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Verónica Dávila Ellis

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Abstract

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Verónica Dávila Ellis

What meanings are ascribed to the voices and sonic compositions of Caribbean and Latinx women and queer performers? What do their sounds tell us about Caribbean identity, gender, sexuality, and race? This dissertation centers the work of seven Dominican women and queer artists of música urbana to analyze how their sonic production and bodily performances negotiate with the hegemonic scripts of identity, race, and gender through sound. I focus on sound and performance to expand on our knowledge of how Caribbean and Latinx popular music reflects on discourses around identity, race, and gender. I conceptualize these artists works as utterances of sonic Dominicanidad, that is, as ongoing negotiations with the regulations that inform the meanings we derive from popular music's sound and performances. Sonic Dominicanidad functions as the accumulation of competing scripts, images, prejudices, fears, erasures, narratives, and impositions that provide listeners with a particular definition and association between the hegemonic identity of Dominicanidad and sound. They resist the capturing sense of the listening ear, through their navigation of the politics of consumption and the production of sound, what I understand as uttering.

Through the sonic and performative work of pioneering Dominican dembow artists like La Insuperable, La Materialista, and queer performers La Delfi, and La Pajarita La Paul, urban alternative music groups Rita Indiana y Los Misterios and Mula, and trap superstar Cardi B, I showcase how utterances are strategically deployed to visibilize the sounds, bodies, concerns, struggles, and histories of Dominican, Queer, Black, Femme, migrant, and working-class communities. By coalescing interdisciplinary methodologies I locate this work within Latinx

Studies and propose an understanding of popular music criticism that traverses various locales, genres, genders, and epistemologies.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation was written under dire personal, environmental, and global circumstances. I do not exaggerate when I affirm that without the support from my advisor and committee members, I would not have been able to go through with this research project. I lucked out with my advisor, Prof. Aparicio, who is committed, understanding, politically engaged, and generous. For seeing my potential, believing in me and my project, understanding my time and pacing, challenging me in the right ways, and for always being honest, real, and human, thank you Frances. I'm grateful to Prof. Maguire's constant guidance and her investment in my project and my development in Caribbean and Dominican studies. I thank Prof. Bouzaglo for the care and frankness she showed towards my project. To Prof. Tallaj, I'm filled with gratitude for our collaborations and the essential input she offered on this project. My committee's trust in my growth and their support in my explorations outside literary studies have been crucial for the development of this dissertation and of my career as a whole.

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left my side, thank you. To my friends in the Dominican Republic; you opened your home to me and I am forever indebted. I'm grateful for that fateful night in la Espiral where Rossy and I met. Your friendship has been invaluable, our conversations, explorations, and adventures through the island shaped big part of my personal and intellectual relationship to the DR.

Finally I'm thankful for my family. I cannot ask for a better sister than Viviana. Thank you for listening, for understanding me and my idiosyncrasies, for providing a home for me in Puerto Rico, and for offering pictures of happy dogs when things were extremely hard. I'm thankful for my dad's support during research and for providing me spaces and resources to work. Mamita, who lived through this process as if it were her own, this accomplishment has been possible thanks to you. Your love and comprehension, as well as your care and passion for teaching has taught me much about this career. I approached my research how I learned from you to care for others and the world.

Preface

TRACKLIST

I have tried the impossible task of describing sounds. If you are able, my wish is that you play these songs while you read through this dissertation. You can also find the playlist here: https://tinyurl.com/sonicdom

1. “Te He Querido, Te He Llorado” by Ivy Queen
2. “La Popola” by Glory
3. “Me Subo Arriba” by La Insuperable
4. “Si Tu Quiere Dembow” by Pablo Piddy
5. “Dem Bow” by Shabba Ranks
6. “Dembow” by Wisin & Yandel
7. “Dembow y Reggaetón” by El Alfa
8. “Que Me Den Banda” by La Insuperable
9. “Contigo Quiero Estar” by Toxic Crow feat. La Insuperable
10. “Celoso” by Las Chicas del Can
11. “La Que Ta Buena Soy Yo” by La Insuperable
12. “Salgo Sola” by MelyMel feat. Mestiza
13. “Siempre Regia Nunca Camú” by La Insuperable
14. “Cero Goga” by La Insuperable
15. “Mastica & Traga” by La Insuperable
16. “Dámelo” La Insuperable feat. Chimbala
17. “Te Boté” by Milka La Mas Dura

18. “Salao” by La Insuperable
19. “La Chapa Que Vibran” by La Materialista
20. “Dame Leche (Cocoro)” by La Delfi
21. “Platano Maduro” by La Pajarita La Paul
22. “El Corazón del Pueblo” by Luis Terror Días
23. “El Blue del Ping Pong” by Rita Indiana y los Misterios
24. “El Juidero” by Rita Indiana y los Misterios
25. “Bajito a Selva” by Rita Indiana y los Misterios
26. “Da Pa Lo Do” by Rita Indiana y los Misterios
27. “Pasame a Buca” by Rita Indiana y los Misterios
28. “La Hora de Volve” by Rita Indiana y los Misterios
29. “Nunca Paran” by Mula
30. “Espejos en las Azoteas (1965)” by Mula
31. “Poción” by Mula
32. “Bodak Yellow” by Cardi B
33. “No Flockin;” by Kodak Black
34. “Bodak Yellow (Latin Trap Remix)” by Cardi B feat. Messiah
35. “I Like It” by Cardi B, Bad Bunny, and J Balvin
36. “I Like it Like That” by Pete Rodríguez
37. “Azúcar” by Eddie Palmieri

Dedication

Para mis abuelas:

A abuela Marcela, por ponerme bachatas bajo el palo de mangó,

a abuela Rosin, por ser ejemplo de fortaleza

y a Mamiabuela, por inculcarme el amor por la música y la literatura.

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INTRODUCTION

Sounding out my Caribeñidad Latina: An autoethnographic overview

It is 2020 and the COVID 19 pandemic has transformed our ways of living globally. But the United States —from where I have been living, writing, researching, growing, and developing for the past six years— has been under a fast collapse during these last months. The coagulation of accumulated rage from the pervasiveness of racial violence that this country has perpetrated against Black people burst open and the past two months have witnessed a rise in anti-racist protests. We've witnessed an amazing increase in support from different sectors of the country and beyond, from widespread protests and demonstrations in favor of the grassroots Black Lives Matter movement all the way to the toppling of monuments and statues that honored slave-holders and colonists. In the middle of the uncertainty brought by COVID, the deaths of millions due to an incompetent and irresponsible government as well as the individualistic culture that upholds it, and the ongoing violence over racialized and queer bodies at the hands of the state, it is, frankly, quite hard to sit down and write this; it is hard to continue life as if nothing was happening.

The reality is that this research project has been carried out in contexts of precarity, violence, and trauma. I began fieldwork for this dissertation in the Summer of 2017, right before Hurricane María ravaged part of the Caribbean islands, and especially, my homeland Puerto Rico. The devastating Hurricane and its worse aftermath caught me unprepared. As has been well documented by now, the following months after that fateful day were increasingly hard. The living conditions of my family —who lost part of their home— made it impossible for me to pursue research agendas or even to intellectualize popular culture, when I felt that so much else was at stake.[1] That November, after a month of living between the shelter my uncle had provided

1. This does not mean that popular culture is completely detached from this reality. At the contrary, cultural expression has historically been one of the ways in which the Puerto Rican community has

for us and two other families, my father's home, and the remains of my mother's house in Levittown, I decided to return to the Dominican Republic, where I found refuge and solace in friends and acquaintances. In this trip it became clear to me that my research interests had been shifting away from my homeland, so I decided to follow my gut instinct and dive deeper into the world of Dominican música urbana.

My research is not completely disengaged from the sociopolitical and environmental contexts I just described. This dissertation analyses how women and queer artists of música urbana engage with the sounds of Dominicanidad, Caribeñidad, and Latinidad in the current moment of globalization, late capitalism, and the resurgence of racist, homophobic, and misogynist far right regimes throughout the hemisphere. It offers a look into the creative sonic endeavors of a roster of local, transnational, independent, and well-known Dominican música urbana artists to understand how and performance artists and their listeners grapple with hegemonic scripts of identity, race, and gender through sound. The world in which these performances emerge is the same world in which I'm writing. The music of these artists corresponds to what is being challenged, discussed, echoed, produced, thought out, and felt in Dominican, Caribbean, and Latinx communities. Their productions offer insight into the uncomfortable discussions about race that are being held right now in the streets, in social media, in households. Their music reflects on the strategies for self-making that working-class Dominican women embark on in order to survive economic entrenchment, lack of access to resources, and invisibility. They propose new understandings of the comings and goings of

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grappled with colonialism, violence, and poverty. In the case of the aftermath of the hurricane, this was no different. The resilience of the local and independent artistic scene, their networks of support and solidarity with the affected communities all showcase the strength and importance of our musical expression. My relationship to these practices was one so poignantly affective that it precluded any other engagement with them, my decision was to feel instead of think.

Caribbean people, their diasporas, the relationship between the other islands, and the phantom of the US ever so present in their daily lives and cultural productions. But above all, this dissertation is about listening. About listening to music that is so ubiquitous for us that we no longer really engage with it, genres that may share commercial visibility but whose community of listeners still suffer from state negligence. It is about listening to the marginal of the marginalized, to women and queer performers who are negated the resources for production, the spaces to perform, the seriousness to engage with their work. The performers for whose communities a hurricane, a corrupt government, and a global pandemic affects, cheapens, and harms the most. And it is about listening to the Caribbean, the marginalia of Latin American studies, the afterthought of American studies, and the resulting fractal geographies that are a product of the US' continuous imperial intervention.

Lorgia García-Peña's introduction to her groundbreaking book *The Borders of Dominicanidad* asserts that her intellectual labor is to "bring the footnote to the center of the page." Dominican studies, and Dominican cultural and intellectual productions have been largely relegated to the footnote of US and Latin American academia (3). Echoing what cultural critic Silvio Torres-Saillant argued in the case of Dominican literature in the United States, Dominican studies are "la periferia del margen" (25). Caribbean studies at large don't enjoy the visibility that other regional subfields have in Latin American Studies. And research on the Spanish Caribbean tends to concentrate on the two countries who conform to an exceptionalism paradigm, especially in relation to the US; Cuba and Puerto Rico. Furthermore, Latinx Studies has shown how the triad of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cubans have constituted the most visible of the Latinx communities in the US. The models of Latinidad that these communities espoused for decades have been challenged by emerging groups such as Dominicans —who now comprise

more than Puerto Ricans in New York, for example— but also of Central Americans and other continental Latin Americans who have been migrating and cultivating cultural expressions, enacting political mobilization, and developing intellectual research since at least the 1990's.

My research interest in the Dominican Republic first stemmed from my engagement with Latinx Studies. Recognizing a need to further research Puerto Rican and Dominican relationships, in part because these had been under theorized due to the mythology developed during the late 19th century of "de un pájaro las dos alas" that configured Puerto Rican and Cuban kinship. Lola Rodríguez de Tío's compelling metaphor was materialized in the solidarity efforts for independence which quite literally threaded the two islands together in those fateful New York days when the Cuban and Puerto Rican flags were created. Furthermore, I saw the contemporary affirmations of the brotherhood between Puerto Rico and its neighbor two doors down, predicated in discourses of mestizaje, racial democracy, and whiteness, that upheld the notions that while one country (PR) understood itself primarily as white and that racism was eradicated, the other (Cuba), had long ago solved its racial problems by equalizing all citizens as a result of the revolution's project.

While these views have been contested before, two texts make evident the falseness and perils of such discourses of racial harmony through a discussion of música urbana in the region: Petra Rivera Rideau's *Remixing Reggaetón* shows us how racial democracy masks discrimination towards Black Puerto Ricans by perpetuating a rhetoric of racial mixture that devalues Blackness. The myth of racial democracy is contested through reggaetón artists' understandings of Blackness. Marc Perrys' *Negro Soy Yo* examines the development of hip hop in Cuba and demonstrates how these artists decry the racial inequality that was exacerbated after the fall of the Soviet Union, —what is known as the Special Period in Cuba. The research

agendas in these books examine the particularities of racial discourses in Cuba and Puerto Rico, but not necessarily the relationship between the islands. They have instead shaped my understanding of how racial discourse shapes each island's development of nationality, and how música urbana can be a lens to examine them.

What I found lacking in research on the Caribbean region was a reflection on how the upholding of the PR-Cuban relationship left behind the very real and lived community building, tensions, dissensions, and negotiations between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, in the islands and the diaspora. To speak about Puerto Rican and Dominican kinship is to talk about Puerto Rican racism and classism. In her book *Our Caribbean Kin*, Alai Reyes-Santos analyses how Haitians, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans create political solidarity through affective narratives of kinship. In her discussion of Puerto Rican and Dominican kinship she shows how Puerto Ricans construct narratives based on family secrets that place Dominican migrants in an ambivalent close relationship with Puerto Ricans which distances them by depicting Dominicans as the inferior, poor, criminalized, and racialized migrants. Reyes-Santos explores these relationships through literature, tv, jokes, and the media, but hints at musical expressions as places where these relationalities are also forged. I found it particularly productive to think about cultural expressions, specifically music, as sites where Puerto Ricans and Dominicans processed their interconnections and disconnections, negotiated racism, discrimination, and forged links of solidarity. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel's *Caribe Two Ways* provided a model for this by attending to how transnationalism creates a culture of migration in the Spanish Caribbean and affects conceptualizations of nationality. Through a repertoire of cultural productions by Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans which range from visual arts to literature and music, Martínez-San Miguel analyses the depictions of Cuban and Dominican migration from a Puerto Rican

perspective. In her chapter: “Con mi música pa’ otra parte: desplazamientos simbólicos dominicanos” she specifically looks into the construction of migrant Dominican subjectivities through music that reflects on multiple transits: leaving the home country, migrating to Puerto Rico, and returning to the Dominican Republic. Following this scholarship, I recognized that reggaetón —and música urbana at large— provided a cultural site from which to engage in a larger reflection on transnationalism, kinships among the Caribbean, and the formation of new subjectivities left out of each national project.

My generation of Caribbean youth coincides with the maturity of reggaetón and its first wave of mainstreaming, with Daddy Yankee’s “Gasolina” peaking in 2005. I grew up with the characteristic *boom-ch-boom-chik* beat that Wayne Marshall so aptly onomatopoeizes, the perennial soundtrack to Puerto Rican early 2000’s living (*Reggaetón* 7). In my engagement with mid-2000’s reggaetón, the sounds of Dominican music provided a ubiquitous shadow that was rarely acknowledged in narratives about reggaetón’s origins nor in assertions about its transnational nature. The occlusion of the Dominican production and participation in the genre was stark given that that modern sound of reggaetón was crafted by two migrant Dominicans; Francisco Saldaña and Victor Cabrera, better known as Luny Tunes. In the first scholarly collection of essays about reggaetón, editor musicologist Deborah Pacini Hernandez, writes about these silences. She notes that despite ample recognition of the Jamaican, Panamanian, and African American contributions to reggaetón, Dominicans musicians and styles frequently go unnoticed. Specifically, she remarks on the acknowledgment that the impoverished, working-class, Black communities from which reggaetón was developed included a large quantity of young Dominican migrants and Puerto Ricans of Dominican descent actively producing and consuming and “whose voice[s]’ reggaetón is assumed to represent” (149). Coincidentally it’s

the more actively pro-Black reggaetoneros who affirmed their Dominican ancestry or their kinship with Dominican culture, such as Don Omar and Tego Calderón. Noticing how much of the reflection and negotiations between Puerto Rican and Dominican identity, as well as the transculturations or cultural affinities between both was developed by the men in the genre, I grew curious about what perspective people of other genders could be bringing to the discussion. Ivy Queen and Glory provided early clues to explore this question. Ivy Queen, one of the pioneers of reggaetón and its predecessor, underground, fused bachata with reggaetón as a creative sonic expansion of the affective registers of the genre. As Rivera-Rideau points out, her recognition of bachata's particular expressions of *sentimiento*, gave her a way to provide alternate perspectives about love and relationships. Glory, who vocalized the famous "dame más gasolina" response in Daddy Yankee's "La Gasolina", recorded her first single after *perico ripiao*, a rural Dominican version of merengue. These two songs form part of my own upbringing with reggaetón, and resurfaced years later as crucial sources of inspiration for my research endeavors. Noticing the lack of attention to the música urbana scene in the Dominican community at large, I decided to leave behind my comparative lens and focus exclusively on the Dominican scene(s). This change provided a different input into the sonic relations between the rest of the Caribbean, one that resituated my vantage point in the Dominican experience.

This dissertation centers the work of a range of exceedingly popular and relatively obscure women and queer Dominican performers of música urbana, their sounds, concerns, struggles, creativity, and impact on Caribbean and Latinx cultural production. Thus, these are not disconnected from the expressive cultures of their neighboring island nor from the transnational currents from the diasporas in the United States and Europe. My first chapter discusses the music, sound and performance of the pioneering Dominican dembow artists: La Insuperable, La

Materialista, La Delfi, and La Pajarita La Paul. I dedicate substantial time to the career of La Insuperable as the most popular Dominican dembow performer in the Dominican Republic, and whose musical work best exemplifies adherence to the standards as well as transgressions from música urbana conventions. The performances of the other three artists provide a more nuanced understanding of the contradictory discourses around race and gender that are in competition in the genre's production. My first contacts with Dominican dembow were through La Insuperable and La Materialista's music. Thus, I follow my own musical trajectory and begin my dissertation with them. Utilizing this ample repertoire allows me to write the history of Dominican dembow and define it in the terms of the non-male performers who have received the majority of the spotlight and credit in the industry. I respond to the call for feminist genealogy projects that Frances Aparicio asks for in her work on the most prominent women in salsa; "the process of unearthing, historicizing, and inscribing the agency of women in the cultural politics of Latino/Caribbean popular music, thus serving as a discourse of countermemory (Foucault 1977) that contests the masculinist historiography of popular music" (22). As I write, the música urbana industry has seen a wonderful rise in the quantity of women artists making headlines and producing chart-topping music, a vast improvement from the panorama a decade ago. The majority of the artists here enjoy a substantial following. What has been clear to me for quite some time though is that, as Pacini Hernández noted in 1995, "the Dominican Republic probably has more women making commercial music than any other Latin American country" (*Bachata* 183). Women in Dominican música urbana have not been lacking, their presence perhaps obscured by the periphery of the marginality paradigm that doubly affects them in this industry. For all its masculinist stance, Dominican dembow is certainly not just a masculine genre.

Dembow[2] is a regional reggaetón-derived genre developed exclusively in the Dominican Republic. As one of the most representative Dominican genres of the música urbana category, I engage with the sounds and transgressions to dembow that these artists enact. I use música urbana to make reference to a wide variety of interrelated Afrodiasporic genres developed by Caribbeans and Latinxs during the last half of the 1990's. The term has been mostly used by the music industry to categorize well-known genres such as rap and hip hop, but often becomes a stand-in for reggaetón. My usage of música urbana to refer to the various genres and subgenres that the musicians in this dissertation employ recognizes the Afrodiasporic roots of these practices. Petra Rivera-Rideau in her book *Remixing Reggaetón* —the only other scholarly publication on the genre— explains:

> The term urbana carries with it racial and class connotations that speak to the music's affiliations with Blackness. Indeed, not only does the term urbana imply reggaetón's ties to urban Blackness in Puerto Rico, but also ideas about urban Puerto Rican communities in the United States that historically have been linked to African Americans in the popular imagination both on the island and in the mainland. (12)

Although the deployment of the term by mainstream US media tends to stereotype the Black Caribbean and Latinx communities recalled in the genre through problematic images tied to violence and illegality, my usage of the term attempts to reclaim it from the ongoing whitewashing and decontextualization of its Afrodiasporic roots. More recently, the Latinx culture media brand Remezcla has ceased using the term "música urbana" to refer to these myriad genres, given that "the word has been used as a way to separate Black artists, while hypocritically allowing many white artists to freely navigate in and out of numerous categories—

[2] From now on, I will simply use dembow to refer to the Dominican subgenre unless otherwise specified.

including urban" writes the former music editor Eduardo Cepeda. While they suggest utilizing the term "el movimiento" I retain the "música urbana" umbrella as a reminder of the tensions between the music industry's cooptation and the work on the ground by Black Latinx artists. Additionally, I subscribe to David Brackett's understanding about music genres as a space performers participate in instead of belonging to (77). This shift in perspective allows us to consider the instability of such umbrella categories for genres and to account for temporality. Furthermore, he suggests that we consider genre's "addressivity," it's engagement with publics, music industry, and other artists as the enactments that construct our understandings of one genre or another. In my usage of "música urbana," I strive to encapsulate the dynamics and negotiations I read within these artists' production. Lastly, my interlocutors all used the phrase to speak about their craft. I also want to respect and record their self-conceptualizations and descriptions.

Dembow, reggaetón, merengue mambo, and trap star in this dissertation as music genres that comprise another layer of marginality to the "periferia del margen" that Torres-Saillant identified. Scholarly work on reggaetón has been scarce and sparse. And while the reggaetón music industry is a multimillion dollar enterprise that expands from various cities in Puerto Rico, to Miami, Florida, to Medellín, Colombia, and the sounds of these interpreters can now be heard everywhere from your car radio, in movie soundtracks, and in Spotify top hits, the genre is still associated with delinquency, corruption, and unsophistication. Worse than the simple attacks on the genre is the continuous ascription of these characteristics to Blackness and the Caribbean. The rise in consumption of reggaetón (in its current pop version) has only strengthened that supposition, depicting Black performers as promoters of immorality and vice, while música urbana produced by white bodies is seen as fashionable, attractive, and sellable. J Balvin,

Shakira, Bad Bunny, Rosalía, and even Justin Bieber are a few examples of the ways in which Afro-diasporic sounds promoted by white bodies through palatable lyrics is the winning formula for the mainstream music industry. The SuperBowl Half time show of 2020 is but the most recent example. Dubbed the "Latina Superbowl," it featured J.Lo and Shakira, who performed a medley of songs that included their respective versions of música urbana pop, accompanied at moments by J Balvin and Bad Bunny. While the performance attempted to convey a political statement through a visual decrying of ICE's de-humanizing practices of containing migrant children in cages, and enacting some sort of Latinx unity, many criticized the performers for direct negligence to address the anti-racist politics of the NFL. And even more, to decide to perform after other artists such as Rihanna and Cardi B had refused to do so, as a way to support San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's anti-racist protests. J.Lo and Shakira's performances of música urbana, coupled with the stark absence of any Black Latinxs, highlights what Zaire Zenit Dinzey describes as "the seduction of whiteness and the continual inability for non-Black Latina/o/xs to imagine a world where Blackness is part and parcel of their community and not a root or an influence" ("Black Rain"). Certainly, as Petra Rivera-Rideau explains on her piece about the show: "Shakira's acknowledgment of how Afro-Colombian culture has influenced her makes visible another way that the media industries promote whitening within Latino communities: drawing from the cultural production of black communities while privileging white performers" ("What JLo"). Indeed, what this halftime show evidences is the music industry's preference of Latinx artists who display particular "whitened" looks utilizing the sounds and practices of Black Caribbean creatives. Beyond the problematics of Latinx entertainers' disavowal of Black Latinx bodies and the lack of political engagement with the repercussions of homogenization, what this means for música urbana production is that the

relegation of Black and Caribbean producers and Djs to the sidelines of the large music industries --but also regional ones which move local música urbana-- hinders them from succeeding and reaping in the monetary gains of the work their communities developed. Black Dominican beat-makers and producers (in the Dominican Republic as well as New York and Puerto Rico), such as Urba y Rome and Nely "El arma secreta", have been the backbone of the música urbana scene for many years. To this day, contemporary producers like Cromo X, Nico Clínico, Nítido Nintendo are groundbreakers shaping the production of música urbana in and outside of the Dominican Republic.

Dominican popular music writ large has shaped música urbana since its beginnings. The first ventures into *reggae en español* and *underground* included mixes between merengue and rap, popularized by artists like Lisa M, Vico C, and Proyecto Uno. Later, reggaetón singers like Tego Calderón, Don Omar, Hector el Father, Ivy Queen, and Glory would draw inspiration from Dominican music. Some of them engaged with these sounds given their Dominican heritage and others because it was the music they heard while growing up with Dominican migrants in San Juan, but all of them recognized the commonalities both reggaetón and bachata shared, specifically their relative marginality vis-a-vis hegemonic mainstream culture. Bachata proved to be uniquely productive to sample in reggaetón songs given that it allowed the syncopated beat to accelerate, doubling the notes, and thus forcing dancers to improvise and show off their skills. "Bachatón," as this mixture would be known, became one of the most favored rhythms in reggaetón. Reggaetoneros asserted their musical inheritance from the salsa of the 70's as a way to affirm their belonging to Puerto Rican culture and, as Rivera-Rideau argues, "a larger insistence on the full recognition of those communities whose cultural practices are not only considered too "unrefined" … but also those who are systematically excluded by racist and

classist discourses" (4). Certainly, reggaetón borrows greatly from salsa sonically, but it owes as much to bachata and merengue ripiao. These sonic intertexts in reggaetón continue to this day; producers of Latin trap have also incorporated bachata and merengue. Even the popular Canadian rapper Drake was inspired by bachata for the beat of his hit "Hotline Bling".[3]

My venture into Santo Domingo's various music scenes shaped my relationship to reggaetón and my research into música urbana. In the Dominican Republic I witnessed a burgeoning creative alternative music scene, where the divisions between música urbana, música raiz, música fusión, and música alternativa were constantly transgressed, and which had a long history of engaging with these fusions. This scene had been revived in the last decade with help from artist and writer Rita Indiana Hernández and the musical group she convened, Los Misterios, around 2009. My second chapter delves into the work of Rita Indiana y los Misterios and Mula as representatives of a porous and rich Dominican music scene interested in expanding the registers of música alternativa and Afrodominicana, recognizing the common roots between alternativa and urbana. I analyze the ways that Rita Indiana y los Misterios disarrange the sonic, textual, and performative narratives that inform our sense of what Dominican popular culture is. This, what I call the Dominican sonic archive, is troubled by the group's playful musical mixtures and Rita Indiana's cross-dressing bodily performance. Conversely, the more recent and currently active trio Mula disassembles the sonic archive through vocalizations that restructure associations between Caribbean women's singing in popular music and the meanings derived from such sounds.

My ongoing intellectual and political growth as a Caribbean Latinx also importantly

3. Problematically, the video's aesthetic of sex phone lines is said to also be inspired in the Dominican Republic, something that echoes what García-Peña painfully recalls in her introduction to *Borders*: the violent association of Dominicanidad with "good rum and cheap whores" (1).

shaped my understandings of Dominican culture and my relationships with the Dominican community in the United States. My engagement with the multidisciplinary epistemologies and theories of Latinx studies provided grounding for a nuanced understanding of the discourses of belonging, politics, and cultural expression that not only Dominican-Americans, but Puerto Ricans and other Latinxs forged. Latinx studies became a political and intellectual home and a space of safety, growth, and empowerment. In recognizing the work that is yet to be done in the field, and the problematic ways in which Latinidad has been wrongly wielded to perpetuate violence and erasure on Black and Indigenous Latinxs, my research engages with one of the communities who taught me important lessons on belonging, race, and equality. I follow in the work done by Latinx scholars and activists in reconfiguring the meanings and politics of identification that the pan-ethnic Latinx identity allows us. I take García-Peña's recognition that "the multiple geopolitical borders of Dominicanidad—Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the United States—become visible through the body of the racialized Dominican Latino/a" (2), as an invitation to address —through Latinx studies— the limits and currents of discourse around nationality, race, and ethnicity as they become salient through the bodies embedded in transnational circulations. As Dinzey-Flores conveys in her critique of the Superbowl, García-Peña contends that "Dominican Blackness does not fit the colonial fantasy that makes the light-skinned version of Latino/a mestizaje marketable in the United States" (3). As such, Dominican migrants in the United States are racialized and excluded from the national fabric as well as from commodified versions of Latinidad. The artists I engage with in this dissertation negotiate these erasures in the island and the United States, and provide examples of the resistances and conformations to the entertainment industries and mainstream media's depiction of Caribeñidad and Latinidad as easily commodifiable, de-politicized, and whitened.

Studies about the Dominican community —from migration studies, to literary and cultural studies— have usually insisted on Dominicans supposed negation of Blackness. The focus on the brutal 30 year dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo has perpetuated the discourse of Dominican's "racial delusions" and the ongoing anti-Haitian rhetoric that upholds this denial. To be sure, the repercussions of the Trujillato, which lasted from 1930 to 1961 and continued throughout the mid-90's in the three non-consecutive terms of Trujillo's puppet, Joaquin Balaguer's presidency, are still felt in the region. The work of García Peña, for example, rewrites this narrative, centering the United States as one of the powers that enforced the maintenance of anti-Haitian rhetoric. The works of Dominican Studies scholars in the 2015 special edition of The Black Scholar Journal on Dominican Black Studies poignantly argues for a wider understanding on the legacies of US imperialism enforced through continuous invasions (1916, 1965) and the CAFTA agreements, for cementing anti-Haitian sentiments, and disavowal of Blackness in the country.

Dominican migration has been ongoing since the early 1960s, since the death of Trujillo and the U.S. Invasion in 1965. Dominicans are currently the 5th largest population of "Hispanic" origin living in the United States, accounting for the 4% of the U.S. Hispanic population in 2017, according to the PEW Research Center. 42% of this population resides in New York City, where currently Dominicans have surpassed the long-standing Puerto Rican / Nuyorican community established there since the 1950s. Upper Manhattan neighborhoods such as Washington Heights and Inwood, as well as the Bronx have become enclaves for the Dominican community. It is no coincidence that these spaces and the experiences embedded in them form part of what Zaire Dinzey-Flores identifies as the "urban spatial aesthetics" of reggaetón, dembow, and the other genres with which this dissertation engages. But, the sustained economic, political, and cultural

circulation between them and their families and friends back home, which has impacted day to day lives of both Dominicans in the island and migrants, has made the community exemplarily transnational. Luis Guarnizo explains that "the term transnationalism refers to the web of cultural social, economic, and political relationships, practices, and identities built by migrants across national borders" ("The Emergence" 287) thus resulting in what he terms a bi-national society, where the members of the national group respond and gain a sense of belonging to more than one nation. In the case of Dominicans, this binationalism encompasses both United States and their home country. The 1994 reform to the Dominican Constitution solidified this by approving the dual citizenship. Jorge Duany discusses the debate around migration studies' paradigms to understand Dominicans' connections between migrants, return migrants, and people in the home country. He explains that Silvio Torres-Saillant rejected the transnational model given that it depicted Dominican as "people without roots", and instead suggests we understand Dominicans as diasporic. Ana Aparicio argues that transnationalism overlooks the political alliances created with African Americans and Puerto Ricans when grounding their identities in the US. Duany instead reconciles both terms, diasporic and transnational, and utilizes them interchangeably to refer "to scattered peoples who remain connected to their countries of origin, despite long distances and periods of residence abroad" (170). Here, I deploy both transnational as well as diasporic. Transnationalism serves me as a viewpoint though which I can understand the socioeconomic and political formations that the Dominican community forges in the context of migration and globalization. In turn, I deploy diasporic as it conveys the effects of the process of transnationalism and the cultural manifestations of the community that resides outside of the Dominican Republic.

In the discussion of Dominican's transnationalism, scholars have explored the ways in

which cultural remittances, as Juan Flores has argued, shape cultural expressions in the island. Certainly, as my discussion on the development of dembow in Chapter 1 will show, an influx of US-based cultural products influenced the creation of musical and artistic practices. But more than US-based imposition on the development of expressive culture in the island, a process more akin to transculturation has taken place in the creation of Dominican música urbana. Transculturation, as coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, describes the process of mutual nourishment from different cultures, unfolding into a new cultural phenomenon.

Notions about Dominican identity have been troubled by the transnational current. The national project largely promoted through the Trujillato but continued throughout the decades, constructed an idea of Dominicanidad predicated on white, affluent, catholic ideologies that largely located haitianidad as its opposite. García-Peña understands Dominicanidad "as a category that emerges out of the historical events that placed the Dominican Republic in a geographic and symbolic border between the United States and Haiti since its birth in 1844" (3). One of the central subjectivities that emerges from this configuration and the transnational current is the migrant Dominican, known as the Dominicanyork. The Dominicanyork subject appears as a stereotyped, demonized representation of the second-generation Dominican in the United States that has adopted the aesthetics, ideas, and behaviors of their social context in urban New York. Angelina Tallaj describes how normative Dominican society conceptualized Dominicanyorks: "They were the working class and rural Dominican migrants who were returning from New York but had acquired the money to access American items of luxury; we perceived them as vulgar and immoral, and stereotyped them as drug traffickers and criminals" (18). Guarnizo coincides when he explains that migrants, "are perceived as Americanized Dominicans, whose behavior, for the most part, is seen by non-migrants as an affront to authentic

Dominican culture. Migrants' style of living, their tastes, and their manners, especially those of youngsters and the most prosperous, are judged as tasteless and revolting especially by the upper classes" ("Los Dominicanyorks" 80). Although the Dominicanyork term was initially used pejoratively, it is now used in its reclaimed sense, to signal any New York-based Dominican. Certainly this community is not only heterogeneous, but in constant transformation, so the deployment of the Dominicanyork as an all-compassing category will not reflect the reality of the current Dominican communities in the diaspora. My usage of the term throughout this dissertation is used to convey the distinct characteristics with which normative society associates migrants. It recognizes the construction of an otherness that island-based, white, middle and upper-class Dominicans have towards migrant Dominicans, especially those who display aesthetic, musical, and discursive alliances with Black populations in the diaspora. I do not employ the term as an exclusionary category; instead, I strive to convey the tensions that emerge from the inclusion/exclusion of the Dominicanyork subjectivities into conceptualizations of Dominicanidad. To be sure, my understandings of Dominicanidad include Dominicanyork subjectivities as well as Haitian and Dominicans of Haitian descent, and rayanos[4]. What my analysis of música urbana reflects is these artists' challenges to the exclusionary version of Dominicanidad that renders Dominicanyorks as its defining other. All of these artists engage with or are part of the wide conceptualization of what Dominicanyork encompasses. Ultimately, all of them call for an acknowledgement of the particular experiences of double displacement (being neither from here nor there), racialization, and strategic inclusion of the Dominicanyork experience as constitutive of an ever evolving Dominicanidad.

Given the changes in migration patterns, the Dominican government's strategic assertion

[4] People raised in the geopolitical borders between Haiti with the Dominican Republic.

of migrants and return migrants, and the consumption of cultural commodities first developed by Dominicanyorks on the island, many scholars claim that Dominicanyorks no longer suffer the alienation they were subjected to in the 1990's. Duany argues that "regardless of where they were born or what passport they hold, Dominican migrants and their descendants are officially deemed part of the Dominican nation" (*Blurred Borders* 186). While this may be true from a political and economic standpoint, since as Guarnizo explains: "All these attempts by the Dominican state to incorporate migrants into the national project are mostly driven by migrants' strategic importance for the internal stability of the country and the state's attempts to reposition the country in the global economy, in particular in relation to the US," I contend that it may not be the same for national identities on the island ("The Emergence" 305). Part of what my fieldwork has evidenced is that while there has been an acceptance of the cultural remittances of Dominicanyorks in the island inside the music industry, the symbolic associations and the imaginaries that are brought from these cultural productions are not necessarily considered part of hegemonic Dominicanidad. Angelina Tallaj identifies, "Dominicanyorks and their plural Dominican identity are now found on the island partly because of their music which, with its bilingualism and urban features, manifests a more open conception of Dominicanness." I concur —and my research on música urbana evidences such claims— that the potential in merengue de calle and dembow is that it pokes holes on tightly wound conceptions of Dominicanidad. But I'm hesitant to readily acknowledge that the cultural and national identity of the island has been substantially impacted in such a way. Specifically, the Dominicanyork identity associated with what Rivera-Rideau calls "urban Blackness" is still largely excluded from hegemonic Dominicanidad. Instead, what I argue is that Dominicanyork aesthetics, ways of being, and cultural production have been widely circulating since the late 90's given the economic power

that they hold and their engagement through transculturation with other cultural expressions such as merengue –considered national music. Thus, Dominicanyork cultural production coexists along with normative conceptions of Dominicanidad but has yet to transform hegemonic Dominican society's understandings of diasporic Dominicans as foreign and othered. For example, Tallaj's discussion of Aventura's establishment of bachata authenticity while incorporating "foreign" styles such as African American R&B and hip hop shows that the content of their lyrics conforms to that of rural bachata. By singing about the negative consequences of women's migration to the US in "Mi niña cambió," Aventura aligns with the anxieties regarding identity, migration, and gendered roles that have been worked out through music since migration started in the 1970's (26). As this dissertation will evidence, lyrics are used by many potentially transgressive musicians in order to 'mask' the ways in which their sonic and performative work ruptures with notions of identity and culture. Like Tallaj posits, "Aventura…are seen as Dominicanyorks who have proudly embraced their Dominican roots…". This embracing of roots serves as a way for Aventura to conform to ideas about Dominicanidad that grant them entrance into island-based Dominican households.

My final chapter thus engages with the politics of being Black, Dominicanyork, and Latinx through the work of trap superstar Cardi B. I contend that her music provides a complicated affirmation of Blackness and Latinidad that strives to be legible in both African American scripts of Blackness as well as the normative conceptualizations of Latinidad that, as previously mentioned, are predicated on whiteness and respectability. This chapter expands on issues brought in the previous two by examining in-depth issues around racialization, its inscription onto gendered bodies, women performers' negotiations with the politics of sexuality, and the commodification of difference. Cardi B also allows me to return to the theoretical and

methodological centers of this dissertation, by concentrating on her speech and articulations as ways of remaining illegible, unlistenable, and therefore unconsumable.

Sonic Dominicanidad

The first section of this introduction has modeled autoethnography, that is, I've woven a narrative that details the process of research and explains the itineraries and goals of this dissertation. The autoethnographic, Carolyn Ellis explains, is "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (xix). With this, I'm conveying the interdisciplinary focus of this dissertation as well as my personal and political investments in the project.

As a dissertation rooted in the fields of Latinx and Caribbean cultural studies, my research involves a variety of methodologies adopted from fields such as cultural anthropology, performance studies, sound studies, musicology, and literary studies. My analysis is informed by ethnographic fieldwork in Santo Domingo and Santiago de los Caballeros in the Dominican Republic, and in New York, where I conducted interviews with artists, fans, producers, journalists, and musicologists, attended performances and gatherings, and collected printed material that documents the development of música urbana in the DR and NYC. Digital ethnography complemented fieldwork by allowing me to gather insight on the day to day engagements of the performers and their listening publics. I spent substantial hours on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube interacting with posts, stories, live broadcasts, interviews, videos, and other digital materials that constituted an archive of the cybernetic personas of these artists. The close and instantaneous, but staged and artificial interaction between the artists and their fans allowed by these social media platforms, constituted an important element of the research process that deepened my understanding of the goals,

strategies, and ideologies of the artists and their publics. Finally, I engaged in careful listening sessions of the recorded material of these performers but also of the wide repertoire that constitutes the umbrella categories of música urbana, música dominicana, and música alternativa.

While I have a stunted training in music allows me to read only the most basic musical notations, and have little formal education in music performance, my own amateur engagements with singing and producing granted me a starting point to make sense of the sonic material I engage with in this dissertation. Thus this is not musicological research, and is not meant to be. Instead ,I employ the methodologies of performance to gain insight into how sound production and embodiment constitute sound and sonic materials. My engagement with performance studies follows Diana Taylor's understandings of performance as "an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis" (xvi). I approach these artists' work with the recognition that in their enactment they're putting forth an act of "transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity" (2).

But most of all, this dissertation is about sound and listening. Groundbreaking work by Latina scholars on popular music has shaped my listening methodology. Listening is the process through which I engage with the work of these artists. I do not listen for their lyrics and I do not listen with expectations. As this dissertation will show, my usage of textual analysis only sheds light on the knowledge that is produced through a moment of cultural embodiment; it does not imperatively necessitate the production of written knowledge in order to signify. In fact, I argue that my shifting away from lyrical analysis of music better corresponds to the meanings that the listeners of música urbana derive from those sounds. That is, performance as epistemology describes the process of listeners' engagement with música urbana. Frances Aparicio's research into women salsa listeners in her book *Listening to Salsa* showcases how little lyrics matter to

people, even when the content is problematic and the listener does not agree with its politics. Ramón Rivera Servera's ethnographies of queer latino night clubs also provide examples of queer clubgoers' strategic ignorance of the lyrics of reggatón songs that reproduce heterosexuality and may even perpetuate homophobia. These examples echo what I myself have encountered during research; my informants and interlocutors take from lyrics what they want, re-signify them if needed, but most of all they engage with the sonic; they are here to dance.

Instead of analyzing the texts of these songs, I follow Alexandra Vazquez's cue to listen in detail and to the asides. In her book on Cuban music she explains that "to listen in detail calls into primary question the ways that music and the musical reflect —in flashes, moments, sounds— the colonial, racial and geographic past and present of Cuba as much as the creative traditions that impact and impart from it" (4). I engage with this careful attention to listening as a way in which we can gain an affective sense of the larger echoes that come into being when sounds are performed and when vocals are uttered. In her contributing chapter to the *Reggaetón* anthology, Vazquez engages with listening to the asides of an Ivy Queen performance. Doing this requires paying attention to the extra-musical and allows for a broadening of the registers of music genres. Listening to the asides and the details permits me two things: on the one hand it allows entrance into what has been brushed aside, into what seems "to have little significance" both in the sense of a genre (or the particular arrangement of sonic aesthetics that form the conventions of said genre), as well as the elements and tidbits hiding in a recording or in an act of music. Listening allows me to hear the tensions at play in these Dominican artists' utterances. It is, for example, how I engage with Cardi B's ad-libs and fillers as disruptors to our understandings of Latinx sound.

I also locate my work in line with Deborah Vargas' *Dissonant Divas* when she poses the

question of "what it means to hear music through musical figures who so many have never had the opportunity to hear, not just musically, but experientially" (Viii). While the artists in this dissertation enjoy substantial following, and the majority of them are currently alive and performing, I wonder how listening to their sounds, over solely engaging with their bodies' hypervisibility or their lyrics, can provide us with a different understanding of the música urbana genres. Frances Aparicio's *Listening to Salsa* suggests a feminist methodology that centers a non-lyrical analysis of musical works, and instead listens to the women that actively engage with them. My approach to the música urbana listeners, dancers, and partakers that are spread throughout this dissertation is my attempt to decentralize the individual researcher as well as the songs themselves as constitutive of meaning and knowledge. Instead, by engaging with the listeners I show how collective acts of bodily movement and sound consumption are significant ways of making sense.

One of the questions that motivates this research has been precisely about sound. What meanings do we ascribe to these performer's voices and sonic compositions? What do these sounds tell us about Caribbean identity, Dominicanidad, gender, sexuality, and race? In order to tackle this query, I base my critical intervention on the work of Nina Sun Eidsheim's and Jennifer Lynn Stoever's work. In her article "Marian Anderson and Sonic Blackness in American opera," Eidsheim analyses how the sound of Black voices in the 19th century was impacted by white listeners' visual rendering of those voices. Recognizing the lack of analysis on the identification of certain vocal timbres as "Black" she examines how the practice of opera listening in the United States evidences the act as "a socially and culturally bound undertaking, rather than as immanent and neutral" (647). Based on Mendi Obadike's "acousmatic Blackness"; the idea that Blackness is summoned through certain sounds without necessitating the actual

presence of a Black body, she deploys sonic Blackness as "a combination of interchangeable self-reproducing modes: a perceptual phantom projected by the listener; a vocal timbre that happens to match current expectations about Blackness; or the shaping of vocal timbre to match current ideas about the sound of Blackness. Sonic Blackness is not the unmediated sound of essential otherness or the sound of a distinct phenotype" (663). Eidsheim provides me with a blueprint for unpacking what I conceptualize as sonic Dominicanidad. Put simply, sonic Dominicanidad is the accumulation of competing scripts, images, prejudices, fears, erasures, narratives, and impositions that provide listeners with a particular definition/association between the hegemonic identity of Dominicanidad and sound. It is what surfaces when one first hears the sounds of a merengue tambora, for example, or even the expectations that come after listening to the regional cibaeño accent. It is also what greases the machinery of Dominican, tropical, and "Latin" sound production and music marketing.

Eidsheim warns that "listening is not a neutral activity. No ear is innocent" (665), and so Jennifer Lynn Stoever's research auscultates the active ear that maliciously shapes and molds the listening act. In her book *The Sonic Color Line*, she analyses the ways in which listening reproduces the violence of racism. Following DuBois, she develops the notion of the sonic color line, as the process of racializing sound, "[enabling] listeners to construct and discern racial identities based on voices, sounds, and particular soundscapes… and, in turn, to mobilize racially coded batteries of sounds as discrimination by assigning them different cultural, social, and political value" (10). Sonic Dominicanidad, while not reproducing just racialization, does contain a set of values, tropes, or scripts that like the sonic color line can activate particular understandings, reactions, and associations between sound, race, and gender. But in order for the sonic color line to be activated, Stoever introduces the figure of the listening ear, as the dominant

listening practices and a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line's norms (7). My understanding of sonic Dominicanidad responds to a listening ear as well. Although the listening ear that engages sonic Dominicanidad is not necessarily the white listener Stoever writes about, it's an ear that conforms to colonial and imperialist consumption and listening practices. Through this dissertation I will make reference to the listening ear as that which activates sonic Dominicanidad, but the latter does not necessitate of the former. Instead, I propose that we think of sonic Dominicanidad in relation not only to receiving of sound (the act of listening) but to the enactment of it. Thus, this dissertation is titled Uttering Sonic Dominicanidad, to convey this double process. In my analysis of listeners and dancers I contend that the listening ear is subverted or fought against through bodily practices. The listening ear derives meaning, seeks intelligibility, and listenability. The performers in this dissertation all resist the capturing sense of the listening ear through their utterances.

Deborah Vargas' concept of dissonance recognizes the overheard or muted in the music of Chicana and Tejana performers. My development of utterance, instead, brings together the under-listened, the unlistenable, and the unavoidable listenability of these performers' sounds and vocal productions. In the act of uttering, the listener is forced to focus on the mouth, on its articulation, the flexing of the muscles that permit its movements, its openings and closures, thus centering on the act where the deconstruction and reconstruction of the scripts that make up sonic Dominicanidad takes place. The utterances can certainly be ignored, as they have been, given that these mouths are attached to gendered and racialized bodies, which the dominant listening ear refuses to engage with. By using an active verb, uttering, instead of nominalizing it (utterance), I insist on these artists' operative and enduring labor which is required for

disassembling imposed scripts and tropes, for selecting from a myriad of histories, tunings, and narratives, and for reconstructing these into coherent sonic materials. Tuning into uttering, as an act of speech, of sound, and of performance makes possible an engagement with the conformations and resistances to the violence, erasure, and confusion inherent in the imposing structures of sonic Dominicanidad. In his discussion about the instability of genre definitions, Brackett states that "musical utterances form and are subsequently reformed within (or between or even among) genres, already anticipating how these utterances will be heard" (77). For Brackett, the phrase "musical utterances" help him describe the musical sounds or phrases that combined make up a genre. My conceptualization of utterances does not correspond to the "parts of speech" that Brackett is conveying by echoing Derrida. Instead, I deploy utterances as the sonic, performative, and discursive work that the artists here engage with in order to grapple with sonic Dominicanidad's prescriptions. The utterances that these artists voice out perform a similar process of doing and undoing, of being undone and reconstituted, in an ongoing chain of negotiation. Knowing that the listening ear will try to render them mute, or distorted, these performers counter with an incessant question (Chapter 1), a vocoded bachata (Chapter 2), or an inimitable catchphrase (Chapter 3).

In what follows, I invite the reader to join me in sitting with the tensions that arise from these negotiations. I illustrate the complications behind these performances and their sounds, and ask what are the meanings we ascribe to them? What stories do these sonic utterances invoke? What images are conjured in these artists' voices? We may not find easy answers, but I propose we dance together, listen with attention, and let the sounds guide us through.

Chapter 1

The Sounds of Abject *Femme*ninities in Dembow: La Chapiadora, La Pajarita, and the Thinking Body.

Introduction

In early 2018, after my first year of fieldwork, I posted a video to my Instagram Story celebrating a recent opportunity to share my preliminary research findings to a group of colleagues and professors at my university. The video consisted of me lip-synching to one of the latest La Insuperable hits "Me Subo Arriba" (2017), accompanied by a message that explained how excited I was to bring some Dominican popular music into such a white, elite institution. One Instagram follower, a Dominican urban music DJ, sent me a private message commenting on that story. He asked if I understood what La Insuperable was singing about. I responded that I did, and that I had selected that song with full conscience of what it conveyed. La Insuperable's chorus: "Y cuando te me subo arriba, hasta que no la vea no me apeo[5]. El le gusta como me meneo. Priva en tiger pero lo noqueo[6][7]" expresses women's command over men through the image of sexual domination. This DJ seemed perplexed at my song choice: he could not understand why anyone would be using or embodying La Insuperable's music, lyrics, and images as a form of celebration. As the interaction progressed it became evident that this person could not make sense of the fact that a light-skinned, educated, Puerto Rican woman in the

5. colloquialism meaning "to step down"

6 Privar: To pretend; noqueo: anglicism for "to knock out".

7 In my transcription of lyrics, I retain the particularities of Dominican Spanish, given that the artists purposefully write and enunciate their songs in this matter. This gesture, I believe is important given that it highlights and celebrates colloquial Caribbean Spanish and proposes a rupture with standard forms of Spanish often imposed on Caribbean speakers.

diaspora researched and openly enjoyed La Insuperable's working-class, Afro-Caribbean, unapologetically sexual music. Amongst the many problematics that his responses held, it revealed to me how his associations between music and identities created powerful dichotomies between who La Insuperable's musical and body performances represent and my own identities. Furthermore, it proved how assumptions about urban music that are based on class, race, socioeconomic background, geographic location, and gender expressions are dispelled even by the genre's music creatives who work hard at legitimizing and profiting from their craft. And it revealed how normalized and internalized the hierarchies between cultural productions still remain in the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean at large. This has been for me a common reaction towards my research topic, specifically from educated, middle-class Latin American and U.S.-Anglo academics. What was surprising to me was to encounter the same sentiments from the people inside the community I'm engaging with in my research, the community that is producing such cultural materials. Ultimately, these incidents evidence how certain women's performances of sexuality in popular music are rendered unlistenable and unconsumable by the listening ear. The politics of respectability that popular music espouses clearly becomes a sexist regulation.

This anecdote allows me to introduce two important facts about this dissertation. On the one hand, it acknowledges the position of outsider or foreigner that I occupy vis-a-vis Dominican música urbana. The reaction of surprise from the DJ also "outs me" as a non-member of the sociocultural communities that música urbana engages. I certainly cannot claim any authentic belonging to those working-class racialized Dominican communities, as a light-skinned Puerto Rican woman raised in a non-Dominican middle-class neighborhood of Bayamón, Puerto Rico. The access I have had to high levels of education and economic resources —inside and outside

of the island— affords me privileges over some of the listening communities and fans of música urbana in the Dominican Republic. But my identity as a Puerto Rican born and raised in the island did provide me in the best of cases a sort of authenticity, what many of my interlocutors in the Dominican Republic understood as an innate knowledge and natural experience with música urbana and the particularities of reggaetón. On the other hand, this episode evidences the ruptures and transgressions that La Insuperable's presence enacts, even though música urbana, its aesthetics, and themes have been mainstreamed in popular music in the Caribbean and elsewhere for some time now. In fact, people's constant negative remarks towards La Insuperable's body, lyrics, and overall career emphasize the marginal space that she occupies in Dominican popular culture. I argue that La Insuperable is an unlistenable performer. Her utterance renders her unlistenable because she engages with and transforms urban music rhythms, she is rendered unlistenable when her bodily performances transgresses respectability politics and standards of femininity, and when her body becomes hypervisibilized, occluding her vocality and enunciations. By characterizing her as unlistenable I'm conveying how she circumvents the listening ear's regulations by playing up her body's hypervisibility, hindering her sonic production from easy consumption. She recognizes how the scopic regime's dominance shapes consumption practices, thus by yielding in to the imposed hypervisibility, she disengages with the listening ear, and strategically makes her music unlistenable.

By analyzing La Insuperable through her "unlistenability", this chapter tackles two goals. First, it sketches a story about Dominican música urbana through the lens of its most successful women interpreters. The lack of proper scholarly work on these Dominican cultural manifestations reveal much about the place it occupies in academia, and the access that Dominicans (specially Black working class) have to these institutions themselves. The feminist

politics that motivate this investigation push me to follow the work of those interpreters that are usually left aside, that have been under-engaged with, and for whom many of the problematics that studies on music urbana tackle are most salient. Second, this chapter looks at these performer's work, their vocal and bodily performances, their aesthetics, and their negotiations with social issues, feminism, gendered power dynamics, racism, respectability politics, and Dominican nationality to understand how they straddle simultaneous popularity and marginality. Through an analysis of their music we can complicate how politics of representation simultaneously fail and succeed at cementing ideas about Dominicanidad, how the gendered body struggles against the straightjacket of nationality discourse and constructs different frameworks from which to think about Dominicanidad and Caribbeanness.

The title for this chapter serves as the roadmap for my engagement with música urbana and the artists that have performed and developed it purposefully from their gender and sexual difference. I talk about abject *femme*ninities, conflating femininity and the term for gender expression "femme", to signal the ways in which these artists' performances of difference are rejected and rendered unsightly in their evocation of images that trouble the listening ear of sonic Dominicanidad. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam observes that while white feminists in the early 1970's utilized the dichotomy of butch/femme to characterize lesbian sexual desires, later feminists critiqued it due to its imitation of heterosexual roles by representing the binary masculine/feminine (122). Judith Butler also argued against associating "lesbian genders" with heterosexual originals, and Halberstam's configuration of the "stone butch" challenges correlations between fixed gender identities and their roles in sexual engagement. My employment of the "femme" category follows Butler and Halberstam's configurations by dislodging the butch/femme binary from its associations with sexual desires and acts. Instead, I

understand "femme" in its contemporary usage to signal a performance of gender that reads as or is close to what a particular society understands as feminine. The "femme" category here has nothing to do with gender identity or sexual preference, and instead just signals an *expression of* gender, temporary and reversible, that is enacted at a specific moment in time. In this chapter then, I will show how dembow performers engage with femme expressions and how the listening ear renders them undesirable in light of the normative scripts of gender and respectability.

The lack of interest in these performer's work, and their unlistenability, is tied to the images they employ. I contend that La Insuperable's, La Materialista's, La Delfi's, and La Pajarita La Paul's sonic and embodied discourses on *femme*ninity exhibit a re-conceptualization of feminism anchored to working-class, barrio experience. Through La Insuperable and La Materialista we can peek at the constructions of normative barrio gender expression, which straddle abjection and commodification. La Delfi and La Pajarita La Paul, in contrast, through their queer subjectivity, propose a transgression of normative gender codes that struggles to re-appropriate strict binary expressions of gender conforming to música urbana conventions.

Defining Dembow

When I began my research for this dissertation around 2016, dembow was popular in the Dominican Republic and Dominican communities globally, but was yet to reach the international prominence it now enjoys in 2020. This year especially, there has been an interest in the genre by popular English-language music publications such as *Rolling Stone*, *Billboard*, and *Pitchfork*, granting young Latinx journalists the opportunity to write about their community's music. While many of these publications concentrate on the current production of the genre and the incursion into it by non-Dominican, non-Caribbean, and non-Latinx producers and artists, little attention is

placed on the local and ever-evolving scene that birthed the subgenre. Dembow's development echoes reggaetón's history. Similarly, its acceptance in countries around the world has done little to grant local producers and performers more revenue and fans. Instead, market pressures and internationalization has forced productions to compromise their regional idiosyncrasies in order to cater to global audiences. Dembow is now produced and consumed by audiences everywhere. Its trajectory, the genre's boundaries in relation to its parent genres —rap and reggaetón—, its sound description, and definition have not been recorded in academic literature, and scarcely in media journalism. Instead, a large part of the record about this music rests in regional Dominican music magazines, online forums, YouTube documentaries and other informal videos, as well as in the *sabiduría callejera*—the knowledge that circulates from listener to listener, based on lived experiences and fanatism. Horacio Roque Ramírez's article on the development of Pan Dulce, a queer Latinx nightclub in San Francisco, identifies the challenges in creating a record of queer Latina/o spaces and diaspora. In his research, specifically documenting the "bodily and psychic pleasures and their political significance," Roque considers flyers, ads, photographs, and most importantly, memories as the forms of social documentation that retell "the histories of the displaced, the diseased, and of the removed" (303). Similarly, my materials include the feelings and memories of listeners, fans, and producers of música urbana. As the last part of this chapter will show, these become central for capturing the new meanings and senses that queer bodies give to música urbana during concerts and dancing at the club.

Thus, my definition and short historical recapitulation of the genre —and of other musical subcultures that will be analyzed in the other chapters— builds up from these scattered archives and música urbana repertoires. More importantly, I'm in dialogue with a range of women journalists and scholars who have been engaging, thinking, and working with the genre

for around a decade. These include AfroLatinx Dominican women working in media and cultural industries in the island and New York. In centering the words of these women, I'm also crafting my own subversive archive, by including the perspectives and experiences of Black, Dominican, non-academic women, I attempt to redefine what we consider truthful, meaningful, and valuable in academic scholarship and intellectual production. Their voices have shaped large part of my own ideas about the genre, the communities that produce and consume it, and the larger meanings it has for Dominicans, Caribbeans, and Latinxs.

We define dembow as a reggaetón offshoot developed by Dominicans[8] during the years of reggaetón's cross-over. Some of its defining features are the accentuation of the clap beat that is characteristic of Jamaican dancehall and "its use of fast-paced fever pitch Jamaican riddims" ("The Global Influences"). It's likely that casual listeners will have a hard time distinguishing between dembow, reggaetón, and dancehall. In the documentary *Dominican Dancehall Vol. 1* pioneer dembow producer, DJ Jhonny explains that the three styles have the same origin; 1960's Jamaican music. He remarks that the difference between them is simply a change in bpm; with dancehall being the slowest at 85-95 bpm (beats per minutes), reggaetón a bit more fast-paced at a range of 90-98 bpm, and Dominican dembow racking it up to 110 bpm plus. But besides these velocity changes, dembow strips down most of reggaetón's dense arrangements in the melodic section, and removes the "timbal" effect that Wayne Marshall distinguishes as distinctive of Puerto Rican reggaetón's dembow beat. Dembow also stands out from its parent genres through a heightened repetition of downbeats, choruses, and catchphrases. These repetitive phrases often include an ongoing shout that reinforces the clap beat. This "shout" tends to be a sampled

8. This definition/description of the genre was developed specifically in collaboration with Dominican musicologist Rossy Díaz.

recording of a woman's sigh or a (sexual) moan, in some cases, it's the male singer's high-pitched shout.

In the Dominican Republic, música urbana has been substantially transformed due to market pressures exerted on what was largely independent and underground music ventures[9]. Initially, following globalized trends in Black cultural expression, rap and hip hop in the Dominican Republic developed as a socially conscious music genre. As Marc Perry has observed elsewhere of Cuba and Brazil, hip hop provided for Afro-descendants outside of the US a site of identification and self-naming through its signification of Blackness in its aesthetic and emotive force ("Global Black"). As such, Dominican hip hop interpreters were able to reflect on their Blackness and communal experiences of poverty, and they utilized the genre's diasporic sonic language to locally contest inequality, racism, and classism. As discussed in the introduction, the late 1990's saw a rise in return migration from the United States, or more specifically in the transnational migration for which Dominicans have been defined as an exemplary case in migration studies. A reform to the Dominican constitution in 1994 allowed Dominicans to hold dual citizenship, a factor that, according to Luis Guarnizo strengthened the transnational currents between New York and The Dominican Republic. The cultural remittances that had been circulating through the decade became more pervasive and with the return of people, what Juan Flores calls "remigrants, "their aesthetics, ideas, and values began to gain traction (*The Diaspora* 4). Sidney Hutchinson has pointed out that these transnational connections offered new kinds of masculinity "further tied to Black Atlantic cultural and musical forms… [that] link[ed] Dominican men quite consciously with people of color around the Americas and beyond" (116).

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[9] I'm referring to the production of música urbana that is independent from the mainstream US music market and that also works through informal channels, understood as underground, in relation to the local popular music industries and media outlets in the Dominican Republic.

As Rossy Díaz has observed, the identities espoused through these early stages of Caribbean música urbana result from the analogies drawn between Afro-descendants globally. Thus, these processes of adoption and regional reformulation evidence hip hop's capacity to amplify concerns not sufficiently addressed in other manifestations of popular culture (*Rumbas* 26). As both Diaz and Hutchinson have identified, even merengue —considered the country's national music— was affected by this transcultural process, resulting in the development of what is known as *merengue de calle* or *merengue mambo*, a genre that will be more amply discussed in the next chapter. Additionally, Angelina Tallaj has argued that Dominicanyork's engagement with African American communities in New York contributed to an openness to other forms of music, importantly, AfroDominican styles that had been previously stigmatized in the island (17). As I will discuss in the following chapter in regards to *the escena alternativa* in Santo Domingo, previous incorporations of Afro Dominican music that acknowledge and celebrated Black heritage were developed by intellectuals and activists during the 1970s and 80s. But as Hutchinson observes, genres such as música urbana "enacted new forms of Black Atlantic identifications that initiated within the lower classes", and differed from the ones promoted by the Nueva Canción and early "alternativxs" due to the points of contact that Diaz and Perry identify: the common struggles of inequality denounced through the language —sonic and lyrical— of the larger hip hop movement (117).

By the late 1990's, reggaetón began taking over not only in Puerto Rico, but in the neighboring islands and the United States. In the Dominican Republic, reggaetón was seen as another foreign-influenced genre, since its composition and arrangements were directly developed by migrant Dominicans in Puerto Rico and the United States, and resonated with other Caribbean music traditions. As some DJs express in the documentary, reggaetón and its

predecessor, *underground*, came into the DR as something foreign and novel, and began competing with the local productions of rap and hip hop. Due to its catchy beats and pop-influenced elements, reggaetón's reign over Caribbean music production created discomfort among rappers steeped in the "socially conscious"[10] realm of hip hop. They saw it as a devalued and apolitical version of rap, blaming capitalism and transnationalism for the corruption of the genre. The *Reggaetón* anthology discusses some of the initial tensions between these kin genres; the rapper Welmo E. Romero reflects on the discomfort he felt when the rhyming patterns and "basic" lyrical play of reggaetón eclipsed the more laborious and skillful rapping that he had developed over the years. In the chapter on the hip hop scene in Miami and the development of *crunkiao* –a Latinx version of the Atlanta-based hip hop subgenre "crunk"-- José Dávila details the challenges that reggaetón brought for performers of hip hop and rap causing a battle for venue spaces and record sales. But this resistance to reggaetón in the Dominican Republic did not last long, and instead many of the producers and MCs decided to develop their own regional variation of the genre; dembow.

As the genre's name evidences, dembow's is a reference to Jamaican dancehall and Panamanian reggae en español, the same roots of reggaetón. The word dembow (and not the genre) describes one *riddim* taken from bobby Digitals production of Shabba Ranks' early 90's recording "Dem Bo". Riddims serve as the sonic foundation of a dancehall song and are usually the percussion rhythm and the bass line. In dancehall there are millions of riddims which are meant to be reused by the MCs and singers over which they create their lyrics and arrangements. The term dembow itself has been amply resignified. As Marshall explains, the idea of "bowing"

10. The reality is that by the time reggaetón reached its peak, many hip hoppers were not necessarily engaging in "conscious" themes, although were indeed still engaged in a politics of Black affirmation that popular reggaetón seemed to not express directly.

that is referred to in the phrase "Dem bow" (Jamaican patois for "they bow") connotes the act of giving in to forces of oppression and corruption "ranging from the forces of neocolonialism to "deviant" sexual practices e.g. oral and anal sex" (*Reggaetón* 38). The Spanish versions of Ranks' song "Son Bow" and "Ellos Benia", recorded by Panamanian's reggae en español pioneers El General and Nando Boom respectively, repurpose the homophobic connotations inherent in the "bow." But, as Marshall notes, already in 2003 reggaetón power duo Wisin y Yandel detach these meanings from the word in their song "Dembow" and instead utilize the term to refer to the danceable beat. Thus, taking the Puerto Rican reggaetonero's resignification of the term as a descriptor of the characteristic beat but also the flavor of the perreo dance, Dominican DJs name their own subgenre as such.

Two tracks are said to inaugurate dembow, but Piddy Pablo's 2010 "Si tu quiere dembow" is an important recording firstly because it is the earliest to name the genre, and secondly because Pablo is the first of the early reggaetón and dembow detractors to make the switch from hip hop to dembow. The other track is DJ Boyo's "Mujeres Andadoras", which samples Cutty Rank's "A Who Seh Me Dum" speeding it to 115 bpms, and thus marking the stylistic fast-paced beat that identifies the genre ("The Global Influences"). However, in 2011, when Dj Boyo's track was released, underground was already considered a relic and reggaetoneros referenced it to bring homage to their DJ forefathers or as nostalgic reminders of a supposedly better musical past before commercialization. Thus, I perceive two parallel musical imports shaping dembow. First, reggaetón as the representative Spanish Caribbean and Latinx music genre of the moment, gave early dembow artists the blueprints for rapping, rhyming, and sampling. But the influx of Jamaican reggae and dancehall that had been coming in since the late 1980's became another point of reference for producers who wanted to engage with a more "authentic" version of the

reggaetón that was commercialized. While dembow artists and producers initially needed to define their music in strict contrast to reggaetón, many of them now acknowledge the influence of one another. Let's consider one recent song by dembow's most visible and popular artist of recent years, El Alfa, as an affirmation and celebration of the genre's inextricable links to reggaetón. In the aptly named "Dembow y Reggaetón",[11] El Alfa's producer Chael introduces the song —and samples throughout the track— the previously mentioned Wisin y Yandel's track. In this song, it becomes evident that the genre's interpreters acknowledge that Dominican dembow's genesis takes place within a reggaetón tradition, affirms the associations between the term and dancing, and positions the two as comrades in arms. Currently, in light of reggaetón's popularization, the incursion of Colombians, Spaniards, and Argentinians into the genre, and the broad whitewashing caused by White Anglo and European musicians, there has been a recent embrace of dembow as Dominican Republic's unique contribution to the música urbana umbrella.

Dembow interpreters follow rap and reggaetón rapping conventions, with faster-paced rhymes and lyrics that speak about the results of social mobility, the accumulation of luxury items, sex or pursuing a sexual interest, dancing, as well as drug trafficking and consumption. Some also relate the apparent realities of the urban barrios the genre's interpreters come from and which is supposed to reference the genre's cultural community. Without a doubt, global trends in hip hop and rap music, not exclusively but primarily US-based, influence lyrics, aesthetics, and sonic arrangements. One specific aspect of dembow that evidences what I see as dembow interpreters' particular cleverness is the usage of onomatopoeic phrases and simplified repetitive syllables —what Diaz describes as the "teletubbization" of verses. Dembow relies

11. This song features Wisin y Yandel, and up and coming Latin trap artist Myke Towers.

heavily on simplification and repetition. The name of the genre itself signals how these factors drive the goal of the songs. By describing the percussive and bass-heavy beat as well as the inherent association between this and the dancing body, dembow is directly linked to the ways the body feels and moves to the beat. Thus, I would argue that different from reggaetón, rap, hip hop and other *música urbana,* dembow is produced specifically and exclusively for dancing, and less for lyrical play, message conveying, or even vocal creativity. This does not mean to perpetuate the musical hierarchies I discussed in the introduction, or even to negate MC's skills in the non-sonic realms of music-making,[12] but instead to insist that the role that dembow plays in contemporary Dominican and Caribbean culture prioritizes the moving body over other ways of meaning-making. This point has made detractors insist on the "unproductiveness" of dembow music. Intellectuals also resort to this valuation, instead of critiquing its crude lyrics and the interpreter's aestethic, as a way to argue against the genre without seeming overtly racist and classist. As music made with dancing and other bodily movements in mind, I insist that such claims actually reveal a misunderstanding of the various forms in which communication and signification can take place precisely in the body. That is, following Diana Taylor's understanding of performance as an episteme, I contend that performing música urbana and its engagement with it through the body are ways of navigating elements of knowledge and memory that cannot necessarily be articulated through language, explained to the non-practitioner, or made sense of through the structures of Western thought. As this investigation will show, audiences of dembow music recognize the potential for subversion –albeit rife with contradictions-- in this embodiment.

12. A listen to any El Alfa songs will prove that dembowseros are skilled at lyricism and rapping.

Las Mamis del Swagger

La Insuperable's sound is characteristic amongst other dembow and urban music performers in the Dominican Republic. She and her producers, KiloBeats and Cromo X's constant usage of beats, rhythms, and loops that go beyond the sonic spaces of reference found in reggaetón and dembow make her sound somewhat more musically adventurous than other performers. While her music follows música urbana conventions of using styles taken from Jamaican dancehall, she also incorporates other sonic elements not so palpable in other productions, such as Haitian konpa, calypso, and African American trap. This amalgamation of rhythms does not strike as surprising given music's globalization, the usage of a wide reference of Afrodiasporic styles in pop music,[13] the similarities between each genre, and the listening ear's acculturation to these. But with an engaged listen to the Dominican dembow repertoire vis-à-vis La Insuperable's production we can glean stark variations in sonic composition and intertextuality. It is not my intention to denominate La Insuperable's music —or any of the artists' discussed here— as a "feminine sound," but my research has made it evident that producers tend to foster "female" or "woman" versions of what they otherwise understand as a "masculine" sound. This translates into a unique production that separates La Insuperable's work from that of her male counterparts. Interestingly, the same cannot be said about the handful of queer, trans, and cross-dressing dembow performers like La Delfi and La Pajarita La Paul, whose work falls under the sonic conventions of the genre. In their case, working with staple producers and without altering much of the structure of dembow production allows them to subvert the genre's most problematic issues, surreptitiously masking the content of their lyrics, and their

13. Primarily produced and recorded by European and white Anglo Djs- a continuation of the "World music" era.

queered vocal expression, without running the risk of censorship or boycotting. That is, conforming to the sonic standards of the genre as well as the explicitly sexual content of the lyrics allows them to mask their truly subversive work and become popular by larger audiences - specifically non-queer.

La Insuperable's music is inserted in the strict boundaries of música urbana,[14] her music becomes porous due to the unforeseen freedom that being a woman in the genre allows her. Contrary to other Dominican music genres such as merengue, where women groups were largely assembled, produced, and promoted by male merengue artists, such as the case of Las Chicas del Can, women in dembow have had to carve their own space, and reach out to the promoters and producers that will grant them access to resources and spaces. Given the lack of interest that many men in dembow have had initially in promoting and fostering women's entrance into the genre, these women artists have found some liberty to develop their sound and persona according to their own preferences. Lastly, the contradiction that stems from producers crafting of a distinct "female sound" has allowed their music to incorporate elements and to be more playful with what could otherwise be a strict and standard sonic structure. Thus, La Insuperable is not actually bound to dembow, strictly speaking. Instead, her repertoire dabbles in most —if not all— rhythms and styles largely defined as música urbana: dembow, reaggaetón, merengue mambo, trap, calypso, among others. This versatility corresponds to the porosity of the genres themselves but also to a creative impulse that she's allowed to pursue given her producer's flexibility with her music. Recognizing that her body overdetermines her persona, La Insuperable has used that negligence over her music production as a permission to produce whatever and however she wants.

14. And all that implies in terms of aesthetic, culture, production, industry, relationship to market, etc

In this chapter, through the work of La Insuperable, and other groundbreaking dembow performers, I discuss some of the ways in which notions of sonic Dominicanidad have been developed in dembow production, and how women and queer artists grapple with those problematics. Additionally, I pay attention to how La Insuperable's performances, sound, and body alterations point to a transformative feminine ethos that questions gender, race, and class propriety dispelled by mainstream Dominican society, and I would add, other Spanish Caribbean and Latinx sensibilities.

"Ya tú sabes quién soy yo" La Insuperable

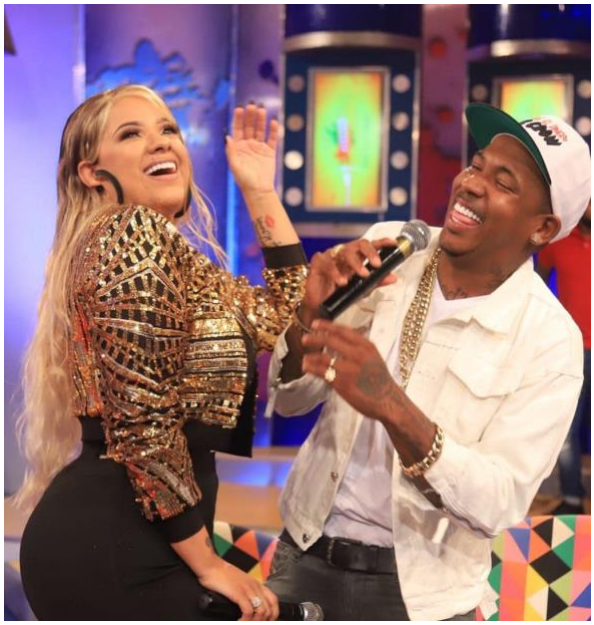
La Insuperable solidified her popularity amongst mainstream Dominican pop music with the song "Que me den banda" (2016), roughly 3 years after debuting in the dembow and música urbana scenes. In the video she appears accompanied and visually sponsored by her husband Toxic Crow, pioneer women rappers Mely Mel and Milka La Más Dura. Although already reaching notoriety before this single, in the video La Insuperable marks sonically and visually the acceptance of her music by the dembow scene as well as casual pop music consumers. But before this moment, La Insuperable was a Dominican migrant in Spain called Indhira Ircania Luna. Indhira enters the public eye through her relationship with famous rapper Toxic Crow, who receives harsh criticism from fans and media for dating her. The most problematic rumors that circulated had to do with Indhira's aesthetics and body. Through the years she has undergone various surgical procedures that have enhanced her body. One of the first plastic surgeries she had done was a buttock enhancement. The size of Indhira's rear has granted her much publicity and has largely influenced butt enhancement trends in the Dominican Republic. Initially, however, the public associated her voluptuousness with sex work. Fans and tabloids

would interpret their relationship as a labor dynamic,[15] seeing Toxic Crow as her pimp. Dominicans' reading of Indhira's body and practices as a sex worker precedes the development of her aesthetics as La Insuperable. As I will further develop, Indhira embodies the *chapiadora*, a Dominican version of the gold digger. Her subjection to these criticisms through the enforcement of racialized and gendered stereotypes allows us to understand some of the discourses surrounding women's bodies and sexual agency that La Insuperable juggles as an artist. The social policing of women's bodies in the case of artists like La Insuperable is a way of tampering with their careers, preventing them from excelling or engaging in a particular industry, and rendering them unlistenable. That is, their work is no longer music work, and so conversations about their body take precedence over listening or engaging with their sonic productions. As these conversations try to eclipse engagements with her music, La Insuperable responds with what Nicole Fleetwood theorizes as "excess flesh", that is "an enactment of visibility that seizes upon the scopic desires to discipline the black female body through a normative gaze that anticipates its rehearsed performance of abjection" (112). In highlighting the body work and insisting on further engagement with it, she employs excessive flesh as a strategy that attempts to return some sense of agency over her image and career.

The butt enhancement connects La Insuperable's bodily work with Black and Dominicanyork women's beauty practices. In the island Dominican context, the enhanced butt and operated body was initially read as a "foreign" practice that marked her as Dominicanyork and therefore non-Dominican. Her music will struggle to navigate through these distinctions, as

15. Field interviews with fans, casual dembow listeners (taxi drivers, club goers), and other people in the music industry attested to this characterization. Currently, even when Toxic Crow is no longer seen as her pimp, she is described as a "cuero" because of her body modifications, evidence that these stereotypes have bearing on the ways in which women are read based on appearance.

it will further align her with Dominicanyork subjectivities without actually having lived in New York. While La Insuperable does not seem to reject these readings, other aspects of her career showcase a negotiation with them. In the best cases, she capitalizes on her honorary Dominicanyorkness and allows it to authenticate her música urbana. More importantly, her acceptance of such resonances will connect her with the transnational work of Dominican artists in the diaspora, more specifically with Cardi B.[16]



1.From left to right: La Insuperable and Toxic Crow performing in live TV.

Due to the controversy surrounding Toxic Crow and Indhira's relationship, the rapper released a song titled "Contigo Quiero Estar" (2012) which serves as an indictment of the veracity and seriousness of the relationship. The track features Indhira's first rapping role and is her first recorded appearance as La Insuperable. The attempted slander against Indhira did not necessarily abate after this, but Toxic Crow's continuous support aided in launching her own

16. As Chapter 3 will show, the scarce discussion on Cardi B's own body enhancement in the United States proves the normalization of such practices vis-a-vis La Insuperable's scandalous reading of her own enhancements.

career, strategically countering the rumors by showcasing her as talented and hardworking. While Toxic Crow's career has been active for longer than La Insuperable's, it is safe to say that it is she who has better positioned both artists to be internationally recognized. Although her career is seen by some as a product of her husband's enterprises[17], they have masterfully utilized the privilege he has granted her to excel in a variety of música urbana genres, providing a female optic that reflects on conversations around hegemonic femininity in the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, the couple has had three children whose upbringing has been recorded amply through social media platforms and a YouTube reality TV show called "My Family". The marketing of La Insuperable's family life promotes an image of normative and respectable domesticity that at once legitimizes her marriage to Toxic Crow while softening her musical, textual, and bodily transgressions. Nevertheless, La Insuperable's persona remains marginal and favored, abject and desirable, transgressive and conforming. Like most of the artists discussed here, as a product of popular culture, La Insuperable's music is not devoid of contradictions. Thus her body and music serve as cultural commodities that irrupt in both the scopic and the sonic regimes, simultaneously producing abjection and commodification.

"Muy Bendecida": Producing La Insuperable

After her debut collab song with Toxic Crow, La Insuperable began releasing a series of singles that would later be compiled in her first album or—to follow the genre's nomenclature, mixtape— *La Mami del Swagger* (2013). The distribution of La Insuperable's music and its relation to the development of her career reveal the dynamics and structures of the Dominican música urbana industry. On the one hand, the distribution formats she follows are typical of

17. Rumors abound surrounding their relationship and certain exploitative patterns from Toxic Crow to La Insuperable, which I interpret mostly as a effort to subtract value and autonomy to her career.

urban music genres and not of mainstream pop artists. One palpable way in which La Insuperable's career functions as a traditional música urbana one,[18] is by following the 'mixtape' format. Haim Lopez, her manager, alongside Toxic Crow, have followed a model that emulates the ones utilized by early 1990's rappers in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. With the lack of digital media in the early days of hip hop, musicians would record cassettes (and later CDs) where singles by multiple rappers could be found. These cassettes or mixtapes would be distributed through informal networks and provide DJs and MCs with material for their sets. Contemporary rappers have by large emulated this model, using online music streaming platforms instead of analog media to distribute their music. Small and/or independent record labels and their producers will record a handful of singles, often including 3 or more rappers in a singular song, functioning as a sort of taster of the different "talent" on the label's roster. La Insuperable's career has profited from this format, allowing her to work with prolific artists in the genre such as El Mayor Clásico and producer Chimbala, thus amplifying her fanbase. Although it's a common distribution format, and historically, rapper "crews" have been a staple of genres that stem from hip hop and rap, my research has made it evident that women and queer interpreters of música urbana, necessitate in more ways than men (that present as heterosexual and are cisgender) this sort of communal support in order to succeed in the genre. The types of patronage in which more seasoned rappers vouch for and support newcomers are commonplace in música urbana but prove essential for non-male artists given that they symbolically transmit inclusion and acceptance for the artist. For queer performers like La Delfi and La Pajarita La Paul, collaborations with other dembow artists allow them to perform in popular venues and — most importantly— to be played on mainstream radio stations.[19] Although there's a critical lack

18. This includes US-based non-Latinx production formats as well.
19. Radio play is still important for artist and label promotion in the DR, despite the democratization that

in sustainable networks of female and/or queer patronage in música urbana, the increase in mainstream women interpreters in the last four years has allowed many of these artists to collaborate with each other and form musical linkages that could potentially help endorse newcomers. Unfortunately, the sexist politics of the music industry, where men still hold the access to production spaces and tools, alongside the sensationalist media that promotes these, tend to pitch women performers against each other, compete for studio time, stage presence, and major collaborations. Some of these women performers —most notably Ivy Queen and Cardi B—, use their social media networks to promote, circulate, and publicize the work of fellow women and queer artists and wield their popularity and clout as "tastemakers" to push for audiences to engage with these artists' work. In the case of La Insuperable, collaborations with other women musicians have been crucial to her career. As I mentioned, "Que me den banda" features rap veterans MelyMel and Milka La Mas Dura on the video. Similarly, she has collaborated in songs with merengue pioneer Miriam Cruz, and with pop music celebrity singers like Martha Heredia. Conversely, for La Delfi, pioneer queer dembow artist, being embraced and supported by important men producers and artists such as John Distro, Bubloy, and Lápiz Consciente allowed them legitimacy in the genre. As I will discuss later, being embraced by these men instead of women or other queer artists helped bring them security in a genre that outwardly displays homophobia.

With a mixtape and more than a dozen singles that attest to her growth as a musician, La Insuperable has won two Premios Soberanos[20], and has performed at festivals throughout The

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streaming platforms have allowed musicians worldwide. Payola is also very common amongst musicians in the DR. This practice where managers and/or producers pay the radio stations to have them play their artist's music, allows many dembow interpreters to reach wider fan bases.

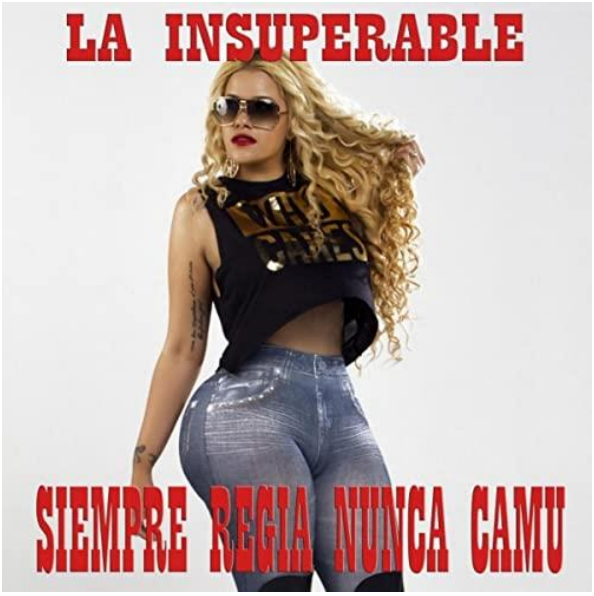
20. Formerly known as Premios Casandra, they are the Dominican Republic's most important art awards.

Dominican Republic as well as in main diasporic cities in the Unites States and Europe. Despite receiving accolades and recognition by cultural institutions such as the Premios, however, La Insuperable still occupies a marginalized position given the cultural sphere her work promotes. The recognition of her work in such Premios largely responds to the music institution's needs to acknowledge that the consumption of certain music by the popular classes has surpassed other "legitimized" genres, and as a strategic commercial move to grant the TV broadcasting station large number of viewers.

Nevertheless, these contradictions reveal the growing acceptance and mainstreaming process of música urbana, a phenomenon hardly predictable in its beginnings. The capitalization of certain elements of the genre run parallel to the continuous disregarding of its performers and listening communities as valuable and valid cultural agents. In the case of women and queer artists these incongruencies become more stark. Often, in order for their music to be consumed widely, they must conform to sexist standards in relation to their bodies and their songs' themes. At the same time, conforming to these standards tends to ostracize them, as they become either "too sexual" or "too submissive". These critiques depend heavily on the performers' racialization. For example, Jillian Baez and Petra Rivera-Rideau have written on how in the career of pioneer Puerto Rican reggaetón performer, Ivy Queen, pressure[21] to perform feminine aesthetics, to engage in normative heterosexuality, and cater to the male gaze often meant that her career was under a different type of scrutiny than that of her male counterparts. In the case of La Insuperable, the aesthetic reconstructions of her body —her butt enhancement, waist-training, nails, and use of wigs— defy Dominican society's female beauty standards and racialize her, making her subject to social policing that devalues her even as she attempts to conform to such

21. As well as other successful reggaeton female artists like Glory.

standards. Like Cardi B, her body modifications allow her access to different and better forms of monetary income.



2. La Insuperable, Promotional Image for single "Siempre Regia Nunca Camú"

La Insuperable's popularity, to a great extent has been possible due to her looks. Her body work references a trend amongst young working-class Dominican women looking for a way to escalate socioeconomically. These women, called *chapiadoras* in colloquial Dominican parlance are objects of critique and disgust for hegemonic Dominican society. They have become figures of abjection and fascination, a fetish commodity amongst men. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins has identified how similar processes are deployed to subjugate Black womanhood and substantiate White male domination, the reconfiguration of their societal roles as productive, and justification for Black families' "degeneration". These "controlling images of Black womanhood" have resonances with the *chapiadora* stereotype in the Dominican Republic.

Patricia Hill Collins' work analyses the ways in which early 19th century societies in the United States and United Kingdom ascribed a series of values to white women in order to distinguish them from Black women. White women became associated with piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, while Black women were, instead, forced to occupy a series of typologies that solidified their "Otherness" and at best, their "utility" in society. These roles are what Hill Collins calls controlling images. Amongst these are the mammy —the obedient domestic servant—, the matriarch —aggressive, assertive mothers—, the welfare mother and queen —the poor, working-class mother and materialistic, state-dependent woman, respectively — the Black lady —hard-working professional—, and the jezebel/hoochie —highly sexual and deviant. We can find Dominican equivalents to each of these images despite the subtle differences in race relations in both countries. An exploration of each of them will unveil, for instance, the way that Haitian women have been relegated to specific subservient roles in Dominican society and their invisibility writ large. Specifically, through the qualifier *chopería*, hegemonic Dominican society differentiates between undesirable demeanor and propriety. The term comes from the word "chopa", a phonetically-based, hispaniziced version of "shopper" which describes the Haitian domestic worker in upper and middle class Dominican households. In the case of la chapiadora, the stereotype can be understood as a woman who unsuccessfully strives to distance herself from "chopería", coalescing with it both the welfare queen and the hoochie stereotypes that regulate Black womanhood. La Insuperable has in fact been described as "chopa". With her over the top aesthetics, US imported fashion, heavy make-up and evident marks of artificiality, hegemonic Dominican society reads her performance as an excess that by not accurately achieving the norms for beauty and stylistic standards highlights the undesirable, unsightly, and indecency of her "natural" self.

In the 2018 book titled *Manual de la Chapiadora*, is a mock sociological research study on the chapiadora figure, Wilsis M. Bautista Lantigua expands the simplistic definition of the stereotype as gold digger into a more "nuanced" description that acknowledges chapiadoras as entrepreneurs that are forced to engage in the gold digger lifestyles given their precarious upbringing. Hill Collins describes the welfare queen as the state-dependent black woman, an image developed after the implementation of federal aid in the United States (88). Given the Dominican state's inability to provide sufficient social benefits to its impoverished citizens, the chapiadoras take it upon themselves to find ways to make ends meet, as well as to secure for themselves and their possible offspring a certain lifestyle of leisure. In this way, chapiadoras can be compared to another common Dominican social type; the "sanky panky". These are men who wander around tourist areas attracting socially mobile white Anglo or European women to offer escorting services. They usually establish an economic dependency with their clients even after they return to their home countries. The sanky panky is a sex worker but the chapiadora does not necessarily 'hustle' through sex. Chapiadoras instead usually contract long-term sentimental and/or interdependent relationships with wealthy men, where sex seems to be part of a heteronormative romantic partnership that leads to marriage and children. The role that sex plays in the economic exchange that is embedded in the chapiadora lifestyle is a site of contention. One of the reasons why the chapiadora undergoes surgical procedures is to transform their bodies into versions that would sexually attract men. But their economic dependency is contingent upon only one stable man. The associations between sex work and the chapiadora —which tend to portray these lifestyles as deviant— evidences how women's engagement with sex and sexuality in such open ways is always condemned. The publication and circulation of the Manual proves the ubiquity of the chapiadora, and the intention to make her fit into pre-established narratives of

female empowerment.

Chapiadoras deal in aesthetics and self-presentation. They are usually young, or young-looking, and are required to look presentable and to succumb to beauty norms in order to attract the men that will sustain them. But even after having secured a providing husband, they need to maintain certain standards of beauty, making them a commodity even within a stable relationship. One of the versions of the hoochie image mentioned by Hill Collins is the "gold digging hoochie" who wants to establish "a long-term relationship with a man with money" (91). The chapiadora thus represents a version of Dominican hoochie because it reiterates ideas surrounding women's compulsory heterosexuality, the gender performance that comes with it, and women's sexuality as a dangerous, devious weapon. The chapiadora attempts to wield her sexuality for her betterment, and separates the commercialization of her body from the usages of the body that sex workers incur. This distinction is necessary for the chapiadora to enter normative society and legitimize her strategies. In this way chapiadoras are not necessarily subversive.

As Hill Collins explains, controlling images serve as ways in which White men control Black women's sexuality. Through the chapiadora —along with other equivalent controlling images of Dominican society— distinctions between what proper womanhood is and is not are created. They allow for the establishment of specific understandings of women's productivity but also justify working class and racialized women's economic stagnation by seeing it as an individual issue rather than a structural one. La Insuperable's reformulation of la chapiadora accompanies her contradictory self-made rhetoric, which reveals the ways in which La Insuperable capitalizes on the chapiadora aesthetic as an image profitable inside música urbana. Along with her emphasis on family life, her performance —both sonic, embodied, and

cybernetic— re-appropriates la chapiadora and repackages it as a version of female entrepreneurship for the working-class, racialized women that form a substantial part of her fan base.

"Siempre Regia Nunca Camú": The entrepreneurship of la chapiadora regia.

Braggadocious lyrics are one of the ways in which La Insuperable's rhetoric of the chapiadora as empowerment is represented. This sort of lyrics are one of the most standard conventions of música urbana, as it borrows from rap and hip hop of the late 1990's that shifted from a politics of social commentary into a heavily commercial rhetoric of accumulation of goods. As many hip hop feminist scholars have discussed before, women in these genres for the most part assumed the language of their male peers, including the discourses on superiority, in order to fit in a genre that was already harsh and hostile towards them. La Insuperable's music, as well as other women's in dembow are not an exception to this rule. Ivy Queen's work, for example, stood out from other reggaetón recordings by engaging in a language of romance and love, through which she offered "women's point of view" as well as a way of expressing violence towards traitorous lovers (Rivera-Rideau 118). She refused to engage in lyrics that pitted other women against her and the few songs that exhibit superiority narratives often place men as the opponent instead. But even though Ivy Queen's most famous single "Yo Quiero Bailar" asserts sexual and bodily autonomy in the dance floor and in sexual relationships with lines such as "Yo te digo si, tu me puedes provocar, pero eso no quiere decir que pa' la cama voy", she rarely engages in a discourse about sex even if from women's standpoint. Rivera-Rideau understands this resistance as part of the strategy of commercializing reggaetón by distancing its lyrics from the "street" themes it has been associated with. These discursive moves go hand in hand with Ivy Queen's attempts to conform her image to mainstream media's

standards of beauty (118). Glory, a coetaneous reggaetón performer who was often placed as Ivy Queen's competition by the media, did engage with this style of lyricism. Glory was disruptive by singing about sex and asserting her desire for pleasure. As one of the pioneering "chorus-girls" of reggaetón, she carried that role throughout her career even when she went solo, a point that Félix Jiménez argues hindered her from reaching the popularity that Ivy Queen enjoyed.

In dembow, women have not shied away from matching their male counterparts highly sexual lyrical content, and instead have resorted to engaging in a women's point of view narrative that blurs the boundaries between being subservient and dominating. And though this has brought them censorship on the radio, it hasn't substantially obstructed their career. Like Glory, artists like La Insuperable, La Materialista, and Milka La Mas Dura's positionality towards sex may be read as a conformation to male's sexual desires —based on the lyrics of dembow and reggaetón, but also merengue and bachata. But these women —and their listeners— will argue that the subservience and sexual self-presentations of their lyrics represent their true desires as sexual beings. As Frances Aparicio has argued for Latina's engagement with the patriarchal lyrics of salsa music, "the poetics and politics of self-erotics is a material, physical, and clearly visual way of opposing the sexual repression of the female, which is heavily influenced by a Catholic patriarchy" (151). In similar ways, these dembow artist's lyrics reflect a need for oppositional narratives that subvert the patriarchal scripts of normative femininity.

The song I made reference to at the beginning of this chapter, "Me Subo Arriba" is La Insuperable's first trap song. The US South-bred subgenre has been produced by Caribbean and Latinx música urbana interpreters since 2016. La Insuperable released her first trap a year later at the peak of the Latin trap production. The beat to this song is otherwise unremarkable, but the lyrics have been censored, and have caused reaction among Dominican listeners. In it, La

Insuperable speaks about dominating a man in sex after stating her desire for "rough" play, a rhetoric that falls in line with the reggaetón choral responses by women in men authored songs. But the explicitness of such statement is starkly different from the discourse of female empowerment from other Dominican popular genres like merengue and bachata. The violence expressed in their songs tends to follow the Ivy Queen logic, where men are "attacked", hurt, or even under threat of murder because of their infidelity. Songs like "Celoso" by Las Chicas del Can and Ivy Queen's "Te he querido, te he llorado" spill violence back to the treacherous man, by beating him or threatening to stab him. La Insuperable's song instead threatens through sex. In the chorus she sings "Priva en tiger pero lo noqueo." Utilizing the language of boxing, she affirms she can knock him out which metaphorizes the capacity to bring him to orgasm. The contrast with the hypermasculinity of the word "tiger" which references the popular Dominican masculinized term "tíguere",[22] conveys the idea of domination as emasculation. Additionally, the rest of the lyrics express a removal of power coded in the language of música urbana: "No pidas más hooka, tampoco pidas mas Henny, estoy como me gusta." By asking the man to stop ordering hookah and Hennessy, commodities used in música urbana to signal economic power and boosting of masculinity, La Insuperable's lyrics take control of the courting session and accelerate the moment of sexual encounter. The lyrics fall into a logic of women as prey when later she states "Tu eres mi lobo papi hoy yo soy tu presa", conveying a power exchange that reverts her position to a submissive one through metaphors of animalistic hunting and consumption.

In a different track, a reggaetón called "La que 'tá buena soy yo" she asserts her independence from a man she's sleeping with by not engaging in anything outside of sex. She

22. Chapter 2 will discuss the tíguere figure in more detail

described the man as needy and love-enthralled: “Parece que se enamoró. Ahora llama que quiere tenerme, parece que se involucró.” And herself as the unattainable object of desire: “ la que ’ta buena soy yo.” Some of the songs by pioneer women rapper and Insuperable friend, MelyMel, such as “Salgo Sola” take this idea further by stating independence from men and liberty to sleep with however many men she wants: “El va y viene y otra vez se va. Te tengo a ti y a unos cuantos más. A mi ninguno me consola. Yo salgo sola.” La Insuperable’s songs tend to maintain a stable and predictable positionality in respect to the men she sings to.

The chapiadora that La Insuperable crafts in her work attempts to render value and propriety to the women who wield their body and sexuality for their betterment. Contrary to Cardi B’s unapologetic rupturing of respectability,—as I will discuss in Chapter 3— La Insuperable insists on a discourse of respectability even while transgressing it. This contradictory move results in her performance of what I call chapiadora regia. I take the phrase from one of her earlier singles “Siempre Regia Nunca Camú”. The tiltle presents a simple comparison of beautiful versus ugly. But the Dominican slang term “camú” denominates more than ugliness, it describes a woman that doesn’t stand out, that has not worked on her appearance, that blurs into the background. Regia, meaning magnificent or even regal, connotes proactivity in La Insuperable’s song. It makes reference to an aesthetic that has been crafted, that requires care—an act of calling attention to oneself. It acknowledges that there is work behind appearances of beauty, and so camú becomes the state of a person who cannot perform appropriate “regalness”. The term camú is not widely used by Dominicans in just any context; it is a heavily classed term, employed mostly amongst working class Dominicans in urban areas both on the island as well as in the diaspora. It is understood to be part of a so-called “language of delinquency” marking the enunciator as abject and criminal. Therefore, La Insuperable’s usage of the term places her

within a specific sociocultural community and as outsider of hegemonic Dominican society. But the action conveyed in the phrase “siempre regia nunca camú” pretends to remove her from that marginalized space that the usage of ”camú” locates her in. That is, being “regia” and no longer camú, implies a process of beautification that would allow you to integrate into normative society. This expression carries a tension that I identify in La Insuperable’s performances, music, and body; as someone both connected to her community but always seemingly growing away from it. For example, in “Cero Goga” she expresses “Tú no me conoces, pregunta por ahí cuantos millones hay en mi closet. Con mi flow europeo y mi flow barrial, tengo to’ los estilos, tu sabes que hay que innovar.” Thus, the development of her hyperfemeninity is always connected to the aesthetics of the barrio, and working-class communities. Contrary to Ivy Queen’s hybridity in aesthetics that results from industry and audience pressures, La Insuperable’s “high” and “low”, regia and “chopo” aesthetics are a purposeful effort in catering to “urban” and “normative” society.

Thus La Insuperable’s regia performance is never completely conforming to hegemonic Dominican beauty standards. The hypervisibility offered by the aesthetic work makes her transgress proper and respectable femininity, she exceeds it because the “barrio” aesthetics she pulls from puts into motion her “excess flesh.” Her adoption of diverse standards crosses the obscure limits of what is proper/improper, highlighting the artificiality of these body modifications as well as the unfeasibility of those standards. While other artists would want to enhance their bodies but make them seem as natural as possible, La Insuperable’s modifications are always acknowledged as prosthetic. This accommodates well with música urbana’s discourses on accumulation of capital and the capacity to purchase luxury items; for La Insuperable her butt is a commodity and the materialization of her hard work and success. In a

song like “Mastica y Traga” we see a development of these two discourses: “Que si me puse muy grande el culón, mastiga y traga, que no eres tú quien me lo paga.” Additionally, she makes it clear to whom she is speaking when stating “Oyeme chapi sin suerte” at the beginning of the first verse. Thus, the chapiadora stereotype is not necessarily one that La Insuperable rejects, instead she rhetorically redefines it, attempting to fix it into comfortable narratives of women’s success.

“Que yo tengo pa’a la lipo, a ti tu chicho te incomoda” Body Modifications

La Insuperable’s body modifications recall other surgically reconstructed bodies in US celebrity world such as the reality tv stars, the Kardashians. In the US context, Kim Kardashian’s enhancement of her rear is tied to the appropriation and commodification of Black woman’s aesthetic traits by non-Black women. Kardashian’s enhanced rear does not necessarily disrupt racist ideas about women of color, and particularly Black women’s sexuality as explained by Hill Collins. The associations between Kardashian’s butt and violent historical accounts of Black women’s voluptuous bodies as exotic objects to be visually consumed, such as the Venus Hottentot, have been materialized in some of her media appearances such as the Paper magazine cover of 2016. La Insuperable’s booty –and the commentary surrounding it— reminds us of these larger histories. But it also recalls another famous rear more closely tied to Caribbean and Latinx culture, such as JLo. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner has stated in JLo’s case “A big culo upset hegemonic (white) notions of beauty and good taste because it is a sign of the dark incomprehensible excess of Latino and other African diaspora cultures” (237). In the DR context, La Insuperable’s booty defies notions of respectability and white hegemony, as well. But the fact that it is not natural, and not meant to be anywhere near what our imaginaries would conceive as “natural” (as Negrón-Muntaner notes when recalling a talk show interview where Jennifer Lopez is asked whether her butt “was hers”, implying that the size of it could not be “real”), makes us

wonder about the motivation behind such modifications. Certainly, JLo's image and the cult to the butt that surrounds her has played a crucial role in defining contemporary standards for women celebrity aesthetics. For Caribbean audiences, this body is not as much transgressive as it is for white Anglo ones. Women celebrities before JLo such as the famous Puerto Rican vedette Iris Chacón had already flaunted and capitalized her voluptuous body for local and American audiences. The fascination with Chacón's derriere is embedded in an economy of Caribbean desire and fetishism that also recalls the animalistic depictions of Black women that the Kardashian's performance does. With Chacón, the "naturalness" of the big butt brings together competing valuations of women's role in entertainment, at once being the vedette's apparently only skill, but providing her with fame and revenue due to the public's fascination/repulsion dichotomy. As such, for the contemporary Dominican audience and the male gaze that regulates women's performances in the entertainment industries, La Insuperable's butt enhancement attempts to conform to the "female body as spectacle" paradigm. As Aparicio observes, wide hips and full bodies have long been part of the ideal feminine body in Latinx and Caribbean culture (*Listening* 151). But La Insuperable's enhanced rear has actually exceeded the proper "size" that patriarchal Caribbean body standards "allow". As Negrón-Muntaner states "The privileged location of the Puerto Rican butt as an epistemological resource in fact registers the ambivalent triumph of nonwhite aesthetics upon boricua cultural production, even among the educated elite" (239). For La Insuperable, these excesses of the butt "darken" her as it signals the African heritage that discourses of nationality —both in Puerto Rico as well as the DR— would render "behind the ears" (Candelario). With La Insuperable, Blackness is thus relegated to an unavoidable behind.

The chapiadora type embarks on such corporeal transformations to secure financial

stability through her provider, but also because she becomes her provider's commodity, and as such needs to "lucir impecable", as the Manual de la Chapiadora states. Bautista Lantigua observes that these physical alterations don't need to respond to a particular racial desirability, and that neither skin color, hair texture, nor height are determining factors for the success of the chapiadora. While this may be true, many chapiadoras exhibit modifications that satisfy the politics of white desirability and alter a range of physical traits that would otherwise racialize them as Black instead of morena, or, in the logics of Dominican national discourse, as Haitian. Lantigua's argument against this is possibly a way to circumvent addressing contemporary racial politics.

Ginetta Candelario's research on the articulation of Blackness through Dominican women's beauty practices reveal how through the hair, they assert their nationality and ethnic belonging in contexts of racialization in the United States. Her findings reveal that certain hair procedures will mark you as Dominican, Latina or White, Morena, and African American. Certainly conflating the categories of race, ethnicity, and nationality —the race-as-nationality paradigm common in the Dominican Republic (Wheeler 37), — these women associate beauty with particular radicalized styles. From her observations, Candelario argues that it is not a desire for whiteness that guides Dominican women through their hairstyle choices, but instead an ideal notion of what it means to "look Hispanic", an intermediate between white and black "types" grounded in the Iberian somatic norm image (229). Thus, these women preferred to style their hair in ways that would largely conform to white femininity —straightened and dyed in light shades— but not overworked as to seem "too floppy" or artificial, both of which would racialize you either as Anglo White (gringa) or African American (Black). La Insuperable's aesthetics correspond to transnational circulations of beauty that include regional conceptualizations on

race as well as foreign scripts that involve the images of celebrity and the cooptation of Black aesthetics by non-Black bodies. La Insuperable is a light-skinned woman and many of her beauty practices respond to standards of femininity that correspond to the somatic norm image that Candelario observed in her subjects. Her butt enhancement locates her outside of proper and white femininity in the Dominican Republic, and its perceived excess racializes her.

Candelario states that for Dominicans, "hair is the principal bodily signifier of race, followed by facial features, skin color, and last, ancestry" (223). Therefore. any attempt at distancing oneself from Blackness begins with a modification of the hair. La Insuperable's aesthetic work operates under the transnational urban músic aesthetics linked to Dominicanyork's styles, so instead of straightening her own hair she often wears wigs. Most of the time these are made evident; just like the artificiality of her butt, the wigs are proudly donned as an accessory she can purchase. This technology, while trying to position her socioeconomic status above the average working-class woman, actually marks her as a Dominicanyork and potentially as Black. The wigs, like other hairstyles that Candelario identifies, lack "naturalness" and are obviously sculpted to distinguish Dominican hair culture from African American ones. La Insuperable's decision to engage in these types of hairstyles corresponds to the global conceptualizations of femininity made possible through transnationalism and música urbana. But in her insistence on speaking about these modifications and the accumulation of capital that allows them points to their artificiality. In masking her "naturalness" she distances herself from normalized femininity, and further evidences her engagement with *chopería*. The perceived bawdiness of the excessive butt, the fauxness of the hair, and the ornamentation of her attire are unsightly, but commodifiable, at once pointing to intentionally failed attempts at proper aesthetics and corresponding to the styles of the urban New York landscape.

The song that opens her first and only album, *La Mami del Swagger* (2013), titled "Cero Goga",[23] is a merengue mambo.[24] *Merengue mambo, or merengue de calle* is a style of contemporary merengue where elements taken from música urbana are highlighted. It usually consists of fast-paced, hard-driven tempos (taken from *perico ripiao* merengue), usage of synthesized string instrumentation, and rapped or spoken vocals. Mambo's themes relate back to the "urban" character of the genre, as they involve a mixture of crude and explicit lyrics, retellings of the realities of working-class life, and most importantly, that of the diaspora settled in New York City. Although Indhira is a return migrant from Madrid, the cultural references from her merengue mambo and dembow point towards the New York Dominican Diaspora, the Dominicanyorks, instead. La Insuperable's performance of Dominicanyork as an aesthetic and not as an identity developed from a geographical and experiential social reality, evidences precisely the circulation of visible characteristics associated with New York migrant populations as well as the authenticity that it grants performers of música urbana. This may reify island Dominican's notions about Dominicanyorks but it can also highlight the transnational Afrodiasporic connections that are performed through música urbana.

"Cero Goga" may surprise new ears, what's most remarkable of KiloBeats' track is the short bossa nova introduction to it. Its seamless transformation into the simple mambo beat is reminiscent of late 1970's merengue and salsa compositions. Musicians like Johnny Ventura and Roberto Roena experimented with a variety of "tropical" sounds that circulated in New York during these decades. The small incorporation of bossa into this mambo track is provocative, it

23. Possible translation to English could be "Zero Haters" The slang term 'goga' is La Insuperable's own version of another Dominican slag: "demagogo/a". The latter refers to someone who envies you, a phrase common in Dominican street slang and dembow music.
24. Also known as merengue de calle or mambo violento.

perplexes the listener and breaks with expectations regarding female incursion into the masculine and "crude" genres of música urbana. La Insuperable's sharp bars straight over the mambo percussion five seconds into the song strengthen the tune. She manages a nasal tone, for the most part monotonous in this album, with a shrill pitch that conveys a certain annoyance as well as a nonchalance; the image of a woman who effortlessly speaks back to her critics. The consistency of her tone diverges from the different rapping styles that previous Dominican female rappers have employed. Milka La Más Dura, for example, manipulates a variety of timbres and shadings that imbue her music with distinctly crude character. MelyMel, on the other hand, with ample experience in classic hip hop and influenced by African American R&B, soulfully adorns her choruses, bringing full bodied vocals to her songs. La Insuperable's first album, training ground, still conveys an amateur performer, developing an unbothered style that will be better exercised in later recordings. But what I find productive in these early stages is a recognition of the potential of her "unadorned" voice to convey the attitude the rest of her performance supports. That is, the chapeadora utterance of La Insuperable rarely seems to be there for male sexual provocation; instead, it wields and utilizes that capacity at her convenience.

One way to understand La Insuperable's chapiadora regia is by considering how it articulates sexual entrepreneurship. Writing on the discourses of female empowerment in the work of African American rap artists Nicki Minaj and Missy "Missdemeanor" Elliot, Theresa Renee White posits that Minaj attempts to redefine the ways that Black women's sexuality is viewed by engaging with a model of sexual entrepreneurship. Based on Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill's concept which describes "a new and contradictory subject position… [which] constituted a hybrid of discourse of sexual freedom for women, intimately entangled with attempts to recuperate this to (male dominated) consumer capitalism…" (qtd in White 610), she

argues for a positive understanding of Minaj's complicated relationship with sexuality and objectification, as spaces of empowerment for Black women. While I find the usage of "sexual entrepreneurship" productive for engaging with the complex representations of sexuality enacted by women in música urbana, I disagree with White when she posits that the images of sexuality portrayed in hip-hop are "perverted social and cultural representations… that are shaping future generations of women…," or that "persistent exposure to stereotypical images in hip hop media may influence beliefs about themselves as women" (613). Such views render women —and Black women in particular— as agentless consumers easily influenced by the media and incapable of discerning between mediatic fictious portrayals of femininity and their own embodied experiences. Frances Aparicio argues against the direct correspondence between fictional texts and reality. She argues that, following Toril Moi, this "excessive referentialism" negates women's active agency when engaging with musical or literary texts (*Listening* 122). Certainly, the women that consume Nicki Minaj, as well as La Insuperable and the other performers in this dissertation, recognize the performativity of the sexuality portrayed in ther performances. They also find empowering ways of transforming the problematic content in the lyrics and videos.

Claims like White's also echo the arguments made by conservative hegemonic institutions to regulate cultural production by marginalized people. State control and regulation of reggaetón in its early years of circulation in Puerto Rico were supported by the claim that it corrupted the youth and incited promiscuity in girls. As Raquel Z. Rivera has explained when arguing against this correlation between music and behavior, "it is difficult to assess effect… even though many claim that common sense is proof enough that there is a direct correlation between artistic representation and action, there is no conclusive evidence to support this."

(*Reggaeton* 119). Instead, I believe that these images and discourses reflect society's understandings of issues of sexuality, power, race, and gender. That is, music, especially in its textual and visual registers, becomes a record of the prevailing notions —and their contestations— of a particular society. If the images of womanhood that music genres portray are violent, sexist, and damaging, it is largely because society actively understands women in such a way. Raquel Z. Rivera contends that the representations of violence in underground and reggaetón are the artists' ways of grappling with the very real violent and precarious life conditions they face (120). Additionally, such arguments tend to be used solely against music genres associated with Black, Brown, and working-class communities. Pop music in general tends to reflect stereotyped and sexist assumptions about society, but the language it uses usually corresponds to romantic and poetic language that masks the violence and sexism through metaphors. For example, as Aparicio's analysis also shows, despite Latin American music genres such as bolero objectifying women through a "libidinal economy" that justifies their exploitation, the "romantic" sensibility with which these lyrics are imbued masks the problematic expressions about women. This makes listeners create a distinction between boleros and salsa, with the former being understood as monolithically disrespectful and *machista* (*Listening* 135-6). The fact that salsa is historically linked to Afro-Caribbean music traditions and its sonic composition is directly influenced by percussion-based Afro-Atlantic practices further proves the conflation between Blackness and its presumed licentiousness, through music. Finally, I want to clarify that my engagement with the artists in this dissertation is not based neither on a moral or ethical judgement regarding their "productivity" nor a Manichaean valuation of their work as influences on society. Nor do I employ a perspective of expectation on their work, where a standpoint for critique enforced a "should have" on music production. Instead, my analysis sees in their music a

dialogic relationship with the ongoing discourses that circle colloquially in society, a record of the development of politics of representation and identity, and the music business' negotiations with these.

With these transits in mind and conscious of listeners and fans techniques when consuming complex cultural productions, I adapt from White's work her engagement with the notion of the sexual entrepreneur, but take it further, employing it as an optic through which we can better read La Insuperable's contradictory discourses on sexuality, agency, and economic progress. My conceptualization of the sexual entrepreneur utilizes the position that male-derived cultural products have given women of serving as sexual objects to her advantage. It rearranges the sexual economy of the popular culture business by positioning women as recipients of the monetary gains that such economy yields. Furthermore, it recognizes these women's purposeful management of their sexuality, in terms of aesthetics, discourses, and bodily gestures, as manipulations of a patriarchal system that assigns value (both symbolic as well as material) to that sexuality. That is, sexuality becomes a performance, and not an inherent characteristic or essence of the feminized, racialized body. As Harvey and Gill point, it is a contradictory subject position given that it doesn't explicitly resist the images and discourses that portray women as object often resulting in a parroting of men-derived depictions of women. The opposite to this move though, usually rests on the virgin/whore dichotomy, where the non-sexualized woman then becomes the pious, respectable woman who "saves herself for marriage" and thus does not engage with any representation of sexuality. What the work of artists such as La insuperable shows is precisely the unfeasibility, unreality, and fictionality of those roles through her performance's negotiations of the various objectifying and "edifying" images to which women have been subjected in popular culture narratives. As White analyzes in regards to Missy Elliot,

women's performances of masculinity tend to rupture this binary, rendering the masculine woman's body as non-sexual. As my discussion of Rita Indiana in the next chapter will show, this female masculinity instead disguises the body with the aesthetic and performative elements of normative violent masculinity. In the case of Rita Indiana, this performance is not de-sexualized, instead it relocates excess sexuality in the male body showcasing the patriarchal scripts that normalize those dichotomous readings.

La Insuperable's excess flesh allows for sexual entrepreneurship, recognizing at once that these reconstructions will grant her visibility (whether positive or not) and -- more importantly -- function as visible and quasi permanent reminders of her economic autonomy. If the golden chains, expensive sneaker shoes, and cars are música urbana's men's material evidence of their success and superiority, La Insuperable's enlarged butt is her way of asserting economic ascendancy.

Thinking bodies

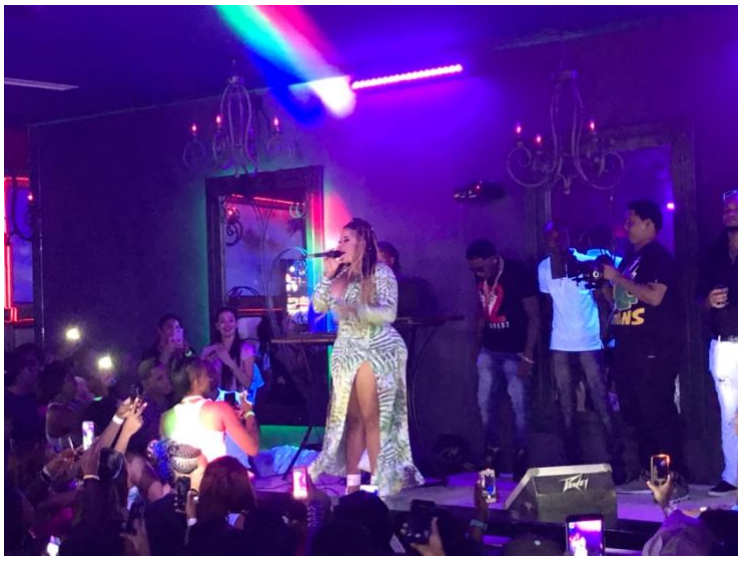
I first saw La Insuperable live in late July 2017. The show was in a casino club at the tourist village of Cabarete, Puerto Plata. We were a couple of minutes away from the beach, and the Casino stood out awkwardly behind small apt villas, and desert plants. The show started roughly around 2am, but La Insuperable would not come on stage until at least 4am. Amateur and up and coming male rappers entertained the bustling crowd before her set. Clubs are the most common places for música urbana artists to play in. In fact, even chart-topping U.S artists of similar music genres tour small clubs and venues, surrounded by the atmosphere they convey in their songs --both through lyrics as well as sounds.

I stood out in this crowd, as there was really no way I could have blended with the

cibaeños that flooded the casino club; I could not pull off the required attire —usually high femme one—, and my pale white skin and un-straightened curly hair marked me —for better or for worse— as an outsider. In the best of cases I would come off as a stranded tourist, a loner white European woman who wanted to check out the nightlife in Cabarete. But my lack of accompaniment made matters worse; although the crowd was composed mostly of women, they were either accompanied by men or with a group of friends, and I had neither. Rarely would you see a woman on her own. As far as I could tell, most men were there to accompany women. In this particular show, the crowd seemed to dispel the idea that men would come to see La Insuperable. It would also contest the hypothesis that La Insuperable's performance serves the desires of male dembow fans who want to go see a woman with curves and a big rear. In this club scene, La Insuperable would get on stage to sing with her fellow female —and femme— fans.

Despite the visual cues that gave away my foreignness in the club, and —unfortunately— my stark intromission in to this primarily Black, working-class Dominican space, I decided to chat with a couple of women who were hanging out in small groups. The high volume of the DJ and the rappers on stage did not allow for a very fluent conversation, and most of the patrons at this establishment were reluctant to engage in conversation with me, but small talk with these handful of women revealed they were all here to see La Insuperable, they mis-recognized me as a Spanish dembow fan (a detail that confirms the genre's circulation in Europe), and their male partners were there to accompany them. La Insuperable's set was simple; at this time she had just released her first trap single, "Me subo arriba." The rise of Latin trap was just underway at this moment, with Bad Bunny beginning to receive international recognition. Therefore, her music was still only known within the confines of Dominican culture. Her set consisted of running

swiftly through her dembow and mambo hits, always looking like a diva, poised and careful. But as an artist with a relatively small repertoire at this point, the middle part of her set consisted of a *culeo* competition, or what is known in English as twerking competition. Singing her Chimbala-produced hit "Pónmelo", she invited fans on stage to dance, *culear* to her dembow song, and compete against each other. The opportunity was attractive to the audience because they got to show off their skills in dancing and because with their stepping on stage came the possibility of hugging and taking a picture with La Insuperable. Some 6 women of different ages took their turns on stage, showcasing their impressive ability to *culear*. The crowd, mostly women, cheered them on and shouted expletives like "dale perra", "eso mami". Amid one of these competitions, a person from the crowd asked for the chance to dance upstage. The person, dressed in a pale pink dress, wearing a long sultry white-hair wig, did not climb on the stage like the other participants, and instead went to the side, climbed the stairs and like a star made an entrance to the platform. This competitor, we later learned, was a cross-dresser, possibly the most visibly queer person in the crowd that night.



3. La Insuperable performing live at Cabarete July 31st, 2017.

Utilizing movements that remit us to ball culture, the dancer strutted through the platform, signaled to their fellow competitors and regarded La Insuperable seductively. La Insuperable then switched her song and started performing "Que me den banda".

This song utilizes a slang Dominican phrase meaning "give me space" or "let me live my life". Recorded as a response to the incessant commentary on her body and relationship, the phrase has been widespread through popular Dominican parlance thanks to dembow itself. "Que me den banda" asserts how the singer's hardworking efforts have allowed for her success. But what interests me most in this scene[25] is how the message in "Que me den banda" is potentially transformed when dubbed and danced by this queer Dominican. La Insuperable's own recognition of the importance of this moment was highlighted through her stepping aside gesture, allowing the dancer to take front and center and make the spectacle and space their own.

Ramón Rivera Servera has written on the ways in which dancing in the club functions as a utopian futurity when queer Latinxs appropriate the space to enact choreographies of resistance. These are "embodied practices through which minoritarian subjects claim their space in social and cultural realms. The Latina/o queer boy in motion, the ability to move to the Latin rhythm eloquently, shifts the power dynamics of the dance floor and the club, at least temporarily, to articulate the particularities of queer Latina/o experience" (161). The impromptu performance by this queer Dominican femme expresses a choreography of resistance that marks the heteronormative —when not, female-centric— dance club and music venue as a space where

25. Which, as I have been able to attest through her social media posts, happens in many of her presentations.

she commands, excels, and temporarily reverses or pauses the power differentials that otherwise regulate the scene. Furthermore, by taking over La Insuperable's stage and moment she adopts the role of entertainer and organizer of the circulations of desire and pleasure of the audience and reroutes them towards her performance of femme sexuality. While this is just an instance that does not revert or resolve the very real violence that queer femme bodies experience in their everyday lives, I contend that like Rivera-Servera, who understands his subjects negotiate the club space and find ways of making it their own, queer audiences can also find in dembow spaces a performance of difference and dissent that would allow them temporary re-articulation of power, or at the very least, of being.

Searching La Insuperable's Instagram posts reveals a handful of parties where queer women kiss and dance and other drag performers get on stage, or even women providing lap dances to La Insuperable and other women in her crew. These instances of queer and femme people's re-appropriation of the problematics of música urbana give us a window into strategies of inclusion and visibility in heteronormative spaces, and within the heteronormative discussions that they forge. Although my own research process does not survey audiences adequately enough to make any claims towards potential processes of resignification, one of the goals of this dissertation is precisely to understand the ways in which embodied discourses and sonic practices can offer us as much insight on how queer and female artists and audiences grapple with the popular music that seems to disrespect them. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler states that "there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and re-idealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms. At best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and,

hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes" (125). Certainly, both Rivera-Servera and Hutchinson warn against seeing the irruption of drag or cross dressing in these settings as automatically or inherently subversive. In the context of the club, Rivera-Servera reminds us that the theatricality of the space makes possible bodies' engagement with the choreographies of resistance. In the context of música urbana in the Dominican Republic, Hutchinson points that "cross-dressing may be more visible, and more commonly accepted, in the Dominican Republic than in other places because of its historical presence as a part of religious practice and of carnival" (153). Thus, the venue in which I witnessed the cross-dresser's performanc, has allowed for the irruption of such enactment as "expected" or part of, given its framing as a space of theatricality and the carnavalesque: women dress up more than in other places, alcohol allows for grand expressions of affection, joy, and sociability, the lighting is meant to ambient particular sexual engagements, and people with more economic power can be exuberant through clothing, makeup, and purchasing drinks. The location outside of Santo Domingo and in the coastline of northern Dominican Republic marks the space as a non-cosmopolitan, in contrast to the venues one could find in the capital or Santiago de los Caballeros. One would expect this venue to adhere more strictly to normative gender codes but instead, it allowed for this disruption of heteronormativity. To be clear, I don't necessarily think the drag performance is subversive, for example, the sole cross-dresser in this event becomes an object of fascination and entertainment, and follows the logic of tokenization —where the acceptance of a single representative of a minority population becomes a stand in for the acceptance and engagement with any one other person of said group—. I, instead, see this dancer's taking over La Insuperable's stage as a practice of making space and reformulation that does not necessarily transform into subversion or reversion, but that complicates our

understandings of the scripts of sexuality, race, and gender by activating other sonic stories and experiences.

In the absence of any textual rewriting of a lyric (a strategy often done by queer and feminist Latin American artists trying to subvert the genres they find chauvinist and homophobic), listening and dancing become embodied practices through which people make different sense of sound and rhythm. The dancer's entrance to the competition stage exemplifies a process of transformation of the listening ear from the point of the listener themselves, or what I call the thinking body. The thinking body recognizes the scripts that shape the listening ear and transgresses these scripts by moving, embodying, and corporeally reorganizing the power dynamics that organize the sounds into discourse. Thus, the thinking body is not concerned with the lyrical, textual, narrative, or discursive resignifications of the sonic material it engages. Instead, it activates the corporeal, instantaneous, and felt meanings that music produces for them then and there. Taking Licia Fiol-Matta's concept of the "thinking voice" as an event of "music, voice, and listening" that when deployed in women's singing can "open up the visual register dominant in celebrity culture to Nancy's 'resonance' of listening by orienting the listener toward the intangible sense of hearing through her multifold performances…" (173), I develop the notion of the thinking body instead, as the transformed listening ear that calls forth the power and agency to activate such possibilities of sound performance. This dancer's thinking body thus already engages differently with the sounds found in La Insuperable's song, it emphasizes their roots of black affirmation and adds to it histories of queer resistance. Since music is so much more than its lyrics, the thinking body forces us to focus towards and into these sonic repertoires of música urbana. It is not only La Insuperable's music which allows for the thinking body to surface; instead, I posit that any listener of música urbana and similar genres can deploy the

thinking body.

La Materialista

Most of the ways in which La Insuperable asserts her chapiadora regia is through a rhetoric of superiority. It's not coincidental that her hyperbolic name translates "the one who can't be exceeded". In her album *La Mami del Swagger*, many songs develop a rhetoric of superiority that is directed at other women. This narrative device is common in reggaetón and other genres of música urbana in the form of *tiraeras*. In "Cero Goga" she asserts her capacity to pay for her body modifications: "Que yo tengo pa la lipo, y a ti, tu chicho te incomoda." In "Me gua pone un culón" a fast-paced dembow track where she announces her butt enhancement, she repeats "No hay mujeres feas solo hombres sin cuarto"[26], asserting the economic relationship with men as a means to transform her body. This track assumes the positionality of the chapiadora more explicitly by acknowledging the transactional nature of the men she deals with and placing her rear as explicit commodity. More recent singles, such as "Salao" directly engage this dynamic by rejecting a man for being "a pelao" and "saltapatrás", that is, someone who is broke and will not help her advance economically. In one of her more popular trap singles "Mastica y Traga" produced by Cromo X and longtime rapper Secreto el Famoso Biberón, she speaks back to her "haters" asserting that it is no-one's problem if she got her butt enhanced; "Que si me puse muy grande el culón, mastica y traga, que no eres tú quién me lo paga." Here one could presume she's once again flaunting the purchasing power of her male partner, but we could also interpret this as an assertion of her own capacity to pay for her body enhancements. In the video for this song, images of New York City through bodegas and graffitied walls enhance

26. "Cuarto" is a Dominican colloquialism for money

her “urban” and Dominicanyork aesthetics. This assertion of the diasporic space is both another boasting of her monetary gains as well as an affirmation of her Dominicanyork influence.

It is common for La Insuperable to express superiority over other women. These responses are rarely based on actual competition. That is, while in rap and reggeatón the *tiraeras* or braggadocios lyrics began through diss tracks directed at other rappers, La Insuperable reutilizes this language without necessarily responding to a real quarrel. Furthermore, while women in pop music, but specially in genres like música urbana are often pitted against each other by the media, —such as the aforementioned example of Ivy Queen versus Glory— La Insuperable hasn’t had many “beefs” with other women. She employs “other women” as a rhetorical device that transposes “haters” and detractors for a feminized mass of people that criticize her for her body reconstruction and her incursion in the música urbana scene. Despite this, the only woman dembow artist with which La Insuperable has been in direct “competition” is another dembow pioneer, La Materialista.

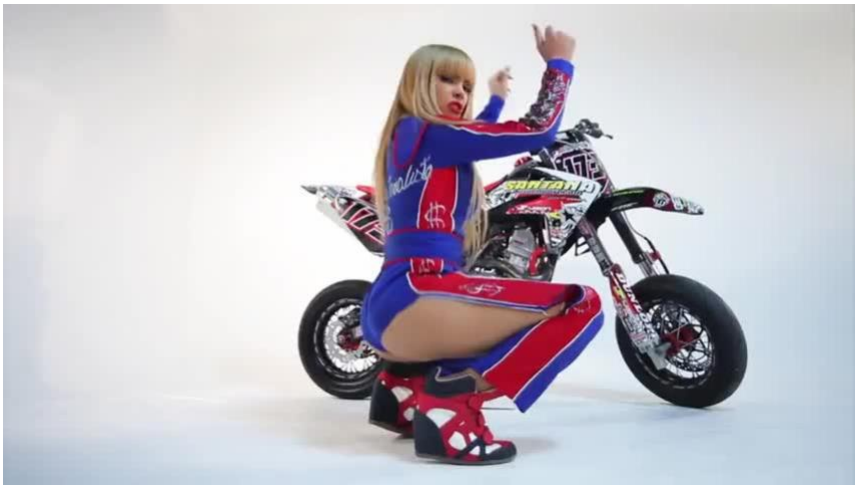
Yamiery Infante Honoret had her breakout in Dominican popular music with her dembow single “La chapa[27] que vibran” in 2014, the first dembow song by a woman to get radio play in the Dominican Republic. As expected it caused both fascination and repulsion. Given the accelerated beat of the dembow and the increasing repetition of phrases it is understandable that people engaged less with the lyrics and only with the chorus, which repeats ad-nauseum the title phrase. But the spread of the song is important as it presents us with the first case of a woman dembow artist that explicitly challenges the objectification found in male-authored dembow. “La chapa que vibran” is based on the repetitive call and response element that structures most of

27. Chapas is Dominican colloquialism for buttcheeks

reggaetón songs in which the men singers elicit a sexualized response from a disembodied female voice. As Félix Jiménez has argued: "reggaetoneros, experts in repetition, created a generic woman that, in essence, could always be invisible and that in most reggaetón lyrics appears as a woman satisfied as a verbal robot." (*Reggaetón* 232). La Materialista's song is based on a question that is never answered: "¿Papi, te gustan la chapa que vibran?" By refusing to engage in a role reversal where the man would respond in the way that the "Recording Reggaetón Woman" would, La Materialista proposes an affront to patriarchy's regulation of women's sexualized responses and calls. Furthermore, by negating an answer, the song allows us to imagine a muted man as the result of the violent sexual advances that they proffer in other reggaetón songs. La Materialista's question echoes incessantly and insistently, almost embodying the robotic woman that Jiménez conveys in his analysis, but whose oversexualized modus operandi now becomes a weapon.

The video provides other clues that affirm the erasure of the male reggaetonero/dembowsero. As a low-budget production, it presents just a few scenes, all filmed in the white set. A couch, a phone, and a motorcycle serve as the only additional props in the video, and the first two only accompany La Materialista briefly. Additionally, about a dozen women appear as backup dancers —or video vixens— *meneando la chapa* alongside La Materialista. The song's beat is a furious 128 bpm, faster than the 115-120 bpm of average dembow tracks, and the little sound effects that accompany the beat include a sustained high-pitched note. As mentioned before, these "sound effects" are common in dembow productions to help cultivate an ambiance of party or menace, depending on the subject of the lyrics. In "La chapa…" the sound complements the acceleration of the beat and emulates the sound of a projectile or device before it explodes. Playing with the referents to speed —in sound and

lyrics— La Materialista asks "¿acelero?" at the end of each chorus section. In the video, she appears on top of a static motorcycle —one of the elements that positions La Materialistas performance squarely in the standard realm of dembow imaginaries. With a thick gold necklace and the motorcycle as prop, Yamiery is dressed as a dembow performer and the motorcycle functions as the adornment that signals superiority, masculinity, and purchasing power. But by placing her body in line with the object and metaphorizing her ass-shaking as the velocity of a motorcycle she self-objectifies following dembow scripts. There's a temporary reversion of such objectification, when she describes her body as "el vibrador." Through the allusion of a sex toy she substitutes the phallic drive that is ever present in mens' dembow to assert female self-pleasure. This move gains resonance when coupled with another sound effect in the background. Following dembow conventions, a sample of La Materialista's moans accentuates the *bomp bomp* kickdrum beat of the song (*Reggaetón* 20). While in regular dembow songs the looped sample of a woman's moan serves as a sonic indicator of the sexual prowess of the singer, here it is potentially transformed into a reminder of the sonic space of self-gratification being forged. At other moments, the enunciating voice speaks menacingly to the male listener: "Soy peligrosa tú me conoce, entonce evitemos el roce. Por favor evítame un problema, siempre te aparece cuando bailo este tema." By rejecting the men's presence and threatening him for his potential transgression, La Materialista enforces a space of her own, or —if we take the video's cues— for her and her friends. These lyrics, with the emphasis on acceleration, coupled with La Materialista's insistent questions: "¿te gusta?" and "¿acelero?" can be read as sonic threats to the listening ear that is attuned to the scripts of sonic Dominicanidad that dembow engages in.



4. La Materialista. Still from the video for “La Chapa Que Vibran”

La Materialista’s vocal performance is distinct from La Insuperable’s. In “La chapa que vibran”, besides the sampled moans that form part of the beat, we can discern the sexualized texture of the “Recording Reggaetón Woman” (*Reggaetón* 232). La Materialista whines and moans while rapping, but switches to a less “weak” temperament when rapping in the chorus. At the end of the song, she resorts to an infantilizing affect and presents herself as “tu pequeñita” conforming to the male pornographic fantasy of idealized petite, almost underage woman. These variants in vocal texture effectuate a schizophrenic performance that confuses listeners, it sonifies both the violently hypersexual woman as well as the conforming subversive one of the dembow male fantasy. By shuffling through these registers Yamiery doesn’t necessarily defy the expectations of the genre, but troubles the distinctions between both positionalities.

I engage in an analysis of La Materialista’s most popular song as an important record of dembow history, but also as a counterpoint to La Insuperable’s c*hapiadora regia* performance. La Materialista is not interested in such performative project, in fact, as I have shown, her work evidences a parroting and re-assemblage of the genre’s gendered sexual positionalities. In the

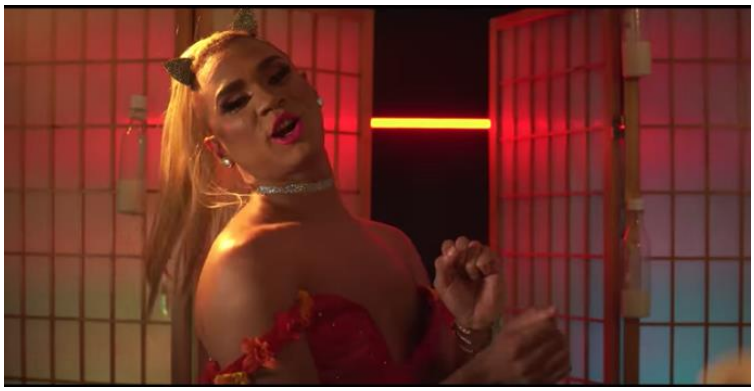
following section I bring into contrast the work of two openly gay, queer femme dembow performers: La Delfi and Pajarita La Paul. While the aesthetic of chapiadora regia cannot be neatly tied to their performances either, they instead evidence a negotiation with the genre's idiosyncratic and masculinist processes and discourses in order to highlight a different sexualized and abject positionally: the overtly sexual queer.

La Pajarita, La Loca

La Delfi's most popular song, "Dame Leche (Cocoro)" opens up with a moaned call to DJ Bubloy. This call is standard of música urbana, MCs shout out to the DJs, producers, and other people in their crews as a way of crediting their work, promoting the music of their peers, and demarcating their social territories. La Delfi's shout-out to Dj Bubloy, one of the pioneers of dembow production, presents a symbolic seal of approval towards their[28] performance. La Delfi is the first queer dembow performer to reach wide popularity. Their songs have been promoted and played in the radio, given plenty of media space, and accepted in dembow venues and spaces. La Delfi's music —openly and directly queer— has not been relegated to marginal spaces where only queer performers are heard. Instead they have been endorsed by the genre's big names. In an interview, La Delfi retells the moment when one of the pioneers of rap in the Dominican republic, El Lápiz Consciente, congratulated her achievements after a show ("How La Delfi"). As Mota notes, this gesture is not only important for them as a newcomer to the genre, but it performs a sort of solidarity and tolerance towards La Delfi's queer lyrics, aesthetics, and performance.

28. I use the non-binary pronouns they, them, and theirs when referring to La Delfi out of respect given their cross-dressing performances, the inconsistencies between female and masculine pronouns in work written about them, and the impossibility in asking La Delfi for their choice.

La Delfi cross-dressed, not only by wearing wigs, dresses, and makeup, but by adopting the stylistic features of both masculine dembow artists and hyperfeminine interpreters. Hutchinson describes that they "mix stereotypes of effeminate gays with those of hypermasculine reggaetón vocalists to offer an ironic and humorous critique of gender in Dominican music" (170). And while these aesthetic "transgressions" to the norms of dembow music may have isolated and hindered their career, La Delfi's music flourished. Writing on the role that queer performances and cross-dressing have in Dominican society, Hutchinson theorizes that the acceptance of La Delfi's cross-dressing performance may be related to the dominance of tigueraje in Dominican popular culture given that "cross-dressing plays to the tíguere's sense of daring, exhibitionism, and tricksterism" (151). Furthermore, La Delfi's lyrics exhibit the same kinds of crude and explicit sexuality that dembow music thrives on. I contend that by adopting the discourse of sexualization directed at women in Dominican popular culture, La Delfi succeeds in enacting a non-normative approach to aesthetics and performance, open a space for queer dembow fans, and criticizes both the masculine as well as the feminine gender performances found in Dominican popular music. Like Hutchinson explains, La Delfi "employs double-entendre lyrics reminiscent of merengue alongside video imagery to poke fun at the hypersexuality of his chosen genre."



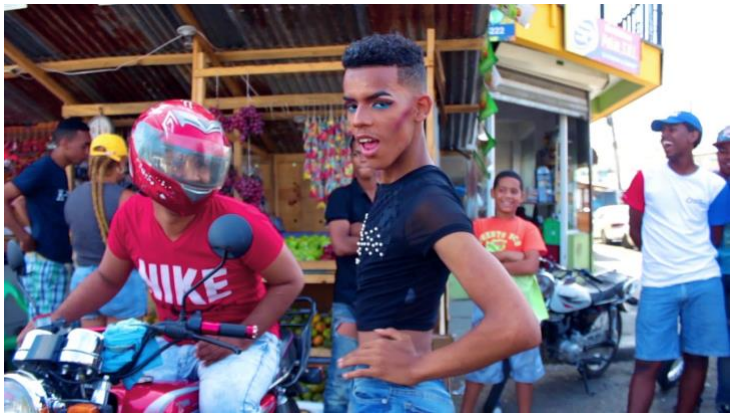
5. La Delfi. Still from the video for "Dame Leche (Cocoro) Remix"

In “Dame Leche (Cocoro)” La Delfi’s voice employs the sexual affection I have described in the case of La Materialista and reggaetoneras like Glory. La Delfi’s coarse undertones are flexed into the high pitched tonalities and playful inflections that recall both the Recording Reggaetón Woman as well as an childish registers observable in other popular music performances, such as the *bachata de doble sentido.* In these bachatas, composers would display their ability to play with words, creating sexual innuendos by replacing sex acts and body parts with everyday objects (Pacini Hernandez 173). As Hutchinson observes, La Delfi echoes this and other similar play in their lyrics.

La Pajarita La Paul, a younger queer dembow performer, has followed in La Delfi’s steps. With his song “Plátano Maduro” he employs the strategy of replacing body parts with fruits. Pacini Hernández notes that many of the *bachatas de doble sentido* metaphorized women’s body parts through food while men’s through mechanical tools, in these dembows it is the male gentialia which is transposed for a phallic plantain. In La Pajarita’s song, he utilizes a national Dominican plate, plátano con salchichón, to seduce a working policeman. The seduction transposes the woman’s cooking with La Pajarita’s genitalia, as elements of seduction. The image of the tempted cop represents state power, and so by placing the cop in the role of the *macho*, the lyrics point to the easy dismantling of the construction of both heterosexual masculinity as well as state authority.

In 2018 a remix of “Dame Leche” was released. In it, La Materialista joins La Delfi and other prominent names of the time to perform a new version of the song. In the original 2012 video, La Delfi’s gender performance read as masculine through clothing choice and hairstyle, but their gesticulations signaled an effeminacy that portrayed her engagement with the “loca” performative that Carlos Decenas has identified in his research on gay Dominican men. He

explains that “la loca will name figures, stylization, and movements of the body and speech pattern as performative utterances that express dissent from the languages of normative masculinity in daily life.” La Delfi portrays la loca through her bodily movements, speech inflections, and vocal performance. But in the video for the remix, we no longer see a Delfi that performs masculinity through dress and aesthetic. Here, they appear in full drag or, what Decenas describes as a gynographic performative, “an imagined form of femininity [that] stages as excess on a male body” (115). As such La Delfi performs the excessive registers of *femme*ninity that connect them with the other women in this chapter. In the video, they take it further, parodying the sexualized images of women dripping with milk. The baby bottles that hang from the background, point to this parody, specifically by visually reminding us of La Materialista’s self-infantilizing vocal affect and assertion of “childness”.



6. La Pajarita La Paul. Still from video for “Plátano Maduro”

La Delfi and La Pajarita La Paul both utilize the discourse of sexuality to trouble the listening ear’s engagement with dembow. Their vocal inflections and playful lyrics utter sonic Dominicanidad, problematizing scripted representations of gender. They also begin to include dissenting subjectivities and non-normative gender presentations in the world of música urbana. Like Hutchinson states: “The fact that acceptance of gender play exists alongside condemnation

of homosexuality suggests that Dominicans do not always consider sexual orientation and gender performance to be closely linked" (151). These dembow performers are not the only ones to play with gender performance and to cross-dress. Other non-queer men performers have "queered" their voices and used the language of homosexuality to play up their masculinity. In those, the adoption of femininity is "allowed" as long as it continues to serve the strict power dynamics that maintain homosexuality and queerness as an abjection and aberration. Through the language of homophobia, those dembowseros adopt stances related with homosexual sex in order to belittle other men, feminize them, and thus perpetuate gendered configurations of power that place women, femmes, and queer men as recipients of patriarchal domination and violence. Those performances echo the very real danger and threats of death faced by the Dominican queer and especially trans community every day. For example, in Puerto Rico, the first openly queer trap artist, Kevin Fret, was murdered in early 2019 as victim of a hate crime. Although still unresolved, many blame reggaetón superstar Ozuna for his death, given that Fret held a gay sex tape that Ozuna had filmed when he was younger. Similarly, Fret kept evidence of many other reggaetón artists engagement in gay sex, as a way to protect himself and as leverage so that he would be allowed a space in the competitive field of Puerto Rican trap production. La Delfi and La Pajarita don't seem to have had to suffer through such strenuous negotiations with the dembow industry. Their successful performances are exemplary manifestations of the ways in which dembow's discourses lend themselves to creative play, self-criticism, and innovation. La Delfi passed away in early 2020 at 28 years old. Her work continues to be a source of inspiration for newcomers to the genre. "La Delfi admitted that being out as a gay man had probably helped his career in the "machista" area of urban music" writes Hutchinson, "that, as the interviewer suggested, people watch and listen to him purely out of curiosity" (171). How would the

disclosure of sexual identity for a woman performer be taken, then? Which codes would a masculine lesbian woman employ when performing in dembow? The next chapter explores the work of two música urbana groups formed by publicly lesbian women, Rita Indiana y los Misterios and Mula. I'll analyze the ways in which Rita Indiana cross-dresses as the *tíguere* of merengue de calle, while Mula engages with vocal technologies to disturb the feminized affect of música urbana.

In this chapter I have analyzed how two pioneering women of dembow music have asserted their perspectives, sounds, and narratives in a masculinist genre. By strategically uttering different versions of *femme*ninities that are considered abject by the normative listening ear they highlight the contradictory spaces their performances inhabit. Additionally, their sonic production opens up space for non-conforming and dissenting performances of queerness through dancing and bodily movements. These audience interactions reshape the space of pleasure and socialization that the performers produce in their aesthetics, discourses, and sound. Thus, by uttering sonic dominicaidad, La Insuperable's, La Materialista's, La Delfi, and La Pajarita La Paul's abject *femme*ninities become productive for queer audience members to claim their space sonically and bodily at the sites of performance.

CHAPTER 2

Queering the Dominican Sonic Archive:

The alternative urban music of Rita Indiana y Los Misterios and Mula

Introduction

It's a cool, breezy night at the Punta Torrecilla Lightouse in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Rita Indiana gazes out at the crowd of young Dominicans who have gathered to witness her return to the music stage after seven years. Smiling, she tells the crowd that although she rarely dedicates songs during live performances, her next tune, "La Jardinera", goes out to her wife. As the crowd cheers and responds with emotional *aws*, a young woman next to me shouts to the stage: "Traiganme un closet pa' volver a salir." This moment of audience reaction and fan-to-artist interaction is the materialization of a symbolic queer solidarity that is enacted in Rita Indiana y los Misterios' music performance. Moments like these are crucial to understand the impact that certain contemporary cultural manifestations have had in advancing the representation and discourse on non-hegemonic *Dominicanidad* and queerness for Dominicans in and out of the island. This is not Rita Indiana Hernández's first public expression of queer affection. In 2010, during that year's Premios Cassandra[29], the most important music awards of the Dominican Republic, Hernandez kissed her current wife and long-time collaborator, Puerto Rican director Noelia Quintero Herencia. But Rita Indiana's dedication of "La Jardinera" to Noelia in the 2017 festival performance goes further, as it frames her festival performance as a space of queer enjoyment, liberation, and resistance. Different from the kiss at the awards, which can be understood as a defiant proclamation of gayness in a mainstream, public stage, the 2017 dedication symbolizes a more intimate queer gesture that allows for an exploration of Rita

[29] Now, Premios Soberanos.

Indiana's continuous impact on queer ways of being in the Dominican Republic, and beyond.

Juana María Rodriguez writes that "gestures can signal both those defined movements that we make with our bodies and to which we assign meaning, and an action that extends beyond itself, that reaches, suggests, motions; an action that signals its desire to act, perhaps to touch. Gesture emphasizes the mobile spaces of interpretation between actions and meaning. … they bring into being the possibility of a 'we'" (2). Rita Indiana's gesture, emphatically lesbian, imbues this performance space, a space of gathering and celebration, as a place of becoming and unfolding queerness. It comes from her subjectivity and is transformed in her project and performance as a guiding mode of production. I want to stay with and convey here what that gesture produces; it leads me to analyze the role that Rita Indiana's music plays as a trans-genre, trans-gendered, trans-geographic, and trans-national project. Queer gestures, as theorized by Rodriguez, are key to navigating the sonic reconstructions of the two groups I analyze in this chapter. The affective vantage point with which they recollect and reassemble the sonic repertoires in which they intervene is laced with a queer sensibility that Rita Indiana's gesture materializes in performance.

In this chapter I analyze two key music projects of what I call the alternative urban scene in the Dominican Republic. I utilize this term differently from the self-appointed música alternativa in order to recognize and highlight the way that these musical projects, Rita Indiana y los Misterios and Mula, carefully straddle distinct subcultural spheres; the música urbana discussed in the previous chapter and the independently-produced music with basis in roots fusion and nueva canción. Given the damaging associations mainstream society makes towards the performers, producers, and the community of listeners and fans of música urbana, the conglomeration of "urbano" peformativities, sounds, and aesthetics with "alternativo" positionalities offers new forms of engagement with Dominican popular culture. My analysis

shows the common ground shared between scenes, and the potential these have for questioning and critiquing the narratives about gender, race, and class that makeup sonic Dominicanidad

Rita Indiana's performance during the Isle of Light festival in 2017 coalesces a variety of developing sonic and discursive threads enacted by the subcultural music scene that is música alternativa in the Dominican Republic. Following the work of two groups: Rita Indiana y los Misterios and Mula, I question the ways in which a sonic *Dominicanidad alternativa* is performed through the queer reconstruction of a Dominican music archive. Both projects are explicitly invested in a queer politics, not only due to the artists' open queerness, but because of their commitment towards representing specific lesbian love ethos in their music. These groups are unique amongst the fast-growing música alternativa scene for two crucial reasons; they feature openly queer women whose gender performance straddles both masculine/tomboy aesthetics and what is understood as chopería[30], and they queer traditional and popular Dominican music by utilizing sounds and referents of *música urbana*. As discussed in the previous chapter, female representation in Caribbean *música urbana* often perpetuates hegemonic gender performance, and women artists tend to self-present as hyper-feminine, embodying what some critics understand as conformity with male-driven representations of femininity. As the discussion on La Insuperable showed, the "excess flesh" of the chapiadora regia hyper femininity locates her bodily work always outside of normative gender representation. Rita Indiana's and Mula's gender-bending performances travel away from this hyper feminine end of the spectrum, performing counter-cultural and overtly political notions of

[30] Chopería is better discussed in the previous chapter; refers to the stereotype of people with poor sense of taste, often working class, that do not conform with hegemonic social conventions of decency and modesty. The term has roots in the service industry, as the women who tended to upper class, white Dominican women, were called "shoppers" because they were in charge of grocery shopping and other domestic chores. Therefore, the term carries strong race and class-based allusions.

Dominicanidad by playing with other forms of gender often not present in the subcultures they borrow from.

Mula's and Rita Indiana y Los Misterios' projects are invested in exploring the realms of queer affect and sensibility, through the careful marriage of diverse music traditions, their transgression in gender performance, and their curated vocal production. This in turn makes them unique amongst the fast-growing música alternativa scene. Furthermore, their usage of música urbana --reggaetón, merengue de calle, bachata-- forms part of the queer sensorium I'm identifying in their songs. Their performances work towards what José Esteban Muñoz has theorized as "queer futurity." On the one hand, the narratives that make up Rita Indiana y Los Misterio's album, *El Juidero,* speak towards an idea of queer love and pleasure grounded in utopian desire. Muñoz's development of queerness "as utopian formation is based on an economy of desire and desiring. This desire, which is always directed at that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise," informs my reading regarding the type of idealized possibility that Rita Indiana y los Misterios fashion in their music and performances (26). On the other hand, Mula's album *Aguas* moves beyond the present to construct a soundscape of futurity, reconstructing both the past and the present to offer a vision of posterity that escapes normative time and space. My analysis shows the ways in which their songs are anchored in a politics of queer desire that imbue their social commentary with the pressing inclusion of queer possibility and fulfillment.

This chapter begins with Rita Indiana y los Misterios not only to maintain chronological accuracy (they were active roughly from 2009-2010, while Mula have been producing since 2015 to the present) but because the impact of the group's only album, *El Juidero (*2010*),* set the stage for the development of the current escena alternativa. My analysis recognizes the work of

electronic music trio, Mula, as emblematic of this contemporary cultural scene, and I believe that through their music we can better understand the escena alternativa's countercultural and political importance. While Rita Indiana y los Misterios (from now on RIM), had a short lifespan --they were active for over two years only-- they were profoundly impactful not only because they revived inert alternative and indie music production in the Dominican Republic, but they also provided a new musical and performative model for both alternative and mainstream music acts. RIM's legacy persists as a foundational project for current groups and performers. They constituted a re-evaluation of merengue mambo, also known as merengue de calle, the style of contemporary merengue popularized during the aftermaths of the financial crisis, which emulated merengue típico's percussive beats and string instrumentation –primarily through synthesizers– and incorporated rapped-style vocals. RIM's sonic experimentations, as this chapter will show, pays homage to the merengue mambo and its interpreters while critically evaluating the genre's place in the Dominican cultural imaginary, including questioning its perpetuation of gender roles, as well as class and racial stereotypes.

Mula's project can be seen as a direct successor of Rita Indiana y Los Misterio's work, despite their distinctive sound. Mula's interest in revisiting key events in Dominican history, their lyrical queer subjectivities, and their aesthetics make them stand out from other música alternativa projects that also fuse diverse music rhythms, and places them closer to a project like Rita Indiana y Los Misterio's. They can be distinguished by their vocal production, toned-down on-stage demeanor, and their penchant for digital or electronic sound generators –instead of analog or acoustic instruments[31]. As I will show, Rita Indiana's gender and genre-crossing

[31] This mode of production has dictated Mula's performance spaces. Contrary to RIM's circulation through a plurality of venues that include spaces historically known for their promotion of meregue típico, Mula's performances have remained confined to alternative and EDM music venues.

performances and Mula's experimentations utter sonic Dominicanidad by queering the Dominican music archive. They are both invested in a pedagogical and historical project that begins and ends with the reconstruction of a Dominican identity that is fixed to, understood through, and reproduced by an array of Caribbean sounds and rhythms. In what follows, I will discuss the development of the música alternativa scene, in order to elucidate my conceptualization of the alternative urban scene and the role that RIM and MULA play as part of it.

Setting la escena

Popular music in the Dominican Republic underwent intense transformations during the end of the 1990's. Merengue, which occupies a distinct place in Dominican national culture being regarded both cultural patrimony of the country as well as the number one popular music rhythm[32], was displaced from popular media by the rise of reggaetón and merenhouse[33] during the first decade of the new millennium. Merengue mambo, a product of the combination of the latter two genres, spread throughout the Dominican Republic, while reggaetón was being popularized internationally by Puerto Ricans. Merengue mambo's popularity grew in the subsequent decade. As discussed previously, return migration during these years greatly influenced the circulation and consumption of genres largely developed by the Dominicanyork community. A genre that represented an updated version of masculine street values, merengue mambo performers displaced merengue orchestras in and outside the capital, placing the genre at the top of the mainstream music lists. It is amidst this shift that Rita Indiana y los Misterios begin performing. Taking advantage of the wide reception that merengue mambo was having all

[32] A fact that may defy notions of lowbrow and highbrow culture, given that merengue seems to occupy both spheres in the Dominican Republic.
[33] Or other forms of merengue fused with other pop music styles. Merenhouse was a fusion of merengue with electronic music popularized primarily by Dominican ensembles in the diaspora.

around the country and internationally[34], RIM refashions their sounds, aesthetics, and subject matter, appropriates their values, and re-signifies the street savviness for which the mambo violento[35] tíguere –the "street-wise, sensual gender identity" performed in merengue-- is known for (Hutchinson 14). Simultaneous to merengue mambo's rise to popularity, the escena alternativa, which had presented itself as an option different to mainstream pop music, suffered a dearth of production due to the impact of the 2003 economic crisis.

Dominican música alternativa has origins in the roots fusion music of the 1980's. In his research on merengue, ethnomusicologist Paul Austerlitz briefly describes the nascent scene during his discussion of Afro-Dominican music. He identifies the early "alternativos" as musicians that introduced the Nueva Canción movement in the Dominican Republic specially through the work of the group Convite (109). Convite's leader, sociologist Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz, guitarist and composer Luis Terror Días, alongside musicians José Duluc and Tony Vicioso were some of the musicians that comprised what Austerlitz identifies as "the alternative generation."[36] These, the forefathers of the contemporary escena alternativa, not only performed avant-garde political music but were invested in community work and activism by working alongside impoverished Dominican communities outside of the capital. Notably, given the rise in anti-Haitian sentiment since the Trujillo dictatorship, Convite reached out to Haitian and Haitian-Dominican communities, affirming commonality as Kiskeyanos[37], and validating an Afro-

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[34] By this time merengue mambo had popularized in Latin American audiences, a fact evidenced by Colombian pop star Shakira's release of two mambo singles with El Cata.
[35] Name that merengue mambo superstar, Omega, gives to his own style.
[36] Coincidentally, current promoters of Dominican música alternativa have given the moniker "Generación Fusión" to a series of conferences discussing the production of the escena alternativa musicians, sponsored and hosted by the Centro Cultural de España in Santo Domingo.
[37] From the native Taino word, Kiskeya, for the island of Hispaniola. Kiskeyano would come to represent anyone from the Hispaniola island, despite the political border that defines Haiti territory from the Dominican Republic.

Caribbean consciousness in both sides of the island. This work also included fostering and preserving Afro-Dominican music that has been cultivated primarily in rural areas of the country and had been long-ignored by official cultural institutions and criminalized by the Dominican government. Groups like Convite fused merengue --music that still carried heavy traces of the Trujillista ideology-- with these rural rhythms as a form of protest.

Luis Días, perhaps the most famous musician to come out of this group, is considered not only the father of Dominican rock, but is lauded by current alternativxs[38] as the forefather of the música alternativa scene. The work of Luis Días, also known as El Terror, is crucial. His music was invested in leftist politics and continued the Nueva Canción trend utilizing an emphatic Afro-Dominican perspective. It is through Luis Terror Dias's music that the first generations of Dominican youth that did not fit in the normative Dominicanidad mold discursively promoted through mainstream cultural production in the island, found visibility and recognition. Through his transformation of bachata and merengue, El Terror uttered sonic Dominicanidad and re-tuned the Dominican listening ear towards bachata and other Dominican rural music styles. Along with El Terror, José Duluc and Tony Vicioso have played essential roles in the conformation of the current escena alternativa. Duluc is considered "el maestro" of the musicians of the scene, having taught them not only guitar and drum playing, but specific Afro-Dominican percussions like tambora, palos, and fututos, among others. It is through Duluc's pedagogical influence that the current alternative music projects continue to fuse traditional Kiskeyan rhythms with rock, jazz, and others.

[38]The "x" in this word corresponds to inclusive language which I employ throughout this dissertation as a transfeminist political commitment to the acknowledgment and inclusion of non-binary and gender non-conforming people's existence. This linguistic transgression is important to enact specially in languages such as Spanish which are gendered and use masculine to refer to collectives of people regardless the individual genders of these.

The preservation of traditional Afro-Dominican music in contemporary alternative productions has also been possible due to Tony Vicioso's nurturing. His ongoing promotion of rural musicians and performers of rhythms like Salves and gagá has not only impacted the work of capital musicians but has, more importantly, helped the former musicians gain wider popularity, new publics, and new forms of revenue.[39] Vicioso is often found in local festivities alongside Duluc and sociologist and cultural entrepreneur Roldán Mármol discovering, recording, and participating in diverse musical practices in order to bring these materials back to the city. These artist-intellectuals formed part of what is considered by music critics in the Dominican Republic as the anthropological turn in alternative music. This trend describes a common practice by musicians that were formally trained and highly educated, of integrating themselves in communities living in the central and southwestern parts of the country (the limits with Haiti), in order to learn and preserve the traditional Afro-Caribbean rhythms and instrumentations practiced there. In these expeditions, young musicians from the city are introduced to traditional sonic practices which they later incorporate in their contemporary fusions.[40]

The alternative scene thrived for over two decades, but changes in the music landscape accompanied by the banking crisis in 2003 affected their cultural production. The younger

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[39] Salves and gagá are feminized music practices. Women are usually the lead singers in salves. Vicioso and other men's management of these rural women performer's craft is problematic and requires careful critical discussion taking into account the power dynamics at play. Additionally, salves and gagá, which have been criminalized in the Dominican Republic, flourished since the late 1980's in New York thanks to the Dominicanyork community. (For more on the latter, Tallaj's "A Country that Ain't Belong To Me"

[40] It must be acknowledged that not only alternativx musicians have embarked on such projects. Popular music interpreters have followed in this tendency, the most well-known example would be Juan Luis Guerra, perhaps the most internationally renowned Dominican musician. Guerra's first album –his thesis when graduating from Berklee school of music—was a classically arranged exploration of rural Afro-Dominican rhythms. Nevertheless, alternativxs' approaches to their local traditions varies significantly from Guerra-style productions.

generation of musicians were, at the time, mostly undergraduate students at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo --the primary public university in the country-- and struggled to make ends meet. This affected production as well as other creative endeavors. According to the musicians and intellectuals I interviewed during my research, it was groups like Batey Cero and subsequently Rita Indiana y los Misterios that sparked the life back into the dormant scene. Batey Cero was a rock and *gagá* fusion group partly composed by some of the musicians in Los Misterios. They remained active during the scarcer period of the early 2000's, performing in festivals around the island. Batey Cero was one of the first groups to incorporate *gagá*, an Afro-Caribbean religious practice related to Haitian Voudou, into alternative and foreign music. They took a risk; *gagá* is a practice that has been largely secluded to certain sectors of the country, allowed to be performed only during Lent, and has been under attack by the government due to associations between paganism and Vodou, and its uncontestable ties to Haitian culture. In this sense, Batey Cero's performances were a radical claim that affirmed Haitian and Dominican fraternity while highlighting the indubitable common roots between both sides of the island, despite official discourse against it.

Luis Terror Días described that the goal of alternativxs "no se trataba de escuchar lo que estaba en la radio, sino precisamente lo que en la radio no ponen…," thus locating their productions outside of the mainstream music industry (Díaz 2018). Due to their circulation outside of the mainstream music channels, their innovations served purposes beyond commercialization and profit-making, aligning their pedagogical values to a politics of cultural preservation and homage to tradition. Finally, due to these conditions, one can argue that the beginning of the anthropological turn was originally based on community engagement instead of competition in the larger music industry.

Música alternativa is used by the music industry as an umbrella term to categorize an array of projects that escape precise genre definition. Rossy Díaz, Dominican musicologist, sketches some characteristics of música alternativa which include referencing of popular Dominican music like merengue and bachata, a distinction between Dominican and foreign folklore, their usage of resources from United States pop music like jazz and rock, a combination of elements from diverse genres, as well as their DIY ethos and affiliation with small cultural projects (Díaz 2018). I want to highlight this last characteristic, understanding música alternativa as a scene committed to championing different and novel approaches to music making. I offer a new term or category for RIM and Mula's work, alternative urban music, in order to coalesce their self-management practices, the history of political commitment that precedes them, and their incorporations of sonic and aesthetic elements from música urbana culture. As may have been evident from my previous recapitulation of the development of the música alternativa scene, these artists consciously distance their music from música urbana projects, creating a problematic distinction between genres and their respective listening publics. In what follows, I will discuss in detail Rita Indiana y los Misteros' album *El Juidero* (2010), analyzing their innovations to Dominican popular culture and their incorporation of queer subjectivities.

Rita Indiana y los Misterios en la Zona Alternativa

I'm in Santo Domingo, at a corner cafeteria that faces the Puerta del Conde, monument that marks the limits between the Zona Colonial and the middle-class neighborhood of Gazcue. The 24/7 cafeteria serves many tourists due to its location, but its clientele is a balanced combination of local folk either starting or taking breaks from their workday and tourists often accompanied by Dominican hosts. It has a narrow and open balcony of sorts, with tables and

chairs set up outside in Calle del Conde, with typical Dominican music blasting from multiple speakers. The fare is traditional Dominican cuisine and the prices are cheap enough to maintain a diverse local clientele. While standing at the counter, I can hear the soft but pointed sounds of a ping-pong ball consistently being tossed from side to side. Recognizing the tune and anticipating the "maco" beat of a tambora that announces that what we're hearing is in fact a song, and not just recorded ping pong sounds, the waitress begins dancing while walking. A guitar riff is immediately introduced, distorting the merengue maco beat and pronouncing the distinct Los Misterio's sound. When Rita Indiana is heard singing the opening lines "si tú le da', yo le doy…", the whole cafeteria chants along. It is 2017 and Rita Indiana y los Misterios have not played for over seven years. Yet everyone in this Zona Colonial cafeteria still sings along to one of their most popular tunes: "El Blue del Ping Pong."

I open this section with this small anecdote because it exemplifies the place that Rita Indiana y los Misterios' music still holds in everyday Dominican life. I want to emphasize the normalcy of this cafeteria and the kinds of everyday folk that work, eat, and pass by this place daily because it helps us understand how deeply intricated to colloquial culture RIM's music is. As one of the most exemplary groups of the escena alternativa and at the same time one of the most distinct, due to their politically pro-queer and pro-haitianismo discourse, the wide acceptance the group continues to have in all strata of Dominican society is remarkable. The question of how RIM managed to do that in a society that still champions Trujillista anti-Haitian discourses, anti-Black sentiments, and homophobic policies leads me to argue that the arrangements of their sonic production are largely responsible for breaking through barriers of conservatism and molding the listening ear to engage with their particular messages of inclusion and subversion. This also provides me with a tentative answer to the question of what is in the

sound of Rita Indiana and how that sound advances the political and social positionalities it espouses. I believe that through a playful management of the "sonic protocols" that make up sonic Dominicanidad (Stoever 23) RIM's –and Mula's-- music finds a way to enact queered sonic gestures that allow them engagements with both trained and untrained listening ears. As in the case of La Insuperable in the previous chapter, while this dissertation is primarily interested in sound, I recognize the importance of Rita Indiana's performances of embodied *tigueraje* as a complementary strategy to this queering project. That is, my analysis acknowledges that sound production and performance often work hand in hand, complementing each other and opening other ways of understanding music beyond the textual.

Previous analyses of *El Juidero*[41] are primarily based on textual interpretations of its songs and complemented with a discussion of Rita Indiana's cross-dressing performances. Except for Sidney Hutchinson's 2016 book *Tigers of a Different Stripe: Performing Gender in Dominican Music,* these rarely take into account live performances or examine the music specifically for its sonic compositions. That is, Rita Indiana's work is explored according to her dimensions as a performer and writer but rarely is her facet as a musician seriously analyzed. For instance, Lorna Torrado's work recognizes that Rita Indiana's music, specifically in *El Juidero,* rewrites key historical periods of the Dominican Republic. This reconstruction certainly counters the hegemonic, racist, anti-Haitian rhetoric that still prevails in the country as a Trujillato legacy and from US intervention. But Torrado's analysis relies solely on Rita Indiana's lyrics. Similarly, Hutchinson's analysis, although more complete, recurs to Rita Indiana Hernandez's

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[41] Torrado, Lorna. "Travesías bailables: Revisión histórica en la música de Rita Indiana Hernández."*Revista Iberoamericana*. LXXIX.243(2013): 465-477; Sinfonía del desencanto: La destrucción de Ciudad Trujillo en Rita Indiana Hernández." *El sonido de la música en la narrativa dominicana*. Ed Médar Serrano. 2012; Hutchinson, Sidney. *Tigers of a Different Stripe: Performing Gender in Dominican Music.;* "The importance of being Rita Indiana Hernández" Celiany Rivera-Velázquez

work as an author to substantiate her interpretations. Not denying the valence of these previous works, my analysis here borrows at the same time as it deviates from this previous research because it is interested in delving specifically into the sonic production of Rita Indiana y los Misterios. Furthermore, I argue that the discursive and rhetorical work of *El Juidero* necessitates the sonic construction that RIM performs, and that therein lies a different kind of reconstruction of Dominican history that takes more closely into account cultural productions, while impacting the listeners in a different manner.

Different from Hutchinson's work, I attempt to understand Rita Indiana y los Misterios as part of the urban music phenomena in the DR, making this a crucial piece to asses her impact beyond the confines of alternative –which at times is also consciously political-- music acts. Both Torrado and Hutchinson describe RIM's music as a merengue-based fusion. I contend that their specific referencing of not just any merengue, but merengue mambo adds an important dimension to their work. This would mean that, given the power of merengue as a symbol of Dominican identity, its place as "intangible cultural heritage of humanity" as it has been christened by the UNESCO, and considering that it symbolically carries with it the legacy of the Trujillato, to understand the nuances between mambo and merengue típico also forces us to question merengue's utility as a counter-cultural symbol. This distinction helps us look beyond the hegemonic definitions of Dominicanidad and recognize the importance of the diasporas, DominicayYorks, and the Dominican population of Haitian descent.

La Montra

Rita Indiana Hernández is a Dominican author, performer, and musician. Born in 1977 in Santo Domingo, she was raised in her maternal grandmother's household. Although currently

living in Puerto Rico with her partner, she spent the mid-2000's in New York City (Hutchinson 176). These three locations and the migratory experiences that this triangulation recalls[42] provide her with material for her novels and music, given that Rita Indiana's creative projects all reflect on these transits, not uncommon for Dominicans (Duany, Guarnizo). Her writing career takes full flight with the publication of the novel *Papi* in 2005, despite having already published *La estrategia de Chochueca* in 2003, and two short story collections, *Rumiantes* (1998) and *Ciencia Succión* (2000). *Papi* has been popular inside academic and intellectual circles due to its stream of consciousness-style prose, and her explorations about masculinity, diaspora, and the Trujillo dictatorship. Critics have identified overlaps between novels like *Papi* and *La estrategia de Chochueca*, and Indiana's music projects, due to the role music and sound plays as rhetorical and stylistic devices in her literature. More recently, *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) explores issues of dystopian futures and environmental debacles, while *Hecho en Saturno* (2018) returns to issues of diaspora and masculinity previously explored in *Papi*.

The Rita Indiana y Los Misterios project is not Hernández's only music venture. In 2005 she formed the electronic music group Casiful and in 2007 she formed the duo Miti Miti with Reina Mast. Miti Miti garnered some following specifically using informal distribution through the internet and their album *Altar Espándex* (2008) was mainly available through the social media platform MySpace. These two musical experiments anticipate the more rounded and full-fledged project of Rita Indiana y Los Misterios, not only in terms of music composition but in their approach to distribution and promotion, mainly their use of platforms like Youtube. Rita Indiana y Los Misterios formed after Hernandez's return to the Dominican Republic. Music from their first and only album, *El Juidero*[43], was first composed by Hernandez using GarageBand,

[42] Martinez-San Miguel's *Caribe Two Ways* discusses this in depth.
[43] Dominican Spanish colloquialism meaning "the getaway".

and later sent to Los Misterios to arrange. Los Misterios are composed of musicians with backgrounds in alternative and roots fusion music; guitarist and co-compositor Eddy Nuñez, percussionist Andrew Ramírez, tamborero Bolilo, and his son, the drummer Francisco "Boli" Martínez, keyboardist Gabriel Lora de Mondesert, conguero Ricardo Toribio, and tamborero Miguel Severino. Most of them were trained by the "generación alternativa" musicians previously discussed. The name Los Misterios is an important element of the project, given that it refers to the Dominican vudú practice. The logo for the group is itself a vevé, a symbol of Haitian Vodou that represents loas, or deitis. Designed by Eddy Nuñez –Rita's main co-conspirator--, it is one of the many symbolic ways in which RIM expresses their commitment to a politics of Afro-Caribbeanness and pro-haitianismo. Therefore, the name Rita Indiana y los Misterios, already presents us with an ethics of expansion and inclusion regarding Dominicanidad.

The group reached its peak in 2010, year when *El Juidero* came out, but their music had been circulating in and out of the Dominican Republic since 2008, and the band had already played many shows during these years. Through usage of the social media platforms of the time, mainly MySpace and YouTube, RIM first gathered a cult following, partly due to the need that Dominican youth had at the time of alternative music projects that represented their lifeways and worldviews. Simultaneously, their music garnered an indie following in Latin America given the attraction of what would be regarded as a new sound for listeners unfamiliar with local Dominican rhythmic traditions, and an overall wave of Latin American independent music that fused local sounds with foreign pop ones. RIM began touring extensively through the island, performing not only in venues where rock, jazz, and roots music could be found, but even –and most importantly– in spaces and events where merengue and música urbana artists also

performed. In a sense this fact not only reveals the wide reach of RIM's sound but evidences their popularity outside the confines of Santo Domingo's alternative, electronic, and rock scenes. As many of the musicians I have interviewed have stressed, and as exemplified through my earlier anecdote, Rita Indiana y Los Misterios was heard and consumed by people in all social strata of the country.

Although RIM's music sounded fresh and unique for Dominicans and Latin Americans alike, their sonic production has very distinct roots in the long-standing history of fusion music in the Dominican Republic. What is unique in RIM's *El Juidero*, is their incorporation of sonic, performative, and thematic elements derived from the Dominicanyork community[44]. In other words, RIM's use of merengue mambo along with her embodied tíguere performance, all reference the diasporic Dominican community in New York, sometimes pejoratively referred to as Dominicanyorks. If conceptualizations of Dominican identity are fixed on a masculine, white nationalist discourses imposed by the Trujillo Dictatorship –and further solidified by The United States-- and which are associated with the tangible and imaginary borders between Haiti, the United States, and Puerto Rico, RIM's work reformulates these sociopolitical boundaries from the vantage point of the marginalized. Thus, they are able to include an array of identities (the Haitian-Dominican, the Dominicanyork, and the Dominican migrant in Puerto Rico) that question the hegemonic construction of Dominicanidad. These "types" go hand in hand with an elaboration of lesbian and queer subjectivities that make up the Dominicanidad alternativa that is uttered in their sonic arrangement. If, in sonic terms, "lo alternativo" refers to a way of making music, a sonic process, then Dominicanidad alternativa can also be seen as a way of being, a way of constant constructing and rethinking the self.

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[44] The last chapter will discuss the Dominicanyork community more in depth.

Armando "El Juidero"

El Juidero is an album about movement and migration. In its lyrical register, it sketches a Dominican subjectivity constructed in diasporic comings and goings. The narrative arch describes an initial flight out of the island in the early 1970's, narrates the vicissitudes of diasporic living, and explores the return to the homeland. This main storyline is not straightforward, though. Rita Indiana's narrative style layers the experiences of diverse migratory moments. Here, she includes migration to Puerto Rico, feelings of homelessness in the US, contact with other Latinxs, and importantly, the story of Haitian-Dominican tension. These historical revisions, as Lorna Torrado calls them, make Rita Indiana formulate a queer and transnational subject which overturns the ideological apparatus underlining merengue's history (3). While not disregarding the discursive strategy that Torrado recognizes, I want to delve into the intricacies of the music composition to better understand the ways in which Rita's gender-bending historical revisions are not only embodied but sonically manifested. That is, Rita Indiana y los Misterio's work not only textually rewrites Dominican history, but their alternative subject construction goes hand in hand with the reproduction of a new mode of sounding Dominicanidad, which proposes a new paradigm for music and sound in the Caribbean.

Additionally, the album's story highlights love encounters made possible through migration and displacement, or the possibility of finding love and connection amidst disaster. This narrative is substantiated in the sonic composition of the album; the marriage between diverse Dominican music and non-native rhythms. Although it has been argued that RIM's music is largely non-political and analyses have been concentrated in those key songs that do exhibit explicit political themes, my intervention considers *El Juidero* in its entirety as a politicized

narration of desire, pleasure, and encounter. Whether by recounting the harshness of multiple migration movements, by affirming the common heritage between Haitians and Dominicans, or by celebrating love encounters across time and spaces, the album promotes a notion of Dominicanidad that is in constant flight and reformulation. That is, instead of relying on fixed notions of nationality and subjectivity as have been espoused in other cultural productions fostered by the state, these songs propose a complicated layering of Dominican identity that is not easily readable or assimilable.

El Juidero's travel itinerary begins with the migration towards Puerto Rico. The title song already announces the narrative elements of the album. “Juidero” is a Dominican slang transformed from the Spanish verb “huir”, which means to “get away” or “escape”. The word “juidero” not only refers to the act of fleeing but is also often used colloquially to signal disorder --with positive and negative connotations. This way, the album’s opening song sets the stage to retell the big migration wave from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico during the mid-1960’s imbued with connotations of distress. The Dominican Republic underwent a dictatorship from 1930 to 1961under the hands of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who rose to power with help from the United States government and a rising tide of anti-Haitian rhetoric that had been burgeoning since the late 1890’s. RIM’s “El Juidero” overlaps the migration patterns that took place after Trujillo’s assassination in 1961 as well as during Balaguer’s --his equally brutal successor-- multiple presidential terms until the late 90’s. These begin with the Puerto Rican exodus, as Rita sings in the title song: “éxodo, voy pa Puelto Rico”, but will later develop into stories about diasporic living in New York City, as evidenced in a song like “Hora de Volvé”.

The song, “El Juidero”, introduces to the listener RIM’s signature merengue mambo. It has a driving tambora rhythm accompanied by an electric guitar riff. But in the background one

can discern a rising noise, resembling that of an airplane about to take off. These sonic arrangements are commonplace throughout RIM's compositions, often, song's backgrounds hide "special effects", much like the ping pong loop described earlier in "El blu del ping pong". These give sonic clues as to the type of situation or atmosphere the song conveys. Special sound effects are also found in música urbana productions, specifically in dembow, where sound effects serve as atmospheric decorations that convey feelings of danger and distress, or celebration and happiness. Much like setting the scene in a movie or a novel, RIM's arrangements make sure that the listener is positioned in the appropriate mood. The airplane take-off, therefore, imbues the song with the same tension alluded to in the term "juidero" and allows the listener to experience the precise type of pressing flight that the song narrates. The take-off sound can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the ongoing reconstruction of the subjectivity the album sketches. It invokes the pressure and stress of the flight as a process of instability, and its take-off implies a break which can symbolize the rupturing of sonic Dominicanidad the album proposes.

Hutchinson and Torrado both analyze "El Juidero" as the narration of Dominican's migration to Puerto Rico during the aftermaths of the Trujillato, specifically when Balaguer was in power. The accompanying video, as these scholars have pointed out, further stresses Rita Indiana's critical revision of this period. Specifically, through Rita Indiana's donning of 70's masculine attire and the embodiment of the avenging male figure, the music video materializes the masculinity that underlies the song and album. The merengue mambo that drives the intensity of the song seems to anachronistically allude to the violence and tension of the period. This way, RIM both highlights and problematizes the legacies of violence that merengue carries. If merengue mambo is specifically the merengue that is born out of return migrants and Domicanyorks, then "El Juidero" audibly connects the violence dispensed by the Trujillato and

Balaguerato with displacement, the experience of diaspora, and the pain of return migration. This is at the same time, laced with gendered associations. As I will show further on, the enunciating voice, and the imagery expressed in the song and the album all build up a subject in constant tension with masculinity. The tigueraje that Hutchinson identifies in Rita Indiana's work here is historically produced through violence. The tíguere, principal figure of the merengue mambo and other urban genres, is embodied through the oppressive policies and discourses of the Trujillo dictatorship and carried out by Balaguer's years in power.

Sounding tiguerajes

The tíguere archetype is part of an array of figures that form part of the Dominican imaginary. The word "tíguere" is a play on the Spanish word for tiger, *tigre*, and represents the street culture version of masculine typologies. Despite the fact that in her book, Sidney Hutchinson identifies tigueraje as a model followed by all Dominican popular music performers –male or female-- (14), I insist that this archetype is primarily displayed in merengue típico performance given the genre's specific conceptualization of street masculinity, bravado, and conquest that often their lyrics, attire, and performance display. The merenguero thus is the ultimate tíguere, both in his management of the stage, his impeccable looks, and his lyrics. As Hutchinson argues, Rita Indiana appropriates the aesthetics of merengue típico in order to represent a tíguera, or a version of Dominican female masculinity, an identity which counters notions of domesticated femininity (210). Rita Indiana's tigueraje certainly begins in the corporeal, being tigueraje centered primarily in the aesthetics and attitudes, posing, and demeanors of those who wish to act accordingly. Women in merengue típico seem to be able to move in and out of the tíguera persona with relative ease, adapting their performance to the

thematic content of their songs, demonstrating their malleability. In RIM's case, tigueraje is embodied and deconstructed through different facets of her performance.

One of the most lucid ways in which RIM deconstructs tigueraje is found in their wardrobe choices. This is best exemplified in the video for "El Juidero", where the group emulates 1970's male fashion specifically coded in Blaxploitation imagery. The tigueraje donned by RIM in the video evokes narratives of the mafia while recounting violent periods of the post-Trujillo and Balaguerato. The tíguere here is both the perpetrator and the victim, breaking apart the distinctions between "evil" and "good". The tigueraje serves as a productive image that champions the contemporary realities of Caribbean living. The tíguere, as Hutchinson has explained, is successful because it has duped the system (33). Tigueraje therefore implies getting by, no matter the course of action, and is a strategy used by common Dominican folks in order to battle against constant corruption and unfavorable odds. Rita Indiana's incorporation of the tíguere expands to her live renditions; she is often seen donning key wardrobes that make reference to different stages and performers of the genres her music manipulates. Notably, she has worn suits reminiscent of 1980's merengue orchestras, and in other occasions has worn looks resembling the style of rappers and reggaetoneros down to the neck bling jewelry and the short buzzed haircut with intricate line designs on the sides.

7. Rita Indiana performing live

Her embodiment of tigueraje goes hand in hand with the incorporation of música urbana aesthetics, recognizing that both cultural manifestations have roots in similar histories of violence and oppression. At the same time, I posit that this recuperation of male urban aesthetics proposes a deconstruction of the gender presentations tied to music traditions. By exhibiting what Hutchinson calls "la tíguera" I believe Rita Indiana forces us to reconsider notions of femininity in music genres and the stages they occupy. The female masculinity that emerges from her wardrobe, the queering of the history of Caribbean male popular music attire, opens space for new ways of understanding queerness and lesbianism in music performance. If música urbana women artists often must rely in hyperfeminized, almost unreal versions of femininity in order to legitimize their place in the music genres they perform, Rita Indiana's exaggerated tíguere performances ruptures these assumptions, providing new ways of gender expression in and outside popular culture.

Rita Indiana's embodiment of *tigueraje* can also be seen through her vocal production. She manages a range of diverse vocal styles borrowed from traditions such as salsa, merengue, blues, and rap. It's a particular style that flows and bends with each different technique seamlessly performing a genealogy of Afro-diasporic vocal inflections that feed off of each other. In "El blue del pin pon" a steady monotone voice runs through the fast-paced song, reminiscent of 1990's rap en español. Similarly, in "El Juidero"'s verses, Rita runs through sung-like bars -what in reggaetón is called "chanteo"[45]—that blend into a blues-rock bridge. This style of singing indexes the specifically merengue mambo style of vocal performance. This sung rap is one of the distinct characteristics that distinguishes merengue mambo from other merengue styles, pointing to the "de calle" and urban character of the performance. In other tunes, such as

[45] A style of vocal performance that mixes rapping and singing, developed in reggaetón music.

"Pásame a buca" and "Dulces Sueños", her intonation resembles that of the salsa singer --nasal and high pitched like salsa legend Héctor Lavoe,-- or more reggae-like singing, sultry and hushed. Rita's traverse through ranges of vocal styles echoes her donning of different masculine attires as well as solidifies her invocation of masculine music figures found all through the lyrics of *El Juidero's* songs.

This tigueraje is not restricted solely to Rita Indiana's aesthetic and sonic performance. An illustrative instance of how Rita Indiana's tigueraje extends to the lyrical register is found in the song "Bajito a Selva". The title includes another *dominicanismo* –"bajito" is the diminutive for the word "vaho", which means foul odor. In this song, the singing voice praises an afro-Dominican street man, whose erotic smell can turn heads, lull Puerto Rican women, and even revive the dead; "Con tu bajito a selva, se van volteando to'a' la' negra' y la' boricua' quie'en mimir contigo. Con tu bajito a selva, que a to' lo' muerto' desentierra y la' menore' dicen 'uy, queje'to'" The descriptions in the song are telling of the kind of Dominican man being admired; shaved head, ripped jeans, studded belt, diamond earrings, and white sneakers sent from the Bronx, describe the "tíguere de calle" whose smell, the song's real protagonist, is evidence of his arduous street labor. This song's lyrics are an important staging of female desire, and a problematic objectification of the afro-Dominican male body. Rita's lyrics utilize the same language of sexual desire found in merengue, bachata, and dembow songs to describe a woman's supposed natural allure and their effects –coded as nefarious-- on the men that lay eyes on them. Common references of women's hips, curves, and movements are here transformed in the descriptions of his "narga que le heredaste a la comay", while metaphors of the consumption of the female body are alluded in "te como con cachú tunai." At first glance, this sort of feminist revision easily falls prey to a criticism on the effectiveness of utilizing the same techniques of

sexualization and objectification that plague women, towards men. One can critique RIM's sexualization of Afro-Caribbean bodies, given that the object of desire in the song is a "moreno", term used to describe darker skinned people in the Dominican Republic[46]. However, upon further inspection, the song presents a parody of this exotization. Lauding the afro-Dominican street man, the tíguere, from the point of view of a myriad of women, it pokes fun at the tíguere performance and its expected effects on heterosexual women.

Rita Indiana's embodiment of these street-male values has made fans and fellow musicians identify her tíguere as operating under a different kind of modality that is specific to her rhetoric and lyrics. In conversations with me, people would often use the phrase "tigueraje intelectual" to describe the witty, colloquial, playful, and sensual but socially conscious, and sophisticated style of Rita Indiana's songwriting. In 2002 cultural critic Silvio Torres-Saillant published an essay titled *El Tigueraje Intelectual* where he employs the phrase to describe a modality where intellectuals –letrados—in the Dominican Republic conform to the ideologies aligned with Trujillismo after gaining access to powerful institutions through work that was meant to critique those values in the first place (71). He identifies this as a strategy of deception, wherein these pseudo-intellectuals wield a façade of academic and political rigor in order to mask and enforce their brutal masculinist and violent subjectivities. This modality of *tigueraje intelectual* he finds best exemplified in the figure of Joaquin Balaguer, Trujillo's successor, who contrary to the blunt masculinity that his predecessor enforced, incurred in literary and scholarly activities that dubbed him an intellectual, thus better hiding his equally violent policies towards dissenting (Black) Dominicans, Haitians, and other vulnerable populations. For Torres-Saillant, the defining characteristic of *tigueraje* is the ability to enforce their will, extract and reorganize

[46] Carlos Decenas identifies the tiguere as a racialized Black masculine figure, a detail that previous scholars writing on the tíguere type have not acknowledged.

power to their advantage. Although deriving this characterization from the *tíguere malo* version of *tigueraje* as developed in Lipe Collado's taxonomy in *El Tiguere Dominicano* from 1981, it is certain that *tigueraje* is based on the skillful management of one's willpower even, but especially in, conditions of disadvantage. As Lipe Collado describes, the tíguere has enough cunning that he is able to succeed in moments or repression. Carlos Decenas has identified *the tígueres* precisely as "men who tread on the edges of the licit" (131). Thus the *tigueraje intelectual* becomes a political and cultural figure that tricks, plays with sly manipulation, and gets away with what he wants with little consequences.

Regardless of whether my interlocutors were aware of Torres-Saillant's elaboration of the phrase, I read their usage of the term to identify Rita Indiana's performance as an inversion of Torres-Saillant's conceptualization. She reformulates the *tigueraje intelectual* to develop a new way of duping the political *tigueres*. It acknowledges the ways in which Rita Indiana's project is precisely an almost illicit masterful manipulation of the tropes of sonic Dominicanidad in order to break with and rupture with those archives. Through her manipulation of sound and embodied performance, she is able to 'deceive' cultural gatekeepers, and negotiate her entrance into 'institutionalized' spaces of mainstream music and all the way into normative and casual listeners. Thus, the engaged listeners that described her performances as *tigueraje intelectual* value Rita Indiana's embodiment as a form of knowledge-making and political labor that is based on the quotidian struggle of marginalized Caribbean subjectivities. This does not romanticize the *tíguere* or negate the ways in which such normative masculinity can be materially threatening. Instead, it recognizes that Rita Indiana's performance also points precisely to the dangers of such modality. Decenas explains that both the homosexual queer figure of *the loca* as well as the heteronormative *tiguere* appear in opposition to the *hombre*

serio, a masculinity that is predicated on its seriousness and productivity inside normative familial configurations. In this sense, *the tíguere* is another figure of excess (131).

Rita's gender-bending move towards the end of "Bajito a Selva" provides an example of her intellectual *tigueraje* and its excess. While the chorus states that "con tu bajito a selva, se van volteando toa las negras", the last chorus shifts the second person possessive "tu" into first person possessive "mi", transposing the object of desire into the enunciator, Rita herself. This shift produces two effects; first, it places the singing voice (arguably enunciating from a female standpoint), in the place of the sexualized masculine *tíguere*. With this, Rita imbues her feminine subjectivity with the values of the Dominican street male, a strategy that she will further employ in the rest of the album and her live performances. Secondly, by switching the possessives, but maintaining the rest of the chorus as is, with "negras", "boricuas", and "las menores" in feminine form, the enunciating voice is stating lesbian desire, specifically from the vantage point of the masculine woman. While women in merengue often perform a femininity that Hutchison argues is tamed, other women such as Fefita La Grande and the performers analyzed in the previous chapter, express female sexual desire through the same codes as men. Rita takes this discursive strategy further. By coding her lesbian desire through the embodied *tíguere* masculinity, she weaponizes her sexual allure. Her queerness metaphorized as the bajito, the "bad smell", points to the abject position of lesbian desire in the eyes of normative Caribbean society. But by placing it as an enticing and magical allure that attracts unsuspecting people and even raises the dead, she proposes lesbian desire as a negated but all-encompassing affect. In the same way that the *tíguere* convinces, her queer allure does too: "Vinite con otro pero te va conmigo. Y si ella no quiere, deja que yo le digo. Que a mi me conocen por haber convencido a cuatro diputado' con su e'posa y su' hijo'. Cuatro generale' y cuarenta bandido'. Una reina de belleza dijo que no y

de'pue' lo pensó."

We can take this image further to argue that the "bajito" is a metaphor for the merengue mambo itself. By recognizing these sounds as the music of the *tiguere de calle* a subject position influenced by Dominicanyork aesthetics and cultural remittances, she is asserting the power of Dominicanyork's cultural contributions. In the list of people convinced, which mostly mentions stereotypes associated with hegemony, she metaphorizes both Dominicanyork cultural prominence and queer desire as a normalized affect.

E' que somo' hermano'

Rita Indiana y los Misterios disruption of the heteronormative narratives that have solidified a problematic vision of Dominicanidad goes beyond a reformulation based on gender and sexuality. In the following section I will briefly discuss RIM's elaboration of transnational and diasporic experiences placing them as constitutive of the contemporary Dominican subjectivity. Her music works backwards from these painful and traumatic episodes, leaving the listener with a story not of despair, but of hope and redemption. By insisting on the potential for happiness, joy, and love, these songs challenge the listening ear and the sonic Dominicanidad that anchors stories of migration only pain and suffering. The work of merengue artist in the 1990's, as Yolanda Martinez-San Miguel has observed, narrated the vicissitudes of the multiple displacements of the Dominican community as ways of signaling "los límites de la supuesta mejoría económica y social implícita en el viaje y asentameitno en Nueva York" (289). While those songs also sketched new conceptualizations of Dominicanidad predicated on the migratory experience, they often portrayed two contradictory understandings of such experience. On the one hand, the explore the flight away from the home country and the return migration that

preserved their identity , and on the other hand, it narrates the story of Dominicans' negotiation with the receiving society, while struggling to maintain their Dominicanidad (297). In the following songs, Rita Indiana converses with such narratives of migration but from a different stand point; "Pásame a bucá'" critiques the Dominican experience of discrimination in Puerto Rico, but its subject carves itself a space of joy and pleasure. In "Hora de Volvé" she explores the disconnection between migrant and host society, the desires to return, and the ever-lasting effect of discord that the migrant subject suffers even in their homeland after they return. Finally, in "Da pa lo do"' no longer is the migrant Dominican the subject of exploration, but instead reflects on the ways in which the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic has impacted the bodies that traverse through it. The three songs, which lyrically function as fables, retrain the listening ear to perceive other sensibilities and to question narratives about nationality and selfhood.

"Da pa lo do" explores the long fraught relations between Haitians and Dominicans. It critiques the history of violence and tension between both sides of the island. As Lorgia García-Peña has theorized, these are the "dictions" that have sustained anti-Haitian rhetoric in the Dominican Republic for decades (3). The songs' imagery is simple and functions much like a children's fable; two impoverished brothers are reprimanded by their father for constantly fighting despite their limited resources and small chance of survival. The father figure pleads with them to get along given that they only have each other to survive. Here Rita assumes a different enunciating voice from the ones employed in other songs in the album. As Lorna Torrado has pointed out, she enacts a "lyrical travestism", by assuming the voice of the father and the masculine authority figure associated with the commands of Trujillo and Balaguer (468).

"Y cuando lo do niño se entraban a la mordía

el papá le decía la verdá.

Agárrense de ahí que no hay má na,

pónganse a jugar o la correa voy a saca,

uno por alante y el otro por atrá,

Dios me los mandó juntico pero ustede na de na."

To take over the voice of the father in this song means reverting the violent acts of separation that originated the contention, it forces the union between the brothers while it parodies the authority of the Dominican government. Rita's *tigueraje* always involves a parodic posture. In this case it points to the failure of the masculine authority, in establishing definite sociopolitical limits and borders, highlighting how damaging these patriarchal discourses have been for both sides of the island. Furthermore, the song infantilizes both countries by representing them as poor children fighting for scraps. This way RIM criticizes Dominicans perpetuation of the feud and marginalization of Haitians.

The title of the song ("it is enough for both") already conveys the idea of union, so transgressive still for modern day Dominican discourse. A verse that mentions specific locations in Hispaniola; "desde Juana Méndez hasta Maimón y de ahí a Dajabón", erases the borders between both sides by pointing precisely to one of the places where perhaps the most violent episode against Haitians was committed, the Parsley Massacre. Juana Mendez is a commune located in the northwestern border between Haiti and The Dominican Republic, and where Dominican troops commanded by Rafael Trujillo assassinated thousands of Haitians in 1937. Thus, the reverse itinerary that this song traces (from the border into the eastern side of the island) proposes a sort of vindication for the traumatized subject.

Another political dimension is at stake here. Ultimately, "Da pa lo do" pushes for a recognition of the same racial and ethnic roots; a common African heritage stemming from the violent middle passage of the slave trade: "Vinimos todos en el mismo bote… Siéntelo, el abrazo del mismo abuelo." These lines accompany the driving gagá rythm that makes up the song. As I mentioned earlier, gagá music is heavily policed in the Dominican Republic. Certain sectors of the country have long practiced gagá festivities but have been under scrutiny by the government who has declared it a pagan practice, and therefore has outlawed it. It is mostly allowed to be performed in *bateyes*, communal grounds near sugar cane fields where migrant workers live. Los Misterios' musicians have incorporated gagá into their compositions defying the notion that it is a foreign, savage practice. In this song, the double-beat of the layered drums that characterized gagá make up the percussive background, with an emulation of the wind instruments made through synthesizers. This incorporation challenges the listening Dominican ear, to discern, feel, and enjoy a music rhythm demonized by hegemonic discourses. Like in other songs in this album, RIM's inclusion of diverse Afro-Caribbean rhythms go hand in hand with their acknowledgment of their African roots, which is often obscured by the discourses of mestizaje in the Caribbean and Latin America[47].

Una yola alrevé.

"Da pa lo do" includes a verse where the singing voice compares Haitian migration and Dominican's disregard towards them with Dominican's own migration. "¿Tú no tienes doce tíos en otro país?" asks the voice alluding to the growing Dominican diaspora in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Europe. Aware of the patterns that are repeated when Dominicans migrate, *El*

[47] A more in depth-discussion on mestizaje and whitening in Latin American and Latinx communities can be found in Chapter 3.

Juidero includes two songs to explore the varying conditions of the diaspora in The United States and Puerto Rico.

Perhaps one of Rita Indiana's most successful songs, "Hora de Volvé" is a driving electro merengue that narrates the return to the island. It repurposes all the stereotypes related to Dominican's migration to New York; the hardships of leaving with or without documentation, the weather conditions, culture shocks, and the accumulation of material goods to send back home. Each instance is alluded to through Rita Indiana's witty and humorous verses, using colloquial Dominican phrases and intricate cultural references. The chorus: "Te llegó la hora, papi, como a monkey magic. Súbete a esta nube y deposítate en tu calle. Coge un avión, coño, o una yola al revés. ¿Tú no lo ve llegó la hora de volve?" insists to the listener, which occupies the role of the migrant Dominican, that it is time to return. By alluding the 1980's Japanese show, the cartoonish image of the cloud that hangs over a sad person, and the infamous *yola* --a small makeshift boat used by Dominicans to migrate often without documentation to Puerto Rico--, the chorus pokes fun at the migrant's predicament.

The sound in "Hora de Volvé" posits a particular combination of elements. It is a simple tambora beat from merengue mambo, emphasizing the bass and the graver sounds of the percussion, with a series of synth effects on top. Similar to "El Juidero" at the beginning of the album, this tune incorporates a series of high pitched sounds that resemble airplanes and/or alarms going off. Here, the tension is elevated, given that this high pitched synth also makes up a big part of the melody. By the time the chorus arrives, the alarm has transformed into a psychedelic radio wave that is never able to tune in properly --a sound effect that I believe tries to emulate the dissonance faced by the Dominican diasporic subject that aches to return to the island. The layers

of sound that build up "La hora de volvé" may very well distress the listener; I contend that it invokes the feelings of desperation and the need --once again-- to take flight.

One final song conveys the hardships of Dominican displacement. In "Pásame a bucá"[48], Rita Indiana's lyrics denounce the oppressive conditions in which Dominican migrants find themselves in Puerto Rico. It is, appropriately, the second song in the album, following the already tense and violent scenario sketched in the title song. "Pásame a bucá" overlaps two different migrant subjectivities in equal struggle for survival. This struggle ultimately becomes a fight for one's humanity and one's freedom to find love. This positionality is important for several reasons. On the one hand, utilizing pleasure as a site of denouncement and reclamation of belonging is a novel strategy for these genre(s). On the other hand, songs that touch upon the complex dynamics that arise due to migration between the islands are rarely found in merengue or merengue mambo songs, despite the tradition of narrating Dominican-Puerto Rican exchanges. While it is known for Dominican merengue artists to portray festive scenarios in which Dominicans and Puerto Ricans cohabitate, an exploration of the discriminatory discourse and attitude towards Dominicans in Puerto Rico is rarely addressed in music. Alaí Reyes-Santos has demonstrated the ways in which literature, ethnic jokes, and the media portray Dominican migrants in Puerto Rico as the racialized, less intelligent, hard-working but criminal, and trickster Caribbean sibling. These narratives showcase the hostility that Dominicans face in the neighboring island, and "Pásame a bucá" engages with some of those same imaginaries. Playing on the trope of the domestic worker, Rita Indiana sketches a different story about the Dominican community in Puerto Rico, critiquing the living conditions and hostile environment that they face. Considering the multiple urban music productions that celebrate the Dominican-Puerto Rican kinship through narrations of male

[48] "Come pick me up"

homosociality, “Pásame a buca” refashions that discourse through a critical approach to bond-making.

"Pásame a buca" formed part of Rita's repertoire during the live performance I witnessed in April 2017. Her live rendition differs in subtle but relevant ways to the 2010 recorded version. The original version begins with a reggae guitar strum adorned with soft short arpeggios at the end of each verse. This guitar flourish resembles the types of arpeggios found in bachata melodies. In the live version, this bachata-style guitar is accentuated, and so is the merengue beat that is later incorporated to the song, which is subtly hinted at in the recorded version. These changes, possibly done in order to transform an otherwise serene song into a danceable tune[49], can tell us more about the cultural associations RIM is making for the listener. By accentuating the bachata guitar, RIM is invoking another crucial moment in Dominican social conformation, the period of urbanization that succeed the Trujillato, and the multiple changes to social and domestic spaces it unleashed. Alternatively, the reggae rhythm that serves as melodic base for the song recalls contemporary mainstream reggae groups like the Puerto Rican Cultura Profética. Contrary to the larger countercultural reggae movement that is known for its ties to leftist politics, reggae in Puerto Rico has been consumed by and is associated with white and upper class boricuas. These sonic resonances set up a scene of island paradise that drastically contrasts with the violent lyrics that shed light on the precarious conditions of many people of the Dominican diaspora in Puerto Rico.

Lorna Torrado describes "Pásame a buca" as “una versión moderna del cuento infantil de ‘La Cenicienta’, [que] engloba las diferentes olas migratorias de la República Dominicana a

[49] Additionally, the fact that Rita was not playing with the original band, Los Misterios, with whom she composed these songs and who accompanied her in all original performances in 2010 also accounts for any changes in arrangement and instrumentations during the April 2017 show.

Puerto Rico" (472). The song relates the story of Dominican woman that calls for a lover to pick her up after work so they can go celebrate during the night. What starts off as the painful story of the realities of female Dominican domestic workers in Puerto Rico, becomes the celebration of a freedom that's regained in a trip around the island and a potential sexual encounter. "Pasame a buca" is a double call for freedom, it is at once the reclamation for liberty from the oppressive circumstances of domestic labor but it is also an evocation of the arrival of Dominican migrants to Puerto Rico; which represents in many instances a version of freedom for the migrant.

The narrative voice presents itself as the woman working in domestic labor at an upper-class household in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. This town, part of the metropolitan area of the northern part of the island, is known for being one of the most affluent, as well as for its annexationist politics. That is, for decades, residents of Guaynabo have –through electoral politics, and symbolic political gestures,- expressed their desires for Puerto Rico's statehood. Locating the Dominican subject in Guaynabo is telling not only because it metaphorizes the distance between the immigrant subject and it's receiving counterpart, but because it is, in all aspects, a symbol for internalized colonialism in Puerto Rico. Guaynabo is then, a referent for the social and material impact that imperial measurements from the United States has in the conformation of the Caribbean society. It already suggests a hierarchical position between the Puerto Rican and the Dominican migrant. The migrant, as abject subject is met with symbolic violence, thus in the song, her response is violent as well: "Cuando salgo de esta casa la sangre me hierve y en el corazón yo tengo un once de septiembre." However, this violent image is abruptly cut by the enunciation of a desire to "rodar por la noche". This wish is marked by a shrill voice that pleads "Lo que quiero e bebe, lo que quiero e goza", which is ultimately a wish to join a loved other. The traveling through the island is also overlapped with the memory of the

Mona Canal passage.

> "Aunque estos boricuas quieran acabar conmigo,
>
> Hay que celebrar que llegamos vivos,
>
> Que el mar no me chupó,
>
> que somos dos tu y yo.
>
> Que llegando a Mayagüez,
>
> los tiburones me dijeron que
>
> tú me estabas esperando"

Thus, the encounter with a loved one is juxtaposed with the arrival at the west shore of Puerto Rico. Both "travels" offer the Dominican subject a sort of respite. But these stories clash, albeit the comedic take Rita infuses it with, given the danger of the Mona Canal passage and the jouissance of the island road trip. Ultimately, the danger of the Mona passage is transposed to the road trip. Movement in this song is always a double edge sword that offers benefits with great risk.

The enunciating voice in "Pásame a bucá" stresses the need to work hard in order to succeed in life, a narrative that has been widely supported in Puerto Rican self-improvement discourses which has also been attributed to the migrant Dominican community in the neighboring island. Like Reyes-Santos observes, Dominicans have been integrated into Puerto Rican society and its imaginaries as hardworking people that will take any job that is given to them (156). The narrative about the "hard-working" character of the Dominican subject becomes damaging as it follows the neoliberal logic that places value and thus makes them acceptable visitors, only in their capacity as subjects that can generate and produce wealth for the betterment of the receiving society. Rita Indiana's narration in this song reverts this system of values by positioning the Dominican working migrant as worthy of being loved and with the

freedom to live and express themselves affectively in the neighboring island, precisely in the moments when the working body is at rest. In the song, images of threat commonly associated with the perils of migrating undocumented, in *yolas* through the Mona canal are subverted and transformed into whimsical and welcoming symbols of the joys of trans-Caribbean love encounters. In the end, the enunciating voice in "Pásame a bucá" also performs a *tigueraje* that allows them to stay afloat despite the hostile environment. In these songs, Rita excavates on the narrative archives that have largely dictated ideas about these alternative subjectivities in hegemonic conceptualizations of Dominicanidad.

Tigueraje's inscription in Rita Indiana's performing body allows her to critically utter Dominican sonic history. By "donning the attires" of dominant masculine figures, accompanied by the amalgamation of sounds and rhythms that sound familiar enough to love but unique enough to question, Rita Indiana's performance places alternative subjectivities at the forefront of Dominican popular culture. Her performances echo the cross-dressing, rule-breaking, social-defying labor of everyday marginalized Dominicans in and outside the island. As I have shown, queering in Rita Indiana y los Misterios' work means actively destabilizing and constantly recomposing the tropes of sonic Dominicanidad, that allow for an attuning to the subjectivities and realities of communities that have fallen outside hegemonic narratives, those that the listening ear has been trained to hear as noise, such as Haitian-Dominicans and return migrants, become musicalized and thus re-engaged with. This is done from the vantage point of a queer sensibility that places love and desire as its motivating forces. In the last section of this chapter, I will briefly analyze how the contemporary electronic music trio Mula continues this queering project by discomposing the historical archives of sonic Dominicanidad through vocal manipulation and pedagogical performances.

Mula

Mula is an electronic music trio hailing from Santiago de los Caballeros, the second largest city of the Dominican Republic. The group is formed by Cristabel and Anabel Acevedo as vocalists, songwriters, and percussionists alongside producer Rachel Rojas, who serves as the group's DJ. They met through a common friend in 2014, right after Rachel returned from Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she was studying electronic music production. Their sound can be described as a unique blend of electronic music with strong pan-Caribbean influences. They incorporate reggaetón, bachata, and merengue and top it off with sultry, airy, high pitched vocals. They have released two full length albums, all self-produced, but it is their second album *Aguas* (2017), which launched their career forward and granted them access to audiences outside of the Dominican Republic. *Aguas* is an album that evidences musical maturity as its material contains a more consistent and sophisticated sound design than their previous record. Thematically Mula's work is comparable to Rita Indiana's; they are interested in a politics of love and care, and in making pleasure (dance and enjoyment) a politically queer gesture.

In this way, I consider Mula a successor of Rita Indiana y los Misterios'. Sonically, one could argue both groups do very distinct things. While RIM was comprised of instrumentalists that performed their instruments live, Mula's instrumentation happens mostly behind studio doors, and is often reproduced through Rachels' synthesizers[50]. Additionally, *El Juidero* and *Aguas* are contrasting productions; Mula's sonic base is anchored in electronic music –house, drum and bass--, contrary to RIM's merengue-rock base with tinges of electronic music. Additionally, while RIM references 80's and 70's English-language pop music, MULA's referents are anchored in 1990's and early 2000's afro-diasporic music traditions. As Cristabel

[50] Although RIM also uses synthesizers it's compositions are primarily based on non-digital instrumentations while Mula's music is mostly composed via digital instruments.

Acevedo and Rachel Rojas have expressed during interviews with me, both projects sprung from a similar context, that is, they are both influenced by a range of merengue-fusion artists like Proyecto Uno's merenhouse from the 1990's, Las Chicas del Can, and Omega's merengue mambo. Mula exhibits similar aesthetics to Rita Indiana, and through their embodied performances honor the same lineage of female Dominican musicians like Myriam Cruz –former member of Las Chicas del Can--, Millie Quesada, and Xiomara Fortuna.

While I'm tracing a genealogy based on sound and vocal performance, it is clear that the politics espoused by Mula differ greatly from these previous performers. As I briefly discussed in the previous chapter, Las Chicas del Can and many of the women merengue groups that were active during the late 1980's and 1990's promoted a discourse of femininity based on their living experiences and often as a response to their representation in men's music. In fact, many of their female perspective lyrics were written by the male composers who formed or managed their music. Such is the case of Las Chicas del Can who were managed by Wilfrido Vargas. As Austerlitz observes, many of these groups sang in witty ways about the realities of unequal power dynamics and sexist assumptions (118). This, he adds, might as well be understood as an act of self-empowerment given the lack of female perspective in any of the popular music of the time. In the case of Xiomara Fortuna, one of the few women present during the first stages of the development of *escena alternativa* of the 1980's, her work is explicitly committed to the political, both in terms of race as well as gender. An openly queer, Black Dominican woman, her music navigates social justice themes and experiments with the Afrodiasporic music genres that –as discussed in this chapter—have been demonized and criminalized. Mula takes from Fortuna her spirit of music fusion, which has granted her the accolade of la Reina de la Fusión. In what follows I show how Mula engages with these previous women artists but disrupts associations

between their performances and Dominicanidad by experimenting with vocal production.

"¿Ustedes son de la República Dominicana?"

"Nunca paran", from MULA's álbum *Aguas*, begins with a question, enunciated by a grave but distorted voice: "You're from the Dominican Republic?". The final "a" in "Dominicana" is amplified and repeated over and over until it blends into the reggaetón beat that introduces Anabel and Cristabel's breathy, fine-pitched voices. This question seems to linger in the air throughout the song, enacting both a wonder and a confrontation. It points to the confusion between Mula's sound and sonic Dominicanidad as a fixed form of understanding cultural production. It invites us to analyze how their composition teases the listening ear by discomposing merengue and bachata. Finally, I believe the question proposes a discussion of Mula's bodies in performance. It points to how their non-traditional and queer femininity renders them unlistenable for the dominant listening ear.

At first listen, Mula's sound may not ring as stereotypically Dominican, even though their music is deeply rooted in local traditions. Currently, reggaetón has been consecrated exclusively a Puerto Rican popular culture export taken up by Colombians and other non-Caribbean Latin Americans, despite the prominence that Dominican DJs, MC's, and beat-makers have in the history of the genre. Additionally, the electronic music traditions that Mula fuses have been considered foreign to the Caribbean. Mula's re-appropriation of these sounds allow listeners to remark on the common Afrodiasporic roots of a variety of popular music genres that have been coopted and whitened due to globalized circulation and mainstreaming. As Deborah Pacini Hernández has discussed regarding the "world beat" phenomenon, increased interest from U.S. and U.K. Anglo, white, middle-class sectors towards foreign but musically rich, danceable tunes from African and Latin American countries, compelled white Anglo U.S. musicians themselves to foray into these genres (209). Merengue became

victim to this process, catching the attention of artists like Paul Simon. Mula's work calls attention to this process and expands it to include other non-Dominican styles that form part of the wide network of Afrodiasporic rhythms that have been taken and transformed. "Retumba", their second single off *Aguas* begins with the popular 1992 dancehall beat from "Murder She Wrote" by Chaka Demus and Pliers[51] which is transformed into a drum and bass beat at the end of the song. The transition to drum and bass, and the contrast created by such a pairing at once recreates the history of globalized Jamaican-derived rhythms, reminding listeners of drum and bass' genesis in Afro-Caribbean music

Tigueraje is a crucial aesthetic reference for Rita Indiana's gender-bending performances, including her vocal expression. In contrast to Rita Indiana's, Anabel and Cristabel's performances do not emulate that of the merengue *tíguere*. Their voices speak back to the archive of female merengue and bachata vocalists. Theirs is a direct incision into feminized modes of performance that actively question women's embodied voices in Dominican music performance. The following section explores how Mula's usage of digital voice manipulation transgresses and subverts gendered sonic regimes in popular Caribbean music.

Cyborg voices, mechanized Caribbeanness

"Nunca paran" is a slow reggaetón groove tinged with the peacefulness of indie dream-wave songs. Cristabel and Anabel's voices may sound foreign to the rhythms they engage in, but their echoed and mechanic sonority point directly to the technological devices with which most pop music –including and especially reggaetón and dembow-- is recorded and performed. A look into this mechanized reproduction can reveal the ways in which these artists are working within global music traditions as well as how they are re-signifying what women sound like in popular Caribbean music. In their

[51] Which is one of the most sampled Jamaican dancehall songs in reggaetón, constituting one of the main tracks that define the whole genre.

performance they remain affected and distressed, their voices tinged with a robotic quality that provides their music a unique signature. Their vocal range closely resemble that of Dominican merengueras Las Chicas del Can and Milly, Jocelyn y Los Vecinos, as well as bachateras Alexandra and Vickiana, among others. Anabel and Cristabel's pitch and texture share the same tonalities and have distinct breathy techniques displayed in these performer's recordings. This separates Mula's performance from the later female merengue trend, developed in the 1990's in Puerto Rico. In this later moment, female singers like Olga Tañón displayed full bodied voices that accompanied that same sexual liberation discourses found in the songs of groups like Las Chicas del Can and of performers like Aris García and Vickiana. Nevertheless, since bachata is one of the dominant referents in *Aguas*, Mula's performance of the fragile voice is tied to the particular affect of bachata performance. Sidney Hutchison draws a comparison between merengueras' and female pop bachata voices, stating that the latter have "portrayed a virginal, prepubescent girl that is no threat to the social order" (91). But if in Hutchinson's reading, bachateras' voices embody values that are considered inferior[52], I propose to look at Mula's vocal production as one that attempts to redeem this apparently unthreatening positionality. In fact, Hutchinson seems to ignore that the affect in male's bachata singing sometimes renders their voices anguished and "weak". Through bachata "men were able to articulate their emotional pain, vulnerability, frustrations, and anger", thus bachatero's vocal performances often express the position of fragile victim (Pacini Hernández 184). It could be argued that some female singers of bachata emulate this melismatic affect. Certainly, in Mula's vocal performance, one can identify traces of popular male bachata vocalists like that of Raulín Rodriguez, Luis Vargas, or Teodoro Reyes. As I will show, Cristabel and Anabel's digital mediation of their bachata-style crooning are performances that propose other understandings of femininity, ones that

[52] Deborah Pacini Hernandez identifies at least one bachatera with a poignant voice that accompanies powerful feminist themes, Mélida Rodriguez (*Bachata* 179). Although widely known in the Dominican Republic, her early bachata style seems to fall outside of Hutchinson's definition of "pop bachata".

restore bachatera's value as agents of change.

Vocal manipulation through digital tools makes its appearance in music during the late 1930's, although it was not until the 1970's when the vocoder (or vocal encoder) seeped into pop music productions (Prior 92). Its usage was popularized in new wave electronic music acts that found resonance between synthesizers and the smooth wave-like vocal effect that the vocoder offered. One of the most prominent vocal manipulation tools in contemporary pop music is the AutoTune effect. Although currently having a widespread use, it was the African American rapper T-Pain who solidified it as a staple for rap and hip-hop music. During its introduction in the early 2000's the usage of what was initially a pitch-correction tool sparked debate amongst musicians and music journalists who regarded it simply as a cheat-sheet for artists that apparently lacked vocal talent. The campaign against auto-tuned artists revealed underlying racists and classists sentiments towards the bulk of Black and Brown artists in genres that have long been the center of controversy in pop music, such as rap. It also stirred some uncomfortable feelings inside the rap community, highlighting the divisions between rap and hip hop or, what is sometimes regarded as conscious, political, and "talented" black music, versus mainstream, banal, apolitical one. But as critics have noted, T-Pain did much more than just "fix" his voice; the vocal deconstruction that AutoTune effectuates, allowed the rapper to produce a whole new musical phenomenon that gave way to new understandings of the voice as an embodied manifestation.

Caribbean urban music, specifically reggaetón, also profited from AutoTune to aid in reggaetonero's incursion into the infamous vocal trend of "chanteo", a performance style of rapping in a song-like rhythm, blending R&B crooning with rapped delivery. Although AutoTune was exploited throughout the first decade of the 2000's it has not been until the recent Latin trap phenomena that the tool has made a reappearance. While before, producers and MCs were keen on maintaining "hidden" the traces of pitch-correction software both in recordings as well as live performances, now trap singers --

possibly influenced by U.S trap artist, Future)-- utilize AutoTune and other similar software as notable effects on their productions. This purposeful effect has provided urban music with a new paradigm. In terms of music criticism, it has complicated our understandings of race, gender, and sexuality as manifested through sound.

Writing on the ways in which black popular music re-conceptualizes Hayle's notion of the posthuman, Alexander Weheliye explains that

> Instead of pulling the strings in the background- that is, being disembodied- these producers, who plug the performers into the technological apparatus, take front and center stage with the artists. This creates a composite identity, a machine suspended between performer and producer that sounds the smooth flow between humans and machines (31).

Although referencing the vocoder effect specifically, Weheliye's provocation leads us to inquire on the ways in which AutoTune's ubiquitous presence in contemporary Afro-diasporic music genres like trap and reggaetón, suggest a new form of machinic embodiment, that oscillates between black bodies' historical occlusion and a newly afforded posthuman condition. In the case of Mula, Rachel's craft with digital tool calls attention to women's occluded labor in pop music production.

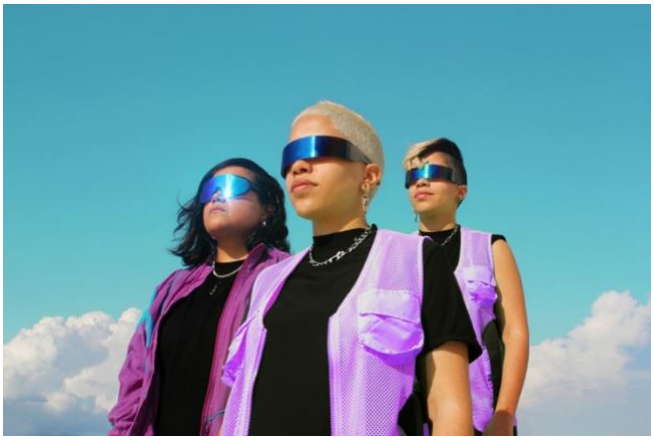
Kay Dickinson, discussing the vocoder effect in female pop music questions the ways in which certain bodies and subjectivities are highlighted when digital manipulation of the voice becomes a trend in the early 2000's. Using Cher as a case study, she discusses how female pop stars' usage of vocoders seems to emphasize their corporeality on stage. Given that women's role in pop music has been tied to their usage of the body, vocoder effects fueled the notion that for many female musicians the body is their instrument, a distinction that helps promote the age-old rooting of women in the natural and anti-technological (337). The female manipulated voice

becomes a substitution of the body, coming to represent a sort of prosthetic that embellishes the performer's presence. This process also cemented the association between vocal manipulation tools and the feminization of voices. If, as Weheliye points out, "the human voice has signaled presence, fullness, and the coherence of the subject, not only in Western philosophical discourses but also in popular music and popular music criticism", women have been burdened with the need to always anchor their music performances to their bodies (31). Popular Caribbean music rhythms, like merengue, bachata, and reggaetón, follow these paradigms by seemingly portraying women solely as consumable bodies, and their usage of women's voices -particularly in the case of reggaetón- as symbolic bodies subservient to the men performing the songs. Mula's vocality calls upon this trope, but as I will show, add a distinction that releases the voice's sound from this sexist entanglement.

Mula's vocal performances range from the non-manipulated echoes of the twin sisters to Rachel's distorted and grave vocoded refrains. They purposefully go beyond the conventions of the genres they fuse to carefully design their compositions using digital tools that afford them the ability to break apart, mutate, and transform their voices at specific moments in the songs. Even when their singing does not appear manipulated by digital audio tools, --albeit they always are mediated by technology through the use of microphone and recording devices-- their voices problematize notions on the natural and organic vocal performance and mechanical reproduction that Weheliye and Dickinson discuss. To use Roland Barthes' terms, the grain of Mula's voices express a Caribbean cyborg body blurring the boundaries between the natural and the mechanical.

But it is not solely their vocal style which points to an aesthetic of the cyborg and the machinic. Mula's wardrobe choices play with androgynous cuts, dark and neon colors, light and

laser-style effects reminiscent of the aesthetics of science fiction movies such as Blade Runner. Often, Cristabel and Anabel will don peculiar glasses that simulate robotic heads, their demeanor on stage usually contained and simplistic, and Rachel's role is fundamentally attached to her work in a machine –her laptop and DJ equipment. This emphasis on their embodiment of the cyborg condition in their live concerts detach their performance from the easily digested and the understandable. They point to the voice as an artifice of the body, as an unnatural prosthesis that folds into itself; a singing entity that has no distinction between voice and body, but that cannot be understood as a natural one. Thus, they distort and confuse the listener, challenging assumptions about feminized popular music performance. Mula's vocal disruptions which call upon a range of Afro-diasporic vocal styles, untethers women's popular music from gendered associations and allows for a reconsideration of the feminized Afro-Caribbean body in performance.



8. Mula

Consignas: Queer Archives in Performance

Aguas' last song stands out from the repertoire given that its lyrics deviate from the romantic themes brought up in the rest of the album. The title itself, "Espejos en las azoteas

(1965)", reflects the song's principal intentions by providing a date of reference, a piece of historical fact. For Dominican audiences and those familiar with its history, the year 1965 catches the eye given that it's the year of the third U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic. Although it is not the only song with spoken interventions, --"Poción" opens with Anabel reciting a poem--, it presents us with a recording of a historical and cultural material. This is a sample of radio and TV personality Freddy Beras Goico shouting "Están ametrallando al pueblo. La consigna es colocar espejos en las azoteas."[53] The initial verses are composed of a simple synthesized beat reminiscent of vogue music. Although not necessarily festive, the song references Ball culture. Hailing from the 1980's New York City Black queer community, Balls are pageants where gay men perform while walking through a runway and compete against each other for prizes and often, the cheers and admiration of the community. Balls are closely related to drag queen performances, as the participants are often in drag as well, and perform similar poses during their walk. Vogue music became an important element to these events, as a queer branch of House music that accompanied these performances.

Mula's queer gesture in this song is the development of a Caribbean pedagogy that transgresses and writes the sonic archive. In their live performances, they curate a space of communal learning, that goes beyond Rita Indiana's gestures of queer love, materializing into a project of discovering and remembering. Their bodies, as technological explorations on the limits of enunciation and corporeality perform the recuperation of hidden histories of queer love and resistance. "Espejos en las azoteas" guides my analysis through their invocations and reflections. I believe it provides the blueprints for the lesbian sensory that I propose in this chapter.

The composition in "Espejos en las azoteas" announces to the seasoned listener what

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[53] My gratitude to Prof. Arturo Victoriano for helping me identify Beras Goico's voice in this recording.

soundscape Mula is introducing. The festive elements of the sound clash with the song's initial warning: "Están ametrallando al pueblo". The story hidden in the song reveals shows how Mula reconceptualizes the notion of "pueblo". The lyrics of "Espejos en las azoteas (1965)" re-imagines the Cuadrilla La Chancleta, a group of Dominican gay men and trans women who rose against the United States during its 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic. Little is known or taught about the role that La Cuadrilla and its leader, Tony Echevarría --also known as Cambumbo--, played in the resistance towards United States' troops. Even though there have been contemporary cultural revisions of the event, scarcely any of these productions highlights the role other communities played in the resistance. Therefore, MULA's song is initially pedagogical. Through their retelling of the Cuadrilla's involvement they raise awareness of the political work and activism of the queer and trans communities, but more importantly, Mula reimagines their lifestyles as a powerful counterhegemonic way of being in itself.

The image of "espejos en las azoteas" alongside the vogue reference places the Cuadrilla in an environment of enjoyment, pleasure, and comradery. The idea of the mirror invokes the process of getting dressed up. As Rachel has expressed during interviews with me, "te recuerda a un lugar donde te puedes vestir como quieras y ser fabulosa." Thus the practice of drag and cross-dressing alluded in Rachel's comment manifests itself as the moment before a battle, emphasizing these queer performances as confrontation and instances of opposition to hegemonic order. Furthermore, overlapping the images of combat with dancing and vogueing scenes forces the listener to understand pleasure practices as embodied acts of everyday resistance. Ultimately, Mula's uncovering of the hidden Cuadrilla story is also a way of wishing towards a painless future, it performs an idea of a queer utopia based on radical acts of enjoyment.

These resistances permeate through Mula's album *Aguas*, I contend that their music highlights at the same time as it occludes the feminine and queer Caribbean body in performance by transmuting their voice into a cyborg-like one. "Espejos en las azoteas" ends with the vocoded singing of the consigna: "espejos en las azoteas, para que nadie los vea". I believe their vocal manipulation points to the disrupted body of the feminized Caribbean, at the same time as it disengages it from the realm of perception, making it unrecognizable through the codes of popular music performance. Their take on performing bodies opens up space for marginalized subjectivities, for these "alternativxs" to inhabit, and engage in joy. Thus, Mula's invitation to listen to what "el Caribe del futuro" sounds like is a challenge to the dominant listening ear and an invitation to reimagine a queer Caribbean futurity based on the *consignas* of everyday queer living.

During the years I traveled for research to the Dominican Republic (roughly from 2017-2019) the queer night scene in Santo Domingo had undergone intense transformations. Partly influenced by the growth of the música alternativa scene, the queer community found a space to gather and feel somewhat protected by the already strange aesthetics and out-of-placeness of the alternativxs. In one event held in the bookstore Mamey, a Halloween party was organized by film editor Juanjo Cid and named "El Cocoró del Futuro." The event featured a roster of up and coming drag queens that had been gaining popularity thanks to other events such as "Draguéalo." Accompanying them was Mula as music performance. The title of the event may read familiar since it is taken from La Delfi's hit "Dame Leche", taking her repetition of the first syllable of the word "coro" (meaning, social gathering), as a new word. The Cocoró del future party, by placing Mula as headliners recognizes the continuities between the work of La Delfi in the dembow scene, Mula, and the underground drag queen performances in Santo Domingo as

interlocutors in a circuit of queer reformulations of sonic Dominicanidad. These events evidence the impact that the performative and sonic work of Mula, Rita Indiana, and La Delfi have for contemporary queer youth in the Dominican Republic. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the work of Dominicanyork superstar Cardi B, questions larger formulations of identity for the Latinx and Caribbean communities in the diaspora.

CHAPTER 3:

AfroLatinx *Okurrrences*: Cardi B's Dominicanyork Latinidad

Introduction

On October 2019, the Afro-Latina trap superstar, Cardi B, tweeted: "How do you act like a black woman? How do black women act?" (@iamCardiB) These rhetorical questions come as a reaction to another tweet in which Cardi B is criticized for "*acting like* a bw [black woman] until its time to *be* a bw" (sic) (emphasis added) (@Rachelle_023). This episode[54] is relevant for discussions about the mainstream music industry's adoption of aesthetics and cultural tropes that are associated with type of Black femininity, especially, in the hands of white artists making incursions into what are considered "urban music genres." The differences between *acting like* and *being* that this tweet invokes, are particularly salient in popular music performance due to narratives about authenticity and belonging in genres deeply linked to subcultural communities. But Cardi B's response to this accusation points to another pressing reality that pertains her ethnoracial identity as Black and Latina. Echoing what Dominican feminist scholar and poet Ana Maurine Lara has aptly observed about Afro-Latinas in the United States as occupying "undefined spaces that result from the ways in which race has been constructed in U.S society", Cardi's retort reveals an understanding that "because of these constructions and the institutions built around them, many Afro-Latinas are often not seen by Black Americans nor by other Latinos" (23).

54. These tweets were triggered by an ongoing discussion regarding Latina actress' Gina Rodriguez's use of the "n-word" in an Instagram video post. Rodriguez has been challenged on her anti-Blackness during interviews and was confronted for being a light-skinned Latina that refuses to acknowledge her privileges due to colorism.

Cardi B's question thus forces us to rethink essentialized notions of Blackness, or how the being of Blackness can read in the body: through aesthetics, comportment, as well as action. Cardi's reflection resonates with a parallel query I have been tracing throughout this dissertation: "How do you *sing* like a Dominican woman?" Cardi B's irruption into my dissertation, through her rhetorical retort transforms my reflection into a more specific concern "How do you sing like a Black Dominican woman? And, what do Black Dominican women sound like?" In paying attention to the vocal referents in the works of Dominican Urban singers, I have been partly assessing what Black Dominican women sound like, and how their tonalities, inflections, textures, and more importantly, their asides —cackles, whispers, sighs, growls, moans, and cries-- point to the construction of a politicized Dominican femininity. In Cardi B's vocal performance, specifically, I question how her AfroLatinidad is made heard and articulated in speech, rapping, and enunciations. My conceptualization of sonic Dominicanidad also accounts for the integration of and interaction with the sounds, tones, and pitches that racialize Dominican women's voices when performing urban music. In Cardi B's work, this process is much more explicit, complicating distinctions between Blackness and Dominicanidad, and often veering towards stereotyped notions of Latinidad. In this chapter, I will show how her two Billboard charting songs evidence the negotiations between the capitalization of Cardi B's ethnoracial background, her embodiment of the ratchet, and the ensuing reflections on AfroLatinidad.

In this chapter I am extending my notion of Dominican women performers' uttering sonic Dominicanidad by honing in on Cardi B's speech. Following Alexandra Vazquez's provocation to listen "in detail," I expand from Cardi B's music's sound production in order to attend to the ways in which her unique form of articulation, rapping, and speaking grapple with cultural ideas of Dominican nationality, Latinx identity, and Blackness expressed through popular music

production. As in the case of La Insuperable, attention to Cardi B's body seems to saturate discussions about her music as much as her racial, ethnic, and regional background. Thus, in this chapter, I de-emphasize her corporeality, anchoring my analysis in a discussion of how her vocal articulations function in conjunction with her racialized body in performance.

"La raza dominicana"

At the center of my analysis of Cardi B's performances is a problematization of the development of ideas about Blackness, Latinidad, and Dominicanidad that have been developed in intellectual spaces since the late 1990's but have recently percolated outside of those as an everyday preoccupation. As listeners —and pop culture consumers— begin engaging with narratives about artists' associations with ethnic and racial categories through popular music performance and its sonic arrangements, artists and producers have had to think through what allows them to innovate, advance, and successfully compete in the music industries while also aligning with the shifting values of their fanbase. My approach to the development of these discourses also aims to decentralize the diaspora as the only site from which ideas about race and ethnicity develop, and to suggest that instead, an awareness of the local problematics of racism and classism experienced on the island (Hispaniola) and the ways in which sound indexes histories of racial oppression, silencing, and violence, promotes the acknowledgement and politicization of artists and listeners in both locations. That is, the transnational circuit is one not necessarily sparked from the communities in the United States, but instead can be understood as continuously moving from island to diaspora and back. Scholars such as Jorge Duany have written on the cultural and economic remittances between Dominicans in New York City and their families back in the Dominican Republic, and how these shape local island dynamics such as political elections, economic development, ideas about fashion and aesthetics, music, and

notions of race and ethnicity (Duany *Quisqueya on the Hudson*). As discussed in previous chapters, the Dominicanyork community, to which Cardi B belongs to, has been seen as the ultimate transnational diasporic community and largely responsible for the introduction to aesthetic elements associated with urban Blackness and hip hop culture (Tallaj *A Country*).

These ideas about Dominican transnationalism and cultural remittances are in conversation with recent scholarship on Dominican Blackness that attends to the ways that understandings about race in the Dominican Republic have been shaped by these transnational relationships. This work has shed light on the historical developments and the ongoing occlusion about Blackness and *Afrodescendencia* for Dominicans in the island and beyond. Specifically, scholars such as Raj Chetty, Lorgia García-Peña, Ana Maurine Lara, and Ginetta Candelario have rewritten the problematic narratives about Dominicans supposedly inherent anti-Blackness as anti-Haitianismo. For example, in *Borders of Dominicanidad*, García-Peña traces the ways in which the United States' interventions in the Dominican Republic, including its politics and affairs, have bolstered feelings of anti-Haitianismo and supported the larger whitening project that is all too often only blamed on the Trujillato.

In the special issue on Dominican Black Studies of The Black Scholar journal, Raj Chetty and Amaury Rodriguez examine how the history of racial categories in Hispaniola are the result of specific political strategies through the independence times all the way into the Trujillo dictatorship. In the same issue, works by other scholars support arguments that complicate the Dominican anti-Blackness narrative to show the ways in which political and economic powers greatly influenced people's understandings of racial identity and the ways in which legal, demographic, and imperialist measures banked on blurring racial differences, *mestizaje* as a category of whiteness, and indigeneity as an alternative to Blackness.

Most importantly, these scholars are writing against historian Francisco Moya Pons' infamous 1970's argument that it is in the United States where Dominicans "realize they are Black" (qtd in García-Peña 17). While Silvio Torres-Saillant argues against this idea, suggesting that instead in the US, Dominicans are confronted with new forms of racism that force them to make alliances with other racialized minorities, García-Peña clarifies that in the U.S. diaspora, "Dominicans find a political language from which to articulate their own experience of oppression, disenfranchisement, and silencing —a process that allows them to build alliances with other oppressed communities around the world" ("Translating Blackness" 17). That is, Dominicans' notions of Blackness and their own racialization are not dependent on their migration to the U.S., instead, that their encounters with the particular structures of racialization as well as political and social mobilizations that African American and other Black communities have developed allow them to articulate better how their disenfranchisement is connected to Black people's struggles throughout the globe. This optic recognizes Dominican's racialization in the island, the ongoing political work of Afro-Dominican communities in avowing Black Caribbean experience, as well as Dominicans of Haitian-descent's embodied understandings of race. Dixa Ramírez also argues for re-focusing the ways in which we conceptualize of Dominican's understandings of race in the diaspora, by rejecting the US-enforced paradigm where "Afro-descendent immigrants who do not enunciate their Blackness through U.S. Dominant vocabularies of Blackness and race have not reached black consciousness" (154). Certainly, Cardi B's illegibility as a Black woman in the opening episode evidences the enforcement of such paradigm.

Additionally, Ginetta Candelario's research on Dominican's negotiation with discourses of Blackness sheds light on the role transnationalism plays in this process. Candelario's work

shows evidence against the idea that contact with other racialized minorities in the US has profoundly impacted Dominicans consciousness around their Blackness. Instead, she suggests that while they may have gained recognition of their racialization, an ideological transformation has not occurred for the first generation in New York City, contrary to what both Jorge Duany and Moya Pons have stated (Black Behind the Ears 20). Instead, she witnessed the ways in which Dominicans in the diaspora have to negotiate with a "bi-national social world and accommodate both without assimilating either" (21). On the other hand, tracing the shifts in language used to define racial categories in the Dominican Republic, Eva Michelle Wheeler discusses the problematic of Dominicans' conflation of racial and national identities. In other words, Dominicans tend to understand their race as nationality, often describing their race as "raza dominicana" (39), a phenomenon that may be inherited from the Trujillo dictatorship but that also reveals a shift in Western Racial Paradigms. Wheeler's study uncovers that racial categories such as moreno, blanco, and indio all fit within the raza dominicana concept, contrary to Traditional Western Racial notions of whiteness (blanco) as the racial category that would be more conflated with nationality. What is illuminating in Wheeler's study, however, is evidence towards Dominicans self-ascription to Blackness (through identifying Dominicanidad with categories such as moreno, mulato and negro) while discursively managing narratives of white aspiration. This data aligns with García-Peña's argument that it is displacement that gives Dominicans a language for racialization. It also reinforces what Candelario observes in her study of diasporic Dominican women's beauty practices, where women associate their Dominican ethnic identity as opposed to both whiteness and African American Blackness. That is, Dominicans —for the most part— do see themselves as Black, and they acquire painful and embodied knowledge of the distinctions between nationality, race, ethnicity, and colorism when

making a life outside of their country. At the same time, their discourses and actions towards racial hierarchies perpetuate whiteness as desirable and hegemonic.

As this discussion of Dominican racial categories reveals, Latin American conceptualizations of race and ethnicity have been largely reproduced in the context of US Latinos. Micah Wright's research on the lasting effects of negrophobia by the U.S. intervention in the D.R. in the 1930's reveals some of the historical underpinnings of Latinidad and hispanidad as white(ned) ethnic categories. "Hispanicismo" was espoused by the Dominican bourgeoise in the late 19th century to liken whiteness with progress and civilization (23), but by the end of the 1920's Dominican nationalists such as the UND (Union Nacionalista Dominicana) adopted the category of "Latinidad" to distinguish themselves from the "Dominicanidad" developed by intellectuals and adopted by the popular classes. "Latinidad" thus allowed them to assert distinctions between the "Dominicanidad" that included migrant West Indians, Puerto Ricans, and Black Europeans that had arrived throughout the preceding decades, as well as to distance themselves from associations with US-American forms of civility, regaining autonomy by glorifying the nation's white but Hispanic past. (28) The term "Latinidad" also proved to be more inclusive than "hispanicismo", and allowed Dominicans to connect to Latin American countries, specifically through the discourse of mestizaje that has ruled over racial and ethnic imaginaries for great part of the continent.

Cardi B's tweet at the start of this chapter gains nuance if we think about the ways in which Blackness and Dominicanidad for her and her family constantly operate in multiple spaces, in flowing harmony as well as in dissension with one another. That is, Cardi understands her Blackness through her embodied experience as a Black Woman in the United States, but also

in place as a Black Woman in the Bronx and Washington Heights, and through nationality, as Dominican and Caribbean, each one granting her a specific set of *dictions* --to use García-Peña's term— with which to understand such Blackness. This is why, in her response, Cardi's rhetorical question breaks with the essentialism of U.S.-based Blackness, to account for the different ways in which racialization's constant unfolding is dependent on social and spatial realities.

AfroLatinx Okurrrences

Cardi's understanding of her Blackness is, in part, informed by the "social rejection" that she and her family experience by both Dominican and US society for being Dominicanyork (Candelario 27). Her Dominicanyork identity is predicated by being second-generation Dominican born in New York, whose attires, language, and attitude correspond to the influences of the social context in which she grew up. In her performances, she needs to strategically accommodate hegemonic standards of self-presentation from both communities, what Candelario calls "strategic ambiguity". The deployment of this strategy often creates a contradiction between Cardi's music performance, lyrics, and social media persona since she both challenges as well as assumes ideas around race, Latinidad, and Dominicanidad that may seem to privilege whiteness. In Candelario's research, this strategy was used by her Dominican interlocutors, as it allows "simultaneously for purposeful self-presentation strategies and for equivocation in dynamic interplay between the internalization and externalization of official identity discourses" (33). My analysis of Cardi's performances understands that these apparent contra*dictions* form part of what I conceive as AfroLatinx *okurrrences*.

AfroLatinx *okurrrences* is in dialogue with Sandy Plácido's framework for understanding the strategic shifting in identity of Caribbean women, based on Gayatri Spivaks's strategic

essentialism. In her research, Plácido analyses how Afro-descendants from Latin American may identify simultaneously or at different moments with various ethno-racial labels to strategically advance political agendas and extend activist linkages amongst disenfranchised communities across the Americas. As I will show, Cardi's diverse performances move through Dominicanidad, Afro-Latinidad, and tropicalized Latinidad as strategies to market her music, gain cultural authenticity, and challenge larger assumptions about Blackness in both U.S. and Dominican society

Although for different purposes than Plácido's activist subjects, Candelario's work evidences Dominican women's grappling with their Blackness, Dominicanidad, and Latinidad in similar ways. That is, Candelario's subjects often espoused conflicting and fluctuating notions on the basis of race and ethnicity, understanding themselves as dark skinned, identifying Dominican nationality as such, all while practicing beautification procedures that "whitened" them, although not so much as to be understood as Anglo whiteness. That is, Candelario's subjects in the hair salon tended to privilege Latinidad and "Afro-European mixtures" rather than US-based white racial purity (237). In Candelario's words "Dominican hair culture situates Domnican ethnoracial formations at the crossroads of multiple identity discourses and displays" (254).

Building on Omaris Zamora's concept of (trance)formations, I deploy *okurrrences* as the evolution of what she identified as Cardi's "slippery subjectivity" which moves away from essentialist notions of Latinidad and African American identity. Zamora explains that (trance)formation is "a continuous process that engages with the spiritual aspect of self-making and centralizes the body as an archive for the creation of an AfroLatina feminist epistemology" (23). If in Zamora's analysis, Cardi's usage of the cyber space allows us to witness her in "the process of becoming" (*(Trance)forming* 211), in my analysis, *okurrrences* are enacted in her

music performance as what is left post-(trance)formation. That is, *okurrrences* reveal to us the journeys in her career and persona, while acknowledging the conjoining of the Black and Latino ethnoracial identity that Zamora identifies is in constant evolution. Taking into account the more recent development of Cardi B's career, —that is, her music—, *okurrrences* manifest the ways in which her ratchet and barrio performance –her "degular-regular-schmegular" Bronxness -- is intertwined with the Latina popstar performativity of her vocal and sonic productions.

In Zamora's analysis of Cardi's online persona, the star becomes an embodied archive that records multiple transformations (2), such as the switching between Blackness and Latinidad/Dominicanidad. In my analysis of her music production, Cardi's *okurrrences* highlight (Afro) Latinidad as a strategy for survival and marketing, musically showcasing the negotiations that diasporic Dominican woman have to perform in order to be heard, seen, and recognized. In this sense, through her *okurrrences*, Cardi enacts what Plácido has defined as AfroLatinx Feminisms, "the intellectual and physical work that women who are of African and also Latin American descent do to increase their political power… In the simplest terms, Afro Latinx feminists bring the histories and experiences of Latinxs and Latin Americans into spaces defined as Black, and they bring the histories and experiences of Blacks and Afro-descendants into spaces defined as Latinx" ("Expanding the Dialogue"). As this chapter will evidence, Cardi B's music introduces her AfroLatina subjectivity through sound, embodiment, and lyrics.

Thus, Cardi B's performances enact what I call AfroLatinx *okurrrences*. The term *okurrrence* calls into being a variety of different cultural processes that intersect Black, Latinx, Queer, Femme, and barrio cultural identities. The noun "occurrence", which in English conveys an action that takes place continuously, has additional definitions when translated into the Spanish *ocurrencia*. *Ocurrencia* is commonly used in Spanish to describe a sudden idea or

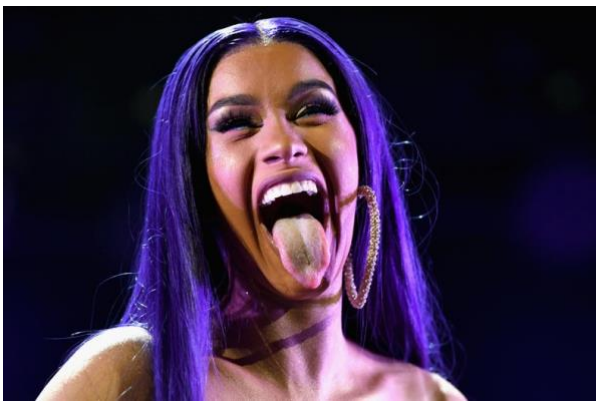
event, but it is also colloquially used to reference someone's witty commentary or action. In conveying this connotation, I'm lassoing speech acts and embodied performances to highlight Cardi's unique lexicon —what she terms "Bardiology"—, her ad-libs and asides in songs and presentations, as well as the impromptu eruption of her persona into mainstream popularity. By recalling the meanings that the Spanish version of the song conveys, I'm performing a Spanglish mis-translation, common to the Latinx community's ways of speaking, but also as a performative project that connects with the creative work of many Latinx people before me.

I transform the noun "occurrence" by substituting the letter "c" for "k" and adding an additional "r" to invoke Cardi B's signature catchphrase: "okurrr". Although there are debates about the adverb's popularization, its genesis lies in mainstream drag culture. First used in the reality TV show "RuPaul's Drag Race" by contestant Laganja Estranja, as "okuuu", Cardi B later adopted it, added its signature thrill, and circulated it amongst colloquial parlance. My conceptualization of *okurrrence* highlights the creative Black and Latinx femme energies of drag culture that Cardi B reenergizes in her addition of the thrilled "r". By transforming "okay" into "okurrr", Cardi complicates its enunciation, restricting some speakers in properly imitating the thrill. Thus, the proper pronunciation of "okurrrr" marks the speaker as a particular –racialized and gendered— one, since thrilling your r's, is not only a particularity of Spanish and other non-English languages, but is commonly produced by Black and Queer folk. Thus *okurrrences* brings to the fore these subversive acts of speech, pointing to moments of drag culture performance, that —as I have explained in the previous chapter—, combined Afro and Latinx queer culture in the 80's in New York. I see these histories as the queer forebears of Cardi B's unapologetic Black Latinx performance. Her *okurrences* also link her to the other artists researched in this dissertation, their inspirations and performative transformations based on drag and female

masculinity, (Rita Indiana and Mula, Ch 2) as well as the relationship with their queer fan base and the listening cultures that uphold their artistry (La Insuperable, Ch 1).

A "Regular, Degular, Schmegular Girl from the Bronx"

With her signature tongue-out expression, vocalizing high pitched but raspy and nasal exclamations, Washington-Heights born and Bronx-raised Belcalis Almanzar embodies, perhaps unknowingly, the Dominicanyork subjectivity that the artists discussed throughout this dissertation have referenced, imitated, and grappled with in their music and performances. Cardi B, born in 1992, raised by her grandmother in the Dominican enclave of Manhattan, Washington Heights, speaking both English and Spanish (Spanglish), and surrounded by the intermingling of Latinx and African American culture, is the poster girl for Dominican-American second and third generation Latinx youth. In her own words, Cardi B is a "regular, degular, schmegular girl from the Bronx" ("The Crown" *Love & Hip Hop New York Season 6*).



9. Cardi B

Her career, still in a relatively nascent stage but already immensely successful, evidences the negotiations, strengths, resilience, rupturing, and complications of being an Afro-Latinx

woman of Caribbean descent in the United States. Cardi's upbringing and demeanors[55] evidence what scholars such as Duany, Torres- Saillant, and Juan Flores have observed regarding Dominican, Puerto Rican, and African American community relations in New York City. Her avowal of both Black and Caribbean identity through aesthetic choices, cultural references, and speech patterns —inflections and vocabulary—, all point to the intercultural exchanges that have long been forged between minority communities forced to occupy marginalized spaces in the city, experience governmental negligence, lack of resources, geographical discrimination, etc.

Her seemingly seamless fluctuation between one cultural marker to another —what Omaris Zamora identifies as an act of AfroLatinx (trance)formation— makes her "authenticity" suspect to both of the communities she affirms to belong to as well as the music genres she performs in (201). The twitter controversies I allude to at the start of this chapter evidence part of this distrust towards her and claims of "actual" belonging to either community, pitting Latinx/Caribbean and Black communities against each other on racial basis. While a critique of how colorism and "white-passing" afford privilege to certain light-skinned bodies (as well as those who conform to certain beautification and comportment standards, as discussed in Chapter 1) inside Latinx communities (and the ongoing anti-black sentiments the community has espoused) are pressingly necessary, and go hand in hand with discussions on the existence, plight, and survival of Black Latinx people.

Cardi B's life story is widely known even by non-fans, as it forms the basis for most of her lyrical narratives, and the publicity strategy that her PR manager has milked in order to

55. She has credited her time in Washington Heights for her "accent" ("Cardi B Shares 5 Things").

distinguish her from other up and coming rappers and social media influencers. As a young high school graduate, Belcalis enrolled in a Community College where she majored in French, Western Civilization, and American politics, a career she cut short when forced to work more hours in order to support her family ("Why the Whole"). This detail, often ignored by the media, foreshadows Cardi's interest and involvement in American politics throughout 2017 and 2019. These range from Instagram-based social commentary monologues where, for example, she urged people go to vote, to a sit-down with former presidential candidate and Vermont senator Bernie Sanders to talk about his campaign and U.S. social democracy. But this also explains Cardi's unique wit when crafting her social media persona and presence. By 2016 she had reached moderate popularity through her Instagram videos, where she commented on gossip, woman's issues, social concerns, and any life event that came up. Her particular Bronx sassiness, her frankness, and the accent and speech patterns that would later make her the target of discriminatory comments on the part of publicists, producers, and audiences, also made her an incredibly attractive and fun social media celebrity. But the most publicized part of Cardi B's life is her former gig as a pole dancer. From roughly 2014-2015, Belcalis resorted to stripping, as it proved to be a more stable and lucrative form of employment than her previous jobs. Having to pitch in to economically support her grandmother, taxi-driving father, younger sister Hennessy, and the 36 or so cousins living in and out of her grandmother's place, the revenue from pole dancing proved to be a more secure form of income that also allowed her the kind of economic freedom and empowerment necessary to overcome many of the immediate hardships she faced while growing up in New York City. Cardi's stint as a pole dancer, although successful, did not last long. Her social media presence caught traction and allowed her to engage with other entertainment industry positions that eventually landed her a role in the Vh1-produced reality

show “Love and Hip Hop: New York.” Heeding her manager’s suggestion, Belcalis decided to pursue music and join the show for its 6th and 7th seasons.

The reality show, staged and superficial, may have done little for Cardi’s immediate music career, but it did a lot for her mainstream popularity. She instantly stood out amongst the cast —both newcomers and longstanding—[56] for her idiosyncratic charisma, and her unapologetic, raunchy, and funny personality. Out of all of the cast members from the two seasons she appeared in, Cardi stands out as the only truly contestatory feminist voice. The show exposes Cardi B’s negotiations with the gender politics of the rap music industry in New York. In particular, it evidences her savvinnes in navigating the sexism that women rappers face when working with male producers and DJs, the sensationalism with which the Love and Hip Hop production team guides the plots, and the politics of respectability enforced on Black women by the other cast members.

By the time the 7th season was broadcast (in 2017) Cardi already had released her first mixtape, *Gangsta Bitch Music Vol. 1* and was gearing up to release what would be her breakout single: “Bodak Yellow (Money Moves)”. The song, which affirms her tenacity at survival and economic independence by asserting her past as a pole dancer, and her superiority over other women and people in the genre, proved to be a musical masterpiece. But much more than garnering her more fans, the single charted on the top of the 1000 Billboard for the 2017 Summer, granting her *music* wide recognition and ample playtime. It was her first major label single, after signing to Atlantic Records and very much set the standard for her debut album *Invasion of Privacy*. Both “Bodak Yellow” and “I Like It” —the album’s third single— rose to

56. Which include a roster of hip hop and rap heavyweights such as Remy Ma, Papoose, and Peter Gunz.

#1 position in the Billboard charts, making Cardi B the only woman rapper to hold two #1 singles at the same time.

Cardi B's work is explicitly different from the style of music-making and performing that other artists from this dissertation showcase. For the most part, these artists have stayed relatively unknown for mainstream U.S. audiences; they garner far less revenue, sing in Spanish, and continuously transform the sounds of both Dominican and Caribbean local rhythms, incorporating the incoming mainstream music genres that become popular through globalization. Cardi B's music responds to the whims and needs of a long standing U.S. music industry that finds itself continuously at a loss to expand its consumer base, to update its standard hit-making formulas, and to repackage the extraordinary innovations that come from Global South producers and musicians in very palatable forms (for a mainstream U.S. audience). But her distinction with respect to other artists here does not rest solely on the fact that she is signed to a major label. Her relationship to the music business is much more explicitly motivated by capitalism; she needs money to survive, and the music industry can provide her that. Just like pole dancing, rapping becomes a means to an end. Despite the possible problematics in Cardi's capitalist relationship to music-making, I show that her performances provide an important reflection on the ways in which AfroLatinx people become legible, and the contradictions in that project. Additionally, I insist that questioning the ways in which the music industry capitalizes on and grapples with artists' identities —especially when these are from disenfranchised communities— tell us a lot about the ways in which discourses of people of color, justice, feminism, etc are repackaged and misconstrued. I believe Cardi B's image, sound, and performance are the results of a careful balance between autonomous desire, industry standards, and her fanbase's needs.

Through my analysis, I show how Cardi B's performance displays a compromise with the

Black American community, specifically Black Women in urban contexts in the United States. This political project finds contradiction in her celebration of the Latinx identity in her specifically marketed Latin songs, by essentializing and occluding her Black Latinx identity. In what follows, I trace the eruption of AfroLatinx *okurrrences* in Cardi B's Latinx songs, contrasting it with her presentation of stereotyped Black Womanhood in her breakout hit "Bodak Yellow."

Money Moves

Cardi B had already put out a mixtape, *Gangsta Bitch Music Vol 1* in 2016, when the breakout single "Bodak Yellow" (2017) was released. Following the structure of "No Flockin," a song by Florida trapper Kodak Black, Cardi B imitates Black's rapping cadence, but her particular style shines through with throaty, rambunctious articulations. The single, which inaugurates her signing with Atlantic Records, catapulted her into mainstream fame. Although Cardi is not necessarily an especially skilled rapper, I contend that instead she makes creative use of her Spanglish Caribbean speech patterns. She combines her articulations with a guttural tension that imbues the texture of her voice and pronunciation with a characteristic melody. This vocal performance not only distinguishes her from other rappers of the moment, but surprisingly updates the Atlanta and Florida-based trap fluctuations ubiquitous in most —if not all— of the trap produced from 2012 onward. Playing with language has become part of Cardi B's signature personality; therefore, the song's title transforms Kodak Black's name. Cardi changes Kodak to Bodak, —with the B standing for Belcalis—and changes Black to Yellow to convey her "yellow[57] skin" ("Cardi B on How Kodak"). In the lyrics Cardi asserts her independence, based

57. Her self-description as a woman with yellow skin corresponds to her recognition of her ethnoracial background, being of Dominican and Trinidadian heritage, and aligning herself with Latinidad, she

on work ethic and drive, and her own feminist stance towards these values. Harnessing Kodak's rapping style not only subverts the masculinist ethos of the original but allows her to show off her rapping virtuosity and musical brilliance. Much like La Insuperable's rhetoric, Cardi uses the language of violence and sexism found in their male peer's work as a strategy for inclusion and authenticity, as well as a form of subversion. "Bodak Yellow" is based on Cardi's time as a pole dancer. From that experience she builds an empowering narrative that places her above other women rappers. The typical rags to riches story displayed in rap music here is based on an indictment of the potentials of pole dancing and sex work as productive means of economic ascendancy. By placing dancing, performing, ("You in the club just to party. I'm there, I get paid a fee") and her commodified vagina ("My pussy feel like a lake, he wanna swim with his face") as means to acquire material goods: expensive shoes, Rolls Royce, fancy dinners, and a house with a gate, the bootstrap work ethic that is often based on music making and enterprise, in Cardi's lyricism is based on sexual entrepreneurship:

> I say, I get the money and go.
>
> This shit is hot like a stove
>
> My pussy glitter as gold
>
> Tell that li'l bitch play her role
>
> I just arrived in a Rolls…
>
> I go to dinner and steak
>
> Only the real can relate

---

conflates her race and ethnicity in the color yellow, to distinguish herself from African American Blackness. This is one of the contradictions inherent in Cardi's performance of AfroLatinidad, one that points to the complications in avowing both racial and ethnic categories and the invisibility this grants her. "Yellowing" herself potentially allows her recognition; at best it helps her regain control over her readability as Afrolatinx.

I used to live in the P's

Now it's a crib with a gate.

In “Bodak Yellow” music making and sexual entrepreneurship become the same: “I don’t dance now, I make money moves.” The novel part of this rhetoric is that the equation of music work with sex work places the same value on the creative production that make that work possible. I contend that in this song Cardi capitalizes on a performance of ratchet, and expands it, as part of a political project against a politics of respectability. In this song —and *Invasion of Privacy*— the ratchet positionality is enmeshed in both labors, thus displacing the idea of “sexual promiscuity” as an “easy way out” of poverty, casting it instead as another capitalist recourse that grants its performer/producer revenue and therefore a mode of survival. A *New York Times* piece on the impact of “Bodak Yellow” recognizes the allure and power of this discourse specifically because Cardi B personalizes the empowerment-through-sex-work narrative. In the song, the equation of sex work with music is carved from an individualistic standpoint, producing a feminism that does not attempt to “speak on behalf of womankind” (“25 Songs That Tell Us”). This feminist ethos thus distances itself from the capitalist and white feminisms espoused in most U.S. pop songs. The individualistic nature or personalized standpoint of Cardi’s rhetoric is specific to the political work that the ratchet enables.

The ratchet is part of the larger repertoire of controlling images that include the already discussed chapiadora/gold-digger stereotype (Ch 1). The ratchet most often appears as the behavior of the jezebel, which represents deviant Black female sexuality that —like the welfare queen— shows hedonism and appears more interested in material things and her self-image (Hill Collins 89). Contrary to the chapiadora, the jezebel does not wield her sexuality to secure a long-term romantic and financial partner. Instead, the jezebel image is deployed to police women’s

sexuality outside the bounds of heteropatriarchal structures (marriage, children, family). The ratchet performance, as exhibited in the jezebel image, becomes a more direct threat to white patriarchal society but also to the respectability that enforces Black Women's decisions over their sexuality, speech, dressing, and overall behavior to conform for the "betterment" of the Black community.

Cardi B's attention to aesthetics, and, most importantly —and distinctively from La Insuperable— her attitude and behavior make her unapologetically ratchet, which corresponds to the figure's connections to trap music. As Nikki Lane describes, "[Ratchet music] was the kind of music that revolved around being inappropriate —drunk, angry, loud, and horny. It also revolved around being Black and bad, on purpose" (4). Furthermore, Lane argues, "Claiming, acting, and being ratchet involves an indirect (or direct) political orientation. To be Black and to be ratchet, on purpose, means that you ascribe no value to assimilation into the American "way of life." (5) The individualistic nature that Jaime Lauren Keiles identifies in "Bodak Yellow" corresponds to the ratchet imaginary that Theri Pickens discusses in regard to its deployment in reality TV. Pickens ascribes political valence to the performance of ratchet as a way of disrupting narratives of black collectivity based in respectability. She argues: "The ratchet imaginary has no desire to participate in narratives of racial progression or social uplift; instead, it articulates a desire for individuality regardless of the ideas and wants of putative collective" (44). The ratchet's relationship to her sexuality lays bare an economy of desire, that while reinforcing dominant and racist views of Black female sexuality, the concern with individual uplift articulates the struggle against structures that silence her in particular (Pickens 47). In Cardi's career, this performance functions as cultural capital within the world of reality TV and is extended onto the mainstream music stage. Certainly, her performance of ratchet in *Love and*

Hip Hop: New York[58] allows her to stand out from other characters; in the case of *Invasion of Privacy*, as we see through "Bodak Yellow," her embodiment of ratchet allows her to capitalize on a stereotype that at once authenticates her in the music genre while allowing her to surface as a "novel" and distinct feminist voice in mainstream pop music. What happens when the ratchet is intertwined with the performance of Latinidad in songs marketed as "Latin"?

The ratchet becomes an *okurrrence* in Cardi B's music, as it forces the listener to confront the contradictions of her gendered and sexualized performance with hegemonic notions about Blackness and Latinidad. But at the same time, the personalization that the ratchet employs prevents listeners and consumers from making complete sense of the performance. Just like the trill in "okurrr" hinders some speakers in articulating the expression, the *okurrrence* of the ratchet in here does not readily permit the easy understanding, consumption, and listenability of Cardi. This hindering thus allows a select roster of people to engage with and make sense of the performer and her music. This counters the universalist nature that most mainstream pop music exhibits, that is, the guiding impulse of writing totalizing narratives with which any audience can relate to These narratives tend to marginalizes those whose lived experiences do not share in what are commonly understood as middle-class values. Cardi's individualism allows for an authentic identification and engagement with the politics of racialization, working-class realities, and non-conforming womanhood.

Lane argues that language is important for the readability of the ratchet. Cardi's usage of culturally specific terms such as hoes, bitch, pussy, bag, crib, and the n-word, further consolidate such ratchetness. A few months after releasing "Bodak Yellow," she partnered with another

58. In fact, Nikki Lane identifies L&HHNYC's consumers as ratchet. (6)

Bronx-based Dominicanyork trapper, Messiah, to record a Spanish version of the song. In the aptly subtitled "Latin Trap Remix" Cardi seamlessly moves from English bars into Spanish, using specifically Dominican vernacular. In this version, her language translations require some cultural translations as well. For example, in the original "You in the club just to party. I'm there, I get paid a fee" in the Latin Trap version is translated as "You in the club, tu *chapiando*, yo llegando y cobrando"(emphasis added). Thus, while in the English version, Cardi's diss against other people is based on a partygoer/party maker distinction, the Spanish version further genders such contrast by naming the "chapiadora" through the act of "chapeo", here seen as an inferior form of hustling. My discussion on the politics of chapeo from Chapter 1 helps us understand the implications of such transformation. If in the English-only version Cardi seems to support women's sexual entrepreneurship and reclaims the ratchet, the Latin Trap version reverts to a politics of anti-chapeo, corresponding with the contradictory stance that La Insuperable's discourses and performances enact. While in the original chorus she states "I don't dance now, I make money moves" in the remix she explains: "Esta canción es pa mis goonies y mis cueros" reclaiming the sexist term "cuero", which corresponds to the English hoe. The chapiadora and the cuero become opposites in the Latin Remix. Thus, in Cardi's attempt to cater to bilingual Latinxs or, specifically, Dominicans, she at once conforms to the stereotypes that uphold puritanical versions of womanhood (the chapiadora as lesser-than), while empowering the "cueros" who live their sexualities unrestrained. The contradiction reveals the tensions between the politics of sexuality on the island and in the diaspora; blurring the distinctions between the both in the song becomes evidence of the transnational nature of these discourses, how a politics of respectability and a resistance to it through music production enforces complicated performances of women's sexuality. Thus, contrary to La Insuperable's chapiadora regia, Cardi

insists on a performance of ratchetness, not necessarily elevating the stigmatized role of the gold-digger but instead reformulating it as the stereotype of the independent woman who does engage in compulsory hetero-patriarchal relationships as an economic transaction.

The performance of ratchet for Cardi B seems to become attenuated when performing Latinidad. Taking a look at "I Like It," we can see how she negotiates Latinidad and Blackness through other essentialized ethnic and racial stereotypes. In these songs, as she displayed in the Latin Remix of "Bodak Yellow," Cardi's language and phonetics connect with a different racialized and classed version of ratchetness that speaks to Dominican Blackness and Latinidad more specifically.

I Like it

One first hears the trumpet blows coming from afar. They become intertwined with a joyfully sustained shout "Yeaaah baaaby" that announces a festive gathering. Right after, the booming bass of a trap beat cuts through a chorus of high pitched voices crying out "I like it like that." The sample might disconcert listeners familiar with Pete Rodriguez's 1967 hit.[59] Even though one of the distinctive traits of hip-hop music and its derivatives[60] is the creative but controversial art of sampling, we had yet to have a mainstream, chart-topping trap song that carved into the proto-salsa, Latin music repertoire, much less explicitly paying tribute to it.[61] Cardi B's tribute to Latin Boogaloo and other salsa music phenomena activates these genre's liberatory forms of music-making to re-energize trap music with a distinctive Latinx ethos. Latin

59. The original Rodriguez's song is titled " I Like It Like That" and Cardi B's homage is " I Like It"
60. An in-depth discussion of these subgenres can be found in Chapter 1
61. Dominican urbano musician Fuego had already recorded bachata infused trap songs in 2016, two years before Cardi B's I like it

Boogaloo's sonic structure lends itself to multiple interventions by distinctive voices, the irruption of grassroots sonic cultures, and even dancer and listener's bodily feedback. This quality feeds into as much as is nourished by trap's percussive anchoring and minor key melodies that, while having a more static structure, yields to the playful contours of other genres. In recognizing this malleability Cardi B's song reconfigures Latin and Southern U.S. trap while staking claim at two sonic traditions, a move that echoes the marketing of her own identity as a Black Latina raised in the Bronx. As I will show, these homages to Latin Boogaloo and salsa become problematic when paired with a reiteration of long-standing tropes about femininity, Caribbean identity, Latinx reality, and Black culture.

"I like it" is the first song where Cardi B explicitly engages with Latinx sounds, and it has become one of her most popular. Released as the 4th single of her 2018 debut studio album, *Invasion of Privacy*, it is an eight times Platinum record,[62] and its video has over 1 billion views on YouTube. The song features two of the most prominent Latin American pop music artists of the moment, Puerto Rican trapper Bad Bunny and Colombian reggaetón superstar J. Balvin. Their collaboration on this track is substantial, granting them more than just the status of "featured" artists, as they are allowed full 16 bar sections each (same as Cardi B's verse). But additionally, their long-time producer DJ Luian, reggaetón staple beat-maker/producer Tainy, and newcomer songwriter Jhay Cortez all dip their hands into the songwriting and production process of the track, making it a full-blown Caribbean collaboration hit. The single rose to the top of Billboard's Hot 100 chart, granting Cardi B the accolade of being the first female rapper to

62. In the United States, the Record Industry Association of America grants the award " Platinum" to albums that have sold more than 1 million copies and singles that have sold 2 million copies. In other words, "I Like It" has been recognized to sell 16 million copies. It's telling that the RIAA awards platinum status to Spanish-language albums that sell 60k copies or more, and multi-platinum status to those who receive 120k or more.

have topped the chart twice. “I Like It” solidified her exponential rise to mainstream music fame, following the popularity of “Bodak Yellow” (2017) and becoming the song of the Summer 2018[63] (Giorgis). Contrary to the latter track, however, “I Like It” gives her the chance to become a household name outside of the confines of urban music consumers as well as young popular music followers; it puts her on the radar of Latinx and Spanish-speaking audiences and allows her to enact a reverse cross-over. That is, instead of the classic Latin American artist recording music in English in order to garner audiences in the US, Cardi B records a song that would more readily give her an audience among Spanish speakers. Nevertheless, in the song, her lyrics, demeanor, speech, and music all retain the particularities of the ratchet, meaning the Black New York Latina experience of her upbringing, creating discord with a new pop icon persona that the industry —and fans— struggle to transform her into.

Cardi B recognizes the potential that Spanish collaborations grant her in asserting her Latinx heritage. Her rhetoric on the purpose of her craft follows the commercial hip hop discourse on money-making and upward mobility through the accumulation of material goods, especially those associated with fashion and the public eye. This sentiment, along with the music industry’s well-known hit making goals, evidences the logic behind the production of “I Like It”; it’s a money-making strategy. The difference between this and the entrepreneurship affirmation in “Bodak Yellow” is how marketing her Latinidad excises the ratchet, making her performance seemingly less genuine. In attending to these contradictions, I analyze “I Like It” taking into account the tensions between an essentialized Latinidad and Cardi’s ratchet performance.

This section also complements my discussion of the negotiations that Dominican urban

63. It’s important to note that the year before, 2017, it was “Despacito”, a Puerto Rican reggaetón ballad in Spanish which held this title.

music performers undergo with their producers and record companies. While in the previous chapters I explore how independent and underground industries have had to manage a lack of resources and mainstream media recognition, Cardi B's productions instead provide us with a contrasting case based on a model of high remuneration and cultural hegemony. By working inside this industry, Cardi's idiosyncrasies become constrained in more ways than those of artists such as La Insuperable and Rita Indiana. However, as this chapter will show, Cardi cleverly navigates these processes in order to maintain her uniqueness intact. "I Like It" becomes a testament to these strategic *okurrrences.*

"I got soul": Latin Boogaloo

Whether a cover, a version, an interpolation, or a mashup, Cardi B's "I Like It" introduces Latin Boogaloo to contemporary audiences ("Cardi B's 'I Like It'"). Latin Boogaloo was a short-lived but potent dance music fad from the mid-1960's developed by Puerto Rican and Latinx musicians and African American audiences in New York. It predates the salsa phenomenon for just a couple months and certainly set the basis for much of what salsa's own sound and structure was going to be like when it bloomed in the late 1960's. Pete Rodriguez' "I Like It Like That" became a radio station and dance floor hit during the peak of the Latin Boogaloo vogue, which was coincidentally also its end. Only lasting roughly from 1965 to 1967, Latin Boogaloo and its performers enjoyed two years of intense radio play time, recording deals, and local shows, only to fade into the background due to boycotting by the industry's promoters and producers after many of the musicians demanded proper remuneration for their recordings and live presentations, according to Juan Flores (*From Bomba* 107). Latin Boogaloo is distinctive from both its Latin music precursors and its salsa successor, mainly due to its explicit marriage of African American mid-century music rhythms and Latin ones (specifically

Caribbean). Its strong mixture of funk, soul, and rhythm and blues music allows the musicians to break with some of the traditional conventions of Latin style music that had been staple in New York during this decade. Specifically, it mashes the Afro-Cuban music of the time (Cubop and Latin Jazz) and big band with bee-bop and other African American styles to create a sonic space of celebration. Some of Latin Boogaloo's specific trademarks are opening piano vamps that set the base for the song and recur throughout the tune, montuno and mambo rhythms, R&B-style backbeats, and a series of elements that convey the sense of live music playing or of a gathering or celebration: rhythmic hand-clapping, a chorus leitmotiv, laughter and shouting, ad libbed conversations, and ecstatic build-ups and restarts (Flores 87). Although considered a simplification of the traditional Afro Caribbean rhythms that required formal training and virtuosity, Latin Boogaloo was masterful in conveying two distinct sonic cultures that coexisted in the New York of the times through the presence of African Americans and Puerto Ricans. But Latin Boogaloo musicians also expanded the conventions of the genre by responding to audiences' particular needs and dance styles. In Juan Flores' discussion of the genre's history, he narrates how during a set, Richie Ray -famous salsa pianist and Latin Boogaloo precursor- was told by his friends that the dancers in the crowd were combining Latin dance moves with steps from Boogaloo and other African American styles. According to them, these diverse moving styles went together really well. The band members then observed the dances and crafted their rhythms and musical qualities to match the crowd's movements (86). Latin Boogaloo is thus remarkable not only due to its integration of the myriad of music conventions of the moment, but also for creatively responding to audiences' movements. The audience for Latin Boogaloo was not just Latinx; in fact, for most of the trend, it was African Americans who attended these performances. Latinx musicians were cognizant of their audience, but their craft also responded

to their lived experiences: "two musical languages thus coexisted in the world of the Latin Boogaloo musician- that of his cultural and family heritage and that of life among peers in the streets and at school" (88). That is, these musicians exhibited the Spanish Caribbean heritage of their migrant parents and the African American culture of the community in which they were inserted.

An additional element that made Latin Boogaloo stand out to non-Latinx audiences was the incorporation of English lyrics, which often coexisted with regional Caribbean Spanish ones, further solidifying the idea of cross-cultural celebration and inclusivity that the genre espoused. It then comes as no surprise that the coming-togetherness of the genre is reflected through sounds of celebration: people's interruptions, laughter and racket, conversations between the singer and the crowd, and (for the most part) non-narrative extemporaneous lyrics. These elements, which essentially make Latin Boogaloo feel like it is always being performed live, open a space for other performance styles such as improvised singing— a creative exercise modeled after jazz, responsible for influencing salsa's montuno sections as well as hip hop's freestyle rap.

Recognizing the interplay between African American and Latinx music cultures that Latin Boogaloo offers, Cardi B's "I Like It" re-vamps its qualities to conform to modern-day conventions. "I Like It" hyperbolizes the original's "Latin"[64] quality. In it, the unique Afro-diasporic elements found in her other productions are transformed to accommodate not only the

64. I use the term "Latin" here to refer to how these artists have been characterized by the media, the music industry, and themselves. It is different from my usage of the term "Latinx" which is a political category. I'm also careful to ascribe the "latinx" identity to artists that have no roots or lived experiences in the United States -unlike Cardi B, even though, as this chapter problematizes, they market the "latino" category to connect with US-based audiences without losing their Latin American ones.

two “Latin” artists featured on the track and their hyper local cultural references, but also the massive amount of stereotypically tropical Caribbean symbolism in lyrics, bodily performance, aesthetics, and sound. Co-producer Tainy (Marco Masís) explains how he imbued the song with the specific kick it needed to become a hit: by calibrating the drum-programming used to craft the trap beat, and by re-recording the horn section to play over the original 1967 sample (“Cardi B’s ‘I like It,’ An Oral History”). Thus, the specific Puerto Rican reggaetón quality of the drum pattern and the newly refreshed horns sonically invigorate the track. This anchoring in Caribbean popular music traditions is instrumental to the track’s success; it calls upon a genealogy of transnational music trends from the archipelago to New York and back. But this move is dangerously close to overpacking the song with stereotypical markers of pop Latinidad, music that, in the words of Licia Fiol-Matta, utilizes a “market-driven, globalized ‘latino identity’ prepackaged and sold for mass consumption” (“Pop Latinidad” 29). As many music columnists have noted,[65] “I Like It” recalls two distinct moments of U.S Latin music craze; the original late 1960’s mambo and Latin Boogaloo, and the1990’s “Latin Boom” -when, coincidentally, a first “I Like It Like That” cover was recorded. “I Like It” allows Cardi B not only to reach into Latin American and Spanish/Spanglish-speaking audiences in the U.S., but also to showcase her Afro-Latina identity as a harmony between her parents’ heritage, her upbringing, and her musical practice.

Trapping Boogaloo

Pete Rodriguez’s original “I Like It Like That” places emphasis on the foreboding piano melody that underlies the otherwise festive song. The repetition of the piano vamp acts as one of

65. Slate magazine, The Atlantic, Billboard Magazine.

the defining features of Latin Boogaloo. Cardi B's version, instead, exploits the original song's refrain, where Pete Rodriguez's solitary voice is joined by a chorus of people extraneous to the band's ensemble. This polyphony lifts Rodriguez's exclamations "you gotta believe me when I tell you" that conforms to the seemingly improvisational nature of Latin Boogaloo lyrics. The 2018 sampling of Pete's refrain recognizes the choral interplay as one of the ways in which Latin Boogaloo shows an aperture to the extemporaneous interruptions to the flow of the song. As Aparicio explains in relation to salsa, long improvisation sections -called *soneos*- exemplify liberty and spontaneity. "It allows salsa to articulate a collective voice in its chorus section and to establish a dialogic texture in its montuno section. When the singer improvises on the main theme of the song (the art of the soneo) he or she creates new utterances and rearticulates and culls phrases from other songs of various traditions. The singer opens up a sonorous space of freedom, improvisation, and innovation, clinging simultaneously to musical tradition and reaffirming collective memory" (84).

Given that Latin Boogaloo is understood to be a precursor to salsa, the practice of soneo is a continuation of what Juan Flores has described as the improvisational style of son montuno. (81). As part of this practice, Latin Boogaloo songs feature short piano vamps,[66] R&B backbeats with upbeat tempo, mambo rhythms, Spanglish lyrics, hand-clapping, one or a small variety of distinctive phrases that are repeated throughout the song by a group chorus, as well as skats, soneos, and adlibs that blurt out phrases. (Flores 81, 97) The montuno section thus allows folks to come in and out of the soundscape with their cheers of joy, grunts, whoops, exclamations, chants, as well as tune bits and other musical pieces. Thus, Cardi's version extends this sense of

66. vamps are short sequences of chords that are repeated for an extended period. In Latin Boogaloo and salsa. they become the driving melodies throughout the song.

open festivity and liberty. The song's producers identify the potentials of amplifying this joyful atmosphere, enhancing the horn section by re-recording the original sample, and allowing all the interpreters to ad lib in their now-signature trap influenced ways.

Trap music can be defined as a contemporary sub-genre developed in 2009 after gangsta rap in the South of the United States, specifically Atlanta. Its defining characteristics are distinctive for seasoned hip hop listeners: usage of the 808 drum machine, repetitive, sinister loops that make up the back melody, an ominous atmosphere coupled with particular rapping pitches and intonations, and lyrics that reflect on the realities of working class, impoverished Black people in the South, with a particular emphasis on illicit activities such as drug selling and consumption, sex work, and violence. The genre has largely substituted any rap or hip hop music commercially produced and consumed mainstream, and its most catchy elements have been incorporated into almost all U.S. pop music produced in the last 5 years.[67] Its popularity outside of Atlanta and the South has been attributed to rappers such as Future, Young Jeezy, and Gucci Mane (each of which have had hugely successful trap singles and albums that climbed the Billboard Hit Charts). As with other Black-produced music genres, the mainstream cooptation of trap has blurred its distinction while further marginalizing the Southern performers who "stick to the script" in terms of the particularities of sound production and rap performance that distinguishes the music.

Jernej Kaluza argues that trap is not just a sound but a conjunction of sound and the practice of production in which it originally appears. Specifically, for Kaluza, trap music reflects

67. So much so that even genres like Country music, which have historically stood in contrast to Black American ones have now incorporated trap elements into their productions. Most notably, Country-Trap collaborations like Lil Nas X's Old Town Road have been successful and embraced by listening communities from both genres.

a rejection of middle class, white suburban realities. In light of global capitalism and the increase in social difference, rap's narratives of upward economic mobility are transformed into a desire to succeed in the "dirty South" instead of outside of it. (26) In this sense then, many mainstream pop productions that include trap into in their arrangements can be catalogued as pop and not necessarily as trap, preserving the specific context that feeds Southern-produced trap. Following Kaluza's definition, one can question whether Cardi B's " I Like It" is indeed trap or not. While the production conditions of the song certainly follow a mode of pop music production that has been standardized at least since the 1960's, certain elements brought in by producers such as Tainy, J White Did It, and the recording methods of Cardi, Bad Bunny, and J Balvin imbue the track with the particularities of reggaetón and trap production values, which largely run counter to the whims of the mainstream music industry. But what is most productive in this reflection of trap music versus its mainstreaming is that there are parallels between the ways in which trap has been largely subsumed and almost obliterated by the larger music industry and the trajectory of Latin Boogaloo. In the same way as Latin Boogaloo was practically dissolved due to the music industry's insistence in including its elements to any pop music recording and the refusal to properly remunerate the latin Boogaloo bands that were being overworked with multiple gigs, trap music's ubiquity in current pop music production can end up "killing" southern trap music production. Thus, in Cardi's version, "I Like It" is revitalized as the successful offspring of production and sonic arrangement elements and procedures that are specific to the underground processes of independently-produced genres like Latin Boogaloo, trap, and reggaetón in their beginnings.

The communal gathering allowed by Latin Boogaloo extends itself to incorporate the trap and urban musicality that defines a new "sonic Latinidad." The new musical texture that the

Latin Boogaloo sample grants the developing trap musicality that is characteristic of Cardi B and her producers' work amplifies the 1960's conjoining of African American everyday nature with a Caribbean and Latinx cultural scene. Although romanticized, the accommodation of the Caribbean Latinx sonic referent into the strict trap structure attempts to sonify the new cultural configurations that Cardi B's own ethnic heritage and racial belonging grants her. It capitalizes on the revitalization of what some journalists have considered a "Nuyorican anthem" ('Cardi B's "I Like It"") in order to extend it to a notion of pan-Latinidad that problematically includes Latin American voices, occluding once again the particularities of the US-born Latinx population and the racialized communities that made both music genres possible.

Bardiology

Following Latin Boogaloo's characteristic language mixing, Cardi's English-spoken bars in "I Like It" are accompanied by Puerto Rican Bad Bunny and the Colombian musician J Balvin rapping in their native Spanish language. Bad Bunny's verses are provocative, not only because they are delivered in Spanish but because of their specific Spanish-Caribbean qualities, the grain of his voice conveying the specificities of his Puerto Rican upbringing. If Latin Boogaloo's lyrics rest on the extemporaneity of spur of the moment utterances, then Bad Bunny's verses here can be understood to follow or emulate it. Not specific to Latin Boogaloo —ad libs are introduced by Latinx musicians through jazz— trap and reggaetón profit off improvisation and unscripted lyrical development as well. Cardi B's utterances in and outside of the musical performance seem to follow this rule. Her speech, interrupted by fillers and onomatopoeic sounds, and accompanied by highly theatrical facial expressions, exudes a playful, almost improvisational musicality of its own. In "I Like It," however, we find a more subdued speech style that calculates the places of interruption strategically.

Latin Boogaloo's seamless interaction between Spanish and English lyrics is transposed to Cardi's version by allowing Latin American rappers Bad Bunny and J Balvin to deliver in their native language, offering just one or two lines in English, thus positioning Cardi as the Anglo-American, and presenting clear distinctions between the three based on language, race, and gender. Allowing non-U.S. Latinx artists to perform in their native Spanish in a primarily English track marketed towards U.S. Anglo audiences is certainly a novelty. Therefore, Bad Bunny and J Balvin's presence in this recording can be seen as a progression towards Spanish-speaking politics in the US, especially when speaking Spanish has been increasingly stigmatized and criminalized. Associations between Spanish speaking communities in the Unites States and undocumented immigration has imbued both the speakers as well as the cultural associations in regards to the language as inherently "alien" and "illegal" (Zentella 630). Thus, the mistrust towards Spanish speaking has fueled a series of attacks —ranging from denial of service at local businesses to threats of calling ICE— throughout North America since 2016. As Lourdes Torres has pointed out, these violent reactions are "predicated on the fact that the Spanish language emerges from racialized bodies and thus is heard as illegitimate by white supremacists". Thus, in this sociopolitical context, Cardi B's inclusion of stand-alone, Spanish verses by her two Latin American collaborators becomes an important political gesture. It seems fitting then that Bad Bunny and J Balvin's development of the tag line "Latino gang" (which they will continue to use for other music projects whether collaborative or solo) stems from this collaboration. Nevertheless, not allowing Cardi to rap in Spanish or Spanglish seems to perpetuate the notion that Latinxs speak Spanish —or at most, are bilingual— and similarly, that Black people only speak English. By this logic then, Cardi B's Latinidad is not only negated, but her AfroLatinidad, which in this case is intertwined with her language, is also occluded.

Similarly, Cardi B's signature Spanish-tinged English —or Spanglish—, that is the language *okurrence*, has been largely corrected, smoothed out, and removed from this song. In one illuminating episode of Love & Hip Hop New York Season 6, Cardi B tells her friend Yung B about her manager's insistence on correcting her pronunciation. Now being forced to take "etiquette classes" (which Yung B calls "not being ratchet classes" —a detail I will connect with Cardi's rejection of a respectability politics further on), Cardi remembers when she had to take a speech class because of her accent. ("Endings & Beginnings"). Her discomfort at and rejection of the politics of propriety embedded in the manager's exhortation is echoed in many subsequent Cardi B interviews, where she often reflects on the self-restraints, self-policing, and other behavioral rectifications she's undergone in order to "better fit" in the entertainment industry or to "better sell" her music: "A teacher also told me my English is not that good. She told me, 'you need to speak a certain way'… They said the same when I got famous. But I feel like I speak English properly…" ("Why The Whole World"). But the people who insist on her adoption of "proper etiquette" and smoothing out of her "rough" accent and speech traits, were the same people who recognized the uniqueness and marketability of Cardi's vocal style ("Cardi B Did it"). This style is characteristic precisely because of her Spanish-Caribbean quality, manifested through her pronunciation; a mix of African American Vernacular with Spanish Caribbean, the velocity of her speech, and last and most perceptibly, her "gibberish-like" onomatopoeic space fillers that grace the end of most of her phrases and sentences —what she herself has termed "Bardiology" ("75 Questions With Cardi B"). These space fillers become intertwined with trap's characteristic ad-libs, the echoed and reverbed "yeah" and "*skrt skrts*" —which in "I Like It" become a contemporary version of the original Latin Boogaloo's "yeah baby"— and other extemporaneous expressions. It is this Caribbean speech quality that the etiquette and speech

classes Cardi is supposed to take specifically want to excise from her talking style. These enforced negotiations on speech and language, while echoing larger sentiments on the politics of Spanish language in the United States as well as the continuous policing of Black American's speech, evidence the transculturation of Black and Latinx communities in New York. Certainly, "I Like It" topicalizes and romanticizes this reality. But Belcalis' life (and partly, the glimpses of that lifestyle, however scripted they may be, that appear on L&HHNYC) portray this relationality through frameworks understood as less respectable, or where explicit political and social mobility are not the de facto result. In this sense, Belcalis' life rewrites the narrative on Latinx and Black relationalities in NYC by embodying the contradictory discourses that shape the daily lives of both populations.

Notably, Cardi B's struggles to reconcile propriety in language politics with the particularities of her vocal and speech performances relate to another long-standing cultural struggle: Latinx writers' and poets' creative misuse of the English language. What Frances Aparicio has identified as subversive signifiers in early Latinx writers and poet's transformation of English through the semantic structure of Spanish finds an evolution in Cardi's "Bardiology". For Belcalis, the tropicalization of English becomes a hyper-performance of the African American Vernacular that stems from the New York City urban landscape she inhabits, as well as Black Caribbean Spanish's playfulness with language. In a Vogue interview, Belcalis has recalled how it was hard for her at the beginning to rap in English, given that she grew up speaking Spanish ("75 Questions With Cardi B"). Although certainly at home, with her grandmother and other Dominican family members, she was more likely to speak Spanish, English —and more specifically, AAVE— was sure to be the language and particular dialect/version of English with which she communicated with friends and acquaintances around

Washington Heights and the Bronx. Similar to what the Latin Boogaloo musicians have expressed, Belcalis' language and music straddle two distinct but coalescing worlds: the Caribbean cultural heritage fostered at home with family and the street cultural codes developed through friends, acquaintances, and the larger NYC cultural sphere.

Raquel Z. Rivera observes that during the mid-1990's rise in Latinx hip hop, language became one of the central signifiers of authenticity. Utilizing the idea of verbal ebonics, she explains that Puerto Rican Latinx rappers were incorporated into the Ebonic realm through their usage of linguistic manifestations of New York Caribbean Latinidad. She highlights that it wasn't necessarily the inclusion of Spanish that deemed these artists authentically Latino and Hip Hop, but instead the ways in which their Caribbean New York speech patterns disrupted and transformed English, what she identifies as a "linguistic tropicalization." Thus, she identifies the hip hop zone as a space where Latinidad is not inscribed through the usage of Spanish, but instead by the particular ways of speaking English. This echoes work done by other scholars who acknowledge Latinidad as an identity manifested through a variety of languages that do not have to be strictly Spanish, that is developed mostly in English- the language of the second and third generations.

Following the relationship between language and hip hop authenticity that Rivera recapitulates, it would seem that "I like It" proposes a distinction between Cardi B and her collaborators. By recruiting J Balvin and Bad Bunny's contributions as the Spanish sections of the song, the producers create and capitalize on further contrast between the perceived identities of the three performers; Cardi's English renders her more authentically hip hop and Black, differentiating her from the two men to be perceived as "foreign". Rivera adds that for most hip hoppers, assertions about Latinidad or ethnic affiliation tend to alienate the performer, as they

disrupt the notion of the hip hop family as one anchored in racialized experiences, instead of ethno-national or language based one. Nevertheless, the beginning of the 21st century witnessed a shift in these politics, and asserting Latinidad became profitable. As a studio-led production, "I Like It" capitalizes on both the umbrella notion of Latinidad and, more importantly, on the underlying differences and tensions between ethnic and racial identifications. Both Cardi B's Blackness as well as BB and JB's Spanish provide enough "exotic images" to cater to White Anglo, Latinx, and Latin American audiences.

Cardi's language is carefully curated and attenuated in "I Like It", contrary to the rest of I*nvsaion of Privac*y. I contend that her phonetics and pronunciation in the song still carry the textural elements of "Bardiology". To listen to Cardi's speech and take in her inflections is to grapple with her *okurrrences*. Her diction and the forceful transformation she puts her facial musculature through, in order to change her articulatios and conform to the "etiquette" required by the record label or the pop music industry, is a metaphor for the struggles to accommodate and fit her Blackness into both hegemonic notions of Dominicanidad as well as Latinidad. It is in this vocal process, which one hears being negotiated throughout the album—she sings soulfully in "Thru Your Phone", spits pointedly violent in "Get Up 10", and screeches hoarsely in "Money Bag"—,where she vocalizes the struggle, mis-recognitions and unlistenability of her performance. In contrast to what Zamora identifies in the content of her instagram monologues as moments of "(trance)sition", my understanding of "Bardiology" as an *okurrrence* suggests instead that there is a coexistence of apparently contradictory modes of speaking, acting, and being that nurture and depend on each other. That is, the struggle is performed as an exercise in discomfort —for the listeners as much as the performers—, but not from a need to accommodate one over the other.

"Spicy mami, hot tamale": Staging essentialized Latinidad

"I Like It" forces the listener to keep up with Cardi B's orotund verses that, in accordance with the song's title, spew her list of preferences. By naming a multitude of commodities common in trap music—and more specifically, commercial hip hop— Cardi makes sure the song's lyrical thematic falls in line with the genre she inhabits, despite the song's explicit transmutations of the sonic characteristics of the genre: "I like dollars, I like diamonds. I like stunning, I like shining. I like million dollar deals." But the feminist listener will probably halt when in the 12th bar, Cardi introduces and describes herself as "Spicy mami, hot tamale/Hotter than a Somali" at once conforming to and reclaiming the exoticized adjectives that have objectified Latinx women in popular music for the last two decades. More specifically, she self-tropicalizes her Black Caribbean femininity through warm weather and spicy foods. Echoing what has been an all-too-common strategy by English-speaking rappers and MCs during the 90's boom of commercial hip hop to both accommodate Latinx and Caribbean performers as well as to cater to a Spanish-speaking audience, Cardi stereotypes her Latinx identity through verbal descriptors, sonic referents, and visual cues. But beyond tropicalizing Latinidad, "I Like It" constructs a palimpsest of stereotypes that occlude her Blackness, missing the chance to position the song as an indictment of the whitewashing process of a globalized music landscape. What is at stake in "I Like It," then, is both the sublimation of the fierce feminist discourse developed in earlier songs such as "Bodak Yellow" as well as the counter-narratives of Black Latinx Caribbeanness that underlie most of her speech and bodily performances elsewhere. I want to unpack here the ways in which "I like It" apparently undermines these political projects, to instead posit that Cardi employs strategic okurrrences which complicate further the relationship between race, gender, and ethnicity in US trap and Latinx music.

Raquel Z. Rivera has amply discussed how conceptualizations of Latinidad were embedded in the development of hip hop. Specifically, during hop hop's commercialization process in the 1990's, the Latinx community and culture began to appear referenced in lyrics and samples. With this, the image of the Latina woman became a trend in hip hop and rap music, posing as a cultural signifier of a tropicalized Latinidad. Often, the metonymic nature of these signifiers position women as consumable objects. What Rivera identifies as "the mark of the plural" renders women, food, music, and tropical landscapes as interchangeable references for Latinidad. The relationship between food and women as sexual object is enforced through metaphors of consumption. This trend has been carried by other genres like reggaetón but has been similarly displayed in popular music both Anglo and Latin American. For example, in bachata, women's sexual organs are usually represented in the form of foods such as fruit, especially in the *bachatas de doble sentido*, where singers wield their creative skills at sexual double-entendre (Pacini Hernandez 175). Cardi's verses recapitulate a common metaphor directed at racialized women like herself, but also evoke a Dominican popular music tradition, perhaps taking on the position of the male enunciator in the same ways as she does with the rest of her trap repertoire. Furthermore, she self-tropicalizes by engaging in the stereotyping of Latinxs in the Anglo gaze. This move corresponds to some of the roles that women have been forced to occupy in hip hop and rap. Both as part of the content of the music as well as performers of it, commercial hip hop and rap largely forced female MCs to conform to certain tropes in order to be successful in the genre. For instance, when hip hop's central discourse kept to social criticism, women performers were expected to pitch in with discussions about sexual politics (*Black Noise*). This subtle sexism relegated women's contributions to hip hop to a specific domain, in many cases the one that constituted their own difference, that of gender and

sexuality.

As Tricia Rose has noted, enforcement meant that women have been understood as uniformly anti-sexist, sexually progressive voices. The pitfall of such an overarching notion is that this pitches men as always sexist and misogynist and women as their detractors, thus preventing more nuanced reflections on how women can also conform to the masculinist discourses espoused by their male counterparts, or, as Rose has evidenced in her work, that feminist narratives can be found in men's rap songs as well. Furthermore, such distinctions operate in a binary, normative lens that leaves queer and non-binary identities and performers out of the realm of hip hop altogether. Often this monolithic view on women's role in the genre attempts to find logics to women rappers' insistence on discourses of sexual autonomy, especially during the transitioning years of commercial hip hop.

In the case of contemporary rap and hip hop, women rappers have been utilizing the language around violence and sex commonly expressed by male MCs[68] in order to subvert the inherently sexist and racist distinction between women and men rappers. This has allowed many women rappers to not only succeed by heeding the demands of an industry that objectifies them but also to subvert the respectability politics that would refrain them from participating in hip hop in the first place. In the case of an artist such as Cardi B, a focus on her discourses through a lens of respectability would not be able to accommodate them to neat narratives of women's empowerment and anti-sexist criticism. For Cardi, embodying the ratchet stereotype allows her to shed light on the hypocrisy towards sexually empowered Black women and criticize the demands over women rappers and pop music artists, while fitting neatly into the sexual

68. As I have discussed already in the previous chapters, similar strategies have been used in merengue, reggaetón, and dembow.

narratives of trap music. As I have previously discussed, women música urbana performers' sexual entrepreneur capitalizes on the sexual politics of the genre in order to make a living through music production and gain some sense of autonomy over her career and her body.

Cardi's rhetoric of superiority through sexiness in her description in "I Like It" reads as superficial compared to a song like "Bodak Yellow", specifically because it problematically reinforces stereotypes about Latinidad. This follows the model that other African American rappers have used in songs where they tropicalize their Latinx counterparts in similar ways as Anglo White performers have, what Raquel Z. Rivera calls subaltern-generated tropicalizations. In contrast to hegemonic or self-tropicalizations, subaltern-generated ones, while still reinforcing notions of Latinidad based on sensuality, passion, and spice, "do not inscribe 'the tropical' with assumptions of inferiority —unless 'the tropical' is gendered as feminine" (127). Utilizing the language of tropical Latinidad found in hip hop and rap songs, Cardi subverts the narrative of inferiority by staking claim to her Blackness.

But Cardi's self-tropicalized Latinidad also becomes a pre-emptive resistance to the categorization of women-as-country that Bad Bunny exudes in his subsequent verses. In other words, Cardi's superficial and stereotypical description could be understood as an already resistance to her male counterpart's sexist verses. In these, Bad Bunny's enumeration of things he likes comes right after the problematic enunciation of "Que viva la raza". Recalling the slogan born out of Mexican Farmer's Strike in the 1930's but later reclaimed by Chicano activists during the 60s and 70s recognizes Mexican-American cultural hegemony as much as it points to a decontextualization of the political struggle that birthed the phrase. In Bad Bunny's usage of "La Raza", Mexican-American and Chicano struggles become a metonym for Latinxs' existence. The rapper's list of things he likes is reduced to his sexual desires over women. These sexualized

descriptions seem to refine what that celebratory "raza" is composed of. Bad Bunny resorts to a strategy that other artists have employed before him;[69] sexually totemizing women:

> Me gustan boricuas, me gustan cubanas (rrr)
>
> Me gusta el acento de las colombianas (¿qué hubo pues?)
>
> Cómo mueve el culo la dominicana (¿qué lo que?)
>
> Lo rico que me chingan las venezolanas (woo!)

Cardi's flavoring of her ethnicity and the ambiguity that ensues from such generalizations about her body —as food, as spice— evade Bad Bunny's sexualized specificity in his coagulation of nationality and women through the male gaze. Here, ethnic and national ambiguity empowers Cardi B over her counterpart's sexism. Here, essentializing her *okurrrence* makes both her Blackness and her Latinidad legible and marketable. In contrast, Cardi's views on the politics of sexuality and women's empowerment through sex work rarely follow the essentialist model. If in "Bodak Yellow", she uses ratchet *okurrences* to assert individual feminist rhetoric that amplifies beyond white feminist ideologies, in "I Like It", the simplicity of the cliched line complicates simple readings regarding subversion/conformation. Instead, I propose that this contradiction showcases her own grappling with AfroLatinidad. By repurposing the tropical her performance highlights the incongruousness of her ratchet within the parameters of that marketable Latinidad. The contrast with her colleagues, and even the clothing choices that

69.1940's and 1950's Cuban son, for example, displayed such a rhetorical device in songs like "Las Muchachas." More recently, N.O.R.E.'s famous reggaetón song "Oye Mi Canto" features the female duo Nina Sky singing "boricua, morena, cubana. dominicana…" while showcasing a beach full of Latin American country's flags being held up by women in bikinis". Additionally, It is not uncommon for patriotic songs to follow the "women as nation" trope, mostly through metaphors of purity and virginity, and images of penetration, corruption, and mistreat to signal invasion of imperial and colonial powers. Bad Bunny's verse recapitulates these intertwined masculinist narratives to argue that la *raza* lives on in the sexualized femininity of its specific nationalities and the masculine gaze that recognizes and renders them valuable.

in the video force her body to represent that tropicalized Latinidad, point to the artificiality and unfeasibility of that standard as an AfroLatina. That is, Cardi as an already racialized body can't fit neatly into the parameters of consumable Latinidad that scholars like Rivera-Rideau and Dinzey-Flores have identified for performers like Shakira and JLo.

While the ambiguity of Cardi's ethnoracial makeup is certainly exploited in the lyrics of the song in her verses, the sonic arrangement and video of the song move away from ambiguity. Cardi's signature diction, the quality of her Bardiology speech, is subdued in this track, causing her verses to be performatively closer to pop articulations than her previous hits. This not only makes her more intelligible to audiences unaccustomed to the genre but also authenticates her as the bonafide English speaker. The music video materializes the AfroLatinx *okurrrences* that allow her to be read by casual U.S. and Latin American audiences.

The video was produced by Eif Rivera, a now-famous hip hop music video producer. Filmed while wrapping up the album's post-production, Cardi B and her collaborators spent a week in Miami recreating the most touristy, Cuban-like fantasy landscape possible. Regardless that the original Pete Rodriguez song would instantly remit listeners to a very specific New York Scene (whether 1960's or the 1990's one thanks to its subsequent revival by The Blackout Stars) Rivera and Craig Kallman decided to redirect the latino urban landscape to the tropicalized Miami one, falling directly into the exotizicing trope. While The Blackout Stars' project had indeed sort of "Miamified" the New York City landscape in their 90's version of the song, Cardi's version moves completely outside of the diaspora, to re-locate the sounds into a Caribbean landscape. Thus, as part of this staging, Cardi embodies a specific Afro-Caribbean aesthetic, which most closely resembles what Jill Lane calls the "smoking habanera," a Cuban cigar-smoking woman, which has become a cultural symbol in Havana, and a characteristic prop

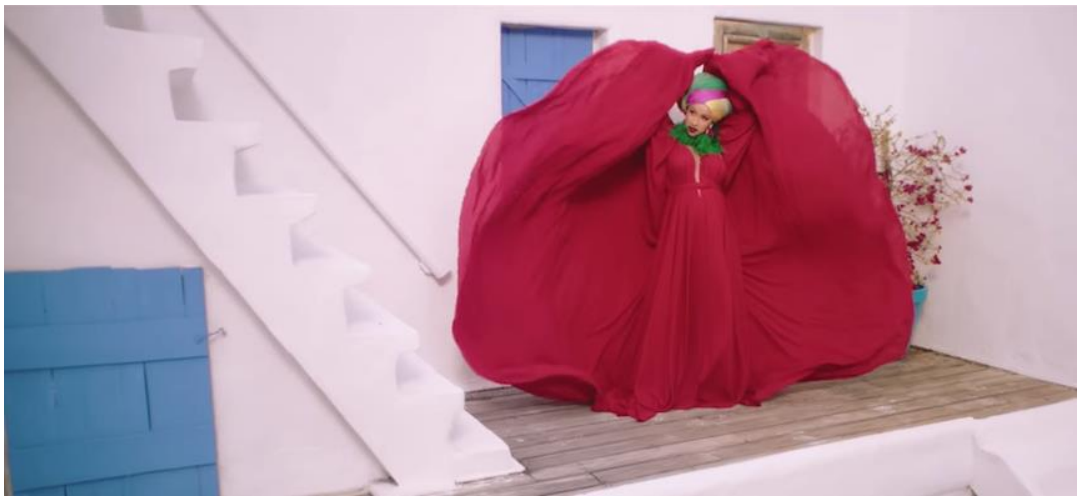
in tourist's pictures in the island. Turbans and tiered skirts are part of the attires that many Afro Caribbean communities wear through the archipelago and even continental Caribbean. In her aricle, Lane shows how the development of the smoking habanera figure as a gendered and racialized image weaves together Cuba's 19th century colonial landsape, the triumph narrative of the Revolution, and the recent neoliberal commodification of Cuban culture. In Lane's analysis of the contemporary deployment of the smoking habanera she explains that: "her refusal to work has been fully naturalized as the new mulata's inherent "tropical" character: in most such images, she suggests no occupation other than leisure, pleasure, and dance; performing to a rumba beat on the beach, she is open to the gaze of the tourist" (28). Cardi's resemblance to this figure is not coincidental, coupled with the video's depiction of a paradisiacal space of leisure, it locates her body in circuit of visual consumption by the white male gaze.[70]

10. Cardi B's first outfit in the video for "I Like It."

Wearing an elegant turban on her head, a satin yellow ruffled skirt, embellished jeweled top, big hooped earrings, and wrist bangles, Cardi is shown in the first scenes of the video accompanied by an undetermined urban tropical landscape: narrow streets, bright sunshine over

70. Furthermore, as Lane describes, the smoking habanera has a close relationship to the story of prostitution in Cuba. This subtext is not lost on Cardi's performance and her own relationship to sex work.

tropical plants, pastel colored buildings. This sun-lit landscape changes according to the singers' positions and so the space transforms into a nighttime outdoor gathering when Bad Bunny and J Balvin perform their verses. In these scenes, we see other men gathered around cars; the singers perform inside empty buildings decorated with neon signs with palms and music instruments, smoking through hookah pipes, or in bars surrounded by couples dancing amongst themselves. In Cardi's daytime scenes we see shaved ice, or piraguas, laughing children on bikes, and women talking with each other. Thus, the choral jouissance of the sampled track materializes in the background of the video.



11. Cardi B's second outfit from the video for "I Like It"

The three outfits we see the Cardi B wearing are telling of the kinds of gender and racial ideas espoused in the song. These were specifically designed to hide her 3-month old baby belly. She hid her pregnancy from the public until April 8, 2018 when she performed "Be Careful" at a presentation on Saturday Night Live. Besides the yellow skirt ensemble, Cardi B appears wearing a long flowing red dress, with sleeves that open up curtain-like when she extends them, giving the look of a bird with wings, or to link it to the Afro Caribbean aesthetic developed in her

outfits, resembling the *vegigante*, or *lechón* suit worn during street festivals in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, respectively. The get-up comes together beautifully with a multi-colored turban and long green feathered earrings, all which gleam given the white building that serves as background for these scenes. Her third outfit, she wears in the scenes where Bad Bunny and J Balvin accompany her. This two-piece purple suit with psychedelic style print is made of long wide legged pants and a long-sleeved tied-up top with knotted ends that fall sumptuously through the center of her midriff—a look that closely resembles singer La Lupe's getups. These wardrobe choices and body movements in the video importantly converse with a range of Caribbean women performers before her, which have largely paved the way for her fame.

Recalling La Lupe in this video is important as it ties the ratchet to early Caribbean and Latinx gendered performances of anti-propriety. La Lupe was a Cuban migrant to New York during the early 1960's who formed part of the larger salsa movement, with a career that coincided with the Latin Boogaloo era. Cardi's aesthetics and demeanor in the "I Like It" video "countermemorializes" La Lupe in by re-inscribing her into the history of Latin Boogaloo and Latinx music at large (Aparicio and Valentín-Escobar 2). Through this Cardi also subverts the essentializing narrative that we have identified so far, reformulating the ratchet through what Aparicio and Valentín-Escobar have identified as the "erotic excess and chusmería" of La Lupe. (82). There are multiple ways in which Cardi B's performance recalls La Lupe's vulgarity and countercultural status. Notorious for her screeching singing voice, La Lupe's "yiyiyiyi" exclamations function in the same way as adlibs; screamed articulations that exuded some apparent impromptu excess of emotion that would break out from the song structure. Her on-stage performance was also read as musical exorcism: she would hit and scratch herself, contour her body, curl her fists over her head, and strip her clothes off as hyper visual cues of the passion

and ecstasy of her singing (84). Because La Lupe was a Black Cuban migrant, these behaviors were associated with illicit and stigmatized practices such as drug abuse, and Santería — AfroCaribbean spiritual practices continuously demonized by hegemonic Caribbean society. Thus Cardi B's aesthetic invocation of the AfroCaribbean spiritual clothing in the video also highlights the relationship between spiritual practices and music performance as best illustrated in La Lupe. In La Lupe's career, however, these elements of performance granted her a marginal positionality that "was both attractive and repulsive to many" by resisting conforming to proper behaviour. (Aparicio and Valentín-Escobar 85).

Another important figure is recalled in Cardi B's performances. While not only in "I Like It", but in her development of the ratchet at large, Cardi conjures one of the most important reggaetón women performers: Ivy Queen. Ivy Queen's performance of strong, anti-patriarchal voice in a male saturated genre is expressed through lyrics and vocal production. But attention to her aesthetics mark her outside the boundaries of proper femininity. Also a victim of criticism towards her resistance to this standards, Ivy Queen's excess and associations with the racial slur "cafre"[71] situate her as part of this large genealogy of subversive Caribbean and Latinx women artists. Like Petra Rivera Rideau has noted, Ivy Queen's long, embellished nails call attention to the artificiality of discourses of racial democracy and mestizaje. (15) Cardi B's ratchet thus dialogues with both Ivy Queen and La Lupe's performative resistances to white, hegemonic gendered standards of beauty and comportment. But most importantly, by activating her *okurrrences*, Cardi is able to extend this project more directly within Latinidad, underscoring the problematics of mestizaje in the development of the ethnic category.

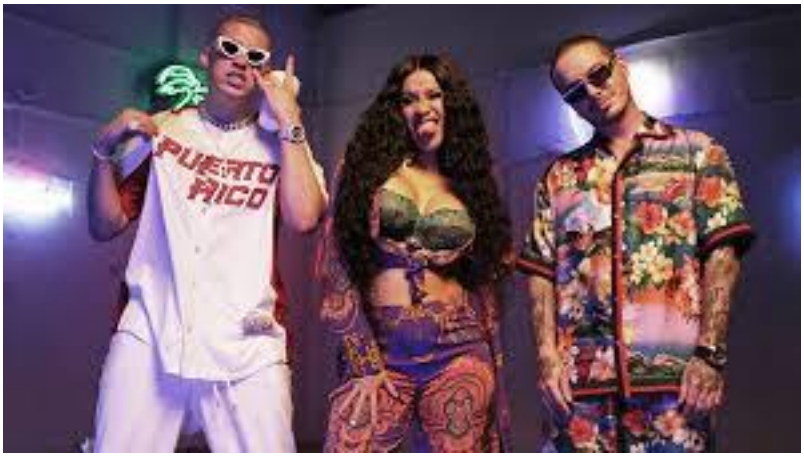
71. For an in-depth discussion on "cafre" and Ivy Queen, Petra Rivera-Rideau's *Remixing Reggaetón*.

Subverting the practice of *apadrinazgo* so important for the development of these genres,[72] Cardi has used her celebrity status to highlight the work of lesser-known women rappers of the Caribbean such as the artists already mentioned and analyzed in this dissertation: La Insuperable, MelyMel, Milka La Más Dura, Natti Natasha, and Ivy Queen herself. While record company contracts hinder Cardi from collaborating further with these artists (she has not recorded or featured any song with them yet), playing their music and promoting their social media accounts potentially do a lot for these artists, garnering them followers and more listeners through music streaming platforms such as iTunes and Spotify. These tend to materialize into more immediate revenue. Cardi's actions begin crafting a community of Caribbean women artists through performative and cybernetic dialogues. But most importantly, as I have argued, Cardi's performances render value to the "unsavory" and "unacceptable" aesthetics, body comportment, and discourses that Black and Caribbean women have expressed for decades now. In the same way that La Insuperable's performances of chapiadora regia attempts to render value to the impoverished Dominican woman, Cardi B's *okurrrences* of ratchet Caribbeanness, normalizes and capitalizes on those traits.

The video for "I Like It" reveals other intertextualities through the other two artists' wardrobes. For example, in the scenes where Bad Bunny and J Balvin are seen together, the former wears a white baseball shirt that says Puerto Rico—playing up the hyperlocal references to his homeland found in the lyrics— with thick jeweled neck chains and full grilled teeth implants. J Balvin, meanwhile wears a short sleeved and short pants, two-piece ensemble made of satin, with a landscape print made up of a collage of Jamaica flowers with serene clouds and

72. As discussed previously here, for the local Dominican urban music scene (Ch1) and the alternative scene (Ch2)

mountains. He also wears a chain and grilled teeth implants. These outfits recall contemporary masculine urban fashion styles, and specifically through J Balvin, the feminized patterns and textures that have been adopted by reggaetón and rap musicians have garnered both artists praises for "expanding" notions of gendered aesthetics. The adoption of clothing pieces that have been said by media to rupture with the strict masculine fashion codes, in this video appears tied to a representation of Latinidad coded as tropical, floral, and Caribbean. If we recall the notion of subaltern-generated tropicalization, J Balvin's attire does subvert the hypermasculine/feminized dichotomy of the stereotype. Nevertheless, the gold chains and grill not only reinforce ideas of hypermasculinity, an aesthetic choice that aligns these two artists to reggaetón and hip hop writ large, but more importantly are coded specifically as urban Blackness. Although, as Rivera Rideau argues, urban Blackness in Puerto Rico functions as a counterpoint to hegemonic whitened Puerto Rican identity (11), J Balvin and Bad Bunny's whiteness subdue the ascribed threat conveyed by the stereotype. Furthermore, the hybridization of both urban and tropical attires follows the mestizaje model of Latinidad.



12. From left to right: Bad Bunny, Cardi B, and JBalvin. Still from the video for "I Like It"

"Bad Bitch Make Him Nervous": Contesting the Latino Gang

Harnessing the "Latino essence" that the original "I Like It Like That" sample allows, Bad Bunny references a multitude of Caribbean and Latinx popular figures, including two other big names in salsa history: Tommy Olivencia and Bobby Valentín. These come after he identifies himself and his peers as the "Latino gang" and accompanies the "que viva la raza" sentiment emitted shortly after. If in this song, "Latino gang" is related to a laundry list of famous people from the Spanish Caribbean islands, then "que viva la raza" amplifies the Caribbean cultural hegemony to include the five nationalities that Bad Bunny totemizes. J Balvin's contribution to the song, coming at the end, adds little to the already packed self-tropicalized Latinidad. But his entrance is compelling, given that it is marked by stating "como Celia Cruz tengo el azúcar", which references one of the most ubiquitous of exoticized Caribbean music interjections, salsa queen Celia Cruz's distinctive shout "Azúca". If this song isn't just about the accumulation of capital —like most trap songs distinctively are— then it is about the prevailing Latinx cultural landscape and its capacity of being easily consumed, like sugar, by white audiences.

A curious anecdote further links "I Like It" to the history of Latin Boogaloo. As Juan Flores recalls, during Eddie Palmieri's shows, Black audience members would ask him to "play some sugar for us," to reference the piano vamps base of the Latin Boogaloo songs that were just starting to be popularized at that time. The request would later inspire Palmieri in titling one of his biggest hits of the time "Azúcar", and would grant him and other musicians a larger fan base amongst non-Latinx audiences (94). Possibly unintended and unknown to J Balvin, conjuring "sugar" by referencing Celia Cruz carries a double meaning; he locates himself in line with other "tropical music" New York Latinx performers, as well as defines his music as addictive but

processed, prepackaged, crafted to consume. The subtext of sugar cane plantation and the history of slavery in the Caribbean is not lost here. His cooptation of cultural products rooted in the Black diasporic experience obfuscates that labor and those bodies, tames its political discourse, but reaps all the benefits.

But as the Palmieri anecdote also illustrates, the first interactions between African American audiences and Latin(x) musicians resulted in a collaborative relationship that over the years has nurtured rich musical practices. As my previous discussion on the history of Latin Boogaloo evidences, cohabitation and cross-community alliances between these two minority groups in New York was fostered and represented sonically and spatially in Latin Boogaloo. It reflects the ongoing kinship that fostered the Young Lords movements and other social movements during the 1970's in New York (and elsewhere) that fought for resources and education to their disenfranchised peoples. But this apparently harmonious relationship has been reframed and questioned in subsequent cultural phenomenon from the same communities. As the "I Like It" song and video demonstrates, notions of Pan-Latinidad, the Latino gang, that seem to starkly exclude Black and Indigenous communities. Latinidad as a pan-ethnic label has been criticized for championing mestizaje, the idea that everyone inside the umbrella term has a racial mixture composed of indigenous, Black, and European ancestries. Similar to the racial democracy myth found in Puerto Rico and Brazil, which avows racial mixing from European, African, and Indigenous but privileges and embraces whiteness (Rivera Rideau 6, Arroyo 205) adopting "Latinidad" served then and now as a form to avoid talking about the African past *and* present, the colorism, and marginalization that Black people face to this day, and the legacy of slavery and colonialism as system that still structures most of the economic and political systems in the Caribbean. Thus, the contemporary deployment of Latinidad, especially in essentialized

forms, such as in “I Like It” seem to still carry these associations with whiteness.

But, while racial categories do tend to function differently for other countries, US skin color-based racialization strongly impacts self-conceptualizations of race for second and third generation Latinos. As has been shown, mainstream media and the entertainment industries largely promote images of Latinidad that correspond to whiteness, and the music industry has not been devoid of that. The more recent transformation of the term Latina/o to Latinx, while mainly adopted to account for trans and gender non-conforming people, also allowed for a reflection on the term to encompass and occlude the heterogeneous communities it amasses. Alan Pelaez’s understanding of the “X” as a wound allows for a reflection on the lasting effects of slavery materialized in the anti-Blackness experienced inside Latinx communities (Citation, online article). As Ana Maurine Lara has identified, the very existence of Black people inside the community has been constantly negated(ref). Candelario’s subjects’ “taming” of their texturized hair, and the identification of naturally textured hair as Black and African America, further provides proof of the ongoing negation and refusal of Blackness for many US Latinxs.

Latinxs’ role in the development of hip hop culture has allowed for a problematization of these discourses of race within the pan-ethnic label, due to the racialization that ensues from associations with hip hop culture: an expression almost exclusively understood as Black. Raquel Z Rivera’s discussion of the politics of the ghetto, Blackness, and Pan-Latinidad serves as starting point to understand trap and mainstream reggaetón’s grappling with this issue. On the one hand, 90’s hip hop and rap began shifting their notions of authenticity from a social justice standpoint (one of the primary goals of 80s hip hop culture) to reflecting on the marginalized and violent day to day of Black and Brown communities in urban settings. What Rivera identifies as “ghettocentricity,” became not only one of the elements that allow[ed] hip hop to become

mainstream, but also a means for the Latino performers (present since the beginning of the genre) to be recognized and legitimized as part of the hip hop community. Extending problematic notions regarding criminalization, poverty, overtly sexual behavior and materialism to the Latinx community that shared space and state negligence with African Americans racialized the Latinx Caribbean communities. In turn, Latinx performers of hip hop used their newfound legitimacy in hip hop culture to vie for the recognition of a Latin family inside the community. Although this strategy initially served as a way to make up for the lack of recognition that Latinx and Caribbean MCs and DJs had in the early days of hip hop, it problematically separated the Afro Caribbean Latinx performers from the African American or Black experience fostered largely in the genre. The discourse on a Latin family, which closely resembles the already mentioned mestizaje-based discourses such as "La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña" or "La Raza", occlude Afro-diasporic heritage and linkages with other Black communities in the United States. This call to Pan-Latinidad is taken up by J Balvin and Bad Bunny through the widely promoted notion of the Latino Gang.

A crucial difference between the state of hip hop culture when Rivera was doing her research and the current state of trap and reggaetón now is that the lines that divide collaborations between Latinx performers and African American ones are less strict. The popularity of "I Like It" proves that on the one hand, Latinx artists are collaborating more regardless of their ethno-national affiliations as well as with speakers of different languages, a consequence of globalization. On the other hand, the song's success demonstrates how the music industry has capitalized on such collaborations as they prove fruitful and profitable. What Rivera identified as "future projection" in the Latino family narrative amongst rappers in the late 90's has actually materialized in the mainstreaming of reggaetón and trap. (*NewYorkRicans* 104) Yet

despite this open exchange amongst musicians, djs, producers, etc.—results of a globalized modern world with swift connections across the globe through internet and social media—, notions of a Latino family persist and they maintain their most problematic gender and racial underpinnings, primarily because it continues to enforce the mestizo, hetero-patriarchal based notion of family. Additionally, new configurations in the production methods amongst musicians and performers of different ethnoracial backgrounds do not necessarily transform discussions on the connections and dissensions between these groups. On the contrary, what the case between Puerto Rican rappers and Dominican producers and beat-makers proves is that the former —who enjoy privileges such as citizenship and for some, being "white passing"— exploit the cheap labor of island-based, working-class Afro Dominicans, and their publics to launch their careers and leave these collaborators largely unrecognized.

Bad Bunny's and J Balvin's claim to a Latino gang continues the hip hop trend of asserting a Latino Family in the genre that separates them from the general hip hop community, understood as primarily Black and African American. But while in Rivera's discussion, boundaries around ethnoracial communities are re-inscribed, and the Latino performers create experiential, racial, ethnic, and diasporic similarities between them and African Americans, Bad Bunny and J Balvin's assertion almost seems to exclude the Afro Latinidad of Cardi B. As discussed previously in the case of Latin Boogaloo, cultural and lived experiences between African Americans and Latinos through music performance did a lot of work to acknowledge and question problematics of race and racialization between minority groups. In the case of Latin Boogaloo, it resulted in a romanticized notion of Latin and African American coexistence. This was mostly fostered by musicians but upheld by academics and journalists writing on the fad a couple of decades later. It helped us understand the commonalities between the two minority

groups and begin a process of reparation between them, however stunted. In the case of the current development of Latin trap collaborations, Latin artists have done little to counter their tropicalization, and the current state of the music industry continues to hinder Black urban artists from getting the recognition they deserve.

Cardi B's performance complicates these dynamics. She doesn't engage in a discourse of black consciousness at the level of lyrics, instead choosing to strategically essentialize her Latinidad in order to "fly under the radar" by conforming to the politics of the music industry. As I have shown, Cardi deploys her *okurrrences* through sound, speech, and aesthetics to create contradictions between discourses of Latinidad and her Dominican Blackness. Her Afro-Latinidad runs the risk of being exoticized; indeed, by playing on this trope she calls attention to the impossibility of performing as anything other than a racialized stereotype while being a Black Latina. Cardi's AfroLatinidadis anchored in her experience of being Dominicanyork. Dixa Ramírez observes that in the work of other contemporary Dominican American women urban music performers, Amara La Negra and Maluca Mala, they constantly evoke a Dominicanness "that may or may not exist in reality. Maluca's is not a desire to return [to the Dominican Republic]… but a desire for Dominicanness that is contingent more on its signifiers and its creative potential " (*Colonial Phantoms* Ch2). Similarly, when Cardi's *okurrrences* allow a Dominicanyork subjectivity to be inscribed in the cultural scripts of Latinidadand Blackness, she is creatively engaging with newly possible Dominicanidades. In turn, she provides us with a possible answer to our question, what does a Black Dominican woman sound like? If we have to ask, we haven't been listening.

CONCLUSION

During the Black Lives Matter protests unleashed after the murder of George Floyd in the hands of Minneapolis police, Cardi B used her social media to support New York Dominicans who took to the streets in solidarity. Posting two pictures of Dominicans holding the Dominican and the Haitian flags side to side, she condemned the ongoing divisions between the two countries and called for unity. Recognizing the role that racism has had in enforcing the geopolitical border between the island-nations, but also in the deportation and dehumanization of migrant Haitians in the Dominican Republic, the Dominican BLM supporters and Cardi B call for a restoration in the relationship between the two island nations based on a politics of race. Many Cardi fans were enraged at the gesture since they interpreted this solidarity as a call for single-state unity between Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The reactions unleashed by Cardi B's Instagram post are just the most recent evidence of how her identities, ethnicity, race, and politics clash with and run parallel to her audience's values and ideas of self and nationality. Throughout this dissertation I have analyzed Dominican and queer performer's negotiations with the normative scripts that regulate their cultural productions, how they are read, appreciated, understood, and most importantly, listened. By focusing on their sound and their bodily performances, I propose new avenues for our engagement with popular music that takes into consideration elements of musical and cultural production, that are not so easily comprehensible, that become readily discarded, but are rich sites for an exploration of how musicians and fans grapple with the potential meanings inscribed in sounds.

The performers in this dissertation voice out diverse understandings of gender, race, and

nationality by creatively transforming the sounds of Dominican music and performing embodied scripts that challenge our perceptions about women's performances of popular music, the historical sonic practices that make up Caribbean music traditions, the usage of the voice in urban music genres, and the circulation of cultural codes made possible by transnationalism and globalization.

With this work, my scholarly intervention is multiple. First, I have expanded research on música urbana and gender, specifically by honing on the performances, sounds, and discourses of popular Dominican women artists. I have included the voices of queer artists that are embraced in the Dominican Republic to subvert our conceptualizations of differently gendered artists as outliers. More importantly, I have tried to show how these performers and their audiences strategically navigate heteronormative scripts to assert their existence, humanity, and joy. I contend that música urbana, and specifically dembow, is a productive sonic space for this. Secondly, this dissertation has performed a variety of travels and crossings. With cues from the artists' investigated, it dances through multiple genres, inviting us to rethink their constructions, their porous borders, and their resistances to simple definitions. This dance also takes cues from a variety of methodologies taken from social science and humanities fields to suggest that we think beyond disciplinary borders and engage with the tensions that ensue from such combinations. My impulse for interdisciplinary research falls in line with the core of Latinx Studies, a field enriched by multiple methodological and theoretical contributions. By thinking beyond the limits of gender, genre, disciplines, methodologies, and geographies, this dissertation's itinerary takes a cue from its artists to fuse, combine, play with, move, and sound out.

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