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DE LA DISCO AL CASERÍO: URBAN SPATIAL AESTHETICS AND POLICY TO THE BEAT OF REGGAETÓN

ZAIRE ZENIT DINZEY-FLORES

ABSTRACT

Conversing with urban sociological theories, and relying on a content analysis of the songs' lyrics, this essay exposes the "urban spatial aesthetics" of reggaetón. The paper examines the particular views of the city that reggaetón makes public and the policy manifestations of these representations. I exhibit the reggaetoneros' lyrical construct of an urban socio-spatial community actualized between the disco, the barrio, the caseríos, and the street. I show that the lyrical profile of reggaetón underscores poverty, violence, masculinity, and race as vital constructs of an authentically urban experience. The environmental elements and themes display an aesthetic that recognizes the city as dualistically liberating and constraining; an aesthetic identified here in the "blin-blin" sensibilities. I conclude suggesting that reggaetoneros have made public the plight of the urban poor in Puerto Rico and unearthed their potentials, becoming sociopolitical ambassadors who calibrate the urban policy frames in Puerto Rico. [Keywords: urban; poverty; public housing; Puerto Rico; policy; music]

IN APRIL 2006, MTV AIRED MY BLOCK: PUERTO RICO,

a newscast that turned popular *reggaetoneros* like Daddy Yankee, Tego Calderón, Don Omar, Calle 13, and Voltio into tour guides of their Puerto Rican neighborhoods. The show sought to understand the particular context from which *reggaetón* had emerged and provide “an inside view about where all those raps originate” (Illich nd). Among others, the Puerto Rican urban spaces visited on the show included public housing projects, the food kiosks of the Piñones coastal lands, the predominantly black town of Loíza, and the renowned urban slum neighborhood of La Perla, subject of anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s book *La Vida*. The documentary began to formulate, particularly for the expansive audience that reggaetón has secured, a schematic rendering of the genre’s urban Puerto Rican platform and context.

In *My Block*, Daddy Yankee defines reggaetón as being about the “street, sex, and struggle.”¹ This representation of reggaetón as being from the “street” is not a one-time avowal. At the recent 2006 Premios Lo Nuestro, Daddy Yankee reminded the audience and viewers, as he often does in interviews, that he is from the street and from a barrio. His commentary on reggaetón’s essence, largely supported and echoed by other reggaetón artists, confirms that reggaetón exists in a dialectic to a set of specific urban realities. However repetitive and consistent these articulations of reggaetón’s Puerto Rican city culture have been, the complex urban realities that frame reggaetón and that serve as referents in the artists’ lyrics and representations have not been critically examined. Is reggaetón indeed, as Daddy Yankee claims, about the “street, sex, and struggle”? And if it is, what are the tangible elements that these qualifiers, the artists, and the genre are anchored to? What is the particular brand of Puerto Rican urbanism that they project?

Conversing with different theories of the city, and relying on a content analysis of the lyrics of songs, this paper explores the urban aesthetics of reggaetón. The quint-essential historian of the city, Lewis Mumford, suggested that by “2500 B.C. all the essential features of the city had taken form.... The walled enclosure, the street, the house-block, the market, the temple precinct with its inner courts, the administrative precinct, the workshop precinct...and the city itself, as a complex and powerful esthetic symbol, magnifying and enriching human potentiality, was visible” (1961: 90). What Mumford pointed to is the city as a locus for particular kinds of creations, constructions, visual signifiers, and significations.² I seek to uncover the particular sets of urban elements and representations that reggaetón launches and that transmit specific knowledge and understandings of the Puerto Rican urban environment and experience.

In particular, I ask what are the kinds of urbanity and urban community that the genre puts on exhibit and uses as a platform? Furthermore, how do the urban images that the genre produces recalibrate urban policy debates and strategies?

The article first provides a profile of the urban spatial elements managed in reggaetón. By reporting the descriptive statistics derived from the content analysis, the section called “Reggaetón City, PR” outlines the city spaces and themes that construct reggaetón and the image of the city that reggaetoneros extol through these places. The spaces are discussed according to how frequently they are mentioned in reggaetón songs, starting with the one most discussed. In the section titled “The Reggaetón Urban Aesthetic,” the article presents the aesthetic elements and how they constitute the urban environment in profiling a particular image of the city. The concern here is content rather than frequency and examining the way that the urban articulations are made. In particular, I contextualize the images in the history of urban Puerto Rico and the everyday lives of people outside of the genre. The paper uncovers the particular notions of the “city” managed in reggaetón and how they exist within popular and sociological conceptualizations of the city. It details how race, gender, poverty, and violence are engaged in representation of an “urban spatial aesthetic.” The paper concludes with an examination of how the reggaetón-produced urban profile of Puerto Rico is legitimized and engaged in policy and sociopolitical discourses and practices. Thus, I suggest that the urban spatial aesthetic of reggaetón has some active social realizations that make it extremely pertinent for policy-making.

Methodology

This study was conducted employing a combination of methods. The primary method consists of a content analysis of the lyrics of 179 songs.³ Content analysis is “a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text” (Weber 1990: 9). This analytical strategy is meant to review text in order to uncover patterns and ideas about the source of the message, the message itself, the medium for the message, or the audience of the message (Neuendorf 2002: 52).

The sample of 179 songs analyzed was selected using a mixed-sample approach: 92 songs were selected randomly from the database of 1,058 songs available on the website www.reggaetononline.net.⁴ The remaining 87 songs were collected from the Billboard Charts.⁵ By using a mixed sampling approach, I aimed to secure a representative sample of songs that are produced in reggaetón regardless of popularity, as well as songs that are popular and have the wider audience in the genre. The analyses thus capture a wide range of songs, popular or not, produced in the genre.

The content analysis was conducted using a combination of inductive and deductive processes. The deductive process consisted of coding all songs for their mention of urban spaces and locations. Any mention of setting, including locations (streets, corners, housing) and temporal contextualization (night and day) were recorded. The locations and times of day frequencies were then grouped and tabulated to arrive at a general picture of the settings within which reggaetón and reggaetoneros live. The inductive coding process, on the other hand, sought to gather the common and diverging themes that were expressed in the songs’ overall message as well as the songs’ lyrics. An in-vivo coding process was utilized, where songs were reviewed line-by-line, and salient points, issues, words, or phrases were restated in the margins. The line restatements were then arranged thematically and utilized to code the song’s main theme or themes. These themes were also quantified.

TABLE 1. SPACES IN REGGAETÓN SONGS

Spaces	Terms Used	Frequency	Percent*
The Club or discoteque	la disco; discoteca; la pista; discotequeando	50	28
Neighborhood	barrio; caserío; residencial; vecindario; ghetto; the hood	45	25
The Street	calle; callejón; carretera; avenida; camino; el expreso; freeway; Calle 8;Calle Luna; 65 de Infantería;	40	22
Home and intimate geographies	Casa; hogar; mansion; cuarto; habitación; cama	37	21
Puerto Rico geography	Puerto Rico; Borinquen; Bayamon; Caguas Carolina; Guaynabo; Loiza; Montehiedra; Ponce; Salinas; Santurce; San Juan: Trujillo Alto; el area este	31	17
Everyday routine spaces	tienda; restaurante; marqueta; cancha; cementerio; gradas; hotel; playa; el mar; el rio; el canho; en la fauna silvestre; el risco; la tumba; altar	20	11
Scales of geographies	pueblo; ciudad; la capital; zona metropolitana; el el mundo; la nacion; la tierra	17	9
United States spaces	Miami; NY; alto Manhattan; Spanish Harlem; Brooklyn; Orlando; Alaska; Las Vegas	13	7
Undefined Spatial Areas	el area; territorio; la parcela; gangster zone; mi zona; mi lado; todos lados	10	6
the corner	Esquina; Rincon; the block	9	5
Dominican Republic geography	Republica Dominicana; Quisqueya; Santo Domingo; El Cibao; Santiago; Puerto Plata; La Romana; Los Minas; Villa Duarte; Guachupita; la matica; bocachica; el malecon;	8	4
Prison	prision; preso; la jaula; el zafacon	8	4
Latin America and the Caribbean	isla; Caribe; Latinoamerica; Colombia	8	4
Gates	muro; pared; verjas con alhambre de pua	8	4
Public institutions	Escuela; hospital; el Pavia	6	3
International geographies	España; Hong Kong; China; Japon; Francia	5	3
Ethereal and outer spaces	castillo; el cielo; Pluton	3	2

* Percent column does not add up to 100 percent because songs could be mentioned in more than one type of category.

To complement these forms of analysis, I examined music videos of certain songs and collected information on the artists through biographies, interviews, public presentations, and websites. In addition, I gathered newspaper articles on the artists in order to gain an understanding of the public debates that have contextualized the industry in Puerto Rico and the United States.

Reggaetón City, PR

Reggaetón is a musical genre that surfaced and existed in Puerto Rico through a journey that cannot be disconnected from the context of the city. Before delving into the specificities of the artists’ lyrics, it is important to garner a brief overarching idea of how Puerto Rican cities came to be and how the conditions extant in these cities gave rise to the genre and its artists.

Urbanism took hold in predominantly agricultural Puerto Rico in the early 1900s. This is not to say, however, that urban life was not already under way in Puerto Rico, with the establishment of urban Spanish colonial towns throughout the island. Due to a failing sugar economy and the advent of an urban industrialism rooted in the new political-economic relationship to the United States, many Puerto Rican agricultural laborers moved to the urban centers in search of better opportunities in the early 20th century. Dramatic population shifts took hold, as Puerto Rico became predominantly urban. Today, with a population of just under 4 million people, 94 percent of the entire Puerto Rican population lives in urban areas.⁶

Urban growth in Puerto Rico resulted in the creation of social “ghettos” where an urban underclass lived in substandard conditions. Urban slums became the major policy preoccupation for technocrats in addressing the growing urban population of the island in the mid-20th century.⁷ A resulting and dominant policy to alleviate poverty and the “uncivilized” conditions of living was to create more adequate housing, which became the current *caseríos* (public housing projects) and *barrios* of the island. The eradication of slums, however, was not complete, and to this day, slums are characteristic in the island, the most legendary being La Perla, where reggaetón group Calle 13 took MTV. The housing inequalities and urban locations that the policies of the early to mid-20th century Puerto Rico created are what structured the urban Puerto Rico of the late 20th, early 21st century and set the stage for the city that reggaetón will grow out of, and will perform, represent, idolize, criticize, debate, and sustain.⁸

Reggaetón’s lyrics reflect Puerto Rico’s urban landscape and reference the spatial geography and everyday city life of the island. The specific contextualization of reggaetón is an important indication of how the artists and the genre have constructed themselves and the Puerto Rican city. Furthermore, the spaces of reggaetón reveal a preoccupation with being authentically and genuinely urban. By far, the most prevalent locations of reggaetón are the discoteque, the neighborhoods, and the streets (see Table 1). As Gallego sings in the introductory track of the 2004 album *12 Discípulos*, the community is constituted in and from these locations: “Celebremos, que este pueblo siga bailando, sudando / Existiendo como pueblo dentro de una disco, o en un residencial” [Let’s celebrate that the people continue to dance, sweating / Living as a people inside a disco or in a public housing project]. Below, I discuss these urban spaces in order of their prevalence in reggaetón songs. At the end, I discuss the most frequent topics engaged in reggaetón songs that contextualize the spaces visited in the genre.

La Disco

More than a quarter of reggaetón songs explicitly mention “*la disco*” [the discoteque] or “*la pista de baile*” [the dance floor]. Thus, dancing and sexual expressions are the call of the day. “La disco” is also lyrically represented as the place to prove your expertise in rapping, test skills of female conquest, and establish your maleness. But the disco is even more than that. The disco is a site to escape the reality of the barrio, to levitate over everyday problems, and reconstitute oneself as a powerful man in a Puerto Rican society that labels poor males or those living in barrios or caseríos as unviable and threatening. As Ranking Stone explains in his song “Baila conmigo,” “bailando contigo mamita me fui del mundo” [dancing with you, girl, I left the world]. In another song—“Donde está mi gata” by Yandel—the artist

goes to the discoteque to look for a woman (the *gata* [cat]) and begs her to give him the chance to be with her because he is escaping a world full of problems, including being persecuted by the police. Daddy Yankee's *Latina Magazine* interview confirms this duality between the disco and the party and reality: "When it's time to party, the music that people want to hear will reflect that. But after the party, when reality sets in, I have songs that reflect that, also" (Cepeda 2006: 118).

Thus, the disco is also a site for free expression and reflection, perhaps in ways that the educational system has not been for underprivileged youth. The disco is an opportunity to escape. The "night" accompanies the disco and other urban settings as the predominant temporal-spatial element in reggaetón. A majority of reggaetón songs stage the action of the songs during the night. Often, the night is when the disco unfolds and the street comes alive, and escape is achievable.⁹ In Nicky Jam's "Chambonea" he sings: "Yo soy un tipo que vive de la aventura / tamo en la noche y en la noche hay locura" [I'm a guy that lives from adventure / am in the night and in the night there is craziness].¹⁰ But the disco at night is not only for craziness and love; it is also for another type of substantive content. As Baby Ranks explains in an interview to Dominican newspaper *Hoy*: "Hablamos de lo que se ve a diario, de lo vivido. Por ejemplo, hay discotecas en las que el público es bien exigente y está bien que le hagas uno que otro tema de amor, pero llega el momento en que te piden que le subas la adrenalina." [We talk about what we see every day, what we have lived. For example, there are discos in which the public is very demanding and it's okay that you do one or two love songs, but the time comes in which they ask you to pump the adrenaline.] (Rodríguez 2006: 10C). Thus, the "adrenaline" has to do with visiting real life circumstances, which can encompass serious social topics, including violence and sex.

The disco constitutes the most exploited visual representation in reggaetón videos. Videos often feature a swarm of women dancing around male artists having the ultimate expression of "fun." The context is typically a dark space with dimmed lights where music is being heard, and money and drinks are plentiful. Many of the early reggaetón videos stuck to this format and, although the representations have expanded, more recent ones continue to rely on the disco backdrop.¹¹ The persistent image (visual and lyrical) of discos frames reggaetón in an urban scenery where music, dance, and fun are central, and maybe necessary, to Puerto Rico's urban experience.

The Barrio

The other most prevalent space in reggaetón is the neighborhood. A quarter of reggaetón songs mention spaces like the "barrio," the "caserío" or "*residencial*," the "ghetto," and the "hood." These neighborhood cues have been adopted by many artists in order to reflect where they come from and their everyday realities. These lyrical repetitions are persistent in artists' representations of themselves and their urban reality.

It is not surprising that reggaetoneros resort to the neighborhood in order to present themselves and their music. There is an intimate link between the artists and the barrios they describe, as reflected by the songs' lyrics and the artists' public personas. Artists always refer to their place of origin as located in the "barrio," the "caserío," or the residencial. Even for those who grew up in *urbanizaciones* (private subdivisions), the residential cleavages are evident. Most artist websites provide biographies that identify what neighborhood in Puerto Rico the artists are from, and for the most part—no matter whether they come from public housing, barrios, or urbanizaciones—they hail from neighborhoods that are of decreased socioeconomic means. Many artists come

from the spaces known as caseríos, or the public housing projects. Daddy Yankee grew up in a public housing project located in the Las Lomas sector of Río Piedras and continued to live there through his jump to stardom. He still considers this public housing his neighborhood and keeps a unit there even though he has moved his family to a house in the beachfront area of Isla Verde (Corbett 2006).¹² Daddy Yankee asserts that when “People ask me how I can still write from the perspective of [Puerto Rico’s]

ARTISTS ALWAYS REFER TO THEIR PLACE OF ORIGIN AS LOCATED IN THE “BARRIO,” THE “CASERÍO,” OR THE RESIDENCIAL.

Barrio. I spent 25 years there. It never goes away” (Taylor 2006a). Like Daddy Yankee, most reggaetoneros boast similar caserío or low-income residential pedigrees. Don Omar was born and raised in what he describes a violent environment, “*a puño suelto y cambumbeo*,”¹³ [brawling and shooting] in Villa Palmeras. Villa Palmeras has been qualified as a “crime-ridden” barrio of San Juan, where the population of Dominican immigrants has grown tremendously in the late 20th century.¹⁴ Voltio was born in the urban town of Santurce and raised in the “Parque Ecuestre” sector of Carolina, an urbanización of low income that doesn’t violate the attachment to the street that his legitimacy depends on.¹⁵ Tego Calderón was born in Santurce and raised in Río Grande and Carolina, located along the eastern coast of the island, as well as in urbanizaciones, but he emphasizes that this is where “some of the strongest Afro-Caribbean influences on the island” are located.¹⁶ The Calle 13 duo of Residente (Resident) and Visitante (Visitor) satirically archive the interplay of being attached to a neighborhood. Their names come from their biographies; as “*hermanos de crianza*” (brothers because they grew up together), Visitante would visit Residente in a street called Calle 13, located somewhere in the suburban area of Trujillo Alto.¹⁷ Thus, most artists see themselves representing their neighborhoods—the barrios and caseríos—and the people that inhabit them. As Vico C expressed regarding his participation in a local film production: “El estándar de mujer bonita no permite que una niña gorda sea aceptada así de fácil y lo mismo le pasa a un rapero de caserío. La gordura se puede ir con el tiempo, pero la marca de caserío se te queda siempre y por eso sentimos rechazo.” [The standard of female beauty does not allow a fat child to be accepted easily and the same happens to rappers from public housing. Being fat can go with time, but the mark of public housing sticks with you and that’s why we feel rejection.] (Rivera Esquilín 2006).

Beyond the lyrical sphere, current reggaetón has been somewhat hesitant to provide images of the caserío that they refer to so much in their lyrics; in fact, there is a dearth of images of Puerto Rican caseríos or barrios in the genre. A few exceptions are notable. One of Buddha’s videos uses the backdrop of a Puerto Rican caserío, and Voltio and Daddy Yankee took MTV crews to public housing sites in the island. Recently, Daddy Yankee went to a bonafide caserío to film his video collaboration with Snoop Dogg, *Gangsta Zone*.¹⁸ The director of the video, Carlos Pérez affirmed that “Basicamente queremos representar el reggaetón de la calle....”

[Basically, we want to represent the reggaetón of the street] (Vargas 2006). Daddy Yankee has been forcefully embracing this image. His website's home page now features him among "the people" in his Reebok ad with a multiple-dwelling housing structure that looks a lot like Torre Sabana of the *Gangsta Zone* video.¹⁹ This, we can surmise, is the representation of Puerto Rican projects and the barrio that Daddy Yankee alludes to in his public persona.

It is peculiar that in recent times visual images of Puerto Rican public housing have been scarce among reggaetoneros. Often, the default images of poor neighborhoods come from United States-inspired urban landscapes. For example, Daddy Yankee's RBK sneaker website shows images of urban scenery, but not of the urban Puerto Rico that he discusses in his lyrics. The images of Puerto Rico are the beach with palm trees in the area of Condado, with a distant view of the Caribe Hilton hotel and an Old San Juan street dotted with palm trees. Another image includes the streetscape of urban New York City or a set of stateside row-houses along a United States city street, firescapes included: an unlikely image of tropical urban housing architecture. Earlier reggaetón videos were perhaps truer visually to the urban Puerto Rican realities that form the basis for the artists' lyrics. Newer videos, with more money and access to a wider set of resources, resort to what are considered visually more aesthetically pleasing sceneries, far from the Puerto Rican neighborhood realities around which the lyrics still revolve.

The disjuncture between lyrical and visual representations of the barrio and the caseríos promotes a hegemonic representation of the barrio as being the same as that which can be imagined particularly in the northeastern and midwestern United States—the dark brick high-rise public housing projects on the one hand, or the run-down vacant boarded up buildings encountered in deindustrialized cities of the United States, on the other hand. However, Puerto Rico has its own experience with public housing. As opposed to predominant views of United States cities (e.g., Chicago), public housing sites in Puerto Rico tend to be low-rise walk-ups. They are built of cement and are often painted in colorful hues, although they have varying degrees of decay. Nevertheless, the lyrics maintain reggaetón firmly grounded in the barrios and caseríos of Puerto Rico.

The barrio in general, and the caserío in particular, serve as legitimizing agents for reggaetón artists. For example, when faced with the mission to take MTV to "their block," Calle 13 chose to take them to the quintessential "slum" of Puerto Rico—La Perla. The slum that anthropologist Oscar Lewis used as a basis to establish his culture of poverty theory and that René Marqués memorialized in his urban migration play *La Carreta* serves as the backdrop for Calle 13's MTV segment. In the documentary, Residente took the lead in explaining that this is where his grandmother lived. Thus, legitimacy came through his grandmother. The Trujillo Alto Calle 13 that Residente inhabited and that became the spatial center of their name remained obscure. Nevertheless, by taking the MTV audience to La Perla, Calle 13 reaffirmed the rightful place of reggaetón in the barrios.²⁰

In centering public housing and barrios, reggaetoneros have attuned the image of public housing and barrios in Puerto Rico and moved away from negative caricature. Largely stigmatized, barrios and caseríos are represented in the media and in policy practices in ways that labels them unviable. The depiction of caseríos by reggaetoneros in some ways follows the line of how they are depicted in the media—hard places, full of struggle, poverty, and crime. However, reggaetoneros bring to the table the "have been there" possibility of redemption to their depictions of "el

barrio.” In this way, reggaetoneros’ representations of their barrios are consistent with how other residents themselves perceive el caserío and el barrio. In focus groups with public housing residents in the city of Ponce, residents echoed the dual good-bad view of the caserío²¹:

ZAIRE: Si ustedes tuvieran que describirles su comunidad a otras personas que nunca en su vida la han visto, que nunca han venido por aquí, ¿como la describieran?
[If you had to describe your community to other people who have never seen it, who have never been here, how would you describe it?]

R1: ¿Como para vivir? Yo describiría a este residencial regular.
[To live? I would describe this public housing project as regular.]

ZAIRE: ¿Regular en que?
[Regular in what way?]

R1: En muchas cosas.
[In many ways.]

ZAIRE: ¿Como que?
[Like what?]

R1: Bueno, no todas las personas que viven son raras. No todo el que vivimos aquí somos malos.
[Well, not all people who live here are strange. Not everybody who lives here is bad.]

R2: Hay gente que cataloga a la persona igual...
[There are people who catalogue people the same...]

R1: Como la que vive aquí. Aquí vivimos gente decente. Yo vine aquí en el 79.
[Like the one that lives here. Decent people live here. I came here in ‘79.]

R3: Yo hace 50 años que vivo aquí.
[I’ve lived here for fifty years.]

ZAIRE: ¿Tita que dice?
[Tita says what?]

R4: Yo estoy aquí desde enero.
[I’m here since January.]

ZAIRE: Como describieras a alguien que nunca lo ha visto. ¿Como es donde tu vives?
[How would you describe it to someone who has never seen it? How is it where you live?]

R4: Como ellas dicen regular. No esta nada de bien.
[How they say, regular. It is not well at all.]

Another exchange reveals the same duality:

ZAIRE: Si ustedes tuvieran que describir su comunidad a otras personas que nunca la ha visto, que no sabe como es, que esta por allá y nunca ha visto algo así, ¿como ustedes se la describieran?
[If you had to describe your community to other people who have never seen it, who don’t know how it is, who are out there and never has seen something like this, how would you describe it?]

R1: Que no se meta aquí.
[Never to come in here.]

R2: Que no se meta.
[Never to come.]

ZAIRE: ¿Porque?
[Why?]

- R3: Esto esta malo.
[This is bad.]
- ZAIRE: ¿Alguien no la ha visto, que le dirían? ¿Como es donde tu vives?
[Somebody hasn't seen it, what would you say? How is it where you live?]
- R4: Buena.
[Good.]
- R1: Tiene sus áreas.
[It has its areas.]
- R5: Si las hay.
[Yes there are.]
- ZAIRE: ¿Áreas buenas, malas?
[Good areas, bad?]
- R5: Exacto, tu sabes donde vivir.
[Exactly, you know where to live.]
- R6: Personas que le gusta vivir porque el área es más tranquila. Hay otros que no porque ahí está el centro del problema.
[People who like to live [there] because the area is calmer; there are others who don't because the center of the problem is there.]
- R7: Hay gente buena, problemática, hay de todo un poco.
[There are good people, problematic people, a little bit of everything.]

The best-selling reggaetón album by Daddy Yankee, *Barrio fino*, anchors reggaetón in this dualistic notion of the neighborhood. In the introductory track of the album, Daddy Yankee describes his barrio as being “fine” and “good” and disrupts and affirms negative stereotypical representations. As Daddy Yankee states about his barrio fino: “Barrio fino es la música, la esencia del reggaetón, de donde vienen mis raíces, como el residencial Las Lomas de Puerto Rico y Barrio Obrero, Vía Kennedy; son las cosas buenas y otras que mis ojos presenciaron que son fuertes y que ni se pueden decir...muchos momentos que me inspiraron.” [Fine barrio is the music, the essence of reggaetón, from where my roots come, like Las Lomas public housing project in Puerto Rico and Barrio Obrero, Villa Kennedy; there are the good things and other things that my eyes saw that are hard and can't be even told...many moments that inspired me.] (Fernandez-Soberón 2004). In this view, the barrio appears to be an oxymoron; it is a dark, prohibited place of good people, an empty vessel full of leashed potential and hope. Artists stick to this reformatory representation of the barrio or the caserío by defending the neighborhood, the people, and their plight.

The barrios and caseríos as contested zones for hope and blight mark the basis of the reggaetoneros' urban reality. Many describe it as the violent zone that gave them their street credibility and simultaneously nurtured their dreams, even when the rest of society shunned them. The centrality of the barrio in reggaetón is reminiscent of the role that the “ghetto” has played in hip-hop (see Forman 2002; Jackson 2005). For example, in Daddy Yankee's “Rompe” (Remix) of the *Barrio fino en directo* album, Lloyd Banks claims: “My ghetto report card [shows] I got honor roll.” Getting “honor roll” on this particular report card involves not only living and experiencing the good-bad duality of the barrio, but also involves highlighting the experiences that gave you your talent and lyrical focus. Tego Calderón, for example, thanks the barrios and caseríos “por apoyar lo que hago y ser de los míos...por permitirme lograr el sueño de mi vida / y con letras mantener un hogar pa' mi hija / Desahogarme / Y de algún modo olvidarme

de cosas que creo / Y debo callarme” [for supporting what I do and being one of mine... for allowing me to achieve my life-long dream / and with words support a home for my daughter/ Vent / and in some way forget about things I believe / and should be kept quiet.] Thus, the caserío grounds reggaetón spatially and provides its legitimacy as true and strictly urban music.

La Calle

Intimately attached to the neighborhood spatial gauge used in reggaetón is the “street.” The street intersects with the neighborhood and the disco to form the lyrical identity of reggaetón. About 22 percent of songs mention the street explicitly in terms like “*la calle*,” “*el callejón*,” “*la avenida*,” and others, as well as naming specific streets in the landscape of urban Puerto Rico.

“La calle” has become a requisite spatial entity for the genre. The first reggaetón radio station in New York—La Kalle 105.9—used the moniker to capture the essence of the genre.²² The street is voiced incessantly by the artists in interviews and public representations, and the term serves artists’ needs to identify their origins and claim an urban legitimacy in their lyrics. To be from and represent the street means to be genuine and “real,” in much the same ways as being from the “barrio” does. In fact, the street becomes the metaphor for genuineness in reggaetón. Many lyrics in the genre refer to the importance of being “real,” honest and sincere. In many songs the artists ask women and men not to “front” (no frontees) and display the author reaffirming how “real” and sincere they are. For many, being clear and not lying are extremely important elements. As Tego Calderón sings in “Sandungueoso,” “Los domino sin venderles cuentos chinos / Con las gomas siempre, pai / Genuino, genuino” [I dominate without selling lies / With the truth, man / Genuine, genuine]. And this is a feature that is intimately linked to the grittiness and omnipresent concreteness of the street and the everyday.

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The street (*la calle*) also makes artists members, and the genre a property, of the public sphere. Their business, both social and professional, in the midst of being poor as in achieving economic success, gets conducted “in the street.” Thus, the street is intimately linked to the everyday experiences of the poor and grounds their legitimacy and authenticity. An article by *Billboard* noted the changing nature of reggaetón and its decreasing “purity” due to its move away from the street and the street culture of doing business (Taylor 2006b).²³ Some “lamented that the handshake that used to secure alliances and creative output has been supplanted” with a more formalized way of conducting business. Thus, the genre depends on being part of public spaces, and particularly the informality of the street, where many believe there is more honesty. Eddie Dee

claims, for instance, that he trusts an addict on the streets of urban Santurce more than a judge from the wealthy suburb of Montehiedra in the city of Guaynabo.²⁴ This sentiment is linked to the fact that many persons living in the street are discarded and ignored by mainstream Puerto Rican society; yet this is the site deemed by reggaetoneros to be most transparent and comprehensible. The street, thus, is compared to obscure and distant political transactions thought to be disconnected from the street and to be ultimately dishonest. As Vico C expresses in “Desahogo”: “...ya sabemos lo que traman / Nos usan pa’ ganar, después nos tiran cuando ganan / Ahí es que podemos ver la verdad / Que trabajan por el voto, no por la sociedad / No les importa las vidas que en el *barrio* se han perdido / Y pa’ ganar las elecciones van al caserío/ Abrazan mi abuela, saludan a mi tío / Pero los pasados cuatro años estaban escondidos” [We know what you’re plotting / You use us to win, then throw us out when you do / This is where we can see the truth / That you work for a vote and not for society / You don’t care about the lives lost in the barrio / And to win the elections you go to the public housing project / Hug my grandmother, say hello to my uncle / But the last four years you were hiding.]

The street that reggaetoneros refer to is typically rooted in the Puerto Rican context and culture.²⁵ Perhaps the best image of the typical Puerto Rican street that reggaetoneros provide is Don Omar’s “Yo vivo en guerra / Caseríos #2.” The song tours the urban neighborhoods, caseríos, and streets of Puerto Rico in a violent tirade of love, hate, and war, with lyrics like “los sicarios de Manuela” [the hitmen of Manuel A. Pérez public housing], “yo vivo en guerra y estamos cazando” [I live in war and we’re hunting]. But, similar to the case of neighborhoods, lyrical representations of the street have remained truer to the artists’ urban Puerto Rican aesthetics than the visual representations in videos and advertisements. The representations of the street in videos tend to be more focused on tropical beauty than gritty urban reality. For example, Don Omar’s *Vuelve* music video takes place in the streets of El Viejo San Juan. While El Viejo San Juan has a diverse socioeconomic demography, the visual depictions of the streets are far from those that reggaetoneros tend to sing about in their lyrics. A similarly sanitary version of the street is presented in Don Omar and Tego Calderón’s *Bandolero* video. In the music video, Don Omar drives down streets with backgrounds of urban vistas that appear to be industries. Residential areas that tend to have single-family houses and backgrounds of palm trees are readily visible. This depiction is also rather far from the urban realities that the song alludes to in its emphasis on being criminalized. In the Don Omar *Pobre diablo* music video, streetscapes and interiors of old colonial buildings and a wood house are depicted. The urban character of the street is marginally captured by a child playing with his hoola hoop on a stoop of a wooden home. Unlike most videos, this one is able to capture some everyday commonness of living in urban Puerto Rico. However, the videos represent the urban lifestyle as being easy, clean, pretty, and sanitized. This is rather different from the dark, full of struggle, gritty street that the genre’s lyrics depict.²⁶

Many other spaces are common in reggaetón lyrics (see Table 1). Nevertheless, Puerto Rican spaces are by far the most common contextualization for reggaetón, with 17 percent of songs referring to Puerto Rican spaces. This makes the aesthetics of reggaetón Puerto Rican-centric, as well as being influenced by United States and Caribbean trends. Everyday routine spaces like the beach, restaurants, markets, and others are common to the genre; there is also the regular naming of public institution such as schools, hospitals, and prisons (see Table 1). Furthermore, the “corner” and “the

TABLE 2. THEMES OF REGGAETÓN SONGS

Theme	Frequency	Percent*
Sex	77	43
Party and Dance	66	37
Love	53	30
Violence	32	18
Lyrical and Self Prowess	30	17
Heartache	19	11
Social and Political Statements	19	11
The Everyday	17	9
Genre Evaluation	14	8
Cheating	10	6
Culture	7	4
Tricky female	5	3
Conquest and Desire	5	3
Representing el pueblo	3	2
Poverty	2	1
Neighborhoods	2	1
Caribbean links	2	1
Defining self	2	1
Friendship	1	1
Geography	1	1
Sports	1	1

* Percent column does not sum to 100 percent because songs can be classified into more than one thematic category.

El Perreo, El Guille, Las Gatas y La Noche

The urban spaces of reggaetón are tightly bound to the topics that reggaetoneros address, and here too reggaetoneros have constructed a particular urban Puerto Rican milieu (see Table 2). The most popular themes in reggaetón songs are sex, dancing and partying, experiencing love, lyrical prowess, violence, and heartache. These themes often occur in combination within a song and result in plots where they act interdependently.

The typical plot involves a guy really liking or even loving a woman, pursuing her by asking or demanding her to dance or have sex. In these occasions, sex and dance are often synonymous or act as metaphors for each other, sometimes making it indistinguishable when one or the other is meant. References to “*perreo*” as the preferred dance style, but also as a metaphor for sex, are ever present in reggaetón songs. The pursuit of the woman is often attached to the reggaetonero extolling his own rapping, lyrical, or sexual virtues, which sometimes involve the mention of being ready to “kill” or having a posse of friends ready to follow his violent orders and defend him. Examples of reggaetón songs that fit into this category include Alexis & Fido’s “El palo,” Baby Rasta & Gringo’s “Causo tensión,” Daddy Yankee’s “Muévete y perrea,” and “Calor” by Hector “El Bambino.”²⁸

Nevertheless, reggaetón songs often include other more sensible and even tender expressions of love. About one-third of reggaetón songs talk about feelings of love, lost love, and heartache. Don Omar’s “Aunque te fuiste” is a popular song that represents this type of love, which 30 percent of reggaetón songs invoke.

gates” are important sites that complement the street, and have a special relevance to Puerto Rico’s urban landscape. The mix of these spaces with other, more common spatial elements like the street, the disco, and the neighborhood give reggaetón lyrics a firm attachment to the urban everyday of Puerto Rico.

Other geographies of a wider scale, in and outside of Puerto Rico, although less common, are part of reggaetón. Songs include the mention of a range of urban geographies such as the city, the nation, the world. United States spaces as well as representations of other Latin American and Caribbean countries (the Dominican Republic is the most commonly portrayed), are becoming more prevalent in reggaetón, especially as the genre attains a wider public.²⁷

The emphasis on sex, dancing, and love makes the preponderance of characters that appear in reggaetón songs female due to the heteronormative male-dominated industry.²⁹ Enamoring or conquering women thus are central activities in reggaetón.

But reggaetón addresses a range of other themes as well, including everyday life, and social and political preoccupations and concerns including poverty and local conditions, in residential neighborhoods, the music and the genre, the local culture and inter-Caribbean loyalties, friendship, and athletics. These themes, although less salient thematically, nevertheless form an integral part of reggaetón and often serve as the backdrop that contains the legitimizing urban codes essential to the genre.

The urban aesthetics of reggaetón

Reggaetón as an urban symbol that locates itself in selective spaces can be examined from the perspective of urban sociologists, who theorized the conditions, culture, and social lifestyles that constitute city life. According to Robert E. Park, one of the earliest urban sociologists and founder of the Chicago School, the city is “a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition.... The city has...its own culture” (Park, Burgess and Janowitz 1967: 1).

The city, in form and function, was constructed by a plethora of economic, technological, political, social, religious, and spatial developments, to name a few. Throughout there is a rich history and multiple reincarnations, so that the city was the consolidation and concentration of a wide array of functions, hopes, and the expansion of the possibilities of human existence.³⁰ The aesthetics of the city can be located in the very dynamics from which it emerged; dynamics that have resulted in a highly novel, ultramasculine, violently imagined, racially qualified, and typically antipodal space of redemption and contamination, utopia and dystopia, heaven and hell. The topics and locations of reggaetón illustrate urban Puerto Rico and the experiences of living in the cities of Puerto Rico for the many local and international audiences that have been captivated by the genre. But they also formulate and affirm ideas of what being urban and having urban culture is about. As I show below, ideas and representations about poverty, violence, gender, and race constitute the “urban spatial aesthetic” of reggaetón.

The violent poverty aesthetic

The most notable urban frame of reggaetón is poverty. The social and economic inequalities experienced by reggaetoneros are rearticulated in lyrics that highlight the plight of people who are poor, stigmatized, and vulnerable to violence. Specifically, the focus on urban barrios, caseríos, and the streets as a rhetorical constitutive element of the genre underscores the experience of urban poverty in Puerto Rico.

Poverty and inequality are intrinsic to the way the city has been formulated, imagined, and experienced. From the beginnings of urban research, the poverty apparent in centers to which migrants and immigrants had gravitated to was of major concern for policymakers. Jacob Riis’s study of urban poor immigrants in New York at the turn of the century and W.E.B. DuBois’s contemporaneous account of African-American urban poverty in Philadelphia lay some of the foundations for understanding how poverty becomes inevitably attached to the city (Riis 1890; DuBois 1898). Oscar Lewis’s (1965) later development of a cultural theory of poverty based on his research in Mexico and Puerto Rico’s La Perla solidified visions of how the city constituted a particular kind of poverty.

Puerto Rican cities today are characterized by rather obvious representations of urban inequality. Multi-million dollar shopping malls and gated communities of the wealthy often exist next to feared caseríos (public housing projects) and urban barrios.³¹ The urban experience is characterized by high levels of poverty; in 1999, 48.2 percent of the island's population had an income below the poverty level (US Census 2000). The median household income in 1999 was a low \$14,412, and 20 percent of households on the island received public assistance benefits (US Census 2000). The socioeconomic inequalities in the island are most visible in its distinct housing stratification. Puerto Rico holds the second largest public and assisted housing authority in the United States Federal Housing and Urban Development System, with over 55,000 units of public housing.

In their lyrics and public presentations, reggaetoneros show an intimate awareness of the marginality that characterizes their own lives and those who live the same brand of urbanity they lived. Most reggaetoneros come from humble backgrounds and experienced the realities of the barrios first hand. In his track, "Gracias," Tego Calderón identifies the experience of urban marginality that preceded his fame:

Gracias a los barrios y los caseríos / Por apoyar lo que yo hago, por ser de los míos / ... / Gracias a todos los que me emplearon / Que me vieron jodido y me dieron la mano, mi hermano / y Yo he hecho to' tipo de trabajo / ... / Gracias gobierno, por robarnos tanto y cada 4 años vestirse de santo

[Thank you to the barrios and the public housing projects / For supporting what I do, for being one of mine / ... / Thank you to those that gave me employment / That saw me down and gave me their hand, my brother / and I've done all kinds of jobs / ... / Thank you government, for stealing so much and every 4 years dressing as Saints].

Daddy Yankee, too, points it out in his recent hit, "Gangsta Zone," with Snoop Dogg:

Damas y caballeros, voy a paso ligero / Ayer estaba pobre y hoy camino con dinero [Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going at a fast pace / Yesterday I was poor and today I walk in money].

Attached to poverty, violence is another element of the urban aesthetic of reggaetón. As discussed above, about a tenth of the songs explicitly deal with violence. Violence and criminalization has long been a social dynamic of concern within urban environments. Given the high densities of the cities and suburban movements away from them, central districts have been characterized in the urban literature as prone to crime.

In Puerto Rico, crime is perhaps the biggest social preoccupation among islanders. During the 1960s and 1970s, crime rose dramatically in the island due to increased drug consumption, and by the late 1980s and early 1990s the island was experiencing what was deemed to be the worse crime wave ever (Rodríguez Beruff 1999). By 2004, with 790 murders, the mean homicide rate in Puerto Rico was three times that of the United States, greater than New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, and four times that of Europe (Rodríguez Beruff 1999).

Many reggaetoneros come from those specific places that are considered to be most violent in the island. And even if they don't, they typically don't come from privileged backgrounds. Public housing, caseríos, and barrios in particular have been recognized both in the media and by formal authorities as the sources of criminal activity. They are feared and avoided, and young males hailing from those places

are labeled criminals. Violence is a part of the everyday life that reggaetoneros experienced and probably remain very close to. As Eddie Dee sings in “Censurarme por ser rapero,” violence and poverty are intimately tied to his experience:

Pero es bien fácil hablar mierda sentado / En aire acondicionado / Como puñeta voy a ser algo positivo / Si todo lo que veo es negativo / Si hablo mis vivencias / Dicen que promuevo la violencia / ... / Nos han puesto un sello, pero / La mayoría de nosotros somos más gente que ellos
[But it's easy to talk shit sitting / In air conditioning / How the hell am I going to do something positive / If all that I see is negative / If I talk about what I live / They say I promote violence / .../ They've put a label on us, but the majority of us are better people than them].³²

In addition to the violence they experienced growing up, being criminalized is a common experience among reggaetoneros. Many express being labeled and even arrested simply for coming from specific neighborhoods. Don Omar and Tego Calderón's song “Los bandoleros” exhibits this tendency of being labeled as outside of the law, resisting that label, and yet celebrating their origins in places that are feared. Don Omar, for example, expresses that his arrest was a result of persecution by the police, while Tego Calderón simultaneously engages and challenges the criminalizing label by stating that in doing music they are behaving better than before: “como quiera que lo pongas hago menos mal que antes” [however you see it, I'm doing less harm than before].

Paul Butler suggests that there are two messages in hip-hop, one political and one that advocates outlaw/extralegal participation.³³ Reggaetón too addresses violence from a different vantage point. The genre's songs explore violence as an everyday phenomenon and turns sympathetic eyes to inmates and those accused of criminal acts, as can be witnessed in the movement to liberate Tempo.³⁴ Furthermore, many reggaetoneros have experienced violence or been involved with the criminal justice system: Don Omar, Tempo, Buddha, MC Ceja, Voltio, and Daddy Yankee. Artists in the genre thus have a more intimate relationship with violence. This may be the reason they discuss violence in rather different ways and from very different vantage points than policymakers and politicians.

Masculine aesthetic

Reggaetón exemplifies the masculinization of the urban aesthetic. Félix Jiménez's important essay on the dynamics of masculinity in reggaetón lays the groundwork for beginning to understand how gender and sexuality are managed in reggaetón. Here, I look at gender and masculinity from a different vantage point; I consult the urban aesthetics of space—in other words, how gender practices formulate the urbanscape that reggaetoneros manage.

Masculinity is utilized to construct the dualistic, complex space that reggaetoneros experience and evince. Their representations of space are not only articulated through an attribution of maleness to urban space, but are also encapsulated in the deployment of the lyrics. The masculinization is perhaps most present in the introduction and conclusions of songs. All songs begin with the artists calling out their names and making claims for their current or future success. The songs similarly end with shout-outs by the artists and an affirmation of their lyrical, sexual, or gender prowess. Young men, as well as the handful of young women in the genre,

subscribe to this format. In a genre that has been critiqued for sounding the same, the call-outs serve to identify the artists. Furthermore, they serve to contextualize the song in a masculine space. Often, the shout-outs identify the public, audience, or interlocutors for the songs. For example, some call out “*pal caserío*” or “*de la calle*.” There is an interlaced construction of place, audience, ego, and prowess, which is encased in pseudo “calls of the wild.” Take, for example, one of the best-known openings and endings in reggaetón, Wisin & Yandel’s “Rakata”³⁵:

OPENING: Salte...('W', con!) / Si no estas bailando con ella / Salte... ('Y,' Yandel!) / Si no estas perreando con ella / Salte...(Luny! Medio millón de copias, obligao!) / Si no estas bailando con ella / Salte...(El dúo de la historia!) / Para hacerle... (En “Mas Flow 2”!) / (Zumba!)
 [Get out...('W', with!) / If you're not dancing with her / Get out... ('Y,' Yandel!) / If you're not dancing doggy style with her / Get out... (Luny! Half a million copies, forced!) / If you're not dancing with her / Get out...(The duo of history!) / To do...(In “Mas Flow 2”!) / (Throw it!)].

CLOSING: Luny! / Ahora hay que trabajar! / De medio millón pa' arriba / Tu sabes! / El dúo de la historia / 'W', el sobreviviente! / Con Yandel / Ellos lo saben / “Mas Flow 2”! / El que para ventas! / Este disco no hay quien lo supere! / Matando la liga, el arma secreta, sin miedo! / Nelly! / “Mas Flow 2”! / 'W', el sobreviviente! / Con Yandel! / El dúo dinámico!
 [Luny! / Now we have to work! / From half a million upwards / You know! / The duo of history / “W,” the survivor! / With Yandel / They know / “Mas Flow 2”! / The one who stops sales! / There is nobody that can exceed this album! / Killing the league, the secret weapon, without fear! / Nelly! / “Mas Flow 2”! / “W,” the survivor! / With Yandel! / The dynamic duo!].

In the opening and closing, the artists call out the names of the artists and the producers (Luny, Mas Flow, Nelly) and position themselves as being the best, the ones who sell the most albums, and the ones who survive and keep on succeeding. The structure of reggaetón songs thus is imparted with a necessity to impose claims to grandeur, a majesty that is also achieved through the urban spaces that the artists highlight.

The masculine aesthetic is also embodied in the representations of urban space in reggaetón and becomes a vehicle for constructing the urban space that reggaetoneros envision. An example of how reggaetoneros utilize their masculinity to form an urban spatial aesthetic is evident in their conceptualizations of the home in relation to the street. About one in five reggaetón songs mention elements of a house, including the house itself, a bedroom, or a bed. The home's palpable presence in reggaetón lyrics might suggest an inclusion of a female space in the genre.³⁶ However, the home too becomes a masculinizing tool for conceptualizing urban space. Intimate home spaces are primarily deployed in two ways: either they contextualize sexual encounters where men are in a bedroom and continue to exert their domination, or they serve to reflect the masculinizing potentialities of the street. The house thus is never displayed as the site for doing the work of the home or child-rearing tasks that constitute the gender cleavages of home and street visible in urban-suburban dichotomies. Instead, the home is another representation of processes of urban masculinization. For example, in “Muévete y perrea,” Daddy Yankee contrasts the respectable but inauthentic female home-space to the wild, sexualized space of the

masculine street: “En la casa con tu mai te pintas la santa / En la calle conmigo eres una sata” [In the home with your mother you paint yourself as a saint / In the street you are a mutt]. Another example is Yaga y Mackie Rank’s “Muñequita”: “Voy a buscarte pa’ enamorarte, ma’ / Y sacarte de tu casa pa’ enchularte” [I’m going to get you to enamor you/ And take you out of the house to have you like me]. Both songs’ lyrics assert masculinity by conceptualizing the home in opposition to the male street. In other words, the woman is invited out into the masculine space of the street so that not only can the reggaetonero reassert his masculinity by enamoring the woman, but he can also move his interactions with the woman into the masculine, controlled space of the street. The home thus serves as an oppositional instrument to conceptualize an ultramasculine space in reggaetón.

By asserting their masculine prowess, reggaetoneros have constructed the residential urban spaces they affirm as masculine with masculine traits (strong, hard, fearful), that tautologically confirms their invincibility and fearlessness. This portrait contradicts the demographic data of urban spaces in Puerto Rico. In the 2000 Census, 51 percent of Puerto Rico’s population was female, and 21 percent of households were headed by single females.³⁷ But in areas of poverty, the proportion of women tends to be much higher, due to the particular conditions (violence and incarceration) that have reduced the number of males. For example, in two public housing sites in Ponce, the proportion of single female-headed households is higher than the national average.

Rather than the depiction of urban neighborhoods of reggaetón being an inaccurate representation of “real” urban life in Puerto Rico, the ultramasculine spaces they present are evidence of the masculinized urban aesthetics of the genre. Specifically, by claiming themselves, and the spaces that constitute their reality and their genre, as masculine spaces, reggaetoneros reposition themselves as strong, fearless products of tough, violent environments. Their prowess and potential for goodness are encased in their ability to struggle and rise above the tough street and violent caseríos. Thus, presenting the street as tough and masculine is exactly what positions reggaetoneros, and the spaces they exalt, as good, strong, and worthy of redemption. Masculinity thus is another vehicle by which urban spaces are consolidated as tough and hard, and at the same time are affirmed as good, worthy, courageous, and indicative of strength.³⁸ The masculine urban aesthetic that reggaetoneros formulate thus colors the important dualistic and complex rendering of reggaetón-produced conceptions of urban space.

The Black aesthetic

Race has been intrinsically tied to theoretical formulations of the city. Particularly in the United States, but also in the Caribbean, cities were formed under dynamics that solidified racial, ethnic, and class cleavages.³⁹ In Puerto Rico, reggaetoneros have brought to the fore an intrinsic connection between urban poverty and race. Many artists mention race and describe the profile of the people in their songs as being dark, using terms such as “negro,” “moreno,” “trigueña,” etc. Of racial terms in songs, “negro” seems to be the most commonly used. “*Indio*” was used twice, once in Calle 13’s “Atrevete te te” and once in Zion y Lennox’s “Don’t Stop.” Thus, in their lyrics, reggaetoneros envision themselves as black or dark people whose disadvantaged position in Puerto Rican society has been linked to the intersection of class and race.⁴⁰

The ultimate example of a reggaetonero who centralizes race in his lyrics, persona, and visual representations is the “happy to be nappy” Tego Calderón, who wears his hair styled in an afro and proudly emphasizes his African roots and black identity. In his collaboration with Yaga y Mackie “Yo quisiera,” Tego was influenced by explicit racial rap acts such as NWA and his racial sensibilities carry through his image.⁴¹ Generally, however, reggaetón has not been blind to race and in fact has attached blackness as an authentic identity of the genre. Eddie Dee claims that society stigmatizes him for being a rapper and looks at him as if it had never seen “un negro” in “Censurarme por ser rapero.” Similarly, Don Omar repeatedly refers to himself as “el negro” o “*el negrito*” in a number of his songs (e.g., the introductory track of the *Sangre nueva* album).

Race is intimately linked to the genre through urban spaces. In the disco, morenas and negras get pursued by negros, and the pursuit is “*a lo niche*.”⁴² Thus reggaetón gets contextualized in dark spaces with dark people. Daddy Yankee’s Reebok ad displays this tendency to present dark people, as do Tego Calderón, his afro, and his videos. Tego, in fact, has in some ways helped to reconceptualize racist standards of beauty; suddenly, black women with afros have jobs on Puerto Rican television, in less politicized circumstances than they have experienced in the past.⁴³

IN THE DISCO, MORENAS AND NEGRAS GET PURSUED BY NEGROS, AND THE PURSUIT IS “A LO NICHE.”

But race has also become a legitimizing agent for reggaetoneros, in large part because it is intimately tied with place and location. Being from the caseríos or barrios labels and stigmatizes reggaetoneros. The music itself becomes a path for seeking both inclusion and liberation from the stigma. Daddy Yankee, for example, can be seen in appearance as being a sanitized and more accepted version than other performers due to his lighter skin; this could be a potential contradiction to his caserío credentials, and may actually explain Daddy Yankee’s vehement assertions of being from “el barrio,” lest he be confused with some of the Latino pop idols of recent times. It might not be too outrageous to argue that Daddy Yankee’s light-skinned phenotype has opened the doors to a mainstream audience. In fact, EMI Televisa affirmed that they signed their first reggaetón act, Tito “El Bambino” because “from the way he looks to the music he makes, he was the most (obvious) to make a cross over into pop music” (Cobo 2006). Looks, including race and phenotype, are intrinsic to the genre and negotiate the genre’s image. Senior Vice President of marketing for Universal Music Latino also referred to Rakim & Ken-Y’s looks as being ideal for a new, more pop-infused type of reggaetón marketing. As he stated: “Beyond the musical credibility they have as a reggaetón act, they have a certain look” (Cobo 2006).

Deciphering the “look” is not hard. Certainly, Tego or Don Omar’s looks stick to the more traditional reggaetón street image than Tito “El Bambino” or Rakim & Ken-Y. Race and appearance, including hair and the use of “black” styles such as

cornrows or dreadlocks thus lend some legitimacy and authenticity to reggaetón, which undoubtedly through their attachment, reference an urban poverty experience. Race thus is a managed urban quality that reggaetoneros seem to be largely aware of in establishing their legitimacy and urban truths.

THE “BLIN-BLIN” AESTHETIC IS ONE WHERE POVERTY AND HARDSHIP, NAMELY “STRUGGLE,” AS DADDY YANKEE PUTS IT, CHARACTERIZES DAILY LIFE.

The blin-blin aesthetic

The city has always been a place of promise and of possibility and has solidified this desire in the forms of monumental buildings, towers, and enterprise. The city, however, also became the source of resistance and alternatives—a place that needed to be escaped from, controlled, and ordered due to a perceived inherent disorder, poverty, and blight. Hence the dynamics that made the city into “the possible” and thus desired also created the “impossible” and thus undesired qualities of urban life. And these events are encapsulated in the style and the language—they are the aesthetic of urban life.

Early sociologists deemed the city to be the center of possibility and limitation; as put by Andy Merrifield (2002), it was a site of persistent dialectic between “something truly epic and tragic.” The schizophrenia of the city is integral to the urbanism that foundational sociologists defined in the very early social conceptions of the American urban experience. Wirth saw the city as the “most favorable breeding-ground of new biological and cultural” hybrids due to the increased density, heterogeneity, and persistent interaction of a wide range of actors. The hustle and bustle of the city that engenders new forms, new cultures, and new social relationships is also the mechanism that creates a new type of man: the “metropolitan man,” in Simmel’s view. The “metropolitan man” of Simmel, reincarnated as the “marginal man” of Park’s sociological city, and Wirth’s person with an urban “blasé outlook” are the new, typical dwellers of the city. The “blasé” attitude is characterized by indifference and reservation, and is based on superficial interrelations that characterize social relationships as meaningless (Wirth 1938: 1; Simmel 1964). The attitude is both redemptory in its ability to innovate, and dangerous in its ability to get out of control and destruct. At the positive extreme, it is characterized by a metropolitan man who innovates, who is competitive, eccentric, and inventive, who attains a level of cosmopolitanism to emancipate himself from social controls, and who simultaneously blends and distinguishes himself through the creation of a new set of sophisticated and rational urban sensibilities. On the negative extreme, the city is also the site for physically proximate but socially distant relationships that permit unchecked creations, as well as an endless complex set of new, dense political economic relationships that can become unmanageable.

In their lyrics and representations, reggaetoneros exhibit this same duality of the city. Tego Calderón captures this confrontation when he acknowledges that he is from the street but elegant (“*calle pero elegante*”) in the song “Punto y aparte.”⁴⁴ In this discourse, reggaetoneros present themselves as being always inside (always poor, stigmatized, and criminal) and outside (having made it, and resisting poverty and stigmatization). The “blin-blin,” I suggest, is the aesthetic marker of this duality.⁴⁵ The experiences of poverty that reggaetoneros present constitute the urban aesthetic that they advance. The “blin-blin” aesthetic is one where poverty and hardship, namely “struggle,” as Daddy Yankee puts it, characterizes daily life. Particularly important to the representation is noting that, although they are successful now, they have gone through significant difficulty in the past as a result of socioeconomic disadvantage. In a sense, they highlight this socioeconomic and cultural baggage as constituting the elements of the movement. The blin-blin is perhaps the best practicing performance of how reggaetoneros are attached to poverty. Heavy and expensive jewelry, including chains and watches, have characterized the fashion sensibilities of the genre’s followers. Flashy “blin-blineo” is the mark of having made it and one of the few markers available to reggaetoneros in simultaneously aligning with, and distinguishing themselves from their constituents at the “poor” caserío. Thus, fashion too is adopted in ways that give them a permanent tie to and escape from poverty.

Reggaetoneros’ music is an example of the innovation that can come from being at the margins, ignored, and overlooked. The very trajectory of reggaetón as a music that emerged unsanctioned by society and grew out of an underground syncretism of multiple cultures attests to its limitless potentialities. In addition, the reggaetoneros’ ability to bring this unknown music into the mainstream, despite major rejection from both the music industry and society, proves their exceptional urban character. In essence, reggaetoneros had the “blasé” attitude and disconnectedness essential to achieving innovation. But the very urban anomie that allowed for the innovation kept reggaetoneros unchecked about their production and messages. The vows professing “urban reality” are taken at face value, and the messages rarely get measured against the communities that they use as referents.⁴⁶

THE EXPERIENCES OF POVERTY THAT REGGAETONEROS PRESENT CONSTITUTE THE URBAN AESTHETIC THAT THEY ADVANCE.

In this way, reggaetoneros show an urban duality where they reassert their poverty and violent prowess on the one hand, but demand liberation from the realities and stigmatization of being poor or violent on the other. The “blin-blin” thus is as much about being poor and threatening as it is about being successful and rich and legal. This duality is rather consistent with the experience that people who live in public housing in Puerto Rico face. In interviews that I held with residents, they expressed that there was a lot of violence in the neighborhood. Even so, they felt

safe in their neighborhood and resisted being labeled as criminals. This view of urban poverty redirects the discussion of urban poverty and violence in Puerto Rico in ways that I discuss below.

Reggaetoneros have highlighted an urban aesthetic that is consistent with the conceptualizations of the city as being poor, violent, masculine, and racially marked. However, reggaetoneros have also provided a different gaze into these dynamics than the ones managed by the media and political outlets. Reggaetoneros have indeed recast the normative image of poverty, violence, masculinity, and race to offer alternatives conceptualizations of urbanity for those who experience the conditions that they describe in their songs. In this way, their practice has been entirely urban, liberating, and able to create the potentiality that the urban modern formation is said to be responsible for.

Conclusion: Policy al ritmo de reggaetón

Toward the turn of the 2005–2006 year, the government of Puerto Rico enlisted Residente and Visitante of the newly popular reggaetón group Calle 13 in the fight against the practice of firing shots to celebrate the advent of a new year (Pérez 2005). An opinion poll suggested that the citizenry was encouraged by the participation of the artists in the social campaign (Pérez 2005). Calle 13 had not been the first group to be enlisted in political and social campaigns. Artists like Don Omar, Tego Calderón, Daddy Yankee, and others have been considered for different social campaigns. In 2005, Bimbo became participant in the sociopolitical and environmental conversation over rising gas prices, through his song “Fuleteame el tanque.”

In an unexpected turn, reggaetón and reggaeton artists have become potential ambassadors for sociopolitical campaigns. The use of reggaetoneros for formalized social and political endeavors, however, has not been uncontroversial. When the governor of the island, Anibal Acevedo Vilá, wanted to feature Don Omar in a school desertion campaign in early 2006, there was an popular and political outcry against it. The controversy revolved around the fact that Don Omar had left the traditional public school system to obtain a G.E.D. and would not be an adequate role model against school desertion. The controversy was not a new one. In 2001, the Senate of Puerto Rico launched an all-out campaign against the genre’s lyrics, declaring them unfit for public dissemination and consumption. Similar censorship has also occurred in the nearby country of Dominican Republic, where some Puerto Rican reggaetón artists have been banned from performing (Núñez Hidalgo 2005). Nevertheless, the popularity of the genre’s revenue-making success and the internationalization of the genre have formed a compelling case for Puerto Rican politicians to at least consider reggaetón representatives to convey their social messages. As one of the genre’s pioneers, Vico C, noted in his 2005 song “Desahogo,” politicians persecuted rappers until they noted that people embraced the music.

Many reggaetón artists have defended their music by emphasizing that their lyrics simply reflect real urban life.⁴⁷ This is no surprise given that the lyrical emphasis of the genre as a place for sharing the character of everyday life makes it ideal for spelling out the social and political realities of its actors. Furthermore, there is a premium in reggaetón on being “real” and accurate in the depiction of life.⁴⁸ This is true from the genre’s beginnings. Reggaetón’s origins are located within lyrics that address social realities and depict everyday urban life. Ruben DJ’s first recording, made in 1989 and titled “La escuela,” addressed school desertion, and Vico C’s “La recta final” looked at the violent reality of the street that the youth of his generation

faced. Other contemporaries like Liza M advocated safe sex by asking men to wear a hat (“*pon ponte el sombrero*”). Through these sociopolitical lyrics, and later through the sexualized songs of the 2000s, rappers and reggaetoneros in Puerto Rico have painted a picture of life as experienced in urban Puerto Rico.⁴⁹ Some original reggaetoneros, then called raperos, believe the genre has moved away from its sociopolitical roots. Ruben DJ vented this frustration in his attempts to return to the genre: “Con tanta violencia, ya lo positivo suena como algo ‘charro’. Tiene que hablar uno con palabras fuertes, con la jerga diaria para ser escuchado y no ser ignorado por una juventud que prefiere la música violenta” [With so much violence, the positive sounds like something uncool. You have to talk with strong words, with the everyday jargon to be listened to and not be ignored because youth prefer violent music] (Torres Torres 2006). Critics have also suggested that reggaetón is socially ignorant and apolitical. Félix Jiménez offers an unforgiving critique:

En Puerto Rico, este modelo nunca fue subvertido para ir en busca de una caribeña sonoridad, con una estética visual propia, sino sexualizado *in extremis* para articular fotográficamente las ‘instantáneas callejeras’ que se formulan como videos agresivos y reiterativos. El territorio del hombre rapero no es propiamente la calle, sino la disco; el movimiento no es social en su fondo, sino automovilístico (el Porsche rojo, el Mazzerati amarillo); la transacción nunca es sentimental, sino carnal, y *toma y dame* son las palabras más utilizadas en las líricas. La ambición de los raperos boricuas se mantiene en niveles estrictamente profesionales o monetarios, y no existen pretensiones existenciales ni latencias político-sociales en las líricas bailables. (Jiménez 2004: 129)

[In Puerto Rico, this model was never subverted to go in search of a Caribbean sound, with its own visual esthetics, but instead sexualized *in extremis* to articulate photographically the “instant streets” that are formulated as aggressive and redundant videos. The territory of the male rapper is not properly the street, but the disco; the movement is not social at its core, but about the car (the red Porsche, the yellow Mazzerati); the transaction is never sentimental, but of the body, and *give me* and *take* are the words most utilized in the lyrics. The ambition of Puerto Rican rappers is strictly maintained in professional and monetary levels, and there are no existential pretensions or sociopolitical interests in the lyrics made for dancing.]

I suggest that there is an alternative view of reggaetón that departs from Jiménez’s analysis. The first juncture of divergence is the idea that the disco and the street are constituted from opposite sides of the spectrum. The disco and the street, in my view, are fluid, continuous elements of how reggaetón artists imagine their lives and constitute their realities. They are spaces that appeal to the wide majority of peers in the poor areas of Puerto Rico. It is the street that gives them the grittiness, and it is the disco that allows for the escape and the reinterpretation or redirection of the street. The street and the disco are indivisible in the same way that everyday events in a person’s life can’t be disentangled from the one being experienced at a particular time.

The same is true for the sexual lyrics that predominate in the genre. Jiménez suggests that there is no “sentiment” apart from the body. But in fact, at least 30 percent of the songs explicitly express ideas of love and heartbreak. But perhaps where I depart most from Jiménez’s representation is with his idea that reggaetoneros have no political or social orientation. In fact, reggaetoneros,

in addition to having many lyrics about political concerns and local realities of violence, have also become participants in the political debate in the island and abroad. By virtue of this, they have become, even if unwilling, sociopolitical brokers.

Paul Butler suggests that hip-hop can serve as a basis to create organic policy from the ones most affected by violence and the criminal justice system. As he states, better and more just punishment would occur “if ghetto philosophers and the classic philosophers met” (Buttler 2004: 1000).⁵⁰ In this case, we might ask: What urban aesthetics have reggaetoneros consciously or unconsciously deposited in the public sphere, and how do these shape the policies and alternatives available to the communities they represent and interface with? Reggaetón has already vied for inclusion in the policy debate through its music (Jiménez 2004: 133). But its reach extends beyond concerns over the genre. Thus, reggaetoneros have become the prime source of public knowledge about what happens in the low-income urban neighborhoods of the island and the unavoidable realities present there.

An early urban sociologist, Louis Wirth, argued that because of its size, density, heterogeneity, and complexity, navigating the city depends on visual recognition (1938: 14). This dependence on visual recognition, in turn, makes “masses of men in the city subject to manipulation by symbols and stereotypes managed by individuals working from afar or operating invisibly behind the scenes through their control of the instruments of communication” (Wirth 1938: 23). Thus, reggaetoneros, because of the wide appeal of a music that was originally underground, are in the unlikely position to create the symbols and stereotypes of the communities from which they emerge. This manipulation by reggaetón artists may be the one that politicians and policymakers succumb to in devising policy. The poor urban dwellers of Puerto Rico are labeled, and simultaneously saved and made important, by reggaetón. Social representations, therefore, as expressed in perceptions of “real” poor neighborhoods, are the most active political expression of reggaetón.

THE POOR URBAN DWELLERS OF PUERTO RICO ARE LABELED, AND SIMULTANEOUSLY SAVED AND MADE IMPORTANT, BY REGGAETÓN.

Reggaetoneros, although possibly unaware of their political privilege and power, are fully engaged in a social relationship of representation with the people of their communities. In a 2006 interview with *Latina Magazine*, Daddy Yankee said, “It’s the first time that we speak for the urban people out there in the streets, everyday people. All that we had in the past were just straight Latin pop and love songs that don’t represent the struggle of our people. So we came to the picture singing about real stuff...” (quoted in Cepeda 2006: 117). In a similar sentiment, Voltio expressed the following: “I represent people in the streets who have suffered like I have, people who have not had it easy in life” (quoted in Cepeda 2006: 128). These reggaetoneros see themselves, and are embraced, as authentic representatives

of urban Puerto Rican realities. Their audience, and the mass appeal of reggaetón, has confirmed this authenticity: “Just as rap has been a symbol for urban youth in North America, reggaetón became, and remains, a defining symbol of urban youth in Latin America, specifically Puerto Rico. The upbeat rebelliousness of the music is hard for any youngster to ignore” (Billows nd). Furthermore, Daddy Yankee and most reggaetoneros have a legitimate claim to these realities; most come from barrios or public housing, most have dealt with violence and the criminal justice system, and most spent a good deal of their youth in poverty developing music that was once largely ignored.

Michel de Certeau and Giard suggest that popular culture is responsible for elements of our culture that “remained fundamental in our modern urban culture but that were considered illegitimate or negligible by the academic discourses of modernity” (1998: 251). According to them, the practice of culture depends on three mechanisms: orality, operations, and the ordinary. Orality refers to the sounds and meanings central to communication, social exchange, and the creation of community. Operations have two aspects and refer to the practices that create the products of culture. The first aspect of operations is the “aesthetic” one: “an everyday practice opens up a unique space within an imposed order, as does the poetic gesture that bends the use of common language to its own desire in a transforming reuse” (de Certeau, Girard and Mayol 1998: 254). The second aspect is the “polemical” one: “the everyday practice is relative to the power relations that structure the social field as well as the field of knowledge” (de Certeau, Girard and Mayol 1998: 254). The “ordinary” is the “practical science of the singular,” the common, repetitive, but also infinitely diverse features that constitute the everyday.

Michel de Certeau and Giard’s conceptualization of culture is useful for understanding reggaetoneros’ sociopolitical reach. Reggaetoneros have, in essence, become the vehicle for making public the culture of the urban poor in Puerto Rico. They offer an actual oral operation of the ordinary. They testify, by their entrepreneurship and creativity in a capitalist context and their representations of ordinary life, to the sociopolitical opportunities available in el barrio. In this way, they have opened a poetic aesthetic of the ordinary that challenges the conceptualizations of the poor in Puerto Rico. While Puerto Rican policy ignores the caseríos and barrios and the people trapped there, reggaetoneros suggest that there is a lot of promise and talent to salvage in the ghetto. The message, granted, is contradictory and thankfully complex—this place of apparent dystopia is actually full of life and promise. While the representation of the ghetto as dystopia is affirmed by the media, reggaetoneros offer an alternative, rather contradictory but realistic message about Puerto Rican barrios that could be effectively adopted and integrated into policy knowledge and efforts.⁵² In their conceptualizations, the barrio and caserío and the disco can be and are redemptive places. As Tego Calderón takes us on a trip to the place where “not even Puerto Ricans go” as part of MTV *My Block*, reggaetoneros shift our view away from the palmed beaches of tourist ideals and offer the “ordinary” life of being poor and young in Puerto Rico.

Through aesthetic representations reggaetón has become a political force and engineer for alternative policy frames. The genre and its participants have realigned strategies to address poverty and have become active collaborators against poverty. Daddy Yankee, for example, funds a children’s baseball team in the public housing project of Manuel A. Pérez, in Río Piedras (Vargas 2006). Tego Calderón recently participated in a national newscast regarding racism and unequal access of black people in the island (Rivera Esquilín 2003). They have also infused their people with

energetic self-mobilization campaigns. Reggaetón has reminded the public that they too are participants in the polity and that they have something to say. In a recent case, the residents of Residencial Manuel A. Pérez put up a mural against repression, including that inflicted by police on residents due to “*el largo y forma de su pelo o su color de piel*” [the length and style of their hair and their skin color] and invited Calle 13 to perform in a concert against repression. According to Carlos Laboy, the Director of Puerto Rico’s Public Housing Authority (AVP), “La norma general es que no se pinte nada en las paredes de un residencial. ‘Las paredes de los edificios no son tablones de expresión pública. Recuerda que estas son propiedades que se reglamentan por disposición federal.’” [The general norm is that nothing gets painted on the walls of the public housing project. ‘The walls of the buildings are not posters for public expression. Remember that they are properties under Federal law.’] (Rivera Vargas 2005). But the residents of the public housing project felt empowered, with the security of reggaetoneros Calle 13, to raise their voices, make a claim to their housing, and change their housing. In this way, reggaetón has become the medium, the rhythm for change and for seeking social policy alternatives. Not only have political campaigns been flooded by reggaetón, but policy initiatives are made and executed in the rhythm of reggaetón. A project to prevent smoking among children, called “Mi residencial libre de humo” [My public housing project without smoke] is negotiated through reggaetón, with reggaetón music as the carrier of the message (Parés Arroyo 2006). Another project by the Fire Department sends firefighters to public housing sites to teach children how to deal with fires using reggaetón music and lyrics: “Al ritmo de reggaetón te venimos a enseñar, cómo preparar el plan para escapar, si ocurre un fuego en la escuela o en tu hogar.... Gatea, gatea para escapar por debajo del humo para que puedas respirar” [To the beat of reggaeton we come to teach you, how to prepare the plan to escape, if there is a fire in the school or in your home.... Crawl, crawl to escape, under the smoke so that you can breathe.] (Millán Pabón 2005).⁵³ It should also be noted that in displaying the realities of the poor in Puerto Rico, reggaetón also reaffirms stereotypes. Reggaetón itself has become the representation of the music that serves and appeals to the underprivileged. Policy campaigns that rely on reggaetón support the idea that the poor lack sophistication; it is as if the poor can only learn through music and through the rhythm of reggaetón. Reggaetón thus is constructed as “ghetto” music, and is relegated to the sites of the poor.⁵⁴ This dynamic typecasts the residents of public housing and barrios in Puerto Rico as an infantile, mentally unsophisticated public who can only understand rhyming slogans.

Reggaetoneros have also become the exporters and ambassadors of Puerto Rican culture, as well as the most accessible producers of commentary on the island’s troubles and political turmoil. In the recent 2006 shutdown, Don Omar (Hernández V. 2006) commented in a press conference in Venezuela on the political backdrop of the situation:

Caracas— Con una sencillez que contrasta con las joyas que luce, el puertorriqueño se refirió a la crisis económica que está afectando la Isla.

A su parecer lo que sucede es un problema de ‘egocentrismo partidista’ al no haber acuerdos entre el liderato político....

‘Si puedo hacer algo alejándome de toda esa sombra de la política lo hago en mi caracter personal. Si no hay libretas para los niños, mando a hacer medio millón de libretas. Lo mismo está haciendo Daddy Yankee y otros exponentes del género.

Somos los más criticados en la Isla, pero tan siquiera estamos dando un grano de arena,' concluyó.

[Caracas—With a simplicity that contrasts with the jewelry he wears, the Puerto Rican artist made reference to the economic crisis that is affecting the island. In his opinion, what is happening is a problem of partisan egocentrism due to the lack of agreement among the political leadership....

'If I can do something far away from the cloud of politics, I do it in my personal character. If there aren't notebooks for children, I order half a million notebooks to be made. Daddy Yankee and others of the genre are doing the same. We are the most critiqued in the island, but at least we are giving a grain of sand,' he concluded.]

Daddy Yankee and Snoop Dogg's video, *Gangsta Zone*, ends with a young dark-skinned girl, standing in front of public housing buildings, holding up a sign that says: "Los caseríos / necesitan / mas materiales" [The public housing projects need more materials].⁵⁵ This video is perhaps the best representation of how the urban aesthetic of reggaetón is intimately linked with a policy message. The continuous images of the residencial, coupled with the indication of urban spaces such as "la calle" and the caserío, as well as the lyrics that address sex, violence, and male prowess, bring together the "real" message that reggaetón is about; displaying everyday life in urban poor Puerto Rico. Indeed, as Daddy Yankee suggested, "sex, street, and struggle" are all encased in reggaetón. This aesthetic is more than a dark vessel of politically and socially empty lyrics. It constitutes the only movement in recent times to project the image of urban poor, violent, and disillusioned Puerto Rico and give Puerto Rico's urban poor a resounding voice with a marked local, and even international, reach. Reggaetoneros have done what political figures haven't been able to do; they restore hope, "*en la disco o en el residencial*" [in the disco or the public housing project] to the beat of reggaetón.



NOTES

¹ <http://www.mtv2.com/#series/20186>.

² A few words on the particular way I'm using "aesthetics" in this paper are worth discussing here. Aesthetics refers to the study or the philosophy of the elements of beauty. The term depends on visual recognition and is embedded in a set of structures that hegemonically define value, worth, and attractiveness. I'm using "aesthetic" here because it allows the subjective and contextual positioning of visual appreciation. In other words, I seek to understand the representation of the elements of the urban built environment, as expressed by reggaetoneros and received by an audience, through their songs. I am, however, less concerned with "beauty" than with the manipulations of selective representations of the elements of the built environment that are constituted as important. Nevertheless, one could argue that perceptions of beauty or desirability are entrenched in decisions about representation. However, this is a debate that I'm hoping to evade. In other words, I'm less concerned with what is considered beautiful in the city than what is considered worthy of mention. I invoke Pierre Mayol's theory on the two elements that guide the organization of "everyday life," one being the visible behaviors that people exercise and the other being the "expected symbolic benefits gained through ways of 'behaving' in neighborhood space" (de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 1998: 8). Thus, reggaetoneros' music is encased in representations of self and a/their city, and these representations are constituted in a/their neighborhoods and audience. The transmissions of these representations make a particular view of the city publicly visible and, as I show later in the paper, a basis for political participation and policy making. In short, the "aesthetic" qualities I appeal to in this essay regard the elements that constitute the rendering of the city that reggaetoneros display rather than the undoubted qualifications of beauty that they implicitly make about these representations.

³ This sample of 179 songs was finalized in June 2006 and excludes songs of other genres, such as salsa, merengue, or bachata, which feature reggaetón artists as invited artists.

⁴ A note on sampling is worth making here. The objective of deriving a sample is to be able to analyze it in order to make inferences about a population. In this case, the population of reggaetón songs is 1,058, and the derivative sample is 92. The 87 popular songs are added to this sample in order to have a sample that is also representative of popular reggaetón songs. Throughout the paper, I will talk about reggaetón songs in general, rather than "a sample of reggaetón songs," because the methodology was devised with the purposes of being able to talk about the universe of reggaetón songs. The list of reggaeton songs is created based on public contributions to reggaetononline. Reggaetononline is a website dedicated to the music and culture of reggaetón. The list is biased towards the songs that people and users of reggaetononline.net listen or pay attention to, or prefer to list. One could argue that this makes this list more appropriate for the purposes of this analysis, because it serves as a proxy to popularity. Another very clear bias of the reggaetononline.net users is that their lyrics' listings are biased to more recent reggaetón music. For example, earlier recording artists who participated in a genre that had not yet mainstreamed may be underrepresented in the number of songs that have lyrics available, when compared to more recent artists.

⁵ These 87 songs represent all the reggaetón songs that have been on a *Billboard* chart for which I could find lyrics. The songs came from a varied number of Billboard Charts including Hot Latin Tracks, Hot Latin Rhythm Airplay, Latin Tropical Airplay, Latin Pop Airplay, Hot Latino Songs, Hot Rap Singles, and others through the end of June 2006. It should be noted that this number does not represent the total number of reggaetón songs that have ever been on the Billboard Charts. I collected the songs by searching for

each reggaetón artist on the Billboard Chart website search engine. It is important to state that *Billboard* does not maintain an independent reggaetón song or artist list. Thus, reggaetón artists may be represented in a range of different lists, as evidenced by the different lists from where the songs derived. Furthermore, one song can be represented in different lists through an indefinite and noncontinuous timeframe. Because it is hard to keep track of reggaeton songs and be sure of which songs can indeed be considered to be “reggaeton” songs in the different lists, I used a sampling frame based on artists rather than songs. The advantage of using this type of sampling frame is that (1) it is consistent with the reggaetononline sampling method, and (2) it guarantees that bonafide reggaeton artists in *Billboard* are not systematically excluded from the sample. However, it is possible that some songs were missed by this method; although I would argue that the number missed is decreased with this method more than with an alternative one. The original sample garnered through this method was 112. Out of these, 7 songs already existed in the randomly sampled www.reggaetononline.net list, and for 18 songs I wasn’t able to locate lyrics. Most lyrics in both samples came from www.reggaetononline.net. For songs in the Billboard Charts who didn’t have lyrics in www.reggaetononline.net, lyrics were obtained from www.mundoreggaeton.com, www.stlyrics.com, and www.seekalrylic.com. All the lyrics were gathered from the websites on July 26, 2006. There are limitations to these data and the ensuing analysis. For example, the accuracy of the lyrics posted in the website is questionable. To increase my confidence, I checked 18 lyrics, or 10 percent of the repertoire, against an audio of the song, and found them to be accurate. However, there is no guarantee that all the lyrics posted and analyzed are accurate. This is because reggaetón is a genre that does not have fixed lyrics with new performances, videos, remixes, and recordings often having different lyrics.

⁶ This figures comes from the 2000 US Census Bureau (www.census.gov). The urban population is calculated based on those that live either in urbanized areas or urban clusters. An “urban area” is defined by the Census as “an area consisting of a central place(s) and adjacent territory with a general population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile of land area that together have a minimum residential population of at least 50,000 people. An “urban cluster,” a new category of the 2000 Census, is “a densely settled territory that has at least 2,500 people but fewer than 50,000.” The breakdown for Puerto Rico is as follows: 91 percent of the total population live in urbanized areas, 3 percent live in urban clusters, and close to 6 percent live in rural areas.

⁷ For a good ethnographic study of the urban underclass of Puerto Rico’s slums see Duany (1997) and Safa (1974).

⁸ Although other cities have been central to the development of reggaetón (e.g., New York), this paper focuses specifically on the urban experience in Puerto Rico that constructed reggaetón.

⁹ The night also points to the surreptitious, clandestine nature of reggaetón. An originally underground genre, its mainstreaming nevertheless keeps reggaetoneros living in the night. The disco, the street, the caserío, and the night are metaphors to the growing reality of life for a persistently excluded sector of the Puerto Rican population.

¹⁰ Lyrics from www.seekalrylic.com.

¹¹ I thank Raquel Rivera for pointing out the differences between staged and real discos in reggaetón videos. Certainly, there is variance in the type of discos displayed and it would be interesting to further explore these variations and their meanings.

¹² In this piece, Daddy Yankee displays the increasing disjuncture between a location of a house and the neighborhood when he exclaims, “The first thing I do when I get back from traveling,’ he said, ‘is go home, take a shower and drive over to my neighborhood.”

Hence, home is where he takes the shower, but his neighborhood is where he finds community and a social life. His community, thus, is not where his home is. This showcases the implicit dilemma of reggaetoneros move from being underground and part of an excluded sector into the mainstream. As Corbett (2006) explains, “The existential quandary of any ghetto-proud artist whose street credibility starts to erode as success carries him further from the streets.”

¹³ Lyrics from Don Omar’s song “La noche está buena” of the album *The Last Don*.

¹⁴ In http://www.vibe.com/music/next/2006/02/don_omar/.

¹⁵ In www.voltiomusic.com/bio.html.

¹⁶ In <http://www.tegoCalderón.com/>. Tego represents a slight deviation in scale, rather than concept, when he reasserts affiliations to a neighborhood rooted in racial spaces of blackness in Puerto Rico,—namely, Loíza and the eastern coast of the island. Many people think that Tego is from Loíza due to his musical and videographic odes to the area, as well as recent visit with the MTV *My Block* cameras. It should be noted that Tego’s experience transcends the Puerto Rico island borders. Tego attended high school in Miami at the Miami Beach Senior High School. Like Ivy Queen, who was born in Añasco Puerto Rico but lived for many years in New York, Tego realigns the spatial discourse of reggaetón neighborhood. As reggaetón moves further into the United States and international mainstream, the genre has begun to espouse a wider conception of their public and “neighborhood” engaging “all Latinos” in their contextualization of the music. Examples of these tendencies include the “Oye mi canto” track and Don Omar’s “Reggaetón Latino” track, as well as the increasing mention of Latin American countries and New York and Miami as Latino centers. Interestingly, the mention of these non-Puerto Rican spaces remain at the larger scale of countries or cities, whereas in Puerto Rico reggaetoneros focus on the finer scale of the neighborhood and specific streets that they know very well. Among the songs in the sample explored here, there was only one exception to this tendency of only addressing local geographies in Puerto Rico, and that is Jhosy & Baby Q’s song “Fiesta,” which features local geographies in the Dominican Republic.

¹⁷ Calle 13 breaks from the traditional neighborhood represented by other reggaetoneros. The neighborhoods they refer to have “*alambre de púa*” (barbed wire), which may point to the prevalence of controlled access residential infrastructure in the suburban urbanizaciones (private residential single-family neighborhoods) of the island. This is a suggestion that is also picked up in Calle 13 and Voltio’s “Chulin culin chunfly” when they call out “Dejame entrar, que soy residente” [Let me in, I’m a resident]. Residente’s and Visitante’s biographies involve rather privileged access to education and traveling that diverges from the experiences of other reggaetoneros and launches the duo’s lyrical orientations in a different path than the majority of the genre. Calle 13 songs, in fact, suggest a type of sardonic ode to reggaetón, politics, and society.

¹⁸ *Gangsta Zone* is a good video for getting a sense of what caseríos look like today in Puerto Rico. There is an interesting visual metaphor in the video regarding the increasing institutionalization of public housing projects in the island. For example, some of the footage of the video makes the apartments and the housing structure appear to be jail cells full of people. In the end, the request made in Spanish for more materials for the public housing project pushes this metaphor even further.

¹⁹ In www.daddyyankee.com.

²⁰ Calle 13, for one reason or another, did not take us to their block, but to their grandmother’s block. This could be interpreted as a racialized phenomena where the group calls back to their grandmother “y tu abuela donde esta?” to make claims about racial, or, in this case, urban legitimacy. The racial and urban interaction persist in the duo’s aesthetics,

as Residente keeps his hair short and adorned with shaved scribbles and Visitante's lighter-skinned somatic whiteness typically takes a back seat. An alternative explanation, and one that runs through this paper but is not explicitly addressed, is the issue of capital and marketing. Perhaps the need to market themselves in a certain way, and one that includes the barrio, drove Calle 13 to La Perla instead of the gated community.

²¹ The focus groups were conducted as part of my dissertation work (see Dinzey-Flores 2005).

²² The term is also the name of the reggaetón station in Chicago, Illinois.

²³ The same dynamic is also described in Cobo (2005).

²⁴ Eddie Dee's track "Censurarme por ser rapero."

²⁵ It is worth noting that the use of the street is reminiscent of the use of the street in what perhaps can be deemed a precursor to reggaetón—Puerto Rican salsa. Growing from earlier generations of similarly socially excluded groups in Puerto Rico and among Caribbeans in New York, the genre relied on an image of being close to "the street." The use of "la calle" to frame lyrics and pushing a street aesthetic were common for the genre. See Quintero Rivera (1998) and Aparicio (1998).

The documentary *Cocolos y Rockeros* is also a good resource for understanding the culture of Puerto Rican salsa. It should also be noted that the New York street is also very prominent in salsa and has diverse connotations and experiences attached to it.

²⁶ The song "Pobre diablo" talks about a woman who is not treated well by her lover, and who runs the streets begging for love, but is not appreciated or valued by him.

²⁷ Given Puerto Rico's physical and cultural proximity with Dominican Republic, in addition to the high immigration waves of Dominicans to the island, it is no surprise that the Dominican Republic has become a common reference for Puerto Rican reggaetón artists. In fact, reggaetón has mass appeal in the Dominican Republic, and there is a solid and increasing contingency of Dominican reggaetón artists both in the Caribbean and in the United States.

²⁸ Note that these songs are examples of songs that have these themes. Their use as an example is not meant to show them as the only songs that have this thematic. In fact, as many as 43 percent of reggaetón songs follow similar thematic orientations.

²⁹ Out of the 179 sample songs, only two were sung by women artists—Ivy Queen and Glory. As a result, only 12 of the 179 songs inverted the heteronormative spectacle and put males under the gaze. It is beyond the scope of this particular paper to examine the gendered cleavages of reggaetón lyrics—namely, whether and how female artists' songs lyrics differ from male artists' lyrics. A preliminary observation is that in the sample of 179 songs that were part of this study, the 11 songs by Ivy Queen tended to approach the subject of dancing and love from a less violent and less sexually focused perspective than men typically did. The same can not be said for the one song by Glory included in the sample, whose lyrics are very explicitly sexual. The divergent lyrics, video representation, and manners in which female and male reggaetón artists approach the genre is a worthy line of research worthy of systematic analysis.

³⁰ "What happened rather with the rise of cities, was that many functions that had heretofore been scattered and unorganized were brought together within a limited area, and the components of the community were kept in a state of dynamic tension and interaction. In this union, made almost compulsory by the strict enclosure of the city wall, the already well-established parts of the proto-city—shrine, spring, village, market, stronghold—participated in the general enlargement and concentration of numbers, and underwent a structural differentiation that gave them forms recognizable in every subsequent phase of urban culture. The city proved not merely a means of expressing in concrete terms the magnification of sacred and secular power, but in a manner that went far beyond any conscious intention, it also enlarged all the dimensions of life. Beginning as a *representation of*

the cosmos, a means of bringing heaven down to earth, the city became a symbol of the possible. Utopia was an integral part of its original constitution, and precisely because it first took form as an ideal projection, it brought into existence realities that might have remained latent for an indefinite time in more soberly governed small communities, pitched to lower expectations and *unwilling to make exertions that transcended both their workaday habits and their mundane hopes*" (Mumford 1961: 31—author's emphasis). "Thus, the transformation of village into city was no mere change of size and scale, though both of these factors entered into it; rather, it was a change of direction and purpose, manifested in a new type of organization" (Mumford 1961: 57).

³¹ Note that here I show the two extremes of inequality, but I am not arguing that there are no other types of spaces, located somewhere inbetween in the socioeconomic hierarchy, that coexist in this urban milieu.

³² It should be noted that here, Eddie Dee is referring to the Puerto Rico Senate's attempts to ban reggaetón music. In the lyrics he highlights the stigmatization processes that label him and those like him, but also questions the possibility of creating different lyrical content given the conditions of poverty and violence that reign in his surroundings.

³³ This link between hip-hop and the criminal justice system is explored extensively in *XXL's* magazine July 2005 issue.

³⁴ Tempo (David Sánchez Badillo) is one of the earliest reggaetón artists and considered by many in the genre to be one of the most talented. He is from a public housing project in Ponce and was gaining wide popularity in the 1990's. In 2002, he was arrested and convicted on drug charges that according to many artists and Tempo himself, were brought without evidence. Tempo continues to uphold his innocence and is appealing the conviction. The reggaetón artist community, including Daddy Yankee and Fat Joe, has mobilized behind him, claiming his innocence and forming an active Free Tempo Campaign. See <http://www.ubo.com/freetempo/main.cfm/>.

³⁵ Lyrics from www.reggaetononline.net.

³⁶ Indeed, the home is considered to be the female counterpart of urban space. See Hayden (2002) and Wright (1983).

³⁷ For a discussion of how poverty has been ineffectively approached through the lens of African-American womanhood and mothering, see Kelley (1998).

³⁸ Parallels to this representation can be made with the military and its training, another space where Puerto Rican males of low socioeconomic means are apt to enter.

³⁹ For a description of social and spatial fragmentation in the city of San Juan in the 19th Century, see Martínez-Vergne (1999). In the 20th Century, see Caplow, Stryker, and Wallace (1964).

⁴⁰ The intersection of race and class in Puerto Rico is a complex one, and one that falls beyond the scope of the paper. However, there is evidence to support the notion that there has been a racialization of space in Puerto Rico; and that these spaces are attached to class. For example, residents in poor areas tend to identify as Black in higher numbers than residents in more privileged residential areas. See Dinzey-Flores (2005).

⁴¹ In <http://www.tegoCalderón.com/>.

⁴² Hector El Father in the track "Noche de travesuras."

⁴³ For a discussion on how the use of an "afro" hairstyle by artist Lucesita caused a public politicized debate in Puerto Rico during the 1970s, see Rivero (2005).

⁴⁴ Please note that Tego Calderón has publicly expressed his resistance to the use of diamonds due to the exploitation of diamond miners in Africa. Here, I use him for his reflection of an aesthetic that blends the street (calle) with luxury (*elegante*); this is the mark of the aesthetic. I suggest that the use of flashy jewelry is one of the expressions of the blin-blin aesthetic, but it is not the only one. The conflation of the everyday and poverty with

the luxury lifestyles, I suggest, constitutes the blin-blin aesthetic that I here discuss.

45 It is important to note the origin of the blin-blin in United state raps, where it is written “bling bling.” Here I’m using the term to refer to a duality, not necessarily capturing all the existent significations and history of the concept.

46 I should note here that another contributing factor to their music remaining unchecked has been the overwhelming capital success and appeal of the music. The genre, thus, is not seen as one that needs to be “cleaned up” or held to certain standards by the industry, because sales seem to indicate that the product addresses exactly what the people want to hear. Politically, there has been plenty of effort to “clean it up,” but I’m talking here more about a bottom-up community check or organic “reality” check about how they represent and reflect their communities.

47 Many songs’ lyrics reflect this argument, for example, Don Omar and Tego Calderón’s “Bandoleros” and Eddie Dee’s “Censurarme por ser rapero.” Many artists have also made this argument in interviews or newspaper features. Daddy Yankee claimed that his songs are based on his experiences: “*Son vivencias del barrio.*” [They’re experiences of the barrio.] (Fernández-Soberón 2004). Baby Ranks also expressed in an interview “El reggaetón es algo muy real, tan real como los problemas que existen con las drogas. Hablamos de lo que se ve a diario, de lo vivido.” [Reggaetón is very real, as real as the existing drug problems. We talk about what is seen in the everyday, about what is lived.] (Rodríguez 2006: 10C).

48 Regardless of the songs’ subject, most artists make a reference to their sincerity and authenticity. Additionally, many characters in the songs, including the disproportionate number of females referenced in the songs, are evaluated according to their authenticity or their attempts to “trick” or be insincere. I observed this trend as I conducted the content analysis of the 179 reggaetón songs.

49 Reggaetón shares the trend of depicting everyday life with hip-hop. Butler (2004: 983) has noted that hip-hop, from its beginnings, was considered in the newspaper. Reggaetón, indeed, may be seen in similar ways.

50 Also, Cornel West’s venture into popular culture can be seen as an example of how academics have recognized the need to engage popular culture and “everyday” philosophy in their work.

51 This statement may reflect a bit of an exaggeration and historical amnesia. Certainly, there are many musical genres in Puerto Rico that are intimately engaged with the discussion of everyday life, including genres like salsa, bomba y plena, and música jíbara. Nevertheless, in the context of the specific society of late 20th and early 21st century Puerto Rico, reggaetón has come to represent the reflection of the “real” life for the majority of youth who only know this era.

52 For an account of the media’s role in popular music in Puerto Rico see Jiménez (2004: 134).

53 Also see Covas Quevedo (2002).

54 A case in point is a letter to a newspaper complaining about the reggaetón music played until dawn at a public housing site, a provocation that no authority was willing to stop (Entrelíneas 2004).

55 It is important to note the appeal for “materials” and the engagement with the capital organization of the city in this video. For a discussion of capitalism and the development of cities see Harvey (2002, 2006). The appeal for “materials” also points to the clarity of the sociopolitical message regarding poverty, based on the fact that poor people are in need of material resources as opposed to programs, employment, or training.

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