

From Música Negra to Reggaeton Latino

The Cultural Politics of Nation, Migration, and Commercialization

When Daddy Yankee's "Gasolina" galloped up the charts on a catchy chorus, some shifty snares, and a riff befitting a bullfight, it expressed as much a sense of where reggaeton had come from as where it might go. Though some detractors heard it as little more than the latest quasi-Caribbean commercial confection (and a rather sexist bit of ear and eye candy at that),¹ a closer listen, with ears attuned to the genre's aesthetic history, reveals a number of ways that the song embodies a complex history of social and sonic circuitry. In particular, if one attends more carefully to the *pista*, or track, propelling the lexically and musically suggestive vocals of Daddy Yankee and his eager foil, Glory, one can hear Lunny Tunes' sleek, powerful production not only as a quintessential example of contemporary, commercial reggaeton style but as a musical text engaging with a long history of circulating sounds, people, and ideas about self and other, race and place.

One might hear such social and sonic circuitry in the explicitly electronic sounds of "Gasolina," which include brittle, chintzy, "preset" virtual instruments from such popular music software as Fruity Loops (or, as it has rebranded itself, FL Studio) as well as more sophisticated "synth patches" offering sounds, such as orchestral strings, with a greater verisimilitude. Ranging from bright and needling to low and buzzy, the track's interwoven synthesizer lines evoke engagements with contemporary hip-hop, pop and R&B, dancehall reggae, and even techno as they provide a dense harmonic texture for Yankee's sing-song, rapid-fire rap. Conjuring club culture, the track's crescendoing kick drums and periodic "breakdowns" seem more clearly borrowed from "trance" and dance anthems than from any of reggaeton's more typically cited "tropical" sources.² The harmonic movement of the track, shifting a semitone or

half-step every other measure—especially with its galloping figures, adding 32nd note flourishes to propel the pista forward—may suggest to some, including listeners who first heard such clichés via the producers' namesake (i.e., Looney Tunes cartoons), the classic contours of bullfight music or pasodoble, as typified by Pascual Marquina Narro's well-worn sporting anthem, "España Cañí." Appearing to affirm such associations, Yankee boasts, "En la pista nos llaman los matadores" (On the track they call us the matadors). Figuring Spain in this manner, or Spanish colonial legacies (as mediated by pop culture fantasies), "Gasolina" not only features the harmonic movement and marchlike figures associated with bullfight music, it also employs, as do many contemporary reggaeton productions, a I-V or "oompah" style bassline, hence gesturing as well to the polka and other social dance forms that have long resounded across the colonial Americas (as can also be heard in Mexican *banda*).

Daddy Yankee's vocal style similarly embodies a range of forebears, from the nasally tinged projections of salsa *soneros* (or, for that matter, of *bomba* singers), to the double-time deliveries and lilting melodies of dancehall DJs, to the more complex rhyme schemes and speechlike flows of hip-hop MCs.³ Accordingly, Yankee's lyrics touch on themes resonant with the race- and class-based concerns so central to these stylistic forebears—genres which, as we shall examine, have long informed reggaeton. The song's blatant sexual innuendo and apparently asymmetrical gender relations, for instance, could be heard as celebrating simple pleasures, affirming patriarchy, and challenging middle-class mores in a similar manner to hip-hop, reggae, or salsa. Suffice to say, though, for all its obvious qualities, Yankee's suggestive, central metaphor has been interpreted by audiences and observers to mean any number of things, from synecdoche for speed to an allusion to oral sex. Indeed, the song's inclusion on the compilation *Reggaeton Niños* (EMI Latin 2005) would seem to confirm its inherently multivalent character.⁴ Unsurprisingly, in an era of gas hikes and instability in the Middle East, many heard "Gasolina" as a rather literal reference, including some surprisingly empathetic listeners in Iraq.⁵

But all these potential meanings only scratch the surface of the track's suggestive figurations. Indeed, for many listeners and dancers, it is no doubt the steady kick drum and syncopated snares, marking out reggaeton's trademark, bedrock rhythm, which primarily catches their ears and hips. Sometimes referred to as the *dembow*—recalling a connection to Bobby Digital's and Shabba Ranks's early '90s dancehall reggae recording "Dem Bow" (1991), a song and a *riddim* (i.e., backing track) which has profoundly shaped the sound of reggaeton—the snares in "Gasolina" play against the steady four-on-the-floor kick pattern, creating a 3 + 3 + 2 groove that cross-cuts as it reaffirms the

downbeat emphasis of the track: *boom-ch-boom-chick boom-ch-boom-chick*.⁶ Overlapping in rhythmic orientation (and embodied dance movement) with a wide variety of Caribbean genres, from salsa to *son* to reggae to soca, reggaeton's prevailing pattern allows the genre, for all its connections to hip-hop and reggae, to circulate as a regionally inflected form of global pop.

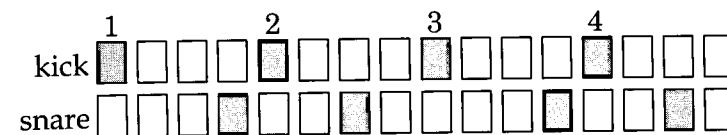
Attending more closely to the snares, the production also takes on a more particularly Puerto Rican character. Not only do the snares play a rhythmic role; perhaps more crucially they delineate the song's form while making direct, timbral connections to such foundational source materials for the genre as the *Dem Bow* and *Bam Bam* riddims—Jamaican dancehall "versions" (or instrumental sides) which became staples of the "proto-reggaeton," self-proclaimed *underground* scene in Puerto Rico during the 1990s. Rather than employing a single snare drum sample for the duration of the track, as most pop songs tend to, Lunny Tunes alternate between a couple of particular, familiar snare sounds, shifting the sample every four measures to create a subtle, stylistically grounded sense of movement against the otherwise repetitive structures of the track (though it should be noted that the duo also manipulate the layers of synths in a similar, regular manner). By directly indexing the classic building blocks of reggaeton, the snares in "Gasolina" suggest connections to a long history of pistas and mixtapes which preceded the breakthrough pop smash and which remain as audible, palpable, if subtle remnants of an unbridled, underground, sample-based past in a genre that has since embraced slick synthesizers and commercial channels.

By beginning with this close reading of what many might dismiss as a disposable, overly commercialized example of the genre, I hope to have suggested some of the ways that contemporary reggaeton style emerges from a longstanding, technologically enabled practice of culturally charged musical engagement. Given how fraught discussions of reggaeton's origins and history tend to be, especially along the lines of nation and style (often putatively cast as national provenance), it is worth taking a closer look at the particular ways that so many social and sonic flows coalesced in Puerto Rico in the 1990s, connecting North, South, and Central America and the Caribbean in symbolic, sensual form. The aim of this essay is to examine reggaeton's aesthetic history to date, tying its shifting shapes and enduring forms to articulations of community relationships amidst shared living spaces and soundscapes. Considering such processes as migration, mediation, identification, and commercialization, I attempt to tease out how the social and sonic have been deeply intertwined in the history of the genre, dialectically informing each other in the music's production, circulation, and reception. Although I ana-

lyze verbal and visual texts in order to explore the correspondence between musical style, sartorial and linguistic symbolism, and the politics of culture, my focus here is on musical texts—primarily, the genre's *pistas*, the underlying tracks which propel reggaeton into the global mediascape and so suggestively embody its complex twists and turns. Reggaeton's driving rhythms and dense textures, I contend, give shape and form to myriad movements across the Western Hemisphere, with metropolises and labor centers serving as crucial sites for the music's creation and dissemination. Connecting musical style to cultural politics (as historically grounded and complexly cross-cut by race- and class-commitments, ideologies of color, gender, and nation, and market forces), I seek to lend you my ears—admittedly, the ears of an engaged outsider—as I hear the genre's musical development reflecting and informing the sonic and social flows of the postcolonial Americas.

FROM WHERE? THE LOADED QUESTION OF ORIGINS

Despite some serious contention, reggaeton's publicly negotiated narrative has tended to locate the music's genesis in Panama, while other places—from Jamaica to New York to Puerto Rico—remain significant, if secondary, sites for the genre's genealogy.⁷ On the one hand, all of these places have played a pivotal role in the music's development. On the other, a number of important figures in the music's history have moved back and forth between various sites over the course of their careers, and so to some extent the most well-worn arguments about national provenance tend to overlook the imbrications of these places due to (circular) patterns of migration and the reach of mass media. The established narrative also tends to proceed in far too linear a fashion, for the interplay between hip-hop and reggae in Panama, Puerto Rico, and New York was rather simultaneous. As I will attempt to tease out, each of these symbolic sites might better be understood as representing both distinctive, local contexts as well as mobile, fluid sociocultural constellations. Depending on where one draws the lines around reggaeton, one draws different lines of community, and various observers, enthusiasts, and participants have sought to circumscribe or expand the genre's geographical-cultural borders according to incompatible if overlapping ideologies of race, class, nation, and the like. Given how heated such debates can become, it is imperative to attempt to clarify the relationships between these various central sites of reggae/ton history.⁸ In this section, I will consider and appraise some of the more common connections made between the current, ascendant sound of the genre and its alleged antecedents, namely *reggae en español*, "meren-rap" and



1. A skeletal sketch of reggaeton's *boom-ch-boom-chick*.

"merenhouse," bomba and *plena*, salsa and merengue, (Latin) hip-hop, and reggae itself.

Journalists and cultural nationalists (or pan-nationalists) alike have been eager to tie the sound of reggaeton to other Latin (or "tropical," to use the music industry term), Puerto Rican genres, or a combination of them. The explicit, if exceptional, appearance of Afro-Puerto Rican folk forms such as bomba on the recent recordings of Tego Calderón and La Sista has helped to encourage this perception. Similarly, the increasing presence in the last few years of musical figures (and direct digital samples) from salsa, merengue, and *bachata*—as will be discussed in some detail later in this essay—serves to fuel fantasies about reggaeton's inherent *latinidad*. Such perceptions of Latin or Afro-Latin musical identity in reggaeton are not without merit, though one would have to propose a more general theory of Latin-Caribbean musical influence and Afro-American (in the broadest sense) musical unity in order to reconcile history with the imaginary.⁹ It is telling that some observers hear reggaeton's musical structures not as "Latin" at all, but as essentially Jamaican or African American in constitution, while others make reference to concepts such as *clave* in order to place the genre firmly in an Afro-Latin-Caribbean tradition. If we consider the prevailing, if not crucial, rhythmic template of reggaeton, we can see and hear how it overlaps with various regional styles (figure 1).¹⁰

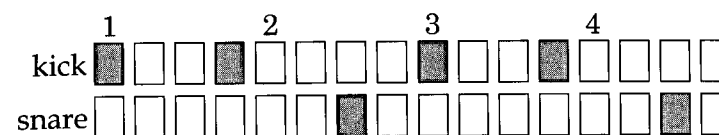
The rhythmic pattern in figure 1—accenting a steady 4/4 pulse with 3 + 3 + 2 cross-rhythms—is ubiquitous in the Caribbean and, given some differences in emphasis and arrangement, can be heard in such diverse genres as reggae and *mento*, soca and calypso, salsa and son, merengue and "meringue," "konpa" and zouk.¹¹ Such overlapping structural features allow some listeners to hear reggaeton less as a "Yankee" thing, as a symbol of cultural imperialism, than as a return to Afro-Latin roots. With specific regard to Puerto Rican traditions, one could understand how reggaeton's persistent kick drum and polyrhythmic snares might dovetail in the musical imagination with *plena*'s steady pulse and playful syncopations or with similarly structured, propulsive bomba rhythms such as *sicá*, *cuembé*, or *seis corrido*.¹²

In this sense, we might compare articulations between reggaeton and various Afro-Latin traditions with Jamaican poet Linton Kwesi Johnson's proposal for hearing the minimal rhythms of 1980s and '90s dancehall reggae—the very rhythms that underpin reggaeton—not so much as an example of a tech-heavy, northward-leaning corruption of Jamaican style but as a modern return to Afro-Jamaican folk forms:

With the discovery of digital recording, an extreme minimalism has emerged—in the music of people like Stealie and Clevie, for example. On the one hand, this music is totally technological; on the other the rhythms are far more Jamaican: they're drawn from Etu, Pocomania, Kumina—African-based religious cults who provide the rhythms used by Shabba Ranks or Buju Banton. So despite the extent of the technology being used, the music is becoming even rootsier, with a resonance even for quite old listeners, because it echoes back to what they first heard in rural Jamaica.¹³

Whether or not one agrees with Johnson or, if you will, his hypothetical Puerto Rican brethren, this rhythmic resonance between dancehall's ultramodern rhythmic minimalism and traditional Afro-Caribbean forms seems at best a subconscious phenomenon. At worst, especially with regard to reggaeton, it encourages the uncritical reproduction of stereotypes about an essential Latin *sabor*, or “flavor,” “hot” rhythms for “hot blooded” people, and so on. Such ideas can support strategic mobilizations of racial or ethnic identities in particular contexts and moments, but the historical record—not to mention the musical record—offers a much more precise, and less problematic, account of the connections between Jamaican reggae and reggaeton.

For all the resonance with Afro-(Latin-)Caribbean music and with Afro-diasporic music more generally, the predominant rhythmic orientation of reggaeton is derived directly, and quite audibly, from dancehall reggae (sometimes referred to as *ragga*, short for “raggamuffin,” connoting the music's rough-and-tumble environs). Thus Jamaica—or more accurately, Jamaica via Panama and New York—merits no small acknowledgment in a genealogy of reggaeton aesthetics. (Explicit tribute is paid, of course, in the derivative name of the genre itself.) One can hear the direct link between these genres quite clearly in the dancehall-derived rhythms and riddims underlying both Panamanian and Puerto Rican recordings and in the borrowed melodies that propel so many of the “proto-reggaeton” recordings from the early and mid-1990s. Although “roots” reggae maintains a degree of popularity in the same sites where reggaeton now rules—such that one still finds “purist” scenes in which Bob Marley is the model—dancehall reggae's synthetic textures, dance tempos,



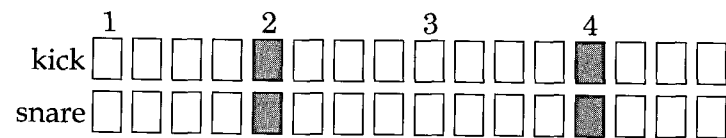
2. Dancehall reggae's minimal “bomp bomp.”

rapid-fire rap, and minimalist focus on 3 + 3 + 2 cross-rhythms starkly demarcated by heavy, synthesized drums, have much more strongly influenced what is today called reggaeton. Indeed, demonstrating a continued engagement with contemporary dancehall style, one occasionally hears in reggaeton *pistas*, rather than the rhythms illustrated in figure 1, a stripped-down pattern more characteristic of dancehall riddims from the mid- to late 1990s. Sometimes referred to as the *bomp bomp*—an onomatopoeic phrase gesturing to the proclivity for tracing out the 3 + 3 + 2 by employing two kicks followed by a snare—dancehall's distinctive rhythmic profile might be represented as in figure 2.

In contrast, roots reggae's predominant groove, often called the “one-drop” in order to describe the spare but regular accent of the kick drum, leaves room for plenty of polyrhythmic activity around the downbeats (and, indeed, one can feel a great deal of 3:2 cross-rhythms in roots reggae's live band interplay and studio-engineered effects), but the prevailing feel is more duple—more easily counted in groups of 2s (or 4s) than 3s and 2s, as depicted in figure 3.

Beyond these structural rhythmic relationships, however, dancehall's uptake among young Panamanians and Puerto Ricans was no doubt related to its cultural connotations: its newness, its rudeness, and its close relationship to rap or hip-hop (and thus to the sounds and images of modernity, urbanity, and blackness). Whereas roots reggae preached pan-African liberation and consciousness raising, often couched in the millenarian language of Rastafari, dancehall reggae embraced more earthy and local concerns, themes resonant and in close conversation with contemporary hip-hop: crime, drugs, violence, sex, poverty, corruption. Indeed, affirming their relational character, dancehall and hip-hop have tended to travel together, heard outside their principal sites of production as two sides of the same coin.¹⁴

It is no mere coincidence that dancehall exploded in popularity in San Juan around the same time that the genre was enjoying one of its periodic crests of “crossover” popularity in New York and in the United States more generally. Dancehall's presence in urban soundscapes was strongly mediated by hip-hop, and the new sounds of Jamaica arrived in Puerto Rico less via Kingston than



3. A (very) skeletal sketch of roots reggae's "one-drop."

from New York. Connected to the remarkable growth and influence of New York's Jamaican community during the 1980s—a decade during which Jamaican drug-trafficking posses dominated the trade across the Eastern Seaboard and representations of Jamaicans (in hip-hop and Hollywood alike) constructed a fearsome, ruthless, exotic portrait of the place and people—by the early 1990s dancehall reggae had become a ubiquitous and culturally charged feature of the New York soundscape.¹⁵ Because of (and adding to) its resonance with contemporary hip-hop, videos by such Jamaican artists as Shabba Ranks and Super Cat appeared on *Yo! MTV Raps* and *BET's Rap City* alongside popular rap videos, while blocks of dancehall favorites worked their way into the sets of hip-hop DJs. It is worth noting that the very dancehall tracks which found favor among hip-hop DJs at this time—including such hits as "Murder She Wrote" (1992) by Chaka Demus & Pliers, "A Who Seh Me Dun" (1993) by Cutty Ranks, and "Hot This Year" (1993) by Dirtsman—not only tended to employ the *boom-ch-boom-chick* drum pattern which would become reggaeton's bedrock (again, see figure 1), but also popularized a set of riddims and other sonic signposts (from basslines to drum timbres to vocal melodies) which Puerto Rican producers and performers would incorporate into the deeply, densely referential *underground* recordings of the early 1990s, laying the musical foundations for what is today called reggaeton.

As will be discussed in the next section, the "proto-reggaeton" of the early and mid-1990s, as called by a number of other names, draws almost equally on reggae and hip-hop. Notably, many *reggaetoneros* (some of whom formerly called themselves *raperos* or *rapeadores*) cite hip-hop or rap as their primary point of reference, rather than reggae, and some go so far as simply to declare reggaeton a subgenre of hip-hop. The 2004 documentary *Chosen Few*, for example, includes a segment in which various reggaeton artists name hip-hop artists they consider to be important influences on their own development, among them Run-DMC, Heavy D, Big Daddy Kane, and Kool G Rap, as well as—for Puerto Rican rap pioneer Lisa M—MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Salt-N-Pepa.¹⁶ Notably these influences all date to the mid and late 1980s, marking a particular generational orientation and a formative period for the artists inter-

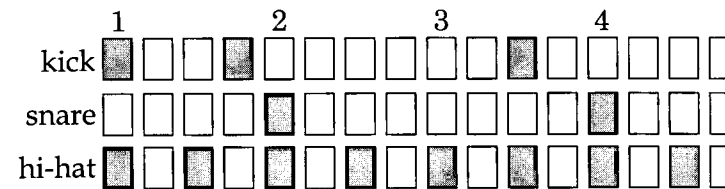
viewed. The segment, as well as other testimony to reggaeton's hip-hop roots, stands in stark contrast to the conspicuous absence of any similar testimonials about the influence of (Jamaican) reggae artists. This somewhat lopsided genealogy might be explained, in part, by the fact that many current reggaeton stars began as aspiring hip-hop artists, rapping over hip-hop beats rather than reggae riddims, and only switched to a reggaeton format when it became clear that the burgeoning genre would provide a path to greater success. Thus, Polaco professes that hip-hop is "what I love to do and what I learned to do." Master Joe contends that the biggest influence on reggaeton has come from hip-hop artists who rap "en americano."¹⁷ And Tego Calderón feels little compunction about describing himself in the following manner: "I sing hip-hop on top of a reggaeton beat. I don't know how to write in any other way." Tego's additional commentary on the tensions between hip-hop and reggaeton in Puerto Rico, accusing some local hip-hoppers (and reggaeton detractors) of wanting "to be real" while acting "blacker than Big Daddy Kane," shows that issues of race remain central to the discourse around urban popular music in Puerto Rico. Despite foregrounding negritude and racial solidarity in his own music and public image, Tego implies that reggaeton is something that Puerto Ricans of all stripes can embrace un-self-consciously ("This is our music," he adds), whereas hip-hop remains strongly marked as the domain of African Americans and thus tied to a particular notion of blackness (as he puts it, "You can't be more of a priest than the Pope").

Any discussion of reggaeton's relationship to hip-hop, however, would be incomplete without an acknowledgment of what is often referred to as "Latin rap" or "Latin hip-hop"—a subgenre distinguished not so much by musical style, which can vary widely within hip-hop's broad sonic palette, but by language. As Juan Flores and Raquel Z. Rivera have noted, rap in Spanish (and Spanglish), especially as performed by Puerto Ricans (and/or Nuyoricans), has long played a part in New York's hip-hop scene despite its marginalization in the hip-hop narrative.¹⁸ Significantly, however, a good number of the most prominent exponents of Latin rap—including Mellow Man Ace, Kid Frost, and Cypress Hill—have been based in Los Angeles, with family ties to Mexico rather than (or as well as) the Latin Caribbean. The popularity of such acts in the early '90s served to validate Spanish-language rap at a crucial moment, offering inspiration for aspiring artists across the Spanish-speaking United States and Latin America more widely. Other ostensibly "Latin rappers" such as Big Pun, Fat Joe and the Terror Squad, and (more recently) N.O.R.E.—all based in and around New York—have acknowledged their *latinidad* as a significant part of their cultural, ethnic, or national identity, but they tend to

rap predominantly, if not entirely, in English. Nevertheless, their popularity among Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish-speaking audiences has further affirmed the place of Latin rap in hip-hop, in some cases—and for some observers—“proving” that Latin MCs “could rhyme.”¹⁹ And yet, despite their common articulations of solidarity among people of color (e.g., freely employing the “n-word”), such performers have also consistently registered strong ambivalence around issues of race, often drawing or redrawing lines between New York’s Latino and black communities despite the common racialization of Nuyoricans as black.²⁰ Lyrics such as the following fragment from Big Pun, for example, seem to reaffirm both hip-hop’s putative blackness as well as the assumed nonblackness of “Latin rappers”: “I’m the first Latin rapper to baffle your skull/master the flow/niggas be swearin’ I’m blacker than coal [Cole]/like Nat King.”²¹

In contrast to U.S.-based rappers of Latino heritage, many of whom might be better described as peppering their rhymes with Spanish words and phrases than actually rapping in Spanish, Puerto Rico’s Vico C stands as a foundational figure, as the artist who first demonstrated that one could rap entirely and compellingly in Spanish (if perhaps peppered with the occasional English phrase or hip-hop slang). Although other Puerto Rican rappers, including Rubén DJ, also emerged in the mid- to late 1980s, far and away Vico C is cited by raperos and reggaetoneros alike as the pioneer of *rap en español*. In addition to releasing a number of popular recordings of his own (including the 1989 touchstone, “La Recta Final”), he also played a strong role as a producer and ghostwriter, assisting in the early careers of other performers in the Puerto Rican rap (and pop) scene, including Lisa M, Francheska, and El Comandante. It is additionally notable that Vico C has participated in the reggae/ton movement since its underground days—appearing, for example, on *The Noise 7* and its accompanying video (1997)—showing again the degree to which reggaeton not only engages with but emerges from (and blurs into) the local hip-hop scene in Puerto Rico, despite deep and enduring fissures between the two scenes.²²

Not surprisingly, Vico C shares his compatriots’ ideas about reggaeton’s basis in hip-hop, describing the genre (in the *Chosen Few* documentary) as “essentially hip-hop but with a flavor more compatible to the Caribbean.” While maintaining that the two are of the same essence, he demonstrates the main difference between hip-hop and reggaeton by beatboxing brief examples of each genre’s quintessential musical style.²³ In contrast to the 3 + 3 + 2 cross-rhythms that underpin reggaeton, Vico C’s representation of a standard hip-hop rhythm is, rather accurately (and audibly), more “duple” in character—that is, more oriented toward a metric accent heard and felt in groups of 2 or



4. Vico C’s version of a standard hip-hop beat.

4—a “feel” produced by the steady snares on the backbeat, anchoring the groove against the syncopations of the kick drum, as shown in figure 4.

This essential difference is not an insignificant one. Reggaeton’s prevailing rhythmic orientation derives rather directly from dancehall reggae and as such overlaps with a great number of other Caribbean (dance) genres. Indeed, it is reggaeton’s danceability, its dance-centric character—as achieved through the genre’s 3 + 3 + 2 snares and 4/4 kicks—which distinguishes it from hip-hop for a good number of fans and practitioners and which often serves crucially to “Caribbeanize” what otherwise would be heard simply as Latin hip-hop. A number of interviewees in the *Chosen Few* documentary, for example, distinguish reggaeton from hip-hop by noting that the former is more of a *baile*-centric genre, more appropriate for couple dancing than “b-boying” or break-dancing, where the focus (for many listeners or clubgoers) is more often the beat than the lyrics.

The conventional story of reggaeton typically follows Vico C’s towering example with a discussion of another exemplar of Spanish-language “rap,” a Panamanian-born dancehall DJ (i.e., a rapping vocalist, in reggae parlance) who, in a nod to the power of Panama’s military dictators, dubbed himself El General.²⁴ Panama’s links to Jamaica, and hence to reggae, have long passed into reggaeton lore, with El General serving as a prominent symbol of Panama’s important place in the story despite the ways that his own transnational narrative complicates too neat an account of origins and outposts. Invocations of the Panamanian roots of reggaeton are, often, all too facile. Typically taking the form of a brief mention of migrant laborers moving from Jamaica to Panama around the turn of the twentieth century, such citations bolster some rather bold assumptions about the transmission of culture between these places, often ignoring the fact that Jamaicans worked and lived side by side with large numbers of people from across the Anglo- and Franco-Caribbean. Many accounts erroneously imply that Jamaicans “brought reggae” to Panama in the early twentieth century, well before the genre came into being, or, similarly anachronistic, that they emigrated to work on the Panama Canal

during the 1970s.²⁵ In contrast to such conjecture, studies of Jamaican migration and nationhood might better inform an understanding of the movements and connections between the Caribbean and Central America, as well as the sociocultural implications thereof. Indeed, for all the claims (and dismissals) that reggae purists level at reggaeton, it is important to note that cultural influence is rarely unidirectional and that longstanding circuits of migration to the Latin Caribbean and to North, Central, and South America have strongly shaped Jamaican culture.²⁶ In his influential work on Jamaican national identity, *Mirror Mirror*, Rex Nettleford notably names Panama as a salient site in the modern Jamaican imagination. "Jamaicans are a people who are constantly exposed to external influences," argues Nettleford,

whose economic system traditionally depends on the caprice of other people's palates, whose values are largely imported from an alien set of experiences, and whose dreams and hopes have, at one time or another, been rooted either in a neighboring Panama, Cuba or Costa Rica, in big brother America and sometimes in Canada, a Commonwealth cousin.²⁷

Shoring up this assertion with yet another reference to the country, Nettleford contends that Jamaicans have been "a migrating people ever since the late nineteenth century when the first Panama Canal project was started." He marshals some striking comparative evidence for such a claim: "Between the 1880s and 1920, net emigration from Jamaica amounted to about 146,000—46,000 went to the U.S.A., 45,000 to Panama, 22,000 to Cuba (to work in sugar), and other countries like Costa Rica (for railroad building and banana cultivation) drew some 43,000."²⁸ Similarly, the anthropologist Deborah Thomas, in discussing the role that Jamaicans' "increased mobility" played in local notions of nation, notes that prior to 1911, when Cuba and the United States began to attract the majority of migrant workers, Panama received 62 percent of all Jamaican emigrants.²⁹

For all the assumptions about the primacy of Jamaican cultural influence in Panama, the degree to which Afro-Panamanian musical culture has been shaped by Jamaican forms and practices is striking, especially given that the canal construction projects first led by France and then by the United States attracted migrant labor from across the Caribbean, including significant numbers of workers from Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. Such a remarkable degree of influence, however, is not incommensurate with what might be seen as a kind of late twentieth-century Jamaican cultural hegemony across the Anglo-Caribbean and the African diaspora more generally, especially with regard to youth culture and counterculture.³⁰ Even so, it is

important to note that prior to reggae's global heyday in the 1970s, when the genre found favor even outside the major sites of Jamaican migration, Afro-Panamanian popular music was heavily based around calypso (popularized by Trinidadians and Jamaicans alike), as performed by such local favorites as Lord Cobra and Lord Panama, whose names nod to the calypso tradition in the same way that Panamanian reggae artists would later crown themselves after various dancehall DJs. By the late 1970s, calypso in Panama had been largely supplanted by soca—a more modern version of the Trinidadian sound, engaging with American R&B as well as Indo-Trinidadian styles—and by reggae, which at that point was still defined by roots-style "one-drop" rhythms.³¹ Largely based in the urban contexts of Colón and Panama City, some of the earliest proponents of Panamanian reggae—and hence some of the first to perform Spanish-language reggae—included such touted pioneers as Renato y las 4 Estrellas (one of whom was Edgardo Franco, a.k.a. El General), Nando Boom, and Chicho Man.³²

Because of such strong, direct links to Jamaica and the Anglo-Caribbean, the embrace and transformation of reggae in Panama are in some sense rather different from the parallel processes in Puerto Rico, where reggae's presence was largely mediated via New York (and hip-hop). Such a crucial difference, however, should not obscure the degree to which reggae in both places has served a local cultural politics based on a similar articulation of race, class, and generation. Nor should it efface the ways that Puerto Rican reggae/ton has influenced the Panamanian scene—in circular fashion—since itself emerging, in part, out of engagements with the reggae recordings of such performers as El General. Typically referred to in Panama simply as "reggae" or localized as *plena* (not to be confused with the Puerto Rican genre) or *bultrón*, Panama's Jamaican-derived popular music was also sometimes called *petróleo*, a descriptor—not unlike *melaza* in Puerto Rico (discussed in detail in the next section)—which strongly signified the perceived and projected blackness of the genre and its adherents.³³ Although roots reggae remains popular in Panama, since the early '80s dancehall reggae, as in Jamaica, has dominated the scene. Indeed, this roots-to-dancehall dynamic illustrates the degree to which reggae in Panama has proceeded in step with reggae in Jamaica, often quite audibly—that is, through the consistent production of Spanish-language cover versions of contemporary reggae hits (typically over replayed versions of the original Jamaican riddims).³⁴ In comparison, one finds far fewer cover songs, melodic allusions, or re-licked riddims in, say, today's Puerto Rican reggaeton scene than in contemporary Panamanian reggae or plena. This would seem to confirm Tego Calderón's assertion, even as he acknowledges the inspiring models

of such “purists” (as he calls them) as Nando Boom and El General, that the Panamanian scene is “more an emulation of dancehall” than Puerto Rico’s reggae-derived music.³⁵

Panamanian reggae’s “emulation of dancehall” is certainly audible in the early ’90s recordings of El General and his compatriots, and it is worth noting that such reverent remakes would play a strong role in shaping the nascent (dancehall) reggae scene in Puerto Rico. A compilation issued by Columbia Records at the peak of New York’s Panamanian-led reggae en español movement, *Dancehall Reggaespañol* (1991), serves as an instructive document, emphasizing the role that cover versions played in this realm of production by pairing “Spanish reggae” tracks by the likes of El General, Nando Boom, Marcony, and Rude Girl (La Atrevida) with the Jamaican recordings (by Super Cat, Cutty Ranks, Ninja Man, Little Lenny, and others) which provided the models for these Panamanian performers’ faithful translations.³⁶ Hence one hears quite clearly how El General’s “Pu Tun Tun” adapts Little Lenny’s “Punnany Tegereg” or how Marcony’s “Mini Mini” translates Fab 5’s song by the same name. Typically, the riddims over which these covers were performed sound almost identical to the accompanimental tracks underlying the originals, but a closer listen reveals that they are often very convincing rerecordings of the riddims—“re-licks” or “do-overs,” in reggae parlance. Sometimes the only distinction is a slight timbral difference in the synthesizer or drum sounds. In other cases the riddims are clearly pitched up or down into another key, presumably to suit the vocal range of the artist performing the cover, while the layers of the riddim—the basslines, keyboard chords, and drum tracks—are manipulated in a different manner in order to highlight certain passages in the new versions. Although such *versioning* is consistent with the reggae tradition in general and had been put into practice in Panama for some time, the use (and licensing) of such riddims on these New York recording sessions was facilitated by producer Karl Miller, a Jamaican New Yorker who had formerly worked at the Queens-based reggae label, VP Records. Indeed, a year before being reissued by Columbia and Prime/BMG respectively, El General’s “Pu Tun Tun” and “Te Ves Buena” (a remake of Shabba Ranks’s “Gal Yuh Good”) were both released on Miller’s own imprint, Gold Disc Records, and distributed by VP.³⁷

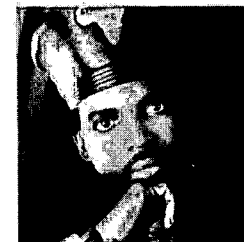
The tracks on *Dancehall Reggaespañol* not only attest to a close engagement with contemporary Jamaican reggae; they also bear witness, yet again, to the crucial role that New York has played throughout the history of the music now known as reggaeton. As a major Caribbean “cosmopole,” to invoke Orlando Patterson’s description of the place’s “ecumenical” and Caribbeanized culture,



Little Lenny



Rude Girl (La Atrevida)



Marcony



Arzu



La Diva

5. Image from *Dancehall Reggaespañol* liner notes.

New York offered aspiring artists such as El General various opportunities for recording and performing, and its status as a major media hub facilitated the broader circulation of such music, including to Puerto Rico.³⁸ Across the soundscapes of New York’s boroughs—where Panamanians, Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, and African Americans often lived (and were racialized) side by side—such genres as reggae and hip-hop resonated powerfully as “black music” which, for all the lines still drawn between such groups, could embody and express new articulations of community. The liner insert for *Dancehall Reggaespañol* underscores the strong Afro-Latin orientation of early New York-based Spanish reggae, depicting, alongside Jamaican artist Little Lenny, the black-and-proud faces of Afro-Panamanian and Afro-Honduran reggae artists, including a shot of Marcony sporting the sort of Afrocentric headgear very much in vogue at that time in New York (figure 5).

And yet, despite such obvious connections between, as the liner notes put it,

"bilingual brethren," a quotation from Rude Girl implies that contested notions of national cultural propriety—which continue to animate discussions of reggaeton today—could still prove a potent source of division: "Jamaicans like to think they're the only ones to come off with reggae, but we in Panama have been chanting deejay music for years."³⁹

It is somewhat perplexing that the question of reggaeton's Panamanian "roots" remains such a sensitive, hotly debated topic, especially given the degree of documentation and firsthand testimony confirming the connection. Panama remains an originary touchstone in the established reggaeton narrative, of course, as countless journalistic accounts and popular documentaries such as the *Chosen Few* consistently reaffirm by starting with the story of Jamaican workers in Panama. As the *Chosen Few* bears witness, plenty of Puerto Rican reggae/ton innovators celebrate the foundational influence that artists such as El General had on the scene there, including DJ Negro, who recounts spinning the instrumental versions of reggae en español recordings while local vocalists performed new lyrics over them—a practice he says developed by necessity since Panamanian performers proved too difficult to contact in order to book for shows. Tellingly, for some Panamanian reggae enthusiasts, reggaeton is simply "la plena Puertorriquena," a reaccented version of an essentially Panamanian cultural product.⁴⁰ And while this may not be an invalid interpretation, it does tend to underplay the degree to which Puerto Rican vocalists and producers radically revised (and *reversioned*) Panama's more reverent approach to the reggae tradition.

Beyond nationalist chauvinism, one reason for such prolonged contestation and confusion may be the various ways in which these New York-based Spanish reggae recordings, largely performed by Panamanians, came to circulate in Puerto Rico. In addition to finding their way into the island's soundscape via such ear-to-the-ground cultural arbiters as DJ Negro, who began operating the Noise nightclub in 1990, the sounds of Spanish reggae were also brokered in a somewhat top-down manner by the promoter and producer Jorge Oquendo and his "meren-rap" project. Released in 1991 on the heels of Karl Miller's Gold Disc releases of El General's Spanish reggae hits, Oquendo's *Meren-Rap* compilation brought together established merengue musicians and rising Puerto Rican rap stars. Issued on his own label imprint, Prime Entertainment (and, significantly, distributed by BMG), the disc was less a representation of actual, on-the-ground musical practice than a calculated attempt to develop a Latin pop/rap hybrid which might appeal to a wide audience—not just rap and reggae fans, but devotees of merengue as well as Latin pop, freestyle, house, and other "Latin" or "tropical" urban dance

genres.⁴¹ Notably, the majority of songs on *Meren-Rap* were written and produced by Vico C.

In addition to tracks that simply add rap vocals and electronic drums to otherwise typical merengue arrangements (e.g., "Meren Rapero") and a number of merengue numbers with seemingly no rap or reggae referents ("Otra Vez"), other songs present a more explicit attempt to fuse contemporary pop and "black" music with merengue. Alongside merengue-inspired piano figures and horn blasts, Brewley M.C.'s "Nena Sexy," for instance, employs a number reggae's sonic signatures, from a "skanking" keyboard pattern (i.e., accenting the offbeat) to the vocalist's dancehall-inflected, double-time rap style. And Lisa M's "El Pum Pum," a response record in the tradition of reggae's "counteraction tunes," not only recontextualizes the melody from El General's "Pu Tun Tun" (i.e., Little Lenny's "Punnany Tegereg") over a merengue piano riff; it begins by invoking the drum-break introduction to Bell Biv DeVoe's R&B hit "Poison" (1990). Significantly, *Meren-Rap* also includes a breakbeat-propelled hip-hop remix of El General's "Te Ves Buena," juxtaposing synthesized hand-claps playing a 3:2 clave, a chunky sample marking the offbeat in reggae style, a dominant "dubby" bassline, and various sampled vocal interjections.⁴² Notably, as a dense, sample-based, hip-hop-inflected attempt at a reggae-style track, the remix of "Te Ves Buena" perhaps comes closest to sounding like the productions soon to emerge from the parallel, grassroots development of rap-reggae fusions in San Juan's clubs and barrios and no doubt helped to affirm the possibilities of such a hybrid genre.

Because of meren-rap's veritable popularity but debatable influence, the studio experiment might best be understood as playing a paradoxically important yet marginal role in the story of reggaeton. The *Meren-Rap* album indeed made a splash on the island, and the artists associated with Oquendo's experiment became visible and audible in the Puerto Rican mainstream. At the same time, meren-rap proved an utterly ephemeral and artificial phenomenon.⁴³ Without grassroots support the hybrid genre was soon supplanted, at least in what came to be known as the *underground* scene (in contrast to the mainstream), by a similar sort of fusion which, instead of Latin or "tropical" signifiers, tended to foreground the black, urban, transnational sounds of hip-hop and reggae. In contrast to the vibrant if raw recordings produced by and for lower-class youth and circulated locally and informally via mixtapes (as will be discussed shortly), *Meren-Rap* sounds overproduced, too "slick" and too "clean," and rather bourgeois despite the involvement of reputable rappers such as Vico C. Targeted primarily at a commercial, middle-class market rather than a street-level audience, meren-rap failed to inspire a new generation of

Puerto Ricans (and Nuyoricans) who had grown up with hip-hop and for whom the sounds of Jamaica provided a sufficiently Caribbean anchor for their urbane articulations. Nonetheless, Oquendo's experiment presented possibilities that would later be embraced, a full decade later, by yet another generation of producers, who—following hip-hop's ascension to global pop—would reverse their focus from the underground to the commercial sphere and seek to reach, once again, a mainstream, pan-Latin audience in part by invoking the “tropical.”

But before discussing reggaeton's turn (back) toward signifiers of Latinness, such that it could eventually project itself into the U.S. and global mainstream as “Reggaeton Latino,” it is imperative to appreciate how the genre first crystallized in Puerto Rico in the early and mid-1990s as *música negra* and *melaza*, *dembow*, and *underground*—terms which directly marked and promoted the music as connected to a particular racial and class formation. Although the various antecedents considered above inform and resonate to varying degrees with the San Juan *underground* scene of the 1990s, the unique and pronounced mix of hip-hop and reggae which defined the nascent genre and provided the basis for what would come to be called reggaeton offers the strongest evidence for Puerto Rico's claims on the genre—Jamaica's and Panama's notwithstanding—as a locally inflected and in some ways quintessentially Puerto Rican cultural product. By exploring the distinctive character of early to mid-1990s Puerto Rican reggae-rap fusions, I hope to clarify some of the genealogical relationships which remain the subject of intense debate in public discourse around reggaeton.

FROM “DEM BOW” TO DEMBOW:

MELAZA CRYSTALLIZES UNDERGROUND

Listening to Puerto Rico's underground music of the 1990s, one hears a series of “flip-tongue,” sing-song vocalists performing risqué rhymes over dense collages made from contemporary reggae riddims and hip-hop beats.⁴⁴ A number of familiar loops and more fragmentary samples cycle in and out of the half-hour to hour-long mixes put together by pioneering producers such as DJ Playero, DJ Negro, DJ Nelson, and their colleagues.⁴⁵ Combining dozens of resonant samples, the *pistas* that drive such nonstop sessions tug constantly at the strings of musical memory, in many cases providing a suggestive, propulsive alternation between the distinctive “feels” of hip-hop and dancehall grooves (see figures 2 and 4)—an approach to form still faintly audible in the shifting snares of today's synth-driven hits.⁴⁶ Such chopped-and-rearranged

loops of recognizable fragments hence provide a rather resonant, dynamic sort of accompaniment. Adding to the allusive mix, such local, Spanish-slanting MCs as Ranking Stone, Alberto Stylee, Maicol and Manuel, O.G. Black and Master Joe, Baby Rasta and Gringo, Ivy Queen, and Daddy Yankee, among others, frequently propel their verses by intoning one of the many familiar melodic contours that Jamaican dancehall DJs have endlessly reworked since the early to mid-1980s.⁴⁷ Especially for San Juan youth, these deeply referential recordings thus engage and embody, as they directly index, the popular and no doubt political *música negra* (as it was called in song lyrics), or “black music,” which so powerfully resounded across the shared soundscapes of Puerto Rico and New York, of home and home-away-from-home (though which is which, of course, becomes increasingly difficult to tease out in the contexts of circular migration and “commuter nationhood”).⁴⁸

It is no surprise that the terms artists and audiences used to describe the Spanish-language rap-reggae hybrids produced in Puerto Rico during the 1990s themselves index a number of significant, overlapping relations and positions. Such terms as *música negra* and *melaza* (i.e., “molasses,” signifying race as sugar products do in postplantation societies) served to express an explicit cultural politics of blackness within a context of enduring racism and *blanqueamiento*.⁴⁹ Calling the music *underground* and *dembow*, on the other hand—not to mention *rap* or *reggae* (both of which were also common)—signaled an articulation with such putatively non-Puerto Rican forms as hip-hop and dancehall and therefore to New York, the Afro-Caribbean, and the African diaspora. Moreover, the term *underground* also embodied the music's marginalized (and proud!) status vis-à-vis mainstream Puerto Rican economy, culture, and society. But although terms such as *underground* and *dembow* were derived from hip-hop and reggae, they took on rather local meanings, signifying that San Juan's distinctive musical fusion was, as Raquel Z. Rivera observed in early 1995, “una fusión tan intensa de rap con reggae que no puede ser clasificada como una cosa o la otra” (such an intense fusion of rap and reggae that it could not be classified as one or the other).⁵⁰

Despite being derived from other genres, the terms used to describe the distinctive yet emergent genre necessarily took on expanded and enriched meanings in Puerto Rico. The term *underground* (sometimes shortened to *under*) came directly out of hip-hop discourse, where it already enjoyed some currency as a militant mode of self-identification for artists eschewing the commercialization of rap music (associating such “selling out” with a capitulation to mainstream aesthetics and a movement away from a hardcore stance vis-à-vis copyright, local and national politics, or street authenticity). But

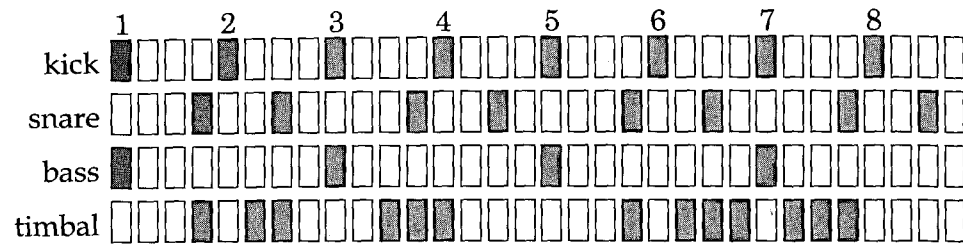
whereas self-proclaimed *underground* hip-hop groups in New York often still participated in the commercial economy via “independent” labels (frequently distributed by major labels), in San Juan *underground* referred not simply to musical style or ideologies of authenticity but to actual market position. In the early '90s, Puerto Rican *underground* recordings literally circulated outside of formal commercial channels and centralized modes of mass production. Dubbed from cassette to cassette after an initial, small run of master tapes, the mixes moved somewhat easily through an informal economy until late 1994, when their appearance in certain “aboveground” stores allowed the authorities, spurred by Christian “watchdog” organizations such as Morality in Media, to commence a series of high-profile, controversial, and essentially illegal seizures.⁵¹ (Raquel Z. Rivera cites DJ Playero as noting that he produced only around twenty copies of each mixtape in the early days; of course, these “masters” were rapidly reproduced within and outside the scene, e.g., in New York, Connecticut, the Dominican Republic, etc.)⁵² Moreover, even after flirting with local commercial channels, reggaeton’s reputation as the “obscene” music of the underclass meant that it had little access to mainstream media channels (i.e., radio and television) before it proved itself commercially viable beyond the underground market. Although the San Juan-based *In the House* magazine offered regular coverage of the music beginning in 1995, for example, as with reggae in Jamaica (which did not have a dedicated place on local airwaves until the launch of Irie FM in 1990) it was not until much later that the genre was embraced by mainstream media: San Juan’s Mix 107.7 FM began its “24/7” reggaeton format in 1999 through the efforts of DJ Nelson and DJ Coyote.⁵³

The term *dembow* offers a similar example of resignification. A minimal drum track with a hint of Latinesque percussion and a unique timbral profile, Bobby “Digital” Dixon’s *Dem Bow* riddim—i.e., the instrumental underlying Shabba Ranks’s “Dem Bow” (1991), performed and recorded by the production duo Steely and Clevie—became such a ubiquitous feature of *underground* mixes that, especially in the mid- to late 1990s, one of the most common terms used to describe the genre was simply *dembow*. Before long, at least for some, the term came to refer more generally to the music’s prevailing rhythmic structure, the *boom-ch-boom-chick* that has defined Puerto Rican reggae/ton since the early '90s (see figure 1). Notably, the term has been so resignified that it has also, for the most part, lost much of its connection to the idea of “bowing” or giving in to the forces of oppression and corruption—ranging from the forces of neocolonialism to “deviant” sexual practices (e.g., oral and anal sex)—which Shabba Ranks decries on the original recording. Hence, while early Spanish cover versions of the song such as Nando Boom’s “Ellos

Benia” (1991) or El General’s “Son Bow” (1991) appear to endorse Shabba’s conflation of macho sexuality and racialized social struggle, later versions, such as Wisin and Yandel’s “Dem Bow” (2003), seem to imply that the term simply signifies dancing to the distinctive beat or otherwise participating in the reggaeton scene.⁵⁴ The concatenated form I employ here (after popular use, though orthographies vary widely) is thus meant to signify this transformation of the term’s meaning: from a specific allusion to a Jamaican precedent, to a rather resonant bit of local argot describing San Juan’s unique approach to reggae production (with a hip-hop twist).

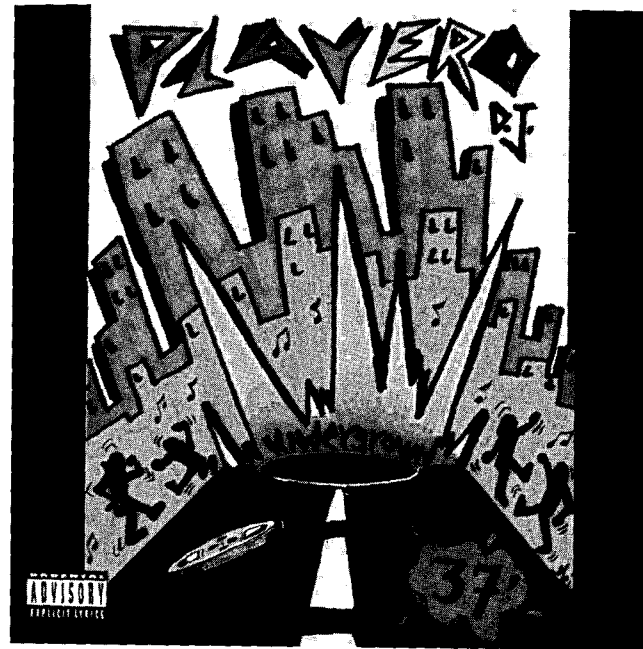
This is an approach and transformation signaled sonically as well, for the instrumental from Shabba’s “Dem Bow” has, aside perhaps from early club and home-studio jam sessions, rarely been employed for *underground* productions in its original form. Abstracted instead into a particular rhythmic pattern (slightly altered from if faithful to the original) and a set of specific drum timbres (as directly sampled from the *Dem Bow* riddim and, tellingly, its reggae en español variations⁵⁵), the *Dem Bow* came to stand as a flexible set of musical tools which could be used in combination with other resonant signifiers while retaining a distinctive sonic profile (hence remaining audible in the vast majority of reggaeton productions, even today). Contemporary collections of reggaeton instrumentals such as *Pistas de Reggaeton Famosas* (Flow Music, 2005), for example, often contain one or more versions of the *Dem Bow*: the “original” or “classic” version—a two-bar loop based closely on Dennis “the Menace” Thompson’s version of Bobby Digital’s dancehall instrumental (as heard on Nando Boom’s “Ellos Benia”) but often reduced to pure percussion (i.e., not containing the keyboards or bass from the original); and a more recent version, e.g., “Dembow 2004,” which might employ different sounds and other effects but audibly maintains the riddim’s well-worn rhythms and timbres. Notably, part of what makes the *Dem Bow* distinguishable from other reggae sources is an element often identified, especially in its digital and Internet circulation, as the *timbal* (presumably from *timbales*), a short percussion sample that plays an easily recognizable, two-measure rhythmic pattern which some might hear as congruent with a 3:2 clave (see figure 6).

As indicated in figure 6, the standard *Dem Bow* pattern in reggaeton productions also features a tonally rich bass drum, accenting beats 1 and 3 atop an underlying, “drier” kick drum which marks each beat of every bar. Together or in various combinations, these musical signifiers can suggest the presence of the *Dem Bow* in a particular pista. Depending on the whims of producers and the extent to which they want to foreground the riddim’s familiar sound, the component elements of the *Dem Bow* might take more or less pronounced forms.



6. The basic elements of Puerto Rico's localized *Dem Bow*.

Like the terms themselves, then, the sounds of *underground*, *dembow*, *me-laza*, and so on, also served to signal, for all their putative foreignness, a local orientation (if always already transnational). Embodying the process of localizing the foreign-but-familiar, the influential mixtapes issued by DJ Negro for *The Noise* album series and by Playero for his eponymous franchise offer a set of sonic snapshots vividly illustrating the ways *melaza* crystallized in San Juan in the mid-1990s. The two series are remarkably similar in aesthetic approach. Indeed, the creation of reggaeton's foundational style and its veritable canon of samples, including the elevation of the *Dem Bow* to basic building block, can largely be attributed to the long shadows cast by Playero and *The Noise*. Mixing song into song, on beat and without pause, their mixtapes resembled live DJ sets, not unlike the sort that might be played by a hip-hop DJ or a dancehall selector. In contrast to hip-hop or dancehall, however, songs recorded by outside producers would not be featured (though they could be sampled); instead the mixtapes showcased the work of the producers and DJs who made them. Accordingly, the mixes were often identified simply by the name of the producer or series and given a number, though sometimes each side of the tape would also get its own, more suggestive title, in many cases gesturing to dancehall or hip-hop (and, yet, often signaling a certain distance via minor misspellings): for example, "Dance Hall Mix" and "Ragga Moofin Mix" are the individually labeled sides on *Playero 37* (ca. 1992), while "Non Stop Reegae" and "Raagga Mix to Mix" describe the contents of *Playero 38* (ca. 1994). Affirming and informing the music's projections of a modern, urban, Afro-Puerto Rican aesthetic, the artwork promoting the tapes often employed graffiti-style lettering and featured city skylines (as on *Playero 37*; see figure 7) and lots of images of stylish, and often dark-skinned, denizens of the underground. On the cover of *Playero 38* (figure 8), for instance, a dreadlocked character sports an Africa pendant, a rather popular hip-hop accoutrement in the early '90s (as also depicted, you might recall, on Marcony's headgear in figure 5).



7. Artwork for *Playero 37*.



8. Artwork for *Playero 38*.

As truly underground music (economically speaking), based on live performance practice (where instrumental reggae recordings provided the accompaniment for MCs), and deeply informed by the musical ethics of reggae's version-based "riddim method" as well as hip-hop's sample-based collages, the recordings produced by the likes of DJ Playero, DJ Negro, and DJ Nelson advanced an approach utterly unconcerned with the strictures of copyright or bourgeois attitudes toward ownership. The music brims with references to resonant musical texts. In measure after measure, one hears layer upon layer of samples from the hip-hop and dancehall hits of the day. Taken together with the allusive tunes and texts of vocalists who often quote lyrics or borrow melodies from the same familiar sources being sampled, the music directly and suggestively indexes New York. Remixing the sounds of home-away-from-home for San Juan youth, *underground* could thus express forms of Puerto Rican-ness commensurate with the vistas (and pistas) of a new generation. The degree of intertextuality on such recordings is not only rather remarkable in its own right, then; it is also charged with significance. A brief guided tour of an early, representative production by DJ Playero, I hope, may suffice to impart some sense of this deeply meaningful intertextuality.⁵⁶

Given that *Playero 38* is sometimes cited as having cemented the centrality of the *Dem Bow* in San Juan's "Spanish reggae" scene, the "Raagga Mix to Mix" side's hip-hop-inflected opening offers a telling reminder of the genre's strong connections to rap as well as reggae.⁵⁷ Beginning with a "wah-wah" guitar figure and the telltale snaps-and-crackles of aged vinyl (and thus explicitly embodying a sample-based approach), the introduction bears the unmistakable sound of early 1990s, New York-style hip-hop, especially when a jazzy bass riff and then a truncated siren and dusty breakbeat bring the song into a solidly swinging funk. Along with the bass enters a looped voice, slightly distant in the mix and punctuated by the siren sound: "La gente sabe/que somos de la calle" (the people know/that we're from the streets), it repeats, insistently, before delivering a rhyming punch line, "mira como goza/cuando traigo un mensaje" (see how they like/when I bring a message). Before long the vocalist, Manuel, begins rapping in a "flip-tongue" style, as it is sometimes called in Jamaica, doubling up the syllabic syncopation in the manner of dancehall DJs. His change in flow accompanies the appearance of a short but recognizable snippet from "900 Number," a two-measure saxophone loop and a rather familiar reference for hip-hop devotees. Produced by Mark the 45 King, a hip-hop producer based in New York, the riff—as sampled from Marva Whitney's funky R&B single "Unwind Yourself" (1967)—became well-known in hip-hop after being featured repeatedly on *Yo! MTV Raps* from 1989 to 1995 as the

backing for the "Ed Lover Dance." Although the sample here is but a beat long, it would be unmistakable for many listeners, especially as a recurring favorite of *underground* producers at this time. As Manuel's partner-in-rhyme, Maicol, makes an entrance, the duo begin trading off rhymes which directly link "la casa" (with its connotations of hip-hop and home alike), "la raza" (signifying racial commitments), and "melaza."⁵⁸ Highlighting the articulation of such symbols, the texture of the music changes radically, dropping everything out save for the dusty wah-wah loop and placing the refrain in the foreground: "en la casa, para la raza" they repeat three times, before delivering the punch line, "Maicol y Manuel que te canta melaza" (Maicol and Manuel who sing melaza).

Notably, the punch line—and, significantly, the reference to *melaza*—is followed immediately by the entrance of *dembow*-style drums, and the dancehall-derived *boom-ch-boom-chick* propels their chant forward. As the duo continue their enthusiastic interplay, alluding to dancehall reggae melodies (e.g., Shabba Ranks's "Ting-a-Ling")—as well as, in another nod to hip-hop and reggae tradition, nursery rhymes (i.e., "London Bridge")—the underlying track mixes reggae style with hip-hop style, augmenting the relatively sparse 3 + 3 + 2 drum pattern and synthesized bassline with the sort of truncated siren sample popularized by Cypress Hill, as heard in the introduction. Playero (and in this case, his coproducer, Nico Canada) create a fair amount of variation in the track by pulling the discrete layers—kicks, snares, bass, and other samples—in and out of the texture, a technique for manipulating form rather related to dub-mixing in reggae.⁵⁹ In the meantime, Maicol and Manuel string together various routines and, indeed, employ some of the same lyrics they would also record on contemporary mixtapes issued by The Noise, demonstrating once again a notion of originality closer to reggae's and hip-hop's traditions of reuse, allusion, and versioning than, say, the status quo for other pop music—and perhaps even more liberal about reusing materials than such antecedents. About five minutes into the track, after a spirited exchange between the MCs, one hears the repeated line—lest one miss it—"esta (es) la música negra" (this is black music).

To fast-forward a bit, Maicol and Manuel are followed by a series of vocalists who perform their own allusive, resonant rhymes over a constantly but often subtly shifting backing. For instance, elements from the similarly popular *Bam Bam* riddim (as produced by Sly and Robbie and popularized on Chaka Demus & Pliers' crossover hit, "Murder She Wrote" [1992]), especially a recognizable guitar "chop," appear soon thereafter in the mix, accenting the 3 + 3 + 2 snare pattern while a pair of performers interpolate the melody from "Old MacDonald," changing the text to signify again the importance of New

York in the *underground* imagination: “Yo me voy para New York/E-I-E-I-O” (I’m going to New York/E-I-E-I-O). Not long after, we hear an interpolation of “Action” (1993), a contemporary dancehall reggae track by Nadine Sutherland and Terror Fabulous and another crossover hit in the New York hip-hop scene. Notably, the performance is not quite a cover of “Action” in the sense that, say, Panamanian reggae artists might version an extant song, but instead, as a Jamaican dancehall artist might do, it loosely alludes to the main melody of “Action” over a new backing. Similarly, rather than replaying (or re-licking) the *Fever Pitch* riddim that underlies the original, the pista brings together a number of different layers and fragments, among them the *Bam Bam* guitar sample which itself served to inspire elements of the *Fever Pitch* (via Sly Dunbar’s *Pitch* riddim, popularized by Cutty Ranks’s “Limb by Limb” [1993], another favorite in the *underground* scene), as well as drum samples drawn from various sources and a heavy, newly synthesized (rather than sampled) bassline.

Before long, that *mélange* gives way to a reversed loop of a breakbeat sampled from (or at least gesturing to) Slick Rick’s “Mona Lisa” (1988), a notably older but rather common musical reference in *underground* productions, which is soon unreversed and augmented by 3 + 3 + 2 snares (once again juxtaposing hip-hop and reggae grooves in a striking manner). Cementing the connection to Slick Rick’s “Golden Age” hip-hop track, the next vocalist employs melodies, affectations, and other formal features from “Mona Lisa” in order to sing, “Oye Lisa,” while a stomping, four-on-the-floor kick drum enters and the hip-hop break is teased in and out of the mix. As the pista changes once again, returning to the bright *Bam Bam/Pitch* guitar sample, the same vocalist shifts to new melodic and textual references, alluding to El General’s “Pu Tun Tun” by chanting “boom boom marijuana” as well as to Super Cat’s “Don Dada” (which was similarly covered, incidentally, around the same time, on El General’s “El Gran Pana”), all in the space of about thirty seconds. From there the mix moves to another resonant sample—the distinctive drum break from Audio Two’s 1988 hip-hop classic “Top Billin,” which had recently been sampled for Mary J. Blige’s 1992 hit single “Real Love”—while two female vocalists rap to the tune of “Ten Little Indians,” followed by yet another sly reference to “Action” over a *Bam Bam* guitar propelled *dembow* pattern. But perhaps you get the picture: the degree of intertextuality on these foundational mixtapes is truly remarkable. The sheer number of references surely rivals, if not exceeds, such pastichelike, sample-based masterworks as Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988) or the Beastie Boys’ *Paul’s Boutique* (1989).

Despite bringing together such a wide variety of sources and hence suggest-

ing a rather ecumenical outlook for the genre, the influential mixtapes of Playero, The Noise, and other innovators also established, not insignificantly, a fairly stable canon of resonant references by reusing their favorite samples over and over again. As I have argued, such an approach serves to directly index reggae and hip-hop (and hence, “black music” and New York) even as it advances a rather distinctive take on both traditions—and, notably, violates a number of aesthetic conventions in the process. For one, reggae producers rarely employ samples, preferring instead to version or re-lick previous riddims by replaying (and reshaping) their distinctive elements. Yet Puerto Rican *underground* producers, for all their fidelity to reggae tradition, employ a primarily sample-based approach and demonstrate no compunctions about sampling whatever source seems appropriate. And whereas sample-based hip-hop producers tend to take a fairly liberal attitude toward the direct sampling of other recordings, the *underground* practice of sampling hip-hop tracks, especially recent releases, contravenes (at least for some U.S. producers) a tacit but widespread ban on “jacking” other producers’ beats or the same samples used to produce such beats (with the exception of well-worn breakbeats).⁶⁰ It is worth noting, then, that Puerto Rican producers and vocalists also depart from the same traditions they so closely engage, extending even further hip-hop’s and reggae’s central practices of reuse and allusion and attendant notions of ownership or originality. In its own way, the ubiquitous use of the *Dem Bow* (as well as such staples as the *Bam Bam* or *Drum Song* riddims) offers a parallel to other digital age genres, several of which have demonstrated the ability for a single sample to serve as the basis for hundreds, if not thousands, of distinct, discrete tracks: for example, the “Amen” break for UK “jungle” and drum’n’bass, the “Dragrap” or “Triggerman” for New Orleans “bounce,” the “Volt” mix for Brazilian funk, or even, though less demonstrably, the constitutive role such breakbeats as the “Funky Drummer” played in late 1980s hip-hop. Puerto Rican producers thus take reggae’s “riddim method” and hip-hop’s omnivorous approach to sampling to an unprecedented extreme.

The samples most commonly employed by *underground* producers offer a telling profile of the specific sorts of sounds—namely, hip-hop and reggae—that proved resonant for certain Puerto Ricans living in San Juan and New York in the mid-1990s. For the sake of illustration, allow me to provide a short list of the most frequently referenced samples during this period. Notably, the hip-hop-related sources range from well-worn breakbeats (e.g., Bob James’s “Take Me to the Mardi Gras” or Lou Donaldson’s funk-soul recording of “Ode to Billie Joe”), to classics from the genre’s so-called Golden Age (e.g., such late 1980s favorites as Slick Rick’s “Mona Lisa,” “Children’s Story,” and “Hey Young

World"; Special Ed's "I Got It Made" and "The Magnificent"; Marley Marl's "The Symphony"; Mark the 45 King's "900 Number"), to contemporary hits and obscurities alike (e.g., Cypress Hill's "Insane in the Membrane," especially, and often only, its squealing siren; House of Pain's "Back from the Dead"; Craig Mack's "Flava in Your Ear"; and De La Soul's "Talkin' Bout Hey Love," i.e., Stevie Wonder's "Hey Love"; as well as various other tracks by such New York-based *underground* hip-hop groups as Gang Starr, Wu-Tang Clan, and Das REX). Raggamuffin rapper Mad Lion's "Take It Easy," produced by KRS-One, also became a heavily sampled staple shortly after its release in 1994. The resonance of such an already hybrid rap-reggae hit in Puerto Rico calls attention again to the broader currency of such fusions at the time; thus, for all its departures, one can hear the particular *mélange* of *melaza* as coherent with simultaneous movements in New York and across the Caribbean-U.S. cosmos.

With regard to reggae, as catalogued to some extent above, the dancehall riddims most commonly sampled, replayed, and reconstructed in Puerto Rico at this time were such recent, popular productions (in Jamaica and New York) as the *Dem Bow*, *Bam Bam*, *Fever Pitch*, and *Poco Man Jam*, as well as older but enduring riddims dating from the '60s, '70s, and '80s: *Drum Song*, *Real Rock*, *Stalag*, *Tempo*, to name a few.⁶¹ DJ Playero and his colleagues and competitors either directly sampled (and "chopped and stabbed") these riddims or alluded to them—especially those defined by their basslines (such as *Drum Song* or *Stalag*)—by replaying the melodies on synthesizers, which had long been used by *underground* producers to augment their sample-based productions. It is also worth noting, as has been mentioned above, that vocalists frequently added yet another layer of intertextuality either by employing melodies drawn directly from dancehall songs (as well as from hip-hop or pop hits) or by borrowing some of the more generic melodic contours that dancehall DJs have long used to propel their lyrics. Shabba Ranks, Tenor Saw, Buju Banton, Super Cat, and Cutty Ranks appear to be favorite models in this regard. (And the names of many *underground* artists—with such appellations as Ranks, Stylee, Notty, and Daddy—pay explicit tribute to such figures.) Even when specific melodies do not appear, *underground* mcs' flows tend to closely resemble dancehall's sing-song, staccato, double-time, end-rhyme orientation. Many *underground* vocalists seem also to have adopted dancehall DJs' frequent disregard for conventional key relationships—what some might brand "off-key" singing—which could be heard as both an expression of these vocalists' "lack" of formal musical training as well as an aesthetic orientation consistent with oral/aural approaches more broadly.⁶²

The dense, distinctive intertextual mix of hip-hop and reggae embodied in

mid-1990s *underground* recordings thus supported a youth- and class-inflected cultural politics of blackness and did so, significantly, by embracing (if not amplifying) the Nuyorican dimensions of Puerto Rican culture. Taking a hip-hop hatchet to reggae's pop-will-eat-itself aesthetics, *underground* producers and vocalists crafted a rich musical fusion which gestured to New York as the cultural crucible where Puerto Ricans, Panamanians, Jamaicans, and African Americans, among others, encountered each other and contributed to a shared, contested, and culturally charged soundscape. Moreover, as noted above with regard to the mixtapes' artwork, the transnational character of *melaza* emerged not only in the sounds of the productions but in the images that accompanied them. Significantly, similar articulations of race and place can be seen in the promotional videos for the mixtapes. The video for *The Noise 6*, for instance, with its shots of goose-down jacket wearing mcs hopping turnstiles in the New York subway and posing in front of the Unisphere in Queens, offers a vivid illustration of what Juan Flores describes as a "notable reverse in the direction of social desire for the geographical other":

While traditionally the translocal Puerto Rican sensibility was characterized by the emigrant longing for the beauties of the long-lost island, in some rap texts and among street youth it was the urban diaspora settings of the Bronx and El Barrio that became places of fascination and nostalgia.⁶³

In this sense, the expressive forms of reggaeton (and its rap-reggae precursors) might be heard, seen, and read as embodying the "cultural remittances" of "transnationalism from below," perhaps even promising a rediscovery of Puerto Rican negritude and a reconciliation of Puerto Rican national identity.⁶⁴ Nodding to historian Frank Moya Pons, Flores compares such a potential shift to the ways in which notions of Dominican self- and nationhood have been reshaped by returning migrants. "Racial and cultural denial worked for many years," argues Moya Pons, "but migration to the United States finally cracked down the ideological block of the traditional definition of Dominican national identity."⁶⁵ Even so, as Tego Calderón contends, despite some encouraging signs—such as Don Omar's self-identification (and projection) as "el negro"—any real change in racial ideologies on the island and across Latin America more widely remains painfully slow: "There is ignorance and stupidity in Puerto Rico and Latin America when it comes to blackness," Calderón bluntly states in a recent piece published in the *New York Post*, and reprinted in this volume.

Resistance to hip-hop, reggae, and reggaeton in Puerto Rico is thus consistent with certain cultural-national parochialisms which fail to come to grips

with what Flores calls “the full force of diaspora as source and challenge in Caribbean music history.” The communities living in diaspora, Flores contends, “need to be seen as sources of creative cultural innovation rather than as repositories or mere extensions of expressive traditions in the geographic homelands.”⁶⁶ This is by no means new cultural terrain for Puerto Rico, as the examples of *danza* and salsa demonstrate a similar process of engaging with putatively “other” music (marked, say, as black, Nuyorican, or Cuban), and of nationalizing as quintessentially Puerto Rican expressive forms once coded as foreign.⁶⁷ And yet, as the “creole” character of *danza* or the blanqueamiento of salsa demonstrates—with the latter genre’s explicit “racial consciousness,” as Deborah Pacini Hernandez puts it, “replaced by the lush orchestral arrangements and insipid lyrical concerns of its stylistic successor, *salsa romántica*”—the “nationalization” or public embrace of that which was initially cast as *música negra* in Puerto Rico can also lead to a co-optation (or at least a transformation) of such genres for commercial ventures.⁶⁸ Indeed, as Puerto Rico’s transnationally forged rap-reggae hybrid moves from the *underground* to the “mainstream” around the turn of the millennium, one hears (and sees) some striking shifts in sonic, visual, and textual articulations of community, especially as artists and producers seek more explicitly to market the genre, especially outside Puerto Rico, as the sound of an emergent, pan-Latino community.

FROM MÚSICA NEGRA TO REGGAETON LATINO: MIGRATION AND THE MAINSTREAM

As *underground* became more commercially lucrative over the late '90s and especially in the first half of the present decade, it also became, inevitably, less underground—both in aesthetic and economic terms. The advent of accessible digital tools for producing and distributing recordings radically changed the sound and reach of the genre, and vocalists and producers alike began to target new markets and audiences, often redrawing the lines of community in the process. No longer bound by Puerto Rico’s shores or even by Nuyorican and wider diasporic circuits, reggaeton artists and record labels began to address a new and increasingly diverse listenership in the expanded contexts of national and international mediaspheres. Infusing the music first with the propulsive and suggestive sounds of techno (or *tecno*, as sometimes localized) and later with such “tropical” sources (again, to use the industry term) as bachata and salsa, the contemporary sound of reggaeton as a slickly produced club music—

indeed, as the world came to know it via the galloping synths of “Gasolina”—cohered around the turn of the millennium and quickly assumed the sort of stylistic orthodoxy one might expect from commercial ventures.

Despite subtle sonic reminders of the genre’s roots and routes, such as the persistent presence of the *dembow* rhythm, familiar percussion samples, and certain vocal styles or flows, what had formerly been ubiquitous and obvious nods to hip-hop and reggae—and which seemed quite essential to the genre and its cultural politics in the mid-1990s—grew further submerged with reggaeton’s burgeoning commercial success. Perhaps in part in order to avoid copyright litigation given newfound prominence (and profits), reggaeton producers increasingly favored synthesized backings, with the only remaining samples being the snares, kicks, and other bits of resonant percussion cut-and-pasted from the genre’s foundational dancehall riddims (and, more and more, circulating as sample banks via e-mail and CD-Rs). Reggaeton, as it came to be called during this time, began to throb with the heavy, bombastic sounds of club and dance anthems (i.e., house- and techno-infused pop). Grafted onto the genre’s *dembow* template, the music was increasingly produced and promoted as the soundtrack of “perreo” and “bellaqueo” (i.e., doggy-style dance and horniness), of highly sexualized dancing and highly sexualized objects of the male gaze.

Mirroring the commercialism and exaggerated sexual license associated with club culture, as well as continuing a longstanding preoccupation for the genre (and a common projection onto reggae), song themes turned more squarely to sex—which is to say, macho fantasies about sex—often bordering on the pornographic: see, e.g., DJ Blass’s *Reggaeton Sex* series or albums such as *Triple Sexxxx*. If perhaps publicly challenging middle-class mores and Christian values, reggaeton’s emphasis on sex (and, more mildly, romance) should also be seen as consistent with mainstream commercial American culture, not to mention enduring stereotypes about “hot blooded” Latin lovers.⁶⁹ It is but a short jump from here to the video for N.O.R.E.’s crossover hit “Oye Mi Canto,” featuring an array of bikini-clad women waving the flags of Latin American and Caribbean countries. Reggaeton producers and performers thus seemed to embrace, if not amplify, a number of stereotypes about race, gender, and nation as the music moved into the mainstream marketplace. Given such changes in context and content, the genre’s cultural politics might be seen (and heard) as undergoing a major shift around the turn of the millennium, moving away from a sonically, textually, and visually encoded foregrounding of racial community and toward nationalist (and often sexist, or at least gendered)

Latin/pan-Latin signifiers—or, to put it in the words of reggaeton performers themselves, from “música negra” to “Reggaeton Latino,” the latter phrase enshrined and projected by a Don Omar crossover hit in 2005.

And yet, as far as the genre may have drifted from hip-hop and reggae in some ways, the embrace by reggaeton producers, performers, and record labels of “bling-bling” style and hustler archetypes; aggressive cross-promotion and media savvy; and the timbres and textures of hip-hop’s and reggae’s own overlapping digital millennial aesthetics—all these features show how the genre has remained in close conversation with its influences. Moreover, reggaeton’s rise to mainstream visibility, audibility, and marketability is tied not only to such stylistic synergy but also to a certain degree of fortuitous timing. In 2003, directly prior to breakthrough hits by N.O.R.E., Daddy Yankee, and Don Omar, a wave of crossover hits and high-profile collaborations by such Jamaican dancehall artists as Sean Paul, Wayne Wonder, and Elephant Man had served to prepare U.S. (and international) audiences for, if you will, relatively unintelligible, dance-centric pop.⁷⁰ (For the average monolingual English speaker, Jamaican creole might as well be Spanish.)⁷¹ Further prepping the listening public for Spanish and Spanglish songs, Jamaican dancehall’s own success in the U.S. mainstream was amplified (if also appropriated) by U.S.-based Latino/a performers who employed the latest reggae riddims to support their own chart incursions: e.g., Pitbull’s “Culo” and Nina Sky’s “Move Ya Body” were both recorded over the *Coolie Dance* riddim, while Lumidee recorded “Never Leave You (Uh-Oooh, Uh-Oooh)” on the *Diwali* riddim, which had already propelled U.S. chart hits by Sean Paul and Wayne Wonder. Thus, as dancehall reggae artists piggybacked their way to new levels of international success on hip-hop’s national and global resonance, reggaeton artists did the same, with the added assistance of their brethren from Jamaica, who readied stateside audiences for a new wave of Caribbean-inflected, foreign-but-familiar, rap-infused dance music.

Other forms of audible commercialization consistent with the mainstreaming of reggaeton from the mid-1990s to today can be heard in the increasingly commonplace effects and affects of R&B and American pop more generally, as also heard in the often overwrought singing styles of Latin pop ballads. While the singsong melodies of dancehall reggae as well as hip-hop’s more monotonic flows have continued to underpin reggaeton vocals, other kinds of approaches—in particular, *American Idol*-style melismatic histrionics—have become more prominent since the mid-1990s, along with the rise of romantic themes and crooner-and-rapper duos (e.g., Angel and Kris, Alexis and Fido, Hector and Tito, Wisin and Yandel, Rakim and Ken Y). Similarly, the ap-

pearance of group and solo albums and compilations of discrete songs, as opposed to dense, nonstop mixtapes, might be seen as another attempt to bring reggaeton into the aboveground commercial marketplace. A similar shift has occurred at the level of the song: whereas early and mid-1990s productions were marked by more fragmentary routines following the regular if whimsical shifts of their collagelike accompaniment, by the late 1990s and especially after the turn of the millennium, it became far more common to produce separate songs following a verse-chorus-verse form and without too many stark departures in musical texture. Such discrete units and familiar forms are, of course, far easier to promote and sell in the mainstream market. Related to this push toward a certain orthodoxy, reggaeton’s defining feature, the *boom-ch-boom-chick* of the *dembow* pattern, has assumed a level of rhythmic hegemony, such that one hears far fewer breaks into hip-hop or contemporary dancehall style.⁷²

At some point in the late 1990s, though the exact date and particular neologist remain in dispute, *underground* (or *dembow*, *melaza*, etc.) was recrowned *reggaeton*, a name perhaps befitting the genre’s increasing commercialization as well as a sense that it had emerged as a distinctive fusion, as neither hip-hop nor reggae (though it was still frequently described using both terms by fans and practitioners).⁷³ DJ Nelson is frequently credited, and takes credit, for renaming the genre. “In 1995 I put the name ‘Reggaeton’ on one of my albums,” he told a reporter for the *Fader* magazine, “I started thinking, Let me put like ‘Reggae Maratón’ or ‘Maratón Reggae’ on it. And from there I started, like, simplifying words, and then I came up with ‘Reggaeton.’”⁷⁴ According to DJ El Niño, a Bronx-born, Connecticut-based DJ who plays reggaeton alongside house, hip-hop, salsa, and a host of other styles, some people began using the term *reggaeton* around this time to describe tracks employing “original beats”—that is, those that did not rely on the well-worn reggae riddims and hip-hop samples of the ’90s but instead primarily employed synthesizers.⁷⁵ DJ Blass’s popular *Reggaeton Sex* series no doubt was crucial in popularizing the term as well as tying it to the new production style emerging in step with digital music software (not to mention significations of the sexual). And, of course, more recent media attention and industry hype around the genre, especially from 2004 to the present, have served to cement the term’s connection to the music and to consolidate its resonance for producers and audiences.

Around the same time the genre was becoming known by a new name, the music had begun to accrue several of the stylistic features that propel today’s radio-friendly, club-ready confections. The advent of new music production technologies, in particular synthesizer and sequencer software, has a great deal

to do with this shift in sound. Programs such as Fruity Loops, with telltale "preset" sounds and effects, served to expand and change the sonic palettes of reggaeton producers. In part because such programs were often initially developed as tools for techno producers, the genre started to move away from reggae and hip-hop samples and toward futuristic synths, cinematic strings, bombastic effects, and (especially just before a "big" downbeat) crescendoing kick drums, snare rolls, and cymbal splashes. The latter formal devices sound more derived from trance-style techno anthems than anything else, if also, notably, sometimes syncopated in a manner more reminiscent of breaks in salsa or merengue. Established producers such as DJ Playero, DJ Nelson, and DJ Joe, as well as relative newcomers such as DJ Blass, helped move the genre's primary sound sources from samples to synthesizers, introducing the use of heavier kick drums, ravey synth "stabs," and trancey arpeggios as well as cartoonish digital sound effects (wind blowing, explosions). Their productions were not uniform or mutually indistinguishable, however, and each offers an interesting look at the development of the genre during a crucial transition. A brief survey will allow us to listen in on some of these changes.

For all the new sounds and technologies informing reggaeton style in the late '90s, prior to a kind of commercial consolidation around 2002 many productions maintained audible links to the genre's sample-laden days, and thus, perhaps, to the audible cultural politics of mid-1990s *melaza*. A number of familiar sources from hip-hop and reggae, if often employed in a self-consciously nostalgic manner, can still be heard on, say, *Playero 41: Past, Present, and Future* (1998–99), including a track tellingly titled "Old School View" which offers up a classic collage in *underground* style, referencing an earful of resonant samples in under thirty seconds: among other bits, we hear fragments from Slick Rick's "Mona Lisa"; the familiar saxophone stab from 45 King's "900 Number"; rapper Rob Base saying "I wanna rock right now" (from "It Takes Two"); the well-worn breakbeat from Bob James's "Take Me to the Mardi Gras" (as used in countless hip-hop songs); Chuck D's heavily sampled shout "Bass! How low can you go" (from "Bring the Noise"); a measure from House of Pain's "Jump Around"; and the stuttered synth stab from the opening of Dirtsman's "Hot This Year." More subtle connections to the genre's past also remain audible in Playero's late 1990s productions, especially in the unremitting presence of Jamaican riddim staples, which nonetheless appear in more fragmentary form as short "chops" and "stabs" integrated into increasingly synthesized *pistas*.

Other tracks on releases such as *Playero 41* strongly embody the genre's new techno- and pop-oriented directions. Notty Man's "Dancing" for example,

features various techno synths, evoking the distinctively "squelchy" sounds of the Roland TB-303 and employing the characteristic filtering, or frequency sweeps, of electronic dance music. Daddy's Yankee's "Todas las Yales" is another case in point. The track begins with a "detuned" synth riff evoking any number of trance or techno tracks. As a four-on-the-floor kick drum augments the riff, one could easily mistake it for a standard, if not cliché 1990s club anthem, at least before the *dembow* drums enter. Once the 3 + 3 + 2 snares come in, along with Yankee's voice, there is no mistaking the track for anything other than reggaeton; nonetheless, it offers a clear example of how synthesized (or sampled) techno references came increasingly to supplant the genre's affinity for hip-hop and dancehall sources. The track still moves somewhat starkly between a hip-hop groove and a *dembow* rhythm, however, and such alternation maintains connections to mid-1990s style. Moreover, at points Yankee propels his lyrics with a couple (characteristically "out-of-tune") melodies borrowed from Culture Club's "Karma Chameleon" (1984) and the Bangles' ballad "Eternal Flame" (1989).⁷⁶ Although these references to '80s pop hits might seem slightly odd here, not to mention rather far from the symbolic links which borrowed hooks from reggae or hip-hop songs might once have evoked, they are actually consistent with what has long been an ecumenical outlook for the genre—an approach derived in part from hip-hop's and reggae's own voracious practices. Finally, "Todas la Yales" also offers a window into the enduring presence of Jamaica via Panama: the term *yales*, which Yankee at times interchanges here with *mujeres* (i.e., women), comes from the Panamanian slang *guiales*, which itself adapts *gyal*, a Jamaican creole version of *girl* or *girls*.⁷⁷

Productions by The Noise and DJ Joe during this period demonstrate similar trends. On *The Noise 9* (2000), for instance, one hears the telltale sounds of Fruity Loops presets and effects alongside other synthesized sounds, especially the pounding bass drums for which techno is known. One also hears, however, the same big bass synths, chopped-and-stabbed hip-hop references (e.g., squealing Cypress Hill samples), repeatedly triggered vocal lines, allusions to dancehall melodies (Ruben San crams several into a single song), and *Dem Bow* samples (especially the snares, but also the riddim's resonant bass drum) for which *melaza* had been known. The *Bam Bam*, *Fever Pitch*, and *Poco Man Jam* riddims also rear their heads in the mix. Although the *pistas* still shift in shape and feel at regular intervals, sometimes fairly radically, the music is less pastichelike than on earlier recordings, and the song forms more closely resemble standard pop fare. DJ Joe's millennial mixtapes also seem to confirm these directions. Whereas the producer's late 1990s mixes retain a great deal of

melaza style, shortly after 2000 the influence of Fruity Loops and nods to techno become far more pronounced. With the exception of *Dem Bow* drum samples, by the release of *Fatal Fantasy 1* (2001), big, cheesy club synths, digital explosions, and melodramatic percussion crescendos dominate the tracks' textures, overshadowing any sample-based connections to earlier styles. Vocalists still employ dancehall-related melodies as well as various pop allusions (including the '50s hit "Mr. Sandman"), though one also hears a refinement of such a melodic approach: a distinctively Puerto Rican approach to melodic contour and vocal timbre—often evoking the nasal singing styles of many *soneros*—seems to emerge after a decade of recycling a handful of tunes. A connection between the sounds of techno and the sexual already appears rather reified by this point, underscored in DJ Joe's case by the suggestively (mis)spelled reference to a popular video game (*Final Fantasy*) on the *Fatal Fantasy* series.

Despite these parallel movements across the reggaeton scene, during the first few years of the new millennium DJ Blass might rightly be credited as most audibly promoting the *tecno* sound, conflating it with sexual license, and ushering in a good number of the elements which remain staples of the genre today and mark most of its mainstream hits. Blass's *Reggaeton Sex* series employs the futuristic, tactile synths and bombast of rave-era techno and contemporary trance to great effect, creating physically and psychologically compelling music over which (male) vocalists and (female) "phone-sex" samples repeatedly invoke the body and the bawdy. Over saw-tooth synths and ping-pong arpeggios, crescendoing kicks and snares and cymbal crashes, vocalists exhort (and/or order) women to "move it," *perreo*, and do a fair number of other, more explicitly sexual acts. Rather than the pliant, reggae-derived basslines of the mid-1990s, synthesized bass tones serve instead to accentuate the kick drums on each beat, often with a I-V ("oompah"-style) movement and sometimes tracing out simple chord progressions—a rudimentary rhythmic and harmonic role for the bass which has remained a feature in a great many commercial reggaeton productions.⁷⁸ Against these steady bass tones and heavy kicks on each beat, the snares—sampled from *Dem Bow*, *Bam Bam*, and other favorite reggae riddims—frequently come to the fore, pulling against the foursquare feel with their 3 + 3 + 2 accents and making quite prominent what is, at times, the only audible, timbral connection to the genre's *underground* roots. Gesturing to the regularly shifting forms of the mid-1990s, Blass often switches between different snare samples at 4-, 8-, or 16-measure intervals, creating a subtle sense of form against the otherwise rather static synth vamps.

One strong contrast to what seems like a creeping sameness among reggaeton producers around this time can be heard in the productions of DJ Nelson, even if, remarkably, he is also partly responsible for ushering in the most hegemonic force in recent reggaeton style, the duo known as Lunny Tunes. Beginning with his production work for The Noise in 1992, Nelson's productions have consistently put forward an ecumenical orientation, as well as one that remains closely connected to contemporary movements in hip-hop and reggae. During an interview segment in the *Chosen Few* documentary, Nelson characterizes himself and his style as "adventurous": "I like to experiment," he says, "to fuse different genres, for example: salsa and reggaeton, electronic music and reggaeton. I always try to bring something new to the genre, to give people new rhythms." (Appropriately, while he is describing himself in this manner a bachata-reggaeton fusion plays in the background.) Most recently, Nelson has been at the forefront of salsa-reggaeton fusions and infusions, but his premillennial productions also demonstrate a great deal of variety. Nelson's album *The Flow* (1998) balances early synth explorations with a hefty number of samples and obvious references to other songs (e.g., Eurythmics' "Sweet Dreams"). Notably, as many tracks on the album employ hip-hop grooves (see figure 4) and dancehall's distinctive stomp (figure 2) as reggaeton's well-worn *boom-ch-boom-chick*; indeed, the second half of the album might best be described simply as Spanish-language hip-hop, suggesting that reggaeton could have gone in a rather different direction altogether. A series of popular productions by Nelson's former apprentices, Lunny Tunes, however, seems to have pushed the genre most firmly into a kind of *dembow* orthodoxy.

The rise and runaway success of Lunny Tunes and the defining role they played in shaping what is today known as reggaeton would seem to symbolize the central role that migration has played in the ongoing formation (and re-formation) of the genre. Both Lunny (Francisco Saldana) and Tunes (Victor Cabrera) were born in the Dominican Republic and moved to Massachusetts as teenagers. But rather than settling in Roxbury or Dorchester or Springfield—local areas known for their sizeable Spanish-speaking communities—the two found themselves (and found each other) living in Peabody, a relatively affluent, suburban town on the outskirts of Greater Boston. Although not far from the larger, more established Latino community in Lynn, the Spanish-speaking community in Peabody was fairly small and encouraged a kind of tight-knit fraternization. As Cabrera once framed it: "Since most of the Latin people there didn't speak English, and we were all together, we had to listen to our own thing."⁷⁹ In this case, "our own thing" primarily meant bootlegged reggaeton recordings circulating from Puerto Rico through familial and peer

networks. The duo's deep, abiding engagements with reggaeton hence says a great deal about the longstanding transnational appeal and reach of the music. To some extent the emergence of such an important production team from such a seemingly marginal set of spaces (both the Dominican Republic and the Boston suburbs) suggests yet another decentralization of Spanish-language reggae-rap, a shift connected to migration and fueled by technology.⁸⁰ Of course, the fact that the duo eventually moved to Puerto Rico to set up shop speaks volumes about the enduring (industrial) center of the genre, new regional nodes of production notwithstanding.⁸¹

As can be heard on such Luny Tunes productions as "Gasolina" or any number of the *pistas* on *Mas Flow* (2003), *The Kings of the Beats* (2004), or *Mas Flow 2* (2005), the duo's penchant for synthesized textures, plucky melodic filigree, techno crescendos, and cinematic bombast builds on the prior innovations of Nelson, Blass, Joe, and others. Even so, Luny Tunes—and such cohorts as Nelly, Noriega, and Tainy—set themselves apart from their forebears through their facility with the latest generation of music production software and keyboards. (Scrutinizing Luny Tunes' sonic signatures as well as photos and videos of the duo at work, studio gear "trainspotters" have noted the presence of such keyboards as the Yamaha Motif 8 and software including Nuendo and Fruity Loops, especially the latter's brittle-sounding *Pluck!* synthesizer, as well as various vst plug-ins, or Virtual Studio Technology instruments and effects—e.g., SampleTank 2 XL, Sonik Synth 2, Hypersonic 2, and HyperCanvas.)⁸² Using such synthesizers, Luny Tunes introduced and advanced a distinctive, pop-oriented melodic and harmonic language to the genre. Drawing on the latest technologies and employing musical devices more common to pop and R&B, the duo produced sleek, shiny tracks which seemed to embody in sonic form the flashy style of *blin-blineo* (or "bling-bling"), an aesthetic borrowed from commercial hip-hop and thus resonant with the predilections of the U.S. music industry and contemporary mainstream or urban radio. The duo's use (and recycling) of 2, 3, and 4 chord vamps, accentuating their simple but moving chord progressions with melodic lines and arpeggios that follow and bring out the underlying harmonic motion, has facilitated the kind of affective, often overwrought crooning which presumably appeals, *American Idol*-style, to a cherished market demographic: teenyboppers.

Maintaining audible connections to contemporary pop and hip-hop while eschewing reggaeton's well-worn sample sources—save for the indispensable percussion of the *Dem Bow* and *Bam Bam* riddims—Luny Tunes also proved crucial in moving the genre more squarely into the realm of "Latin" or "tropical"

music by invoking the distinctive piano riffs of salsa and merengue and, especially, the trebly, swirling guitars of bachata. Imbuing their productions with a crossover appeal which had eluded more hardcore recordings, and tapping into a growing Latin-urban music market in the United States, the duo's productions served as significant sonic symbols, accelerating the genre's move from *música negra* to "Reggaeton Latino," from a principally Afro-Puerto Rican or Puerto Rican audience to a pan-Latino and mainstream U.S. consumer base. Their heavy use of the *dembow*-derived *boom-ch-boom-chick*, moreover—which has come to stand as another important signifier of the genre's Latinness, despite its foundations in Jamaican reggae—seems to have played a major role, especially via their most successful singles, in establishing what many hear today as reggaeton's rhythmic conservatism (or its monotony, to put it more pejoratively, as many detractors do). It is important to note, however, that despite their formidable influence on the "tropicalization" of the genre, Luny Tunes were not the first to infuse reggaeton with "tropical" sources. DJ Joe's *Fatal Fantasy 3* (2002), for example, offers some relatively early attempts to incorporate salsa into the mix: on Ranking Stone's "Todas las Mujeres" a salsa-style piano figure, as played on a chintzy digital synthesizer, dovetails with *dembow* drums; Noemi's "Voy Caminando Reggae Lento Mix" finds propulsion in a sampled salsa riff; and Negrito Truman's "El Phillie" employs a replayed version of the opening ostinato from El Gran Combo's "Ojos Chinos" (notably, a year or so before DJ Nelson would reanimate the same piano riff for Tego Calderón's "Dominicana").

In some ways, the timing was fortuitous for such sonic shifts, especially toward bachata, a Dominican genre originally confined to the slums of Santo Domingo which, like reggaeton, had been gaining prominence among urban, U.S.-based, Spanish-speaking audiences since the turn of the millennium or so.⁸³ The integration of bachata into reggaeton (and, it is worth noting, vice versa), fueled in part by producers of Dominican heritage with a love for both genres, again speaks to the role migration has played in reggaeton's formation. With increasing numbers of Dominicans living in San Juan and New York alike, bachata's unmistakable, shimmering guitar timbres became an increasingly common feature of these cities' soundscapes. According to DJ El Niño, the embrace of bachata by reggaeton producers was a marriage of convenience: "People who were into reggaeton hated bachata," he recounted via e-mail, "it even got dissed on some early reggaeton tracks . . . as things became more mainstream (including bachata) and not so underground it became ok and then u see wât happens now they all have at least 2 'bachata' tracks per cd . . . lol!"⁸⁴ Indeed, based on my own daily listening while commuting from Hum-

boldt Park to Hyde Park in Chicago during the 2006–7 school year, contemporary Hispanic-urban, or “hurban,” radio appears increasingly drawn to reggaeton-bachata hybrids (sometimes referred to as *bachaton*). Crooning R&B-style over *dembow*-propelled bachata guitars, “Dominican York” boybands such as Aventura and Xtreme seem to be contributing in their own way to this broader shift in reggaeton’s cultural profile that is pop oriented and pan-Latin.⁸⁵

This is not to say that reggaeton is not still heard and projected as “black music” by performers and audiences alike, or that genres such as salsa, bachata, or merengue are not (or perhaps, *were* not) themselves cast as *música negra*. For all its mainstream, pan-Latin strivings, reggaeton continues to be racialized as black in the same way that Dominicans and Dominican music and culture are racialized as black in Puerto Rico and, indeed, as Dominicans and Puerto Ricans are, in such places as New York, together racialized as black according to the binary racial logic of the United States. Especially due to the genre’s enduring articulations—musically, sartorially, and discursively—with hip-hop and reggae, reggaeton remains, for many, a “morenos” thing (i.e., African American, not Afro-Latin), as Tempo calls it while explaining in the *Chosen Few* documentary that he “based [him]self on the hip-hop culture.” A quick glance through *In the House* magazine or at any reggaeton video reveals a plethora of visual markers of hip-hop generation, African American culture: braids and dreadlocks, chains and jewelry, oversized clothing, and symbols of “thug” glamour more generally. (Notably, these same culturally charged markers of visual style, prompted a Puerto Rican percussion teacher with whom I was studying to give voice to enduring prejudices, remarking that Daddy Yankee should dress in a manner more consistent with his fair complexion, taken as an index of his assumed [high] class position in the same manner as he took Tego Calderón’s and Don Omar’s phenotypical features to be signs, if misleading ones, of their lower-class background.⁸⁶) Moreover, the implicit and explicit racialization of women as sexual objects in song texts and videos plays on and reanimates longstanding myths about *negra* and *mulata* sexuality. Demonstrating the genre’s strong significations of race and raciness as it finds favor among audiences in Central and South America, recent debates and viral video phenomena on what we might call the Latin American YouTubeosphere have consistently portrayed reggaeton artists and devotees as sexually licentious, morally depraved, and racialized Others.⁸⁷

For all its audibility, then, the increasingly projected pan-Latino character of reggaeton is also inextricable from visual and textual cues. It is telling that a number of the genre’s biggest crossover hits, especially N.O.R.E.’s “Oye Mi

Canto” and Don Omar’s “Reggaeton Latino,” offer explicit attempts to represent reggaeton as the music of a wider community (and market). Both songs address a “Latino” audience in the lyrics, and yet they do so, interestingly, without invoking musical signs of the “tropical,” tending instead toward *dembow*-driven R&B. Instead of sonic signifiers, the songs attach themselves to iconic images of “Latin pride” via their videos, employing grainy footage of political figures, artists, and athletes in “Reggaeton Latino” and (light-)brown-skinned, bikini-clad women dancing under giant flags in “Oye Mi Canto.” The pan-Latino, multinational flag-waving in “Oye Mi Canto” finds correspondence in the song’s chorus, which invokes a now well-worn litany of Spanish-speaking identifications: “*boricua, morena, dominicana, colombiana,*” sing Nina Sky, a Puerto Rican-born, New York-based duo, at times substituting *cubana* and *mexicana* to round things out. Notably, both songs were produced by Boy Wonder, a New York-born producer with family ties to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico who has been among the genre’s biggest boosters—especially via his *Chosen Few* franchise. A revealing moment in the *Chosen Few* documentary portrays Boy Wonder in the studio coaching Nina Sky to add “*mexicana*” to the refrain. The young producer has proven himself rather savvy in promoting reggaeton (and his own efforts in the genre), at times embracing the for-hire, your-ad-here, self-commodification that commercial hip-hop has so successfully leveraged toward cultural and market dominance. “Every kind of message can be said with this music,” he says at one point during the documentary, “and you can put a face on any product.”

As somewhat cynically expressed in Boy Wonder’s aspirations and productions, the genre’s shift from *música negra* to “Reggaeton Latino” seems connected to, even as it informs (especially with reggaeton’s growing visibility, audibility, and marketability), such broader phenomena as mass media marketing in the United States. Take, for example, the programming and on-air practices of Spanish-language media giant Univision’s La Kalle radio franchise, which broadcasts on two signals in the Chicago area and which has sister stations in New York, Miami, San Francisco, Las Vegas, and San Antonio, to name a few. Seeking out the so-called hurban market and offering what they bill as “reggaeton y más” (but not too much *más*), La Kalle’s DJs and promotional materials, presumably in an attempt to reach a wider audience, tend to downplay invocations of particular nationalities, addressing instead a general, Spanish- and Spanglish-speaking audience united under an implicitly racialized, urban American “street” identity (*kalle* is a misspelling of *calle*, or “street” in Spanish). Callers-in, for instance, are now prompted simply to say their name and the catch-phrase, “Yo soy *La Kalle*,” rather than, as was previously

the practice, representing themselves as both belonging to a national group and to the wider Hispanic community.⁸⁸ Reggaeton's success on such radio stations as La Kalle suggests that the genre's own marketing strategies—as advanced by artists, producers, and music industry executives—dovetail quite well with corporate media's initiatives to entice a prized demographic, the substantial and growing numbers of Spanish speakers in the United States.

At the same time, reggaeton's aesthetic shift toward *latinidad* and away from (explicit) negritude seems also to play into current debates in the United States about immigration, citizenship, and civil rights—debates which often erupt into a host of xenophobic, racist, and nationalist arguments on all sides. In this context reggaeton often emerges in the words of detractors as parasitic (on hip-hop and reggae in particular), and it is revealing that discussions (or dismissals) of reggaeton's musical value tend to come to the fore in such discourse, with allegations of monotony and lack of originality as the most common epithets. In the most provocative examples of such discourse, critics accuse reggaeton of horning in on hip-hop's and reggae's market share in the same way Latino immigrants are accused of stealing American jobs.⁸⁹ Thus one might infer that despite the repeated, inclusion of "morenas" in reggaeton's established litany of community relationships (which still serves to draw lines even as it connects dots), such an articulation with blackness functions rather differently in the broader context of U.S. and Latin American race relations than it did in the specific context of mid-1990s Puerto Rico. Similar to hip-hop and reggae, but with its own particular points of provocation, reggaeton has thus served in recent years to animate intense public conversations about race, nation, gender, and generation across the Americas. Given what can seem a tumultuous redefinition of social relationships in the wake of new migrations amidst competing projects of national and transnational (not to mention local) unity, it is hardly surprising that so much heated debate rages over the past and future of reggaeton.

TO WHERE FROM HERE? (WHERE'S "HERE"?)

As this essay has attempted to trace across time and space, reggaeton can be claimed and located as Jamaican, Panamanian, Puerto Rican, Latin, and/or black music. Depending on the particular sociocultural context and historical moment, reggaeton may be heard, embraced, and projected as representing any or all of these people and places, with significant implications for local cultural politics. Despite the genre's history of movement and shifting centers, with its recent rise to mainstream American and global prominence reggaeton

today may stand as even further decentered, diversified, and subject to rearticulation in various sites of production and reception. The music is now crafted and consumed across the Americas and the wider world. That a number of the biggest hits of the genre have been pan-national, flag-waving affairs has further cemented a growing perception—a perception resented by some Puerto Rican cultural nationalists—that reggaeton is yet another genre in the global/Latin pop pantheon. This is a perception from which Puerto Rican artists still benefit a great deal, for they remain the major players in the scene and comprise the vast majority of international stars. But as the genre continues to grow and new regional centers develop, Puerto Rico may find itself as decentered in the reggaeton universe as is New York in global hip-hop's sphere of influence—an inevitable outcome of various artists and labels rushing headlong toward mainstream visibility, audibility, and profitability.

Lest my narrative come across as overly cynical in describing reggaeton's shift toward a pan-Latin profile, I should emphasize that the changes in musical style I have described emerge not simply out of Puerto Rican artists', managers', and labels' calculations about how to reach a wider market, but from the genre's increasingly and genuinely pan-Latino, grassroots popularity. Aspiring producers and performers from across the Latin Caribbean, Latin American, and Spanish-speaking communities in the United States have embraced the music as the sound of their generation, as a style that embodies signifiers of their Latino or national heritage as well as dimensions of the global, the modern, the urban and urbane. For all its core connotations, mainstream success has allowed the sound and style of reggaeton to escape local control; the genre is but the latest Latin dance style to find favor in popular U.S. culture. As such, it appeals to producers and consumers of all kinds. The advent of *reggaeton cristiano*, or Christian reggaeton, and the appearance of such compilations as *Reggaeton Niños* serve as telling confirmations of the genre's new status and significations. In some sense, this move from the margins to the mainstream—complete with a radical shift in the genre's perception and reception in Puerto Rico, moving from a target of censorship to a cause for celebration (if with an enduring ambivalence and anxiety)—follows a familiar arc for a lot of popular, and eventually national, music. Writing about the mbira in Zimbabwe, Thomas Turino observes: "As with the tango, the rumba, steelband, and merengue in the Caribbean and Latin America, it is often foreign interest in a local tradition that causes it to be selected and popularised as a paramount national musical idiom at home."⁹⁰ At this juncture we might rightly add reggaeton to the list.

As time goes on, the term *reggaeton* may come to describe a far wider, or

narrower, field of musical activity. As the genre's influence sinks deeper into Latin, U.S., and global pop, it could simply be seen as an umbrella term for a range of styles—as, say, *rock* functions today, or perhaps even *hip-hop* at this point (which, according to some, including Vico C, would contain reggaeton). However, such diffusion might completely obscure the genre's presence, perhaps leading devotees (and no doubt marketers) to restrict the meaning of reggaeton to a more specific sense of style. Indeed, this may already be true: for many, reggaeton is simply the sound of synth, *dembow*-driven Puerto Rican pop from the Lunny Tunes era. Yet while such synth-driven, snare-shifting compositions remain at the heart of the genre (at least according to the radio, the media, and record sales), already such hybrid offshoots as *salsaton*, *bachaton*, *cumbiaton*, *chutney-ton*, *rai-ggaeton*, and *bhangraton*, among other novelties, point to further localizations and new possibilities for the genre's distinctive sonic footprint to propel the politics of culture (not to mention offering fresh opportunities to cash in on the latest global pop trend).⁹¹ At the same time, a growing number of major pop acts—from Shakira to Britney Spears to R. Kelly to Ricky Martin—have employed reggaeton's telltale *boom-ch-boom-chick* in order to imbue their tracks with resonant, club-ready beats. And reggaeton's *dembow* drums, especially the use of snares to mark out a 3 + 3 + 2 polyrhythm, have also turned up increasingly as new rhythmic accents in rock en español as well as bachata, merengue, norteño, and so on.

Finally, although most mainstream reggaeton hits to date display something of a stylistic orthodoxy, a number of prominent acts from Puerto Rico have also infused their music with a great deal of variety, expanding the sonic palette of the genre with the help of adventurous producers such as DJ Nelson, Danny Fornaris, and Visitante. In some sense, then, reggaeton could be described as fairly heterodox today, displaying at least as ecumenical an outlook as in the days of the sample-dense melaza collage (which, interestingly, has been rearing its head of late as a nostalgic, “retro” signifier for “old school” style). Tego Calderón has done a great deal of stylistic stretching in this regard, incorporating many of the Puerto Rican genres journalists so often take for granted as part of reggaeton's DNA (e.g., bomba, salsa), not to mention experimenting with dancehall and roots reggae, hip-hop, and blues. For their part, Calle 13 (a.k.a. Residente and Visitante) have brought an art-school/class-clown attitude to the genre, expressed musically in their irreverence for any sort of stylistic purity. While referencing the *Dem Bow* and *Bam Bam* enough to convince the reggaeton faithful of their belonging, the group also nods to klezmer, cumbia, tango, and contemporary electronic pop, to name a few. Such eclectic, idiosyncratic musical approaches—in these cases combined with

both Tego's and Residente's combination of reflexivity, earthy humor, and incisive social commentary—seem to suggest that the genre maintains a healthy degree of insurgent creativity. Similarly, we can trust that with bedroom producers from Minneapolis to Medellín seeking to put themselves on the map, reggaeton will not be “running out of gasolina” anytime soon, contrary to premature predictions of its demise.⁹² Where the next fuel injection comes from, however, and how the music's future will embody where it has been, where it resides, and where it is going, are things that remain to be seen. And heard. (I'm going to keep my ears on the snares.)

I hope that, in attempting to construct a metanarrative about reggaeton—a story about the stories people tell about the music, as well as a story I hear the music tell—that I have not proposed too overbearing (or overdetermining) a master narrative of my own. Part of what compels me to listen so closely to reggaeton is that it seems, especially in its mainstream manifestations, to challenge a number of master narratives about American culture and society. For all the conflicts and debates around the music, it also holds the promise—or perhaps gives voice to the postcolonial dream—of a convivial, cosmopolitan multiculture, as Paul Gilroy might put it, suggesting that our cities already sound so and that musical communities might as well act as political communities.⁹³ Whether reggaeton has the potential to change the status quo is deeply unclear to me, for it appears at this point to be co-opted by (and/or willingly “pimping” itself to) a system that thrives on, sells, and sows difference, distinction, and division. I do think, however, that I hear a different America in reggaeton, a different kind of mainstream—or perhaps the disappearance of the mainstream altogether. With regard to the emergence of an increasingly diverse, global, public archive of videos and other media, Jace Clayton has observed, “I enjoy watching the notion of a mainstream dissolve into a trillion scattered data-bites.”⁹⁴ I feel similarly when I listen to today's digital *dembow* tracks and Spanglish raps. Can't we all just dance along?

NOTES

Thanks to Deborah Pacini Hernandez and Raquel Z. Rivera for their indispensable feedback, as well as to the many interlocutors who engaged with earlier versions of these ideas via various blog posts, e.g.: <http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2005/08/we-use-so-many-snares.html>; and <http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2006/06/cabronque-reggaeton.html>.

1. For criticisms of the song (and the genre) as sexist, see, e.g., http://blogging.la/archives/2005/09/latino_963_more_la_radio_sucki.phtml, and <http://www.lacocte>

lera.com/eme/post/2005/09/16/-no-al-reggaeton-perfil-del-fan-del-reggaeton#comentarios (accessed January 6, 2007).

2. By “breakdowns” I refer to the sections in the song when most or all of the percussive elements drop out (in the case of “Gasolina,” e.g., from 1:10 to 1:20 or 2:12 to 2:22), thus creating anticipation for their return—an expectation typically intensified, in reggaeton and trance/techno alike, via the (re)entry of the drums, especially in rapidly subdividing form. Like a crescendo (or hypermeter) in classical music, these dense percussive passages highlight the return of the regular meter, or groove—or the beginning of a new section—by creating what is felt as a “big downbeat,” sometimes further emphasized by a crash/splash cymbal or an explosion, etc. With regard to “tropical” music, I am referring to a category used by the music industry (e.g., Billboard) which tends to lump together various Latin Caribbean (dance) genres (e.g., salsa, merengue), distinguishing them from other Spanish-language music such as Mexican *banda* or *norteño*.

3. Daddy Yankee, a.k.a. Raymond Ayala, happens to have direct family ties to a number of bomba performers, e.g., Los Hermanos Ayala, which included his late father (Ramon “El Negro” Ayala) and his cousins. Hence, I would argue that the bomba connection I make here is not as perfunctory an observation as most invocations of the genre in writings about reggaeton, which tend to rehearse such connections (as I will discuss in this and later sections) despite the actual rarity of audible bomba references in reggaeton recordings. (Tego Calderón and La Sista, both of whom have explicitly incorporated bomba into their albums, stand as exceptional in this regard.)

4. From a description at cduniverse.com, an online vendor: “As one of the most popular musical styles of the mid-2000s, reggaeton gained favor across racial, ethnic, and even age boundaries. It was only a matter of time, then, until a ‘reggaeton for kids’ disc found its way to shelves, and REGGAETON NINOS VOL. 1 is just that. While many reggaeton raps concern themselves with sexual themes or the hard-knock thug life, the tracks on REGGAETON NINOS have been edited for content and language, so concerned parents can at last feel safe letting their young ones groove out to these infectious songs. The album includes several singalong tracks (identified as such) that feature a chorus of children singing the hook, adding to the charm and youth-accessible appeal of the set”: <http://www.cduniverse.com/search/xx/music/pid/6996932/a/Reggaeton+Ninos+Vol.+1.htm> (accessed October 20, 2006).

5. Spencer Ackerman, e.g., describes the ironic resonance and popularity of “Gasolina” among Kurdish “gas-hustlers” in early 2006 in an article hosted at openDemocracy.net: http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-iraq/kurdistan_3369.jsp (accessed October 20, 2006). Moreover, for listeners in Panama, where reggae has long been associated with “oil” and “petróleo” because of their metonymic connotations of blackness, “Gasolina” might have seemed like yet another familiar derivation of *reggae en español* (about which, more in the next section).

6. Moreover, as will be discussed in greater detail below, the track frequently features

a “timbal” figure also associated with the *Dem Bow* riddim in Puerto Rico, thus creating additional sonic links to Afro-Latin styles. Also, allow me to clarify here my various spelling choices: when I write “Dem Bow,” I refer to the Shabba Ranks song; when I write *Dem Bow*, I refer to the riddim produced by Bobby Digital; when I write *dembow*, I refer to the abstracted rhythmic pattern derived from the *Dem Bow* as well as the genre in Puerto Rico named after the ubiquitous rhythm, which was/is sometimes also rendered, in local discourse, as *dembo* or *denbo* (and which is synonymous with “underground,” “under,” *melaza*, etc.).

7. The story of reggaeton’s Panamanian origins has become such a commonplace in journalistic coverage that it seems almost a perfunctory gesture. Online message-board discussions, on the other hand, tend toward fairly heated disputes over which place truly lays claim to the genre. See, e.g., <http://www.futureproducers.com/forums/showthread.php?t=64392&page=3> (accessed October 11, 2006); <http://www.reggaetonline.net/forums/threadnav805-1-10.html> (accessed June 25, 2006).

8. At times throughout this essay I employ the construction “reggae/ton” when referring both to reggae and reggaeton, especially in cases where I am discussing reggae in Puerto Rico or Panama prior to the advent of the term *reggaeton* or seeking to describe the genre across historical periods. For examples of some rather contentious debates around reggaeton’s geographical and cultural provenance, see, e.g., <http://forum.univision.com/univision/board/message?board.id=reggaeton&message.id=91580>; and <http://www.bacanalnica.com/foros/viewtopic.php?t=11646>, <http://abstractdynamics.org/2004/08/reggaeton.php> (accessed January 6, 2007).

9. Among a great deal of other scholarship, the writings of John Storm Roberts—see *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1979]), or *Black Music of Two Worlds: African, Caribbean, Latin, and African-American Traditions* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998 [1972])—and of Ned Sublette—*Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004)—stand as persuasive efforts toward advancing and elaborating such a theory. The work of Ken Bilby, such as his essay “The Caribbean as a Musical Region,” in *Caribbean Contours*, ed. Sidney W. Mintz and Sally Price, 181–218 (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), also offers a compelling narrative lens into these connections.

10. Audio samples illustrating the examples discussed in this essay are available at the following URL: http://wayneandwax.com/?page_id=139.

11. The differences in emphasis and arrangement between these genres are not inconsequential, however. One can thus get into vociferous disagreements about whether reggaeton and, say, salsa indeed share a similar rhythmic orientation or “feel.” See, e.g., the “2005 Rolling Reggaeton Thread” at <http://ilx.p3r.net/thread.php?msgid=5625584> (accessed January 6, 2007), which features such opinions as the following (made in response to a comment of mine): “There is a world of difference between the quarter note pulse existing (which yeah, of course it does) and being explicitly stated. It’s not

stated in most dancehall, Afro-Cuban, New Orleans, etc. music. There's also a big difference between stating it on top with a cowbell or cymbal than on the bottom with the bass drum."

12. I should note that in my own experience taking bomba lessons in Chicago during the fall of 2006, however, such connections between these traditional genres and reggaeton were never elaborated by the instructor, and, indeed, reggaeton was at times denigrated—more because of its lyrics than musical style—as a dangerous, corrupting influence on Puerto Rican youth. The connections I make here, then, are largely my own attempts to provide a generous reading of what are perhaps, more often than not, tenuous attempts to connect reggaeton to traditions other than its most direct forebears, hip-hop and reggae (though I would like to acknowledge the expertise of Anton Kociolek in helping me to articulate these connections). Finally, I hasten to distinguish such structural rhythmic similarities from more specious assertions that particular elements in reggaeton were borrowed directly from bomba or plena, e.g., "While reggaeton is very similar to reggae, a notable difference are the extra claps and high hats derived from Bomba and Plena": <http://xpress.sfsu.edu/archives/life/003326.html> (accessed January 6, 2007).

13. Linton Kwesi Johnson, "Introduction," in *Tougher than Tough: The Story of Jamaican Music*, CD liner notes (London: Island Records Ltd., 1993), 5. It is significant that the DJs and producers Johnson names here are among the major touchstones for Puerto Rican producers and vocalists in the early and mid-1990s: Shabba Ranks's "Dem Bow," as discussed in the previous and following sections, became reggaeton's bedrock riddim; Buju Banton's gruff tone inspired a good many Puerto Rican DJs/MCs; and several riddims played and produced by Steely and Cleve, such as *Poco Man Jam* (1990) and indeed the *Dem Bow* itself, became staple samples for "underground" producers.

14. See, e.g., various essays in Tony Mitchell, ed., *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop outside the USA* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), a good number of which bear witness to a conflation of dancehall (often glossed as "raggamuffin") and hip-hop style in various contexts outside the United States.

15. There is a rich and growing literature on Jamaican (and West Indian/Caribbean) migration to New York in the late twentieth century: see, e.g., Mary C. Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999); Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); Nancy Foner, *Islands in the City: West Indian Migration to New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and, for a volume focusing on music, Ray Allen and Lois Wilcken, eds., *Island Sounds in the Global City: Caribbean Popular Music and Identity in New York* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). As for musical texts, Boogie Down Productions' *Criminal Minded*, CD (B-Boy Records, 1987) is perhaps the best example of the currency that Jamaican style had come to assume in New York by this point. Full of direct references (as sampled, as replayed, and as rapped/sung) to contemporary dancehall, the album nonetheless allowed BDP to advance their claims to interborough dominance (as in the

battle with the Queens-based Juice Crew). That a "hardcore" New York rap group could represent the Bronx so convincingly with the sounds of Jamaica at this time speaks volumes. For similar, more widespread, and perhaps more pernicious representations of Jamaica as the locus of an exotic source of hardcore violence, see, for example, such Hollywood films as *Marked for Death* (1990) or *Predator 2* (1990), both of which feature fearsome, dreadlocked villains.

16. *Chosen Few: El Documental*, CD/DVDs (Chosen Few Emerald Entertainment / Urban Box Office, 82520110152, 2004).

17. The documentary's subtitles, which occasionally offer slightly odd interpretations of the interview texts, translate Master Joe's "en americano" to "in English" in order to distinguish from Spanish-language rappers. In the other cases here, unless noted, I directly quote the subtitles (after reviewing for serious discrepancies).

18. The Mean Machine, Ruby Dee and Whipper Whip, and Charlie Chase are among the earliest, New York-based "Latin rappers." For further discussion of the phenomenon, as well as the implications of its marginalization in the hip-hop narrative, see, e.g., Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Raquel Z. Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

19. See, e.g., a tribute to the late Big Pun in *xxL*, which begins with the lede "Four years ago, we lost Big Pun, a legendary lyricist who changed the game with his furious flow. In tribute, we examine his jump-off—Capital Punishment, the classic LP that proved Latin MCs could rhyme and go platinum": <http://xxlmag.com/Features/2004/0204.BigPun/index.html> (accessed February 1, 2007).

20. See, for instance, Victor M. Rodríguez, "The Racialization of Puerto Rican Ethnicity in the United States," in *Ethnicity, Race and Nationality in the Caribbean*, ed. J. M. Carrion (Río Piedras: University of Puerto Rico, Institute of Caribbean Studies, 1998), 233–73.

21. Big Punisher, "The Dream Shatterer," *Capital Punishment*, CD (Relativity, 1998).

22. For more on the tensions between hip-hop and reggaeton in Puerto Rico, see MC Welmo's essay in this volume. See also, Jesús Triviño, "Spanish Fly," *The Source*, March 2004, 99–101.

23. The segment in question can be found in chap. 8 of the *Chosen Few* DVDs, "Hip-Hop Latino vs. Reggaeton." Interestingly, Vico C's examples also differ in terms of tempo, as he performs the reggaeton rhythm noticeably faster than the hip-hop beat. Although hip-hop and reggaeton tracks alike can range fairly widely in terms of bpm (beats per minute), it is not altogether inaccurate to represent reggaeton as, on the main, generally faster than hip-hop. This, in part, relates to reggaeton's dance-centric character.

24. Not insignificantly, Vico C and El General are often discussed, and even marketed, together. For example, BMG issued a joint greatest hits CD for the two, despite that it simply offers alternating solo tracks from each: See El General/Vico C, *Juntos* (BMG 74321 92210–2, 2002). Also, it is worth noting that El General's influence on the Puerto

Rican hip-hop/reggae scene is perhaps as pervasive as Vico C's *El Comandante's Asi Asi* (1991), for instance, in addition to a song written by Vico C ("She Likes My Reggae"), includes covers of El General's "Tu Pun Pun" and "Te Ves Buena."

25. An online search turns up a number of references in this vein, some asserting that reggae was brought to Panama in the early twentieth century, others alleging that Jamaicans came to work on the canal in the 1970s. See, e.g., http://www.reggaetonfever.com/reggaeton_history.php; <http://www.rhapsody.com/latin/latinraphiphop/reggaeton/more.html>; and <http://www.hispanicscene.com/html/reggaeton.html> (all accessed on January 6, 2007).

26. For examples in which reggae connoisseurs dismiss (as well as defend) reggaeton, see, e.g., <http://www.bloodandfire.co.uk/db/viewtopic.php?t=2282&highlight=reggae> and <http://www.bloodandfire.co.uk/db/viewtopic.php?t=3425&highlight=reggae> (both accessed January 7, 2007); or <http://www.dancehallreggae.com/forum/showthread.php?s=5a0ba209bcd27a57513564dee20f2f27&t=99529> (accessed January 29, 2007).

27. Rex Nettleford, *Mirror Mirror: Identity, Race and Protest in Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: LMH Publishing, 1970 [2001]), 20.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Deborah Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 43.

30. Panama Canal Authority, "Panama Canal Gallery": http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/panama_gallery_04.shtml (accessed January 25, 2007).

31. The local interplay between these styles, not to mention what was referred to as *haitiano* music as well as Latin Caribbean and Central American genres, has yet to be analyzed in depth. (El General, for instance, in the interview with Christoph Twickel published in this volume, mentions the popularity of Haitian music in Panama at the same time reggae was catching on.) As the work of Carla Guerrón-Montero suggests, the ways these genres articulate with Panamanian cultural politics is a complex, interesting, and understudied story. In particular, it would be useful to know how and why reggae eventually came to such cultural prominence among Afro-Antilleans in Panama. See Carla María Guerrón-Montero, "Can't Beat Me Own Drum in Me Own Native Land: Calypso Music and Tourism in the Panamanian Atlantic Coast," *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (fall 2006): 633–63.

32. One well-circulated account also names an immigrant called "Guyana" as having "introduced" reggae to Panama, though this story sounds somewhat apocryphal given the already longstanding musicocultural links between Panama and Jamaica. See, e.g., [http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plena_\(Panam%C3%A1\)](http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plena_(Panam%C3%A1)) (accessed January 29, 2007).

33. Thanks to Mario Luis Small for telling me about *petróleo* (via e-mail, January 2007). For a colorful discussion of the differences between plena, bultrón, and reggaeton in Panama, see the following message-board discussions: http://foros.latinol.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic&f=47&t=000683; and http://foros.latinol.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic&f=38&t=000051&p=3 (both accessed February 20, 2008).

http://foros.latinol.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic&f=38&t=000051&p=3 (both accessed February 20, 2008).

34. Surveying some of the latest songs produced in Panama, one finds the practice continuing: hence, in 2006, one could hear the Panamanian DJ Principal proclaiming himself "El Rey del Dancehall" with the same cadences and over the same riddim that Jamaica's Beenie Man used to crown himself "King of the Dancehall" a few months earlier, or Panama's Aspirante employing for "Las Cenizas Dijeron Goodbye" (The Ashes Said Goodbye) the melody from Jamaican singer Gyptian's "Serious Times" over a reverent re-lick of the strikingly acoustic *Spiritual War* riddim that propels the original (though Aspirante changes the text from a meditation on the state of the world to a failed relationship). For elaboration on Jamaica's "riddim system" and the practice of re-licks, covers, and other kinds of versions—as well as a discussion of vocal or melodic approaches—see Peter Manuel and Wayne Marshall, "The Riddim Method: Aesthetics, Practice, and Ownership in Jamaican Dancehall," *Popular Music* 25, no. 3 (2006): 447–70.

35. Raquel Cepeda, "Riddims by the Reggaetón," *Village Voice*, March 28, 2005, <http://www.villagevoice.com/music/0513,cepeda,62467,22.html> (accessed February 1, 2007). Moreover, for all their commitments to upholding and engaging with reggae tradition, Panamanian artists have also transformed and left their own mark on reggae as the world knows it—and not simply by adapting the form for Spanish, which would eventually spur the reggaeton revolution in Puerto Rico. Here again Tego seems to hit the mark: "In Panama, there's more soca influences. It's faster," he told Raquel Cepeda (*ibid.*). And though that observation is not true across the board, it is consistent with El General's memory, as recounted in the *Chosen Few* documentary, of performing over sped-up reggae riddims during the formative days of Panama's plena scene, playing the instrumental sides of 33 rpm records at 45 rpm. In addition, although one finds a wide range of tempos across Panamanian reggae recordings, there is also an entire subgenre called "110," which directly refers to the number of beats per minute—an above-average bpm for most dancehall (or recent reggaeton, for that matter). And yet, in other ways, the Panamanian reggae scene has long been in conversation with developments in Puerto Rico, though the global rise of reggaeton and the more recent advent of new communication and information technologies have accelerated this exchange. Panamanian producer El Chombo, whose very nickname signifies "piel morena" (dark skin) in Panama, collaborated with Puerto Rico's DJ Negro in the late '90s for the first of his *Los Cuentos de la Cripta* (Tales from the Crypt) series, e.g., while a disc from another series, "Spanish Oil"—a reference to *petróleo* reinforced by the name of Chombo's label imprint Oilers Music—apparently carried the subtitle "From the underground with class," which clearly makes reference to the mid-'90s discourse around Puerto Rico's hybrid of reggae and hip-hop. (This bit of information surfaced in an online discussion about Panamanian reggae, as left in a comment by "cristo," May 31, 2005: http://www.fly.co.uk/fly/archives/2005/04/reggaeton_the_story_so_far.html [accessed January 28,

2007].) More recent Panamanian artists—such as El Roockie, Kafu Banton, Dicky Ranking, Aldo Ranks, Danger Man, and others—differ in the degree to which they engage directly with Jamaican dancehall or with a reggaeton-inflected style.

36. Notably, the compilation also includes contributions by both Afro-Honduran reggae singers such as La Diva and Arzu, as well as the Puerto Rican rapper Lisa M, demonstrating the rapid spread of Spanish-language dancehall reggae across cosmopolitan New York and its postcolonial networks.

37. For discographical information on these releases, as well as photos of the labels, see <http://www.discogs.com/release/366596> and <http://www.discogs.com/release/366600> (accessed February 2, 2007).

38. Orlando Patterson, "Ecumenical America: Global Culture and the American Cosmos," *World Policy Journal* 11, no. 2 (1994): 103–17.

39. *Dancehall Reggaespañol*, liner notes (Columbia Records, 1991), 3.

40. See, e.g., the message board debate at <http://www.bacanalnica.com/foros/viewtopic.php?t=11646&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=32&sid=d94a213b33a0169fa191c301c8a09565> (accessed January 28, 2007). As with all of my Internet sources, I have preserved the ("incorrect") orthographical renderings here, despite that "puertorriqueña" would not be capitalized in Spanish, etc. For more on Panamanian perceptions of reggae, see Ifeoma Nwankwo's interview with Renato elsewhere in this volume.

41. See Deborah Pacini Hernandez's essay elsewhere in this volume for a detailed description of Oquendo's project, as well as its implications for understanding reggaeton's interplay with Dominican music.

42. Although many of these terms will be familiar to readers, I realize that for others this shorthand may appear esoteric. Briefly then, by "breakbeat" I refer to the sampled, looped, funk-derived drum tracks (also called "breaks") used in countless hip-hop tracks; and when I refer to a "dubby" bassline, I mean that it features a lot of repeated notes (at the level of the 16th note), a signature approach for reggae bass players.

43. A group such as Proyecto Uno, who emerged from the New York merengue, merenhouse, "Latin house" and hip-house scenes with a similar fusion around the same time (i.e., the early '90s) and sustained a career throughout the decade (and, to some extent, into the present), stands as an exception to meren-rap's brief bubble of popularity. It is noteworthy that such groups, however, as well as individual members such as Magic Juan, have in recent years incorporated the sounds and styles of reggaeton into their merengue-centered pop (see, for instance, Magic Juan's 2003 hit "Meniando La Pera"), not unlike the similar incorporation of reggaeton into contemporary bachata and salsa, among other popular, "Latin" genres.

44. "Flip-tongue" is a term I learned in Jamaica by which dancehall DJs refer to the double-time style of rapping for which they have become known and which served as a touchstone for many early *underground* MCs in Puerto Rico. This vocal approach, which usually involves an alternation between virtuosic double-time passages (often at the level of the 32nd note) and slower, regular cadences, can also be found on a great number of reggae-influenced hip-hop recordings from the early and mid-1990s.

45. Other notable producers of the period include DJ Eric, DJ Adam, DJ Goldy, Mister G, DJ Joe, and, later in the decade, DJ Blass and DJ Dicky. The forms such recordings took, of course, were directly tied to the media on which they circulated: thus, typically a mixtape contained two 20–30 minute continuous mixes (one for each side of the cassette).

46. As discussed in the opening of this essay, the alternating snares in contemporary productions such as "Gasolina" can thus be heard as subtly embodying a connection to this earlier pastichelike practice of alternating between recognizable, resonant samples from hip-hop and reggae. Moreover, recent songs such as "Reggaeton Latino" by Don Omar or "Sola" by Hector "El Father," continue, for all their commitment to the bedrock *boom-ch-boom-chick*, to employ contrasting grooves in order to propel the songs forward and, perhaps, to appeal to different audiences.

47. Again, just to be clear here, when I refer to hip-hop/underground "MCs" and reggae "DJs" in this context, I describe an essentially equal function—that of the rapper (rather than turntablist/selector). The terminology may differ depending on local parlance, but both MCs and DJs (in hip-hop and reggae, respectively) are descended from the radio and "talkover" DJs of the '50s and '60s who inspired early hip-hop and dancehall vocalists. For more on this nomenclature, as well as an explanation of the recycling of certain melodic contours in dancehall, see Manuel and Marshall, "The Riddim Method."

48. For extensive accounts of Puerto Rico's (and the Caribbean's) increasingly circular migration patterns and the social and cultural implications thereof, see Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz and Carlos Santiago, *Island Paradox: Puerto Rico in the 1990s* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996); Carlos Antonio Torre, Hugo Rodríguez Vecchini, and William Burgos, eds., *The Commuter Nation: Perspectives on Puerto Rican Migration* (Río Piedras: University of Puerto Rico Press, 1994); Patricia Pessar, *Caribbean Circuits: New Directions in the Study of Caribbean Migration* (New York: Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1996); and Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

49. One of the most salient examples of such an invocation of *melaza* can be found in Ismael Rivera's version of Catalino "Tite" Curet Alonso's "Las caras lindas de mi gente negra": "Somos la melaza que rié/la melaza que llora/la melaza que ama . . ." (We are the molasses that laughs/the molasses that cries/we are the molasses that loves . . .). Linked to ideologies of *mestizaje*, or race mixing, *blanqueamiento* refers to the processes, practices, and ideologies of social "whitening" in the Latin Caribbean and Latin America. Often linked to individuals' desire for social mobility or to elite and middle-class nationalisms (with all the exclusions and internal colonialisms of such projects), *blanqueamiento* has been explored by a great many observers and analysts of the region. See, e.g., Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 84–87.

50. Raquel Z. Rivera, "Del underground a la superficie," *Claridad*, February 10–16, 1995, 29.

51. The following website, prepared in 2002 but referring to the debates of 1995, offers a series of talking points for those who oppose the morality expressed in "rap y reggae obsceno": <http://www.moralidad.com/alertas/alerta1.htm> (accessed February 7, 2007).

52. Raquel Z. Rivera, "Del underground a la superficie," 29.

53. See the *Chosen Few* documentary for DJ Coyote's testimony about putting reggaeton on the radio as well as a segment on *In the House* magazine.

54. For an extended discussion of the movements and meanings of "Dem Bow," see Wayne Marshall, "Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton," *Lied und populäre Kultur/Song and Popular Culture: Jahrbuch des Deutschen Volksliedarchivs* 53 (2008): 131–51.

55. Significantly, it appears (to my ears) that the most common versions of the *Dem Bow* riddim circulating in Puerto Rico may in fact be sampled from Nando Boom's "Ellos Benia," produced by Dennis "the Menace" Thompson, rather than directly from Shabba Ranks's "Dem Bow" (though elements from the Bobby Digital version crop up as well).

56. I should confess that although I am able to identify a good number of the references in such recordings thanks to my acquaintance with the hip-hop and reggae repertoires from that period, I am no doubt missing many others, especially, perhaps, references to Puerto Rican (pop and folk) songs—a testament to the sort of listening competency expected, rewarded, and engendered by these *underground* productions.

57. See, e.g., a message-board discussion at reggaetonline.com from November 2006, which offers the following opinion: "The use of the dembow beat came in *Playero 38* first, with the song 'La Musica Negra-Hispana' by Blanco. That song, in its pure and simple self, including the timing of the start of the song after Daddy Yankee's 'Me Quieren Ver Muerto En Mi Funeral', dropping the beat like that, is the essence of Reggaeton right there. If that doesn't make you get up and perrear and dance, I don't know what will." The same author, gsus25th, continues by contending "You can safely say that *Playero* popularized the dembow beat with *Playero 38*": <http://www.reggaetonline.net/forums/threadnav15418-1-10.html>. I am not sure why *Playero 37*, however, which features *pistas* that also employ *dembow*-style rhythms and *Dem Bow* samples, would not be given consideration in this respect, unless it was simply less popular. Appearing to affirm (or perhaps inform) this account, as of the date of access, the Wikipedia entry for DJ *Playero* describes *Playero 38* as having "established the dembow as the official rhythm of reggaeton": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DJ_Playero (both accessed February 14, 2007).

58. Affirming this connection between "la raza" and blackness in mid-1990s Puerto Rico—as opposed to, say, the Mexican-accented meaning of "la raza," which signifies that country's particular, mixed racial heritage—Mayra Santos writes: "If before, 'Cocolos' (salsa fans) were the ones looked upon as the biggest delinquents in the community, and the ones to develop the discourse of a 'Latino' and 'black' identity, now

they're the rappers, the ones who, through their songs, create a new identity designated with the epithet of 'the race.'" "Puerto Rican Underground," *Centro* 8, nos. 1 and 2 (1996): 229.

59. Although I have not been able to find sufficient documentation, it is alleged that DJ Black and DJ Manuel were also involved in the production of *Playero 38*. It should be noted that most of these mixtapes were quite the collaborative endeavors, though many of these stories have yet to come to light.

60. See Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 114–19.

61. For examples of (reggae) songs that employ these riddims, one can browse any number of online databases, e.g., <http://www.dancehallmusic.de/riddimbase.php> (accessed February 28, 2007).

62. For more on the use or reuse of such melodic contours and on unconventional relationships to key in the dancehall tradition, see Manuel and Marshall, "The Riddim Method," esp. 459–60.

63. Juan Flores, "Creolité in the 'Hood: Diaspora as Source and Challenge," *Centro Journal* 16, no. 2 (fall 2004): 289.

64. *Ibid.*, 285.

65. Frank Moya Pons, "Dominican National Identity in Historical Perspective," *Punto 7 Review* (1996): 23–25 (quoted in Flores, "Creolité in the 'Hood," 289).

66. Flores, "Creolité in the 'Hood," 288, 283.

67. See, e.g., Peter Manuel, "Puerto Rican Music and Cultural Identity: Creative Appropriation of Cuban Sources from Danza to Salsa," *Ethnomusicology* 38, no. 2 (spring/summer 1994): 249–80.

68. Deborah Pacini Hernandez, "Dancing with the Enemy: Cuban Popular Music, Race, Authenticity, and the World-Music Landscape," *Latin American Perspectives* 25, no. 3 (May 1998): 113–14.

69. Carolyn Cooper, e.g., has argued that dancehall reggae's so-called moral slackness often served as a kind of class- and race-based critique of bourgeois values in Jamaica. See, e.g., *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1993). Although reggaeton's increasing emphasis on sex may seem an insignificant shift for a genre that had long represented itself, if perhaps wishfully, as "para la chica que le gusta el sex" (for the girl that likes sex; a sound bite from *The Noise 1* [ca. 1992]), it is worth noting that this turn also represents a commitment to commercializing the hardcore rather than cleaning it up for the mass market. Such a strategy stands in contrast, for instance, to the attempts at commercialization via romantic themes and "clean lyrics" during the mid-1990s in response to calls for censorship and seizures of cassettes. See, e.g., *The Noise 3* (ca. 1993), which bills itself as "temas románticos al estilo de reggae" (romantic songs in a reggae style) in the faux-radio intro, or *The Noise 4* (ca. 1995), which advertises "Clean Lyrics" on the cover.

70. It is worth noting as well that especially for audiences in Europe and Latin

America, the Panamanian artist Lorna's 2003 hit "Papi Chulo (Te Traigo El Mmmm)," produced by El Chombo, exposed international audiences to reggaeton style prior to Daddy Yankee's breakthrough.

71. My assertion here is supported only by anecdotal evidence, but various informal polls I have taken of students, friends, and colleagues have affirmed that few English monolinguals in the United States understand any significant portion of dancehall reggae lyrics, even by artists such as Sean Paul who strive for a certain level of "mainstream" accessibility.

72. See figures 1, 2, and 4 above for examples of such rhythmic patterns.

73. Well into the new millennium, I still routinely heard people refer to the genre simply as reggae. While working as a substitute teacher at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School and as a digital music instructor in Roxbury, Mass., from 2002 to 2003, I heard students discussing, or asking how to produce, "reggae," only to discover eventually that they referred not to Jamaican-style reggae but to the distinct timbres and rhythms of "Spanish reggae" or reggaeton.

74. Francis Jargon, "DJ Nelson," *Fader* 40 (September 2006): 158.

75. E-mail correspondence, September 28, 2006.

76. For a discussion of unconventional key relationships or "out-of-tune" singing in reggae (from which reggaeton seems to derive its own similar vocal practices), see Manuel and Marshall, "The Riddim Method," esp. 459–60.

77. Thanks to Mario Small for bringing this connection to my attention, as well as for offering other examples of localized Jamaican terms in Panamanian discourse, such as *liquiyu* (from *likkle youth*).

78. Given the "oompah" feel created by such bass patterns and a pronounced four-on-the-floor, it may be of little surprise that, according to an attuned observer in Chicago, some Jamaicans refer to reggaeton, presumably pejoratively, as "polka reggae." See <http://www.gearslutz.com/board/rap-hip-hop-engineering-production/39561-where-does-reggaeton-fit-all.html> (accessed April 14, 2007).

79. Jon Caramanica, "The Conquest of America (North and South)," *New York Times*, December 4, 2005.

80. See Deborah Pacini Hernandez's essay in this volume for a more detailed account of the role that Dominicans have played in reggaeton.

81. It is worth noting, however, that Saldana (a.k.a. Lunny) also grew up in Puerto Rico, living with his mother and sisters before moving to Massachusetts to finish high school. Hence, his move to San Juan also represents a return, further complicating (or perhaps remaining consistent with) reggaeton's circuitous geography.

82. See, e.g., <http://www.futureproducers.com/forums/showthread.php?t=130753&page=2> (accessed May 8, 2007).

83. Of course, the mainstreaming of bachata in the United States and in Puerto Rico was preceded by the genre's rise to the mainstream in the Dominican Republic via such middle-class mediators as Juan Luis Guerra. For more on the historical development

and social status of bachata, see Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata: A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

84. E-mail correspondence, September 28, 2006. I have left the spelling and punctuation, fairly typical of the informality of Internet discourse, largely unchanged here in order to preserve the tone of the exchange.

85. Adding to this impression is some additional, admittedly anecdotal, evidence. I have noticed since I began writing online about reggaeton and bachata that such search strings as "bachata guitar sample loops"—presumably, by aspiring reggaeton producers—bring people to my site fairly frequently; similarly, I have gathered a fair amount of informal evidence about the popularity of certain techniques and technologies used to produce reggaeton. Countless strings with some variation on the phrase "reggaeton samples para fruity loops," e.g., have led search engine sleuths to my blog. See, e.g., <http://www.flickr.com/photos/wayneandwax/366562442> (accessed January 22, 2007).

86. For a provocative discussion of race and class stereotypes as projected onto reggaeton artists, see Raquel Z. Rivera's August 2006 blog post "Will the Real Blanquitos Please Stand Up?: Class, Race, and Reggaeton," http://reggaetonica.blogspot.com/2006/08/will-real-blanquitos-please_115637030500548739.html (accessed May 10, 2007).

87. I am thinking here of such examples as "Yasuri Yamileth," "Chacarron," and "Perreo Chacalero," all of which inspired countless "karaoke" versions posted to YouTube. These responses to the original videos, and to other responses, frequently feature blatant performances of race and class stereotypes by the transnational, Latin American "digerati" who have access to such tools and technologies. I have written about these videos and their social and cultural implications in the following blog posts: <http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2006/07/jajaja.html>; <http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2006/07/mas-chacarron.html>; <http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2006/07/chaca-riggity-ron.html>; <http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2006/10/we-are-all-yasuri-yamileth.html>; <http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2006/10/pooh-bear-yo-le-conozco-apenas.html>; <http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2006/10/ni-chicha-ni-limonada.html> (all accessed May 10, 2007).

88. I'd like to thank a student at the University of Chicago, Diana Lester, for calling my attention to these changes in on-air practice.

89. For some fairly provocative, if perhaps tongue-in-cheek, examples of this sort of rhetoric, see a number of contentious posts by prominent hip-hop blogger Byron Crawford: e.g., "Ban reggaeton" <http://xxlmag.com/online/?p=767>, and "Rap against fence jumpers" <http://xxlmag.com/online/?p=961> (both accessed May 10, 2007). A similar set of tensions can be read into Jon Caramanica's early 2006 article on reggaeton for the *Village Voice*, which concludes by speculating that Eminem is the least of hip-hop's worries: "Fuck a Slim Shady," writes Caramanica, "Hip-hop's race war begins here" ("Grow Dem Bow," *Village Voice*, January 10, 2006).

90. Thomas Turino, "The Mbira, Worldbeat, and the International Imagination," *World of Music* 40, no. 2 (1998): 86.

91. While fusions with salsa and bachata might be expected, more far-flung attempts to mix reggaeton with *rai* (by Spain's DOSHERMANOS) and bhangra (by such groups as Tigerstyle and Panjabi Hit Squad in the United Kingdom) suggest, again, an interesting loosening of reggaeton from its Latin/American moors. At this point, however, *desiton/bhangraton* tracks have yet to go beyond reggaeton remixes of bhangra or Bollywood tracks (and vice-versa), while *rai-ggaeton* appears to be little more than a one-song experiment. There may yet be a future for such fusions, however, especially considering hip-hop's and reggae's longtime Orientalist leanings. For example, calling herself Deevani, Luny's sister has taken a couple stabs at a Puerto Rican version of Hindi-esque vocals. (Thanks to Ana Patricia Silva for calling my attention to these phenomena.)

92. For a detailed description of the reggaeton scene in Minneapolis, see Peter Scholtes, "Reggaeton Animal," *City Pages*, November 22, 2006, <http://citypages.com/databank/27/1355/article14906.asp> (accessed May 12, 2007). Although I've yet to see a sustained study of the scene in Medellín, a U.S. blogger describes speaking with some young people there, noting, significantly, that "they were avid fans of reggaeton music above all else": http://www.katherinehouse.com/bendan/archives/2006/03/this_is_why_i_t.html (accessed May 12, 2007). And ethnomusicologist Michael Birenbaum Quintero has detailed the thriving reggaeton scene in Tumaco, Colombia, on his blog <http://laguayabita.blogspot.com/2007/04/baila-negra-del-trasero-grande.html> (accessed May 29, 2007). Finally, to read an early account of reggaeton's fall, see, e.g., Agustin Gurza, "When the Fad Goes Fizzle," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2006.

93. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

94. Jace Clayton, "ATLAS IMPRESSIONISTIK," <http://www.negroponic.com/2007/atlas-impressionistik> (accessed May 14, 2007).