she shows how privileged youths use proximity to blackness to protect themselves against crime and violence. Whereas the previous chapter revealed the ways in which white Brazilians protect themselves from the encroachment of blackness, this chapter focuses on racial transgressions that disrupt these lines of separation. She shows how regular association with blackness can undermine the ‘personal whiteness’ achieved by middle-class people. Significantly, Roth-Gordon underscores the difference between the ‘situational whiteness’ achieved by dark-skinned youth in Chapter 2 and privileged youths ‘crossing’ into blackness. Crossing, she explains, is a choice to associate oneself with a stigmatised group by adopting particular practices—a choice that is not afforded to many in less privileged positions.

In Chapter 6, ‘Making the Mano’, Roth-Gordon draws on her expertise in Brazilian hip-hop to explore the ways in which defiant celebrations of blackness are used to critique the racial hierarchies described throughout the book. She shows how hip-hop artists and fans draw on international black empowerment movements and local realities to create a black, Brazilian political consciousness. These artists take specific aim at narratives of racial ‘tolerance’ and ‘racial cordiality’ that, as Roth-Gordon has demonstrated, mask continuing racial oppression in Brazil.

Finally, in the conclusion, Roth-Gordon recounts her young daughter’s experiences as an African American child in middle-class spaces in Rio. Using examples of how her daughter’s darker skin is read by Brazilians in swimming lessons, museums, and other everyday activities, she reiterates her central claim of the book; despite avoiding talking about or acknowledging race openly, Brazilians continue to assess bodies for signs of race and racial capacity (p. 188). These signs include language and cultural practice, as well as phenotype, and continue to privilege whiteness and disparage blackness.

Throughout the book, Roth-Gordon takes great care to walk her reader through the methodological tools she employs and the analytical moves she makes. The result is a remarkably accessible book that will be of great interest to scholars of race in Latin America who wish to incorporate an attention to language and practice to their own work. The book’s clear explanations of how the research was organised and executed likewise make it an excellent teaching tool for undergraduates and graduate students.

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The disruptive potential of music is at the heart of Petra R. Rivera-Rideau’s examination of reggaetón music, performances, audio-visual characteristics, incorporation of African diaspora signifiers, aesthetics and symbols, as well as performers’ discourses and concepts of their scene and music personas in San Juan, Puerto Rico. These themes are discussed in relation to reggaetón’s role in countering racism and classism, with its limitations and contradictions. This social and geographical perspective is the main difference between this and existing volumes, such as Reggaetón, edited by Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall and Deborah Pacini Hernandez (2009), or Buena Vista in the Club about reggaetón in Cuba by Geoffrey Baker (2011), both books published by Duke University Press.
Throughout the five chapters Rivera-Rideau argues vehemently that reggaetón criticises the idealised notion of Puerto Rico as a racially harmonious society, ‘racial democracy’, by denouncing racism, claiming a place for black representations of culture and challenging white hegemony. The comprehensive introduction outlines the history of racial politics in Puerto Rico. Rivera-Rideau highlights the historical exaltation of the white and demonisation of the black, which fostered the idea of whitening as a way to acquire social respect and decency. She examines what she terms ‘folkloric blackness’, a nostalgic stereotyped notion of African authenticity, and ‘urban blackness’, a stereotyped image of violent hypersexual poor blackness, as interdependent concepts sustaining the dominant racial democracy discourses, which reggaetón criticises.

Chapter 1, ‘Iron Fist against Rap’, examines the development of underground, the precursor to reggaetón, focusing on migration, cultural exchange and local conditions. The author looks at how underground artists used diasporic influences (e.g. hip-hop, Panamanian reggae en español and dancehall) as part of a broader critique of racism and classism among the Puerto Rican elites. Rivera-Rideau also discusses elite attempts to suppress reggaetón through the ‘Mano Dura’ (Iron Fist) censorship campaign in the 1990s, which colluded in marginalising the poor, the premodern, and the hypersexualised, thereby cementing prejudices (p. 36).

Similarly, Chapter 2, ‘The Perils of Perreo’, focuses on a 2002 anti-pornography campaign that targeted reggaetón and perreo music videos perceived as too sexual and exploitative of women. The author argues that it reproduced stereotypes of black female hypersexuality in an attempt to secure the hegemony of racial democracy in Puerto Rico. For Rivera-Rideau, the female perreo dancers expressed a non-white ‘erotic autonomy’ disrupting the status quo (p. 55).

Chapters 3, ‘Loiza’, and 4, ‘Fingernails con Feeling’, address the work of specific reggaetón artists who challenge dominant discourses of racial democracy, while negotiating contradictory notions of self-image, personal history, race, class, femininity, and market. These chapters explore Tego Calderón’s ties to the Afro-Puerto Rican town of Loiza, which allow him to connect with other blacks through diasporic relations associated with a place; and Ivy Queen’s drastic change of style in her extensive music career from hip-hop tomboy to diva. Rivera-Rideau focuses on her ‘excessively’ long acrylic nails as ‘not a symbol of femininity, but of a weapon, of courage’ (p. 117).

In the final chapter, ‘Enter the Hurbans’, Rivera-Rideau explores the racialisation of reggaetón once it broke into the US market in 2004 with Daddy Yankee’s hit Gasolina (pp. 130–1). She offers a much-needed analysis of the relationships between latinitud and blackness through diverse music examples. The conclusion celebrates the reach and influence of reggaetón worldwide, especially regions with African diaspora communities, reaffirming the place of reggaetón as a site for political commentary.

Rivera-Rideau contributes a wealth of data to the study of reggaetón. Her discussion of the video, aesthetics and lyrics of such a polemic genre is timely and innovative. Through reggaetón’s inconsistencies and contradictions, Rivera-Rideau navigates the social context and history of Puerto Rico. However, her analysis could have focused more on its contradictions, particularly how multiple performers attempt to negotiate and reconcile racial politics with an emergent market and the strategic essentialisms they deploy when they get a foothold on the reggaetón scene. This would have lent greater depth to her discussion of negative reactions to the genre, not only among the racist or ‘whitened’ Puerto Ricans she describes, but also Latin Americans of
diverse racial and class backgrounds. Also, an analysis of music aesthetics, not only lyrical and visual content, would have completed the examination of the genre.

Throughout, the author provides ample evidence of how the self-representation of artists, branding, and construction of the scene broadly dovetails with the stereotyped ideas of caseríos (Spanish slang term meaning public housing for low-income families) and reggaetón performers she describes. In parallel she argues that the criticism of the genre is racist because it is based on precisely these stereotypes. But is it all baseless? For example, Tego Calderón describes Loiza as ‘his barrio’, a rough black town nobody wants to visit (p. 81). He might intend to denounce racism and classism, but in doing so he self-essentialises by painting a picture of poverty, roughness, and isolation. Ivy Queen’s lyrics refer to the streets she is from: ‘yo vengo de la calle’ (‘Mi Barrio’, 2004), while declaring she leads an urban movement (p. 115). Independent labels are called ‘El Cartel’ (p. 134), and underground and reggaetón lyrics contain repeated references to tough streets, caseríos, neglect and poverty. Could it not be argued that reggaetón artists themselves claim their space by self-declaring as tough, macho, hyper-sexual, poor, but talented with a voice, social message and now money, even if earned by feeding the stereotypes that condemn and racialise reggaetón?

Rivera-Rideau’s excellent discussion of Ivy Queen’s nails in Chapter 4 successfully frames her contradictory persona. On the one hand, Ivy’s lyrics contest racial politics, on the other she adopts a ‘whitened corporative’ look flaunting her new purchasing power. She criticises her male reggaetón colleagues for objectifying women, while adopting a more sexualised persona. Ivy symbolises female power, but simultaneously validates her presence in reggaetón by adopting masculine stances.

This innovative monograph on a controversial and rich genre interconnects cultural politics of race, class and diasporic influences in Puerto Rico, and can be extrapolated to many other countries and social contexts. The author clearly wants to focus on the potential of reggaetón to give visibility and a stage to expose racial and class inequalities and their consequences. However, Rivera-Rideau’s rich material emphasises the many contradictions of performers and audiences on their journey through reflection, racial and class self-awareness, profiting from a global market while representing a country, a town, a community.

I write this review when reggaetón’s visibility is greater than ever. Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee have the first ever Spanish-language US billboard hit since the Macarena via a remixed version of Despacito with Justin Bieber, the ultimate white boy. The fact that a star like Bieber recognised the song and the artists and initiated contact for a bilingual collaboration speaks to the visibility reggaetón has achieved. The question that remains is, what are performers doing with it? Are they discussing racial politics or feeding controversy by perpetuating stereotypes?

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