}” and “Caserío #2,” and I use the figures of the badman and the nigga to read the interplay, and sometimes conflation, of

hyper-sexuality, violence and activism in the production of black masculinity in Don Omar's work and persona.

The figure of the badman in African American folklore emerged as a response to the slavery and post-slavery violence, toward black culture in the U.S, particularly against black men. According to Eithne Quinn, the badman may be either motivated and work to the betterment of the black community or unmotivated and work against his own community. Quinn links the development of the badman figure with the period immediately after slavery in stating that he “encapsulated the modes of overt resistance to racial oppression suitable for ‘culture-building’ at that moment of newfound freedom” (2005: 95). Vestiges of this type of oppositional persona remain in rap today, as the badman is seen as a precursor to the gangsta of gangster rap. Two of Don Omar's songs, “La recompensa” and “Los bandoleros” provide critiques of the political corruption that ensures the continued marginalization of Puerto Rico's black poor.

“La recompensa,” performed with *reggaetón*er/poet Gallego (José Raúl González), most strongly denounces institutionalized corruption in politics and the church, as well the injustice visited on the bodies of residents of *el caserío* in the form of violence. Here, Don Omar and Gallego perform the badman's desire to better his community. In “La recompensa” Don Omar implores listeners that living is the reward as “La vida es una sola [We only have one life].” As he makes his plea, Gallego enumerates poverty, infidelity, loss of faith, betrayal, and Puerto Rico's continued colonial status as examples of rampant corruption and injustice. He critiques the use of Puerto Ricans by the U.S. government in its wars in the Middle East. The song reads as an indictment of the Puerto Rican government, first and foremost, as a morally bankrupt institution that oppresses the poor while politicians are above the law.

In fact, Gallego connects the violence and lack of productive future for the youth who reside in *caseríos* with the political scandal of former Secretary of Education, Victor Fajardo: “¿Por qué Victor Fajardo se robó el dinero que era pa’ que nuestros niños estudiaran, y salieran del barrio con un diploma en vez de un tiro [Why did Victor Fajardo rob the money that was supposed to be for our children to study and leave the neighborhood with a diploma instead of a bullet]?” Fajardo had been accused of stealing money from the Department of Education to fund political campaigns. Essentially, Victor Fajardo proves to be no better than Don Omar, despite his cultural capital as a top-ranking politician. Moreover, the Fajardo scandal enters into dialogue with the type of scandal associated with artists like Don Omar which include accusations that some *reggaetóneros* finance their music with drug money. Gallego goes on to remind, then Puerto Rican Governor Sila Calderón, that the government robs the people of their faith and hopes, with a clear reference to corruption in the government of former governor Pedro Roselló, “a Pedro Roselló jamás lo pudieron vincular con el palo, el pueblo.” [The people could never tie him to his abuses].²⁴ Finally, he links the election of Calderón to the moral decay of Puerto Rico given her divorced status, “Yo me aferré a creer que el matrimonio, según la iglesia católica, es hasta que la muerte nos separe y sin embargo, viene nuestra gobernadora y y se nos divorcia [I clung to the belief that marriage, according to the Catholic church, was ‘til death do us part and yet our governor comes along and she gets divorced].” Thus “La recompensa” casts politicians and clergymen, who are described as false prophets and sinners, as criminals guilty of bankrupting the dreams and faith of disempowered Puerto Ricans.

Despite all of this corruption and lack of morality, Don Omar and Gallego’s self-designated testimonial does find redemption as Gallego states, “Brodel, yo me aferré al amor, y estoy vivo. Este es mi testimonio, Gallego, Don Omar... [Brother, I clung to love and I am alive.

This is my testimonial, Gallego, Don Omar...].” Likewise, Omar asserts that life should not be taken lightly and residents of *el caserío* must use whatever means possible to succeed in the face of obstacles such as poverty. Indeed, it is the honesty of lived experiences in *el caserío*, via descriptions of senseless killing and despair that legitimizes Gallego and Don Omar as voices of truth who uncover the differences between the reality of the *caserío* and the *urbanización cerrada* [gated community]. Precisely the representation and lived experience of this harsh reality problematically define the core of (male) reggaetón identity, an identity awash in controversy for its glorification of violence.

“Los bandoleros,” a duet performed with Tego Calderón, similarly criticizes those that misjudge Tego Calderón and Don Omar as bandits.²⁵ In a moment of homosocial bonding, the two defend each other’s positions as niggas and *negros*. In fact, at the outset of the song Calderón affirms, “Oye a mi me importa poco lo que se diga del nigga. William Landrón y yo somos socios de la avenida [Listen I could care less what they say about the nigga. William Landrón and I are homies from the street].” He immediately follows this show of support with an indictment of the hypocrisy of government and identification of himself as a badman, “el maluco.” Calderón accuses the political system of Puerto Rico of moral bankruptcy in stating that rappers and politicians are both “*bandoleros* [bandits],” but politicians are allowed to lie and abuse their constituents while the Drug Enforcement Administration keeps him under surveillance for speaking the truth about poverty and racism. He claims that despite working, paying his taxes and participating in the practices of productive citizenship, he does not escape scorn and second class treatment.

At the end of his statement, he identifies himself as a badman, “conocido mundialmente como el maluco [known worldwide as the badman]. Here Calderón indicts not only

governmental and institutional corruption of politicians and the D.E.A., but also the construction of his body and person as “second class” under a racist gaze, as an extension of his blackness. In the particular case of Tego Calderón, who identifies William Landrón as a nigga and himself as *negro*, I believe this reflects both his engagement with an African identity as well as an example of the beginning of the fusion of the *negro* and nigga similar to the connection between reggaetón and hip hop. In this way, the *negro/nigga* trope inscribes a shared history for African Americans and Afro Caribbeans both linguistically and conceptually, couched in the ambivalence of the term *negro*. Calderón also discursively positions himself with the badman in African American history as “*el maluco*.”

Don Omar responds with an assessment of his own mistreatment by Puerto Rican authorities, couched in his appreciation of his fame, and the help of his boys who will help him in times of need, “*mis gatos activaos [my boys stand ready]*.” This is another example of the homosocial discourse mentioned above, which functions here as a critical mass of resistance to the government for which Omar shares Tego’s contempt. Landrón explains his criminal notoriety by way of his poor and violent upbringing, claiming that he should not be judged by those who have not had to endure what he has, doing what he must to survive.

He further states that the police arrested him “*por pasar el rato [hanging out]*,” a law enforcement critique similar to Tego Calderón’s critique of the D.E.A. Don Omar more strongly critiques the moral character of institutions of law enforcement such as the government, the police and the prison system. He also acknowledges the market value of the scandal that surrounds him. In this way, we see the badman begin to shift toward the nigga through the conversation between Don Omar and Tego Calderón, who deploy their former economic subordination and constant racialization as discursive weapons to contest the oppression of rap

culture in Puerto Rico. Don Omar extends this even further as he argues that he finds himself adrift in scandal caused by drugs and guns, due to his upbringing in a *caserío*.

The figure of the nigga directly indexes the historical and economic issues which underpin the oppositional, black identity of gangsta rap, hip hop culture, and I would add reggaetón. In an essay entitled “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” cultural critic R.A.T. Judy locates the emergence of the nigga in history and myth as well as capitalism and commodification. The author situates the nigga within the context of the slavery and post-slavery period, pointing out that during, and just after slavery the term nigger (incorporated into rap as nigga) was used to distinguish African Americans as a non-human labor force (2004).²⁶ Additionally, the nigga functions as an outgrowth of the badman in African American mythology as a figure dedicated to social justice and morality at all costs, even if that means breaking the law.

The nigga parts from the badman in that he realizes the marketability in his call for violence against the racism of the government (R.A.T. Judy, 2004: 105-117). According to Michael Spencer, “The attitude of the ‘bad nigger’ is not negritude, it is narcissism and hedonism, and it is genocidal” (Quoted in R.A.T. Judy, 2004: 108).

This argument predicates itself upon the fact that “niggas” embellish and potentially misrepresent aspects of the African American experience in their quest for economic success. Eithne Quinn summarizes the power dynamics of gangsta rap in the following, “The heightened awareness of inequity and power play in daily lived experience, stemming from a position of race/class marginality and historic oppression, served as an impetus for rap’s expressive complexity, cultural savvy, and, indeed, its deliberate social irresponsibility” (2005: 39). The interplay between violence and marketability of the “nigga” characterizes Don Omar’s vivid

description of life in public housing in “Caserío #2,” a song which met with much controversy on the island.

“*Caserío #2*,” and the controversy surrounding it, push the boundaries of violence as social critique of the badman who defends his environment by whatever means necessary, as well as the “nigga” who knows this persona will bring money and power. The song consists of a conversation between Don Omar and Héctor el Father as they describe turf wars and police evasion in Puerto Rico’s public housing system. By far Don Omar’s most barrio-based and barrio-centric song, Omar and Héctor name various *caseríos* as they activate their crews and attempt to outrun the police. A kill or be killed mentality underpins the song’s lyrics “*Me matas, o te mato* [you kill me, or I kill you].” Metaphors of war and survival of the fittest abound in the description of living conditions in the *caserío*, so much so that Puerto Rican Minister of Education Rafael Aragunde rejected Governor Aníbal Acevedo Vilá’s selection of Don Omar for an anti-desertion program for high school students.²⁷ Don Omar, for his part, stated that his music and image should not impede his genuine desire to help his people. Don Omar was not featured in the campaign. It is precisely the defense and marketability of the marginalized, performed via the persona of the badman cum “nigga,” that Don Omar manipulates and performs through his public persona as “el rey del reggaetón.”

Conclusion: Community and Chaos, Some Final Thoughts on Don Omar

“Nobody’s in charge”
Bumpy Johnson *American Gangster*

As I have argued throughout this essay, the shared terrain of the gangster, gangsta and *el negro* is the opposition of dominant society. The 2007 film *American Gangster* which tells the

story of Harlem gangster Frank Lucas, highlights the arrival of the black gangster figure. The above quote from Lucas's predecessor, at the moment of his death, captures the chaos that gangster and reggaetón culture both creates and critiques. Indeed, reggaetón indicts the political corruption plaguing Puerto Rico, from the perspective of the poor. For this reason, the government has tried unsuccessfully to silence reggaetón, and cast it as scapegoat for the island's social problems (Negrón-Muntaner and Rivera 2007). This position renders the government ineffective in the eyes of many of its citizens.

Reggaetón functions, in part, as a response to lack of confidence on the part of citizens. The economic specter of the gangster also exists in reggaetón, as performers, including Don Omar, use their wealth to help their communities. Popular depictions of gangsters often include a philanthropic side. For example, returning to *American Gangster*, the film opens with Bumpy Johnson giving turkeys to Harlem residents for Thanksgiving dinner. Don Omar has spoken of his own philanthropic activities, emphasizing his desire to remain outside of the realm of politics:

“Si puedo hacer algo alejándome de toda esa sombra de la política, lo hago en mi carácter personal. Si no hay libretas para los niños, mando a hacer medio millón de libretas. Lo mismo está haciendo Daddy Yankee y otros exponentes del género. Somos los más criticados en la Isla, pero tan siquiera estamos dando un grano de arena (Hernández 2006).”

[If I can do something, distancing myself from the cloud of politics I do it in my personal character. If there aren't notebooks for the children, I have half a million made. Daddy Yankee and others of the genre are doing the same thing. We are most criticized on the Island but at least we are doing something].

By comparing gangsters and *reggaetoneros*' efforts to help their communities I do not mean to ignore the fact that gangsters actually commit illegal acts, but rather emphasize that both advocate for their communities in ways that the government does not.

Most *reggaetóneros*, including Don Omar, insist that they seek to build a Latino nation by way of highlighting the social and racial injustices in the urban Americas. In “*De la disco al caserío: Urban Spatial Aesthetics and Policy to the Beat of Reggaetón*,” Zaire Dinzey Flores views the depictions of urban life in reggaetón in a positive light. Dinzey Flores acknowledges the violent content but also recognizes that the popularity of reggaetón has forced Puerto Rican politicians to examine issues of poverty which would probably not have received much attention otherwise. She also cites the example of the conduct of *reggaetóneros* such as Don Omar in providing financial support to impoverished communities, an aspect of their personalities that the mass media emphasizes far less than their more sensational activities (2008: 56-60). This debate underscores the extent to which material consumption structures racial and social relations.

Though some of Don Omar’s actions are indeed laudable, consumers of Don Omar’s music, and reggaetón in general, should remain mindful of the contradictions that the genre presents. I echo Tricia Rose’s caution to hip hop fans, and I would add reggaetón fans, that they must listen carefully to the lyrics and not simply allow the beats to seduce them. As such, she calls for listeners to demand lyrical context that reflects hip hop’s more politically engaged origins as opposed to the market trends that have resulted in the popularity of subgenres such as gangsta rap. Rose asserts that this is the greatest love that hip hop fans can express for black culture (2008: 261-273). As we have seen throughout the analysis of Don Omar as *negro*, and gangsta, his very real social criticism is sometimes overpowered by an violent performance of social defiance that occludes his call for Latino unity and black pride, evoking chaos instead.

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Notes

¹ For a complete description of reggaetón's component genres, see Wayne Marshall's essay "From Música Negra to Reggaetón" in *Reggaetón* (2009), edited by Rivera, Marshall, and Pacini-Hernández.

² According Tricia Rose starting from the period of 1995 to 2001 white listeners comprised 70-75% of hip hop fans. These figures persist in the present (2008: 4).

³ De Genova and Ramos-Zayas posit the construct “Latino racial formation” which challenges the black/white racial system but also unites Latinos around experiences of colonization, both historical and actual in both the United States and Latin America to explain this type of hybridity (2003).

⁴ Cepeda (2009) points out that given its aesthetic ties to hip hop, and its historic ties to the Zoot Suit era, reggaetón in general attracts U.S. youth. “Reggaetón Latino,” (Chosen Few Remix) in particular attempts to unite Latinos via masculine images of the Latino family, past and present, through its video (561).

⁵ All of these performers are Puerto Ricans from New York and are well-known in the hip hop/rap community. Don Omar’s union with these performers represents a larger Puerto Rican unity among Island and New York-based performers. N.O.R.E. in particular marks his place as cultural bridge in reggaetón history, “They say I introduced reggaetón to Americans.”

⁶ Luis Rafael Sánchez’s metaphor of “la guagua aérea” or the air bus which which connects New York and San Juan perhaps best illustrates the unbounded spatiality of Puerto Rican identity. Duany and Flores’ work explores the impact of labor, economy, and cultural production on what Duany has termed “the Puerto Rican nation on the move.” In *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (2002), Duany argues that Puerto Ricans often forge their identities in relation to the mainland as well as the island due to economic and labor practices that require sustained migration for economic survival. In his work on Caribbean music and identity, Flores (2004) notes the transnational trajectory of Caribbean music in the post-salsa period where hip hop and rap have had the greatest impact of any musical genre on Caribbean youth. Flores notes that many do not recognize the contribution of the peoples of the diaspora in the creation of Caribbean hip hop. Furthermore, according to Flores, racism against African Americans, and negative perceptions of hip hop have resulted in the ban of hip hop floats from the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City (2004: 288). Similarly, in *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (2003), Raquel Rivera emphasizes the hybridity of hip hop created by Puerto Rican youth in New York as a product of Puerto Rican heritage as well as experiences of urban poverty in New York, neither one supplanting the other. Rivera further argues that many Puerto Rican hip hop artists in New York do not identify as separate from African Americans in hip hop.

⁷ Wayne Marshall has identified this trajectory as moving from more racially coded, and nationalist to pan-Latino signifiers, termed by *reggaetóneros* themselves from “*Música negra*” to *reggaetón Latino*” (2009: 49-50).

⁸ Vasconcelos’ construct of *la raza cósmica* which celebrates and empowers Latino identity in the multicultural inheritance of Spanish, indigenous and African roots, has been contested and criticized for its oversimplification of the actual racial climate in Latin America. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (*México profundo: una nación negada*), in particular, has argued that Vasconcelos

does not pay enough attention to issues of class and gender connected to race in Latin America, and privileges “*la raza cósmica*” as a mechanism to whiten Latin America.

⁹ According to Fraticelli, Landrón’s criticism of UBS resulted to a lawsuit against him. UBO spokesman, Román Suárez explains that the objective of using Latino political icons such as Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, along with the flags of Latin American nations, is precisely the type of unity that Landrón claims to represent with his music.

¹⁰ This tension of identification as a Latino nation on the one hand and a related community of listeners belonging to separate nations in terms of ethnicity, racial, gender or class on the other is one function of performance in popular music. While Frith (1987) argues that music is indeed a powerful medium of identification for its fans, both with performers and as a more patriotic discourse, Juan Flores (2000) reminds us that such identifications are never so easy and shift with respect to time, space and transnational identity. Flores uses the example of the relationship between Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Mexicans in New York City to illustrate the tenuous nature of *latinidad*. Further, María Elena Cepeda (2003) questions the politics behind Shakira as Colombian as well as U.S. Latina. Thus her persona becomes a medium through which to strategically construct her either as a Colombian, a Latina or both in shifting contexts. These varying currents and questions inform the study of Don Omar in that, as an Island-born Puerto Rican who now resides in Puerto Rico and the United States as an elite transnational subject, he embodies a complex site of layered Latino and Puerto Rican performance. Through “Reggaetón Latino” and his outspoken call for Latino unity Don Omar casts himself as a Latino figure but as a boricua above all else.

¹¹ Many reggaetóneros bare stage-names that reference mafia culture. Such artists include Héctor “el father”, Tito “el bambino,” Mafo Crew and Juan Gotti.

¹² Indeed, with respect to the history of race in the United States, in *White by Law* (1996), legal studies scholar, Ian F. Haney López argues that in the early twentieth century Italians, along with Irish, Asians and most Latin Americans, were not considered “white” and thus denied the full rights of citizenship, a condition that persists for mainland and island Puerto Ricans. Exclusion from the requisite citizenship category of “white” often depended, not on one’s skin color, but rather perceptions of certain ethnic groups as a threat to the dominant Anglo-Protestant ruling class (1996, 61).

¹³ Afro-Cuban novelist, Evelio Grillo illustrates the extent to which Italians and Afro-Caribbeans have historically been similarly racialized in his memoir, *Black Cuban, Black American* (2000), where he explains that black Cubans in Tampa Florida in the early twentieth century were assigned the derogatory term “tally whop,” already used to describe Italians, due to their shared dark complexion, and the fact that they spoke a romance language.

¹⁴ In *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* (2009), Rodríguez argues that Chicano rappers deploy a hyper-masculine performance, based on mafia culture, to assert their

oppositional power as working-class subjects, subject to frequent violence and racial profiling. He further asserts that the “familia” that these men create does little to liberate Chicanos as a people due to its exclusion of women and gay men from its membership (95-134). A similar argument could be made for *reggaetóneros*.

¹⁵ In *Tuning out Blackness: Race and Nation in the History of Puerto Rican Television*, Yeidy Rivero traces the connection between anti-colonial movements in the black power movement in the U.S. and the independence movement of Puerto Rico via media and popular culture (2005: 67-114).

¹⁶ While some writers and intellectuals portrayed Puerto Rico from a Eurocentric perspective, referencing the Spanish *jibaro* mountain peasant figure, others concentrated on the image of the Taino, and still others celebrated African cultural influences in Puerto Rico through the *cultura negroide* movement which sometimes objectified the exotic, African Other. Interventions by literary and cultural studies scholars Juan Gelpí (*Literatura y paternalism en Puerto Rico*), Tomás Blanco (*El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico*), Frances R. Aparicio (*Listening to Salsa*), and Juan Guisti-Cordero (“Afropuerto Rican Cultural Studies: beyond Cultural Negroide and Antillanismo”) trace the development of European, indigenous, and African strains of Puerto Rican identity in history, literature, and popular culture.

¹⁷ The presence or absence of blackness in Puerto Rican culture centers many debates on *puertorriqueñidad* due to its contested relationship to class. Upper class notions of Puerto Rican identity de-emphasize, if not silence Puerto Rico’s African character, while many working class notions of what it means to be Puerto Rican, particularly on the mainland, deploy African inheritance as a source of pride. Lillian Guerra asserts that those marked as Others in Puerto Rico, due to gender, class or race, reject the hierarchy that marginalizes them through popular expression (1998: 212-321). In *Boricua Pop*, Frances Negrón-Muntaner argues that precisely his status as a *blanquito*, and perhaps the most famous Puerto Rican of his time, allows Ricky Martin to incorporate African elements of *bomba* and *plena* music in his mainstream pop. Cultural critic Yeidy Rivero uses the Meléndez family of 1990’s, *Cosby Show* inspired Puerto Rican sitcom, *Mi Familia* to illustrate continued ambivalence to black Puerto Rican identity as she argues that, though the Meléndez family is presented as “Puerto Rican, period,” stereotypes of lack of intelligence, laziness, and hyper-sexuality persist in the show’s content (2005: 147-184).

¹⁸ In *Listening to Salsa* (1997), cultural critic Frances Aparicio provides an intervention on issues of gender and class relations in salsa music, dance, and consumption which can be seen in reggaetón as well. Aparicio underscores the class tensions and violence visited on women’s bodies through the figure *la bandoera* (the gold digger) as well as the forced submission of women in the lyrics of *salseros* such as Daniel Santos. In her work on *reggaetónera* Ivy Queen, “En mi imperio: Competing discourses of agency in Ivy Queen’s reggaetón,” cultural critic Jillian Báez argues, similarly to Aparicio, that the roles constructed by reggaetón’s gender politics complicate the possibility for female agency such that women must balance their images

as *bandoleras* or *yales* (dancehall girls seeking the attention of men) and their own ambition, aesthetic vision, and voice within the genre.

¹⁹ In *between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick defines as homosocial any relationship that privileges patriarchal or male-centered relationships. She argues that heterosexual relationships are often a pretext for relationships between men. I use the term homosocial throughout this chapter in accordance with Sedgwick's work as she defines homosocial practices as those which seek to sustain patriarchy and privilege the interests of men through male bonding.

²⁰ Throughout my discussion I distinguish between *el negro* and the nigga in order to tease out the Caribbean and African American influences in Don Omar's persona. *El negro* refers to the complex relationship to African identity, in Puerto Rico, and elsewhere in the Caribbean, where this same term signifies a pride in African heritage as well as a derogatory and painful reference to slavery and racism in the region. Nigga, a term which seeks to redress the racism of the term "nigger," refers to an Afro-centric figure associated with violence as a strategy to uplift the African American community.

²¹ In an article in *El Nuevo Día*, "Negro y orgulloso... pero pégame," upon the death of James Brown, Tony Sabournin laments the lack of any gesture of public mourning for Brown's death in Puerto Rico. He attributes this to the racism and invisibility of black music and its influence on rock on the one hand, as well as its impact on young. Black Puerto Ricans who understand the oppositional performance and discourse of African American musicians such as Brown. The case of James Brown sheds greater light on performers such as Don Omar because it demonstrates the persistent social stigma, and silencing of African Americans and Afro Puerto Rican cultural production. This racial critique is also reminiscent of the class-based tensions of the *roquero/cocolo* cultural divide in the 1970's and 1980's where more affluent, and whiter, music fans identified as rock fans, *roqueros*, and poorer, Afro Puerto Rican music fans identified with salsa as *cocolos*.

²² The cultural capital associated with whiteness is particularly prevalent in Puerto Rico, known as "the whitest of the Antilles. It is argued that Puerto Rico will become entirely racially mixed by 2200 with the rest of the Spanish Caribbean following a few centuries later (Godreau, 2002: 281).

²³ The complexity of blackness among Caribbeans and African Americans marks much literary production by Latino males. Both Piri Thomas (*Down These Mean Streets*) and Jesús Colón ("Little Things are Big") acknowledge that U.S. racism operates in such a way as to censure and control their black bodies. Thomas's protagonist seeks to separate himself from African Americans as he has his own problems as a Puerto Rican and thus cannot handle the problems of the black man as well. Junot Díaz takes up the issue of shame over the black body in his short story "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie" when he states that you [an Afro

Caribbean male] secretly “love the hair, skin and lips [of the whitegirl] more than you love your own” (1996, 147).

²⁴ This is most surely a reference to Pedro Roselló and the New Progressive Party (PNP) *mano dura* policy to abate crime which was targeted at public housing projects (Giovannetti 2003, 87).

²⁵ The choice of Tego Calderón as partner for this duet is significant given his status as both an icon of reggaetón, as well as one of its most staunch critics due to its commercialization. Also, Calderón, himself a fan of *salsa vieja*, evinces an Afro-centric persona in his own work and is known as an icon of Afro Puerto Rican pride due to his work as well as his large afro. In his work on the production of Puerto Rican masculinity, Félix Jiménez has identified Tego Calderón as one of few truly oppositional figures of reggaetón citing the performance of Afro-centrism through his body as well as his work, in contrast to the highly colonial imagery of American culture such as sports teams and material cultural production which abounds in most reggaetón videos (2004: 122-150).

²⁶ R.A.T. Judy points out that the “nigga” realizes that his work will not convert to the capital necessary for the possibility of success in U.S. society.

²⁷ According to an article posted on Univision.com, Acevedo Vilá acknowledged the problematic images surrounding Don Omar and his work but felt that the campaign should take advantage of his popularity and willingness to participate, though Aragunde did not agree, pointing out that Landrón himself did not graduate high school, and only received his GED years later.