

Puff Daddy les ofrece un millon y le dicen que no:

Reggaeton as Resistance to U.S. Political and Cultural Hegemony

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The ambiguous position of Puerto Rico, a country placed within a post-colonial economic framework while still experiencing the political realities of the colonial era as legal property of the United States has resulted in myriad debates and a significant quantity of scholarly focus centered on the particular cultural identity of this nation. Its geographic position as a point of transition from Latin America to the United States and historical past of both Spanish occupation and American occupation has inevitably facilitated forms of cultural expression containing vestiges of influence from the United States. While this influence is arguably no more pervasive in Puerto Rico than in other Latin American countries, its implications are more significant given the U.S.'s legal and political control of the island. The overwhelming cultural influences streaming from the United States, coupled with their complete legal control over the island nation functions as the basis around which Puerto Rican cultural and political nationalism has been constructed.

As such, this discourse has historically set the rules for defining forms of artistic expression emanating from popular culture as either "authentic" or "inauthentic." The impact of imperialism on the destruction of Puerto Rican culture of as a product of the colonial era reflects the lens in which "Puerto Rican nationalists" and their followers view their culture. For these individuals, Puerto Rican national culture consists of all those elements which reflect a historical continuity and more importantly, those values coinciding with political independence.¹ Not surprisingly then, forms of popular culture produced on the island that are in any way

¹ Ramirez, Rafael, "National Culture in Puerto Rico," *Latin American Perspectives* 3:3 (Summer 1976) 109-116

emblematic of the U.S. are criticized as inauthentic, deviations of the nationalist dialogue, and guilty of perpetuating conformity to the dominant culture of the north.²

How is it, then, that reggaeton music has emerged as what Puerto Rican scholar, Frances Muntaner- Negrón cites as the “national cultural export” of Puerto Rico?³ While the musical composition of the genre stems from an amalgamation of hip-hop, Jamaican Dancehall, and other Caribbean rhythms, it is the hip-hop component that has grown to dominate the stylistic and aesthetic representation of the genre.⁴ The strong affinity between hip-hop and reggaeton has roots in the genre’s rap origin, a cultural product of the coalition established between New York Puerto Ricans and African-Americans who collectively employed rap music as a mechanism for redressing experiences of socio-economic marginality under the framework of an Anglo-dominated society.⁵ Reggaeton’s emergence into Puerto Rican popular culture corresponded with hip-hop’s emergence into the international music marketplace, resulting in a process by which reggaeton producers and artists, in an effort to emulate hip-hop’s commercial success, modeled their music in sync with both lyrical themes prevalent in hip-hop, such as sex, gender relations, and club culture, and visual markers indicative of an archetypal hustler.⁶

Despite then, the compositional hybridity of musical genres that collectively characterize reggaeton’s unique sound, it’s sonic and visual politics reflect a corresponding discourse with

² Malavet, Pedro, *America’s Colony: The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 112. Malavet, a scholar on Puerto Rican political and cultural nationalism describes the historical tendency for cultural nationalists to characterize the adoption of American cultural imports as “assimilationist” and a mechanism by which the U.S. exerts further domination over Puerto Rico.

³ Negrón-Muntaner, Frances, “Reggaeton Nation,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 40:6 (Nov/Dec 2007) 35-41

⁴ Marshall, Wayne, “From Musica Negra to Reggaeton Latino: The Cultural Politics of Nation, Migration, and Commercialization,” in *Reggaeton*, ed. Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 26. Many reggaetoneros frequently cite hip-hop as their primary point of influence with many even going so far as “outwardly declaring reggaeton as a sub-genre of hip-hop.”

⁵ Rivera, Raquel, *New York Ricans in the Hip-Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 101.

⁶ Marshall, Wayne, “From Musica Negra to Reggaeton Latino,” 49.

American hip-hop. As the so-called “national cultural export” of Puerto Rico is a derivative of American music that projects starkly similar sounds, images, and lyrics, reggaeton’s significance transcends that of a mere musical genre and is rather the cultural bridge that connects the mainland from the island, redressing any hostile feelings between the two countries over issues of political representation and legal status. As Frances Muntaner-Negron appropriately states, “If much of Puerto Rican high culture is invested in distancing Puerto Rico from the United States, reggaeton brings Puerto Rican culture into the U.S. mainstream more than ever by becoming a part of the hip-hop nation.”⁷ If the genre indeed serves as an impetus for forging notions of cultural citizenship between Americans and island *boricuas*, then it seems its structural fabric, inextricably linked with American popular culture, would inherently deny a space allocated for traditional, *independista* values of Puerto Rican political and cultural nationalism.

The emergence of the prominent reggaeton duo, Calle 13 marks the opening of a space dedicated to challenging U.S. cultural and political hegemony in the reggaeton discourse. Calle 13, comprised of half brothers, Rene Perez and Eduardo Cabra (better known as their stage names, Residente and Visitante) have altered the current direction and impact of the genre through the incorporation of musical styles, lyrical content, and visual aesthetics that contrast with the current homogenous state of the commercialized Puerto Rican reggaetonic orthodoxy. The group’s mechanism for vocal expression is still undoubtedly a form of rap, and their frequent use of synthesizers and other digital production tools to create that familiar reggaeton beat; however, it is their explicit lyrical criticism of U.S. political and cultural influence (including a criticism of hip-hop music itself) and their consistent incorporation of other musical genres native to different countries around the world that set them apart from contemporary

⁷ Muntaner-Negron, “Reggaeton Nation,” 41.

reggaeton. While some of their songs include themes typically found in the music of other reggaetoneros, such as violence, gender relations, and barrio life, the group has fashioned itself as the “nation’s digestive system, transforming the garbage of desire, politics, and violence into a useable language to criticize the status quo.”⁸ In other words, Calle 13’s re-formulation of reggaeton is unprecedented in that amalgamates some musical and lyrical elements of mainstream reggaeton, seen as inauthentic, overly commercialized “garbage” with politicized, culturally substantive messages into a form of cultural expression accessible to consumers of Puerto Rican popular culture.

In representing an alliance of the two most currently popular genres of music to emerge between the United States and Puerto Rico, the relationship between hip-hop and reggaeton as a derivative of hip-hop perpetuates an imagined cultural connectedness between the two countries, effectively masking the still highly problematic absence of Puerto Rico’s political sovereignty and the continuation of American occupation of the island. This paper will demonstrate how Calle 13 works within the conceptualized framework of reggaeton as a “derivative” of music inextricably tied to the United States in order to deliberately work outside the endurance of U.S. political and cultural hegemony otherwise sustained by the popular discourse of mainstream reggaeton. Erected under the musical framework of reggaeton, Calle 13 inserts politically charged lyrics critical of U.S. current occupation of the island, signifying the unprecedented emergence of Puerto Rican political nationalism in the reggaeton narrative. The first section will illustrate how Calle 13 employs reggaeton as a vehicle for espousing an ideology of Puerto Rican political nationalism, thus using Puerto Rico’s contemporary occupied status as a mechanism for rejecting the perpetuated cultural connectedness between the U.S. and Puerto Rico that is

⁸ Negron-Muntaner, “Reggaeton Nation,” 40.

perpetuated by reggaeton. The second section demonstrates how Calle 13 further integrates Puerto Rican nationalist ideology via the doctrine of *mestizaje*. In juxtaposing the Afro-centric discourse of American hip-hop with the nationally adopted dogma of miscegenation and racial democracy of Puerto Rico, Calle 13 rejects hip-hop's relevancy in the context of Puerto Rican popular culture. Lastly, the third section reveals Calle 13's contemporary adoption of "cultural cannibalism" that sonically appropriate Puerto Rico in the regional context of Latin America, a distinguishing characteristic between the group and their reggaetonero contemporaries, whose interpretation of derivation maintains cements Puerto Rico in close proximity with the U.S. The fusion of all three sections reveals the true significance in Calle 13's music for while both rap and reggaeton are often praised for their ability to forge identities rooted in the transnational, Calle 13 has transformed this transnational style of music in a manner akin to traditional values of Puerto Rican political and cultural nationalism. As such, Calle 13's reggaeton represents a form of national resistance under a framework of transnational music that effectively challenges the enduring imposition of U.S. political and cultural hegemony in Puerto Rico.

***Querido compatriotas*: Calle 13's Reggaetonic Politics of Dissidence, Difference and Identification**

The song that signified the initial entrance of Calle 13 into the reggaeton scene, *Querido F.B.I.*, similarly foregrounds the construction of their music as a nationalist project reminiscent in ideology to the traditional views of Puerto Rican political nationalism, which fervently champions a doctrine of independence.⁹ As lead singer, Residente, notes in *Sin Mapa*, a documentary chronicling the duo's biography, concerts, and journey throughout rural areas of

⁹ Malavet, *America's Colony*, 50.

South America, “*La primera vez que me di cuenta la fuerza que teniamos nosotros y el poder que tiene el microfono...la primera vez fue con Querido F.B.I.*”¹⁰ Reinforced by the direct statement of Residente himself, the song’s distribution across Puerto Rico was the “setting in which Calle 13 broke into the music world, defying decorum to broadcast a strident cry for rebellion, a cry for uprising, and a claim for independence for the country.”¹¹

The song is a direct response to the U.S. government-sponsored, September 23, 2005 U.S. assassination of Puerto Rican Popular Army leader, Filiberto Ojeda Rios.¹² After allegedly attempting to serve an arrest warrant to Rios after surrounding the building in which he was hiding, shots from the side of the F.B.I. suddenly fired, killing Rios and sparking instantaneous controversy. Many Puerto Ricans, Calle 13 included, viewed Rio’s death not simply as the violent and unnecessary attack of a man who advocated for Puerto Rican political independence, but rather as a full-on attack of the political Puerto Rican independence movement as a whole. Public demonstrations, political rallies, and the celebratory burning of the American flag all transpired as forms of political protest expressing their frustration with the U.S. Government and the F.B.I. Calle 13 would likewise engage in a form of protest expressing similar sentiments of anger and distrust. However, their form of political expression would be erected under a musical framework emanating from the country in which they are protesting. As such, the song demonstrates how Calle 13 works under reggaeton as a “derivative” genre of American music to work out of the dominant confines of U.S. political hegemony.

¹⁰ *Sin Mapa*, 2009.

¹¹ Nieves -Moreno, Wayne, “A Man Lives Here: Reggaeton’s Hypermasculine Resident,” in *Reggaeton*, ed. Raquel Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 262.

¹² Beame, Abe. “No Country: Calle 13-Residente o Visitante.” May 7, 2008. <http://archive.ohword.com/blog/953/no-country-calle-13-residente-o-visitante>. The organization to which Rios belonged (also known as the Machateros) has been linked to numerous terrorist bombings and attacks in support of Puerto Rican independence. Rios himself was wanted by the FBI for his role in a 1983 Wells Fargo depot conducted by the Machateros in Connecticut.

This reggaetonic tirade kicks off with a direct address to “*todo el gobierno y todos los puertorriqueños*” instantly evocative of political militancy, referring to every social group on the island including lawyers, teachers, mayors and occupations signifying various degrees of economic status as his *compatriotas*.¹³ The subsequent verses go on to depict both Rios’s death and its political implications to Puerto Rico at large, as interpreted through the staunch independista perspective of Residente. “*Nuestra bandera la han llenao de meao, lo van a tenerque enterrar conel machete allao*. In claiming that the Puerto Rican flag has been soiled by U.S. governmental authorities and they will have to bury Rios standing up with a machete by his side, Residente powerfully equates Rios’s murder with a defamation of Puerto Rican nationalism. Moreover, while Rios may have died at the hands of the political oppressor, in being buried with a machete by his side, his dedication to the cause of Puerto Rican political independence will live on, symbolizing the eternalization of the fight for legal sovereignty summoned by Residente. The remainder of *Querido F.B.I.* goes on to depict violent actions of what Residente feels is an appropriate form of reparation for Rios’s death. In seeking justice on behalf of the Puerto Rican nation, Residente claims he will “blow the White House up in style,” and tells his listeners that “instead of shooting at our own housing projects, we need to shoot upwards, where it’s cold, at those from the north.”

The song that terminates with an elongation of the chorus calling for a “*lucha por la libre*,” then angrily shouting, “*vive Puerto Rico libre*.”¹⁴ The strongly explicit criticism of U.S. political influence in Puerto Rico endorsed by Calle 13 is sufficient in itself to set the group apart from their fellow reggaetoneros. However, the true significance of this song is not just its ability to serve as a form of political resistance to U.S. hegemony. As noted earlier, forms of popular

¹³ Single “*Querido F.B.I.*” by Calle 13. 2005

¹⁴ *ibid*

music produced with the intention of sparking political protest is rooted in the history of the nation's popular culture. Rather what is unprecedented about Calle 13's approach is their application of reggaeton as a tool to frame their message of political dissidence. During the period in which much of the reggaeton discourse was centered on the dangers of barrio life, significant criticism of the genre arose, accusing those artists of glorifying violence and unlawful conduct. Given the decline of barrio-centric themes, this criticism has fallen to the wayside and is instead replaced with accusations of being too representative of American hip-hop, overly commercial and apolitical. In depicting imagery of the white house being blown up and a bloody revolution against the United States, *Querido F.B.I* incorporates the portrayal of violence once integral to the popular reggaeton discourse, but aiming this violence at the very society responsible for creating the music and aesthetics from which reggaeton derived.

While the homogenized features of contemporary reggaeton and hip-hop have been cited as a form of cultural diplomacy that encourages the continuation of Puerto Rico of a U.S. commonwealth, the reggaeton of Calle 13, as evident by *Querido F.B.I.*, conversely works within the homogenized structure of the two genres to boldly project their advocacy of a Puerto Rico completely free of U.S. control. In using reggaeton to denounce U.S. political influence, they have succeeded in reaching an audience that would have otherwise never been exposed to political messages embedded in popular music. While the movement for political independence has been historically popular within the elite, educated classes, it is not highly followed among the less affluent, marginalized classes who represent the largest consumers of reggaeton music.¹⁵ Therefore, it is noteworthy that the sonic politics of Calle 13 takes an unusual approach in using reggaeton, a genre originating from the U.S., as the primary vehicle for affronting U.S. political

¹⁵ Nieves- Moreno, "A Man Lives Here," 262.

hegemony; moreover, in working under the context of reggaeton, the group has appropriated a new space for entry into the movement for an independent Puerto Rico for the economically and socially marginal who until the emerge of this song, have never witnessed an intersection of independista politics and reggaeton music.

The reggaetonic, political nationalist project of Calle 13 is particularly significant when appropriated within the contemporary political context of Puerto Rico. Since the early nineteenth century when U.S. occupation grew more legally solidified on the island, Puerto Rican politics has been characterized by a division of those in favor of either statehood, independence, or the continuation of their existence as a commonwealth. The status dilemma has been characterized as a “black hole that swallows every political space in Puerto Rico,” and rightfully so given its position in formulating the structure of Puerto Rican politics.¹⁶ Interestingly though, in the most recent referendum issued to Puerto Ricans allowing them to cast their ballot in favor of their preferred answer to the status question, the majority marked “*ninguna de los anteriores*”, or “none of the above,” as their desired outcome.¹⁷

This decision to completely negate a resolution to the status question altogether is problematic in that it implies that “Puerto Rico’s new challenges have somehow rendered the old ones irrelevant; that territorial sovereignty and the nation-state have somehow become more ambiguous and complicated today than they were in the past, and that the status debate can

¹⁶ Duffy Burnett, Christina. “None of the Above means More of the Same: Why Solving Puerto Rico’s Status Problem Matters,” in *None of the Above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era*, ed. Frances Negron-Muntaner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 79. In Puerto Rico, political parties do not differ according to their positions on issues such as healthcare, education, etc, but are rather contrived solely in terms of their preferred status alternative

¹⁷ Negron-Muntaner, Frances, “Introduction,” in *None of the Above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era*, ed. Frances-Muntaner-Negron (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3. The referendum was issued in 1998 with 50.3% of those who voted casting their vote in favor of the *ninguna de los anteriores* option.

somehow be settled by simply putting it aside.”¹⁸ The position of Puerto Rico as a nation afforded local sovereignty without national sovereignty and its inhabitants as legal citizens without access to federal voting rights has hindered a proper space for political participation, expression, and mobilization on the island.

In expressing his decision to center much of lyrics on themes of anti-U.S. political influence, Residente states, “I couldn’t permit that neither the people of Latin America nor the United States or any other part of the world would think that all Puerto Ricans are the same and that they are all indifferent.”¹⁹ Residente connects his music to the status question, appropriating Calle 13’s lyrics into a larger context that is applicable to the 1998 *nunca de los anteriores* decision. The music of Calle 13 as representative of traditional political nationalist values and critical of the U.S.’s prevalent political influence on the island, creates a space within Puerto Rican popular culture for political expression that is not afforded to Puerto Ricans through traditional means. Ethnomusicologist George Lipsitz states that, “post-colonial cultural expressions are based in the experiences of people and communities rather than on the master narratives of the nation state. They foreground questions of cultural and social identity, rather than direct struggles for political power.”²⁰ However, in connecting people and communities to the Puerto Rican nation state, the music of Calle 13 as a post-colonial form of cultural expression effectively embodies both narratives. The musical composition of mainstream reggaeton as a product of sonic transculturation between sites in North America and the Caribbean raises questions about the cultural and social identities of those who produce the genre, who consumes it, and the relationship between them.

¹⁸ Duffy Burnett, “None of the Above Means More of the Same,” 74.

¹⁹ *Sin Mapa*, 2009

²⁰ Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso Publishers, 1994), 32.

The group uses reggaeton as the cultural template for projecting nationalist sentiments of Puerto Rican independence. In constructing politicized lyrics under a reggaeton beat, Calle 13 articulates a new space for political expression and identification among groups who would have otherwise been denied such a space. The creation of this space for political representation and more importantly, the specific strategies responsible for the development of this space signifies the unprecedented contributions of Calle 13 to the popular reggaeton discourse. The parallel sounds, aesthetics, and lyrics characterizing both mainstream reggaeton from Puerto Rico and American hip-hop resulted in a popular discourse depicting the cultural delineation of the two countries. In espousing a lyrical poetry of political dissidence targeted at the U.S., Calle 13 rejects the projected image of reggaeton as a bridge between Puerto Rican and American popular culture, employing reggaeton as a form of post-colonial expression as a tool for anti-colonial, political resistance.

Soy una mezcla de todas las razas- batata, yuca, platano, yautia y calabaza: Introducing the mestizaje narrative in Calle 13' Regenerative Reggaeton

Reggaeton's construction as an imagined location of cultural connectedness between Puerto Rico and the United States, as facilitated by the genre's narrative of derivation can similarly be viewed as a location that racially connects African Americans and Puerto Ricans. The diasporic foundation that grounds the musical composition of reggaeton serves as a sonic site of contestation against the dominant "Anglo" forces that racially disenfranchise blacks and Puerto Ricans living in the United States. This shared experience of oppression fueled the creation of the black/Puerto Rican coalition representing the "hip-hop nation" in the U.S. that would ultimately serve as the guiding influence for reggaeton's sound and aesthetics. The presumed representation of reggaeton as a racial link between Puerto Ricans and African

Americans is affirmed by Frances Negrón-Muntaner who states, “If Puerto Ricans on the island pride themselves in being whiter and wealthier than all other Caribbean islanders, reggaeton insists that Puerto Ricans are as much a part of the United States as they are of the Caribbean.”²¹ In other words, if whiteness is a signifier that both defines Puerto Ricanness and contrasts it from seemingly “blacker” Caribbean identities, reggaeton’s Afro-centric derivation encourages the recognition of a common Afro-diasporic identity that binds African-Americans and Caribbean islanders alike, including Puerto Ricans.

Negrón-Muntaner’s reference to the rejection of blackness in Puerto Rico alludes to the concept of miscegenation or *mestizaje*, which racially characterizes the nation as a blend of Africans, Taino Indians, and Europeans.²² *Mestizaje* functions as a post-colonial corporal manifestation of Puerto Rico’s colonial past. Cultural nationalists proudly adopted the discourse in its ability to unite all vestiges of African, indigenous, and European cultural traditions that collectively comprise Puerto Rican national culture and with it, a Puerto Rican national “ethnic” identity. The affirmation of one racial identity over the other, according to the way race is contrived in the United States, has been perceived as denying an essential component of one’s Puerto Rican selfhood,²³ and thus, a rejection of Puerto Rican national identity as a whole. While the popular discourse of reggaeton as a derivation of Afro-centricity perpetuates an affirmation of black identity, Calle 13’s reggaeton conversely re-appropriates notions of *mestizaje* in their music, re-integrating ideals of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism otherwise masked by the genre’s furtherance of a transnational “black” identity.

²¹ Negrón-Muntaner, “Reggaeton Nation,” 41.

²² Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip-Hop Zone*, 33.

²³ Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip-Hop Zone*, 33.

In the documentary, *Sin Mapa*, lead singer Residente acknowledges mestizaje's important role as a part of his own identity and in the identity of Calle 13's music stating, "This is our dilemma-black, white, Indian; three races who are bound together by blood and fire and still don't know where they are headed. Three races that flow through my veins, each one of them saying something different and that together could say much more than all three alone."²⁴ In referring to mestizaje as *their* dilemma, Residente claims Puerto Rican ownership to miscegenation and recognizes its impact as a creative impetus for their work. Cultural vestiges of Puerto Rico's hybrid African, Taino Indian, and European past influence the construction of Residente's individual identity as a Puerto Rican in a manner incongruent to each other, but it is the intersection of all these identities that profoundly impact his sense of self as a Puerto Rican citizen. Residente's attribution of mestizaje as a component of his understanding of Puerto Ricanness is reflected in the music put forth by him and Visitante. Calle 13 uses mestizaje as a racial signifier distinguishing the racially hybridized Puerto Rican corporality with the black/white viewpoint in which race is constructed in the United States.

In positively espousing mestizaje as a purely Puerto Rican element of the island's identity, Calle 13's reggaeton rejects the acceptance of the U.S. binary racial model. The disenfranchisement of the African-American community that is produced from this model as it is applied in the United States, contributes to the strong emphasis of black affirmation that dominates the lyrical content and visual aesthetics of the music put out by U.S. rappers and Puerto Rican reggaeton artists. In rejecting the commonly championed doctrine of "black pride," Calle 13 essentially rejects Puerto Rico's connected relationship with the hip-hop nation. Their condemnation of hip-hop's Afro-centricism transcends race and is further represented as a

²⁴ *Sin Mapa*, 2009.

condemnation of the United States as a whole, demonstrating how their employment of race serves an affront to U.S. cultural hegemony while simultaneously embodying a resurrection of Puerto Rican nationalist values.

The song, *Pi-di-di* exhibits the group's strong identification with *mestizaje* and its importance as the racial cornerstone of Puerto Rican self-understanding, demonstrating how Calle 13 employs race as an interpretive point of differentiation between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. In the second verse, Residente makes sure Puff Daddy is aware of his location, exclaiming, "*Esto no es Mozambique, esto es Puerto Rico...Aqui aunque seas blanco, eres prieto.*" In these two lines, significant concepts reflecting the discrepancies between the approach to racial identification in Puerto Rico and the United States are manifested in a fake dialogue between Puff Daddy and Residente. In contrasting Mozambique and Puerto Rico, Residente deliberately discredits the emphasis on the affirmation of a purely African ancestry that reflects the affirmation of a strong black identity championed in the common discourse of U.S. hip-hop, and as such, is similarly rejecting a place for black affirmation in the reggaeton discourse. This rejection is rooted in a valorization in Residente's lyrically implicit valorization of *mestizaje* as he informs Puff Daddy that while Puerto Ricans may look purely white or light skinned, everyone is also black as a society harboring a history of racial miscegenation.

The need for such clarification is seemingly necessary according to Residente, whose approach to racial identity obviously stands in contrast with that of an African-American like Puff Daddy, who has been socialized to view race under the black/white binary framework adopted by the U.S. In Puerto Rico, however, anyone with light skin, "more delicate" European

facial features, and straight hair can claim to be white, regardless of ancestry.²⁵ This approach in racial classification according to phenotype rather than genetics is a direct product of the historical espousal of mestizaje and pattern of interracial sexual reproduction.²⁶ A phenotypic approach to racial classification in Puerto Rico ostensibly negates the possibility for de jure segregation formerly adopted by the United States, contributing to the idealized construction of Puerto Rico as a “racial democracy” where racial prejudice and discrimination is virtually nonexistent. As the narrative of mestizaje denies a space for discrimination on the basis the race, it concurrently creates a space for discrimination based on class. This position is historically expressed in the works of prominent Puerto Rican authors and proponents of the mestizaje doctrine.²⁷

The concretization of the mestizaje discourse in Puerto Rican popular culture and its projection of Puerto Rico as a color-blind society have greatly facilitated the construction of class-based discrimination as the only form of discrimination that emanates from the island. As such, the concept of racial discrimination and advocacy for racial justice on the island have historically been viewed as imperialistic imports from the United States that are inappropriate solutions for a problem that Puerto Rico simply does not have. Calle 13’s affirmation of mestizaje and traditional values of Puerto Rican national culture is significant in that the group utilizes reggaeton, a form of music rooted in American hip-hop derivation, to promote a cultural dialogue antithetical to that cultural dialogue from which the genre emerged. Calle 13’s

²⁵ Duany, Jorge, “Neither White nor Black: The Politics of Race and Ethnicity among Puerto Ricans on the Island and in the U.S. Mainland,” in *Neither Enemies nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*, ed. Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005,) 176.

²⁶ Duany, “Neither White nor Black,” 178. Recurrent themes of early Puerto Rican literature particularly exemplify this historical espousal of mestizaje, explicitly illustrating how the island’s history and culture promoted racial integration rather than segregation as in the U.S.

²⁷ Duany, “Neither White nor Black,” 179. Author Tomas Blanco, arguably the most influential proponent of mestizaje as a critical component of Puerto Rican national culture, explains the nature of discrimination in Puerto Rico, citing that prejudice is “more of a social than a racial character in Puerto Rico.”

reggaeton, works deliberately within the framework of an Afro-centric style of music to work against the influence of affirmative blackness pervasive in mainstream American hip-hop. In replacing such a discourse with that of mestizaje, Calle 13 refashions reggaeton in a manner symbiotic to values of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism, thus rejecting cultural hegemony from its imperial neighbor to the north.

Calle 13's lyrical allusion to mestizaje is significant not only in its ability to regenerate advocacy for traditional values of Puerto Rican nationalism in popular culture, but is also a critical cornerstone of the group's existence in the reggaeton community. Mestizaje's replacement of racial discrimination with a system of social stratification entirely based on class functions as the point of entry for which Calle 13, a group comprised of working-class whites, can enter the reggaeton industry as a legitimate group. In refusing to stylistically conform to representations of blackness that is encouraged by the symbiotic relationship between American hip-hop and mainstream reggaeton, Calle 13 has seemingly denied themselves a space for belonging in the reggaeton community, a community largely understood to be a black domain.

For those Puerto Rican reggaeton artists who are not self-identified blacks, the conformity to "black" culture as indicated by the similarities in lyrical content, musical composition, and aesthetics between hip-hop and reggaeton, perpetuates the construction of reggaeton as a black domain. Calle 13 redefines the current terms and conditions for entering the genre by inserting themselves as voices of the marginal by deploying class status, which works to subsume race under class.²⁸ The group's departure from the norms of mainstream reggaeton have been met with sharp criticism by other artists in the genre who associate the group's deviation from the hip-hop narrative as a deviation from the entire genre altogether. Residente

²⁸ Llorens, Hilda, "Brothels, Hell, and Puerto Rican Bodies: Sex, Race, and Other Cultural Politics in 21st Century Artistic Representations," *Centro Journal* 20:1 (Spring 2008), 209.

responds to such criticism in Calle 13's song, *Ven y Criticame*, stating, "*Soy clase media baja desde la placenta...toda mi vida trabaje para pagar la renta.*"²⁹ These two lines reflect the working class background Calle 13 claims and utilizes as a means to legitimize their voice in the reggaeton community. While other reggaetoneros are taking a U.S. approach to view the intersecting marginalities of race and class, Calle 13 emerges as the first example of a reggaeton group to discredit that link. Rather the group represents a return to the traditional lens in which inequality is viewed in Puerto Rico, on the basis of class. While the duo may embody the phenotypic traits that otherwise classify them as white, they deploy a background of class marginality, thus validating their authenticity within the genre that corresponds with a doctrine of Puerto Rican nationalism. Their ability to create shared sentiments of marginality rooted in class identity rather than racial identity reflects their negation of what some scholars have classified as "white privilege."³⁰ Calle 13 negates the importance and more significantly, the sheer existence of this white privilege in direct references and lyrical allusions to *mestizaje*. In reinforcing traditional representations of Puerto Rico a society of mixed races, the group perpetuates the resulting notion that discrimination in Puerto Rico solely exists on the basis of class. As such, the group effectively challenges mainstream reggaeton's adoption of a transnational black identity rooted in experiences of socio-economic marginality.

Calle 13 rather appropriates traditional values of *mestizaje* in the reggaeton domain, redefining the significance of the genre; while mainstream reggaeton bolsters the cultural link between the U.S. and Puerto Rico rooted in transnational black experiences of social and economic marginalization, Calle 13 rejects the place of such an identity in the domain of Puerto Rican reggaeton. The recognition of *mestizaje* as an integral component of Puerto Rican identity

²⁹ Calle 13, "Ven y Criticame," from album *Los de atras vienen conmigo*, 2008.

³⁰ Llorens, "Brothels, Hell, and Puerto Rican Bodies," 215.

presumes the creation of such an identity based on race is inappropriate given Puerto Rico's representation of a racial democracy, and rather the significance in Calle 13's reggaeton lies in its ability to foster experiences of marginality where race and class are mutually exclusive. Calle 13's reggaeton further represents an affront to U.S. cultural hegemony, specifically discrediting mainstream reggaeton's role as an outlet to express transnational black experiences of marginalization among Puerto Ricans and African-Americans. In rejecting this shared identity, Calle 13's reggaeton represents a rejection of the hip-hop narrative's cultural relevance in Puerto Rican reggaeton and a broader rejection of U.S. cultural influences in Puerto Rican popular culture.

***Con to' y eso mis rimas son escrambles y me como a to' el mundo como si fueran un waffle:*
Calle 13's Digestion and Regurgitation of Derivation**

The affront to U.S. hegemony embedded in Calle 13's reggaeton does not merely represent a resistance to political and cultural influence emanating from Puerto Rico's dominant neighbor to the north. Rather this rejection of U.S. influence as otherwise perpetuated by the symbiotic relationship between mainstream reggaeton and U.S. hip-hop opens up a new space for representation and a reformulation of Puerto Rican identity in the context of popular culture. Calle 13's direct denunciation of reggaeton as a point of cultural synthesis between the U.S. and Puerto Rico is corroborated by the work of Puerto Rican scholar, Juan Flores, who notes, "The cliché of Puerto Rico as a 'bridge between two cultures' was coined in a reactionary, assimilationist spirit to emphasize the neighborly co-existence of the benevolent, self-sufficient colossus and that helpless speck of tropical subculture."³¹ While the marked relationship between American hip-hop and mainstream reggaeton exhibits such an assimilationist spirit,

³¹ Flores, Juan, "The Insular Vision: Pedreira and the Puerto Rican Misere," in *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*, ed. Juan Flores (Houston, University of Houston Press, 1993), 13

Calle 13's reggaeton instead represents a new approach for negotiating Puerto Rican identity under occupation of the oppressive "colossal."

Rejecting the assimilationist approach in favor of an explicit anti-hegemonic construction of a reggaeton that severs ties with the U.S., the group further abandons the hip-hop nation by incorporating genres of music authentically linked to other Latin American countries. In addition to a stylistic identification with Latin America, the group lyrically champions various political struggles endured by some Latin American countries. The abandonment of an identification associated with the U.S. and a greater identification with Latin America creates a sonic space in which a Puerto Rico libre is firmly appropriated in the region alongside other sovereign, Latin American countries and as such, re-configures the genre as a form of cultural production that is more *latinoamericano* than *estadounidense*.

The group's decision to incorporate diverse musical styles outside the conventional usage of synthesized beats that otherwise characterize reggaeton is addressed in their documentary, *Sin Mapa* as Residente states, "People may ask themselves, what inspires Calle 13? Well its simple...everything that surrounds us."³² The amalgamation of a wide array of styles is evident in virtually every track produced by the group. From their first album, *Calle 13*, to their most recent album, *Los de atras vienen conmigo*, a multi-cultural range of Latino musical traditions are integrated into their work, including (but not limited to) Puerto Rican bomba drums, Cuban rumba beats, Mexican norteno polka, Argentine tango, Brazilian samba, and Colombian cumbia, all placed under a distinct reggaeton beat.³³ The absorption of these styles into their reggaetonic repertoire has been met with sharp criticism from fellow reggaetoneros in the industry who

³² Sin Mapa. 2009.

³³ Beame, Abe. "No Country: Calle 13- Residente o Visitante"<http://archive.ohword.com/blog/953/no-country-calle-13-residente-o-visitante>.

categorize Calle 13's music as "alternative" rather than reggaeton.³⁴ Calle 13's critics uphold the standards set by a growing indoctrination of "authentic" reggaeton, characterized by a strict adherence to synthesized, dembow beats and lyrical content and aesthetics representative of U.S. hip-hop. Embracing a musical style, lyrical narrative, and form of self-representation that deviates from these "reggaetonic norms," Calle 13's music is thus viewed as "inauthentic" by the self-proclaimed gate-keepers of "pure" reggaeton.

The discrepancy over the authenticity of mainstream reggaeton versus the inauthenticity of Calle 13's reggaeton has significant ramifications for contemporary interpretation of Puerto Rican national culture. Mainstream reggaeton's adoption of a narrative and aesthetic indivisible from U.S. hip-hop has created a canon of authenticity by which all artists are expected to abide. Yet ironically, their interpretation of authenticity, rooted in an aesthetic directly tied to American hip-hop, stands in direct contradiction with the values of authenticity espoused by the doctrine of Puerto Rican nationalism, which explicitly labels any cultural influence originating from the U.S. as overtly inauthentic. It is under this framework of Puerto Rican nationalism that Calle 13 defends the authenticity of their work. While still working under a presumably stylistically "inauthentic" framework of reggaeton music, Calle 13 refashions the genre's narrative of derivation by de-emphasizing its connection with U.S. hip hop and sonically linking reggaeton with the rest of Latin America. As a result, the group not only creates a new place for reggaeton within the tradition of Puerto Rican nationalism but also articulates a new identity for Puerto Rico in Latin American popular culture.

³⁴ Program *Es Musica*. Youtube, 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mY4D71ruIbI> An uproar in the reggaeton community ensued after the 2008 after Calle took home a grammy for "Best Reggaeton Album" for their album, *Residente o Visitante*. The most vocal of these artists was the prominent female reggaeton star, Ivy Queen, who claimed, "It is disrespectful that you [Residente] are an alternative music artist and yet you collect the reggaeton award using our beats."

The array of musical influences contributing to the production of Calle 13's music reflects a contemporary adoption of "cultural cannibalism"³⁵ adopted by the Brazilian tropicalists in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The ideology of cannibalism is rooted in a philosophy that encourages artists to critically "devour" cultural inflows from abroad and "regurgitate" these influences into a form of cultural production that hybridizes the foreign and the national into a unique product.³⁶ Cannibalism was re-visited by the tropicalists musicians in the 1960's in an effort to negotiate a space for forms of cultural production that challenged values of Brazilian nationalism and the military dictatorship by incorporating elements of culture emanating from other geographic locations that were otherwise seen as inauthentic.³⁷ Although criticized for their incorporation of foreign music that threatens the preservation of Brazilian national culture, their music represented a re-configuration of national culture that negotiates the international with the national, opening a space for forms of popular culture that can be in tune with the world outside Brazil while still representing a form of music that is distinctly Brazilian.

In struggling to negotiate their own space within a genre that similarly views their music as inauthentic, Calle 13 employs a version of cannibalistic reggaeton appropriate within a context of Puerto Rican nationalism. In erecting their music under the derivative narrative of reggaeton, Calle 13 "devours" influences of American hip-hop; however their simultaneous digestion of other forms of Latin American music is regurgitated into a final product that reshapes the derivation narrative of reggaeton as a sub-genre of hip-hop into a form of cultural production that is distinctly Puerto Rican. Calle 13 takes an approach similar to that of the tropicalists in

³⁵ Dunn, Christopher, *Brutality Garden: Tropicalia and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 200), 17. The term was originally coined by Brazilian modernist writer Oswald de Andrade in his "Cannibalist Manifesto," first published in the *Revista de Antropofagia*. (1929) This paper however, utilizes the adaption of cultural cannibalism as interpreted by the Tropicalists in the Brazilian counter culture movement of the 1960's as a point of comparison for Calle 13's usage of cannibalism.

³⁶ Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 6.

³⁷ Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 74.

appropriating stereotypes about mainstream reggaeton in order to make a statement that addresses the disconnect between popular reggaeton and Puerto Rican national culture.³⁸ An examination of their records collectively reveals countless, negative portrayals of mainstream reggaetoneros juxtaposed with depictions of inequality in Latin America and allusions to Puerto Rican nationalism. This juxtaposition effectively highlights the inauthenticity of mainstream reggaeton as an overly-commercialized, carbon-copy sub-genre of American hip-hop in the context of a country that harbors a shared history of language, culture, and political struggle for independence with other Latin American countries. For example, the track, *Gringo Latin Funk*, criticizes the loss of “real” Latin identity among the Latinos living in Miami, characterizing them as “*verguenza latinos*” who in an effort to attain an “*objetivo de fama*,” lead lifestyles centered on wealth and material possessions, dining on “*filete de oro con ensalada de diamantes*” in the finest restaurants. Residente then judges the superficiality of this lifestyle as being “*igual de creativo que un cantante de reggaeton*.” Ending the song, Residente discusses what he would like to do to such a verguenza latino, stating, “*Me gustaria regalarle un Lamborghini sin frenos...and inflict physical violence upon this man until he “bote sangre en nombre de toda la gente en Latino America que se muere de hambre.”*”

Throughout *Gringo Latin Funk*, Calle 13 establishes a profound connection between the manner in which Latino immigrants are stereotypically assimilating in the United States, (specifically Miami) and the stylistic manner in which mainstream reggaeton artists approach the production of their music in Puerto Rico. The valorization of material wealth and the adoption of

³⁸ Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 74. Caetano Veloso’s “Tropicalia” best exemplifies how the tropicalists appropriated stereotypes in their lyrics to criticize Brazilian society’s dependency to national culture and its exploitation under the military regime. The song juxtaposes symbols of Brazilian high national culture with symbols that reflect the reality of Brazilian society such as poverty, racism, and inequality. Such examples the juxtaposition of the *mulata*, the nationally valorized paragon of Brazilian beauty and corporal symbol of racial democracy and the *mata*, the vastly undeveloped forest region where indigenous populations are left with no resources and excluded from the celebratory, national consensus that was being espoused by the Brazilian government.

an American lifestyle seemingly centered on the acquisition of this wealth characterize these Latinos as “fake Latinos,” and the propensity of mainstream reggaeton artists to produce music around what will gain the most commercial success and what will potentially bring them fame and wealth, likewise makes them “fake Latinos.”³⁹ These fake or “inauthentic” Latinos are contrasted with what Residente views as the real or “authentic” people of Latin America, living in poverty and dying of hunger. The violence Residente seeks to inflict upon this fake Latino in the name of these authentic Latinos personifies the position of Calle 13’s music as a whole. In taking a stance to these reggaetoneros whose music, imitating the commercial success of American hip-hop, have rejected their authentic Latin American roots, Calle 13 marks a return to these roots, replanting the sound and message of the real Latin America in the sonic space of reggaeton music.

Just as the Brazilian tropicalists’ cannibalistic approach to popular music reconfigured the conceptualization of cultural production by negotiating nationalism with foreign influences, Calle 13’s reggaetonic cannibalism negotiates Puerto Rico’s ambiguous global position as a nation harboring a shared history with Latin America, yet existing as legal territory of the United States. The narrative of derivation that characterizes mainstream reggaeton as a sub-genre of U.S. hip-hop has become solidified as a doctrine of authenticity by which all artists are expected to follow. This trend has been praised among scholars for its ability to connect Puerto Rico culturally with the United States and forge transnational identities among minority ethnic groups abroad who share similar experiences of marginalization in their respective countries;⁴⁰ however,

³⁹ Calle 13 condemns the sole purpose producing reggaeton for commercial success and profitability in multiple songs and interviews. http://www.latinrapper.com/calle_13_interview.html The distinction between their music and objectives for creating their music is most poignantly made in the song, “*Que lloren*,” where Residente spouts, “*Mi musica no es pa’ las discotecas, mi musica es pa’ sembrar una semilla en las cabezas...Esto no se trata de ganarse premios ni de vender discos, ni de carros, mujeres, hoteles.*”

⁴⁰ Marshall, “From Musica Negra to Reggaeton Latino,” 37.

Calle 13's cannibalistic reggaeton, in "devouring" elements of mainstream reggaeton tied to U.S., along with other musical influences, produces a new style of reggaeton that still reflects this notion of derivation, minus the direct replication. Calle 13 deliberately takes advantage of Puerto Rico's position as a geographic intermediary between the U.S. and Latin America by laying claim to influences from both regions and in doing so, negotiates a space for themselves between "authentic" reggaeton, a sub-genre of U.S. hip-hop, and "authentic" Puerto Rican national culture, where American influences are promptly condemned. As such, Calle 13's reconstruction of reggaeton's narrative of derivation represents a new space in which the national and the transnational can coexist as a vehicle for cultural expression.

Conclusion

Pal Norte, a song on Calle 13's album, *Residente o Visitante*, is a defiant declaration on statehood and citizenship where lyrics sympathizing with immigrants' struggles are articulated behind a musical mixture of rumba, blaring trumpets, electric guitar, and of course, synthesized, reggaeton beats. The absence of belonging among Latin American immigrants as citizens-in-transition, as depicted in *Pal Norte*, represents in many ways the absence of true citizenship in Puerto Rico under continued U.S. occupation.⁴¹ Commencing the chorus, Residente addresses "todos los inmigrantes del mundo entero," declaring, "Tengo tu antidoto...pa'l que no tiene identidad." While the sympathetic praise of the immigrant community might not serve as an effective antidote to the sense of lost identity emanating from immigration, it symbolically reflects the ability of popular music to forge a cultural identity among a populous lacking

⁴¹ <http://contoelpeso.com/calle-13-le-tira-al-gobernador-de-puerto-rico/> At the MTV awards, Residente declared, "America Latina no esta complete sin Puerto Rico y Puerto Rico no es libre." This quote is just one of many reflecting the frequency in which Calle 13 advocates Puerto Rican independence outside of the studio.

political identity. As such, *Pal Norte* reflects the ability of Calle 13's music to establish a transnational identity between Puerto Rico and Latin America. Just as these immigrants "*no tienen identidad*," in leaving their country behind, Calle 13 proposes that the continued U.S. legal occupation of Puerto Rico similarly leaves island *boricuas* without a true political identity.

The inextricable link that fuses American hip-hop and mainstream reggaeton has undermined the absence of this political identity by perpetuating an imagined relationship of cultural connectedness that bridges the U.S. and Puerto Rico in sonic harmony. By reconfiguring reggaeton's narrative of derivation, Calle 13 has found a creative and unprecedented mechanism for addressing Puerto Rican political grievances and employing traditionally nationalist values that seek to reject that notion of cultural connectedness. The refusal to immerse in the hip-hop is nation is further evident in the group's advocacy of *mestizaje* and rejection of the U.S. binary racial framework that has served as the impetus for the production of hip-hop music. As such, Calle 13 employs race yet as another mechanism for exposes the façade of cultural connectedness between the U.S. and Puerto Rico that is facilitated by the symbiosis of mainstream reggaeton and hip-hop.

Yet is not solely the criticism of U.S. political occupation, espousal of *mestizaje*, or integration of other Latin American musical styles into the reggaeton genre that signifies the true importance of Calle 13. While mainstream reggaeton implies a process of assimilation through imitation, Calle 13's music reflects a process by which foreign forms of music and nationalism do not have to be mutually exclusive, but rather can fuse collectively to produce a product by which nationalist values are projected in a manner more akin to a globalized context. By deliberately exploiting reggaeton's narrative of derivation in order to deliberately both speak out

against the U.S. Calle 13 has constructed its own nationalist project that offers new possibilities for representation and identity in the sonic space of reggaeton.

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