Reggaeton music's sense of freedom vibrating through the african diaspora

Government, Colonialism

The music rings loudly through the salon. “ A ella le gusta la gasolina. Dale mas gasolina…” This Reggaeton breathes life into us. Makes our hips move from side to side, our bodies shift up and down. The celebration is nowhere near over. We heard that the baile sorpresa would be Don Omar’s “ Danza Kuduro.” See, Reggaeton is the music of the decade right now. We relate to its rhythmic sense of freedom and can understand the politicizing of it. Through every move, we are embracing a musical genre that was produced and developed in a social, political, and historical context. The artists of this genre, such as Tego Calderon and Ivy Queen, use Reggaeton as a platform to reconstruct Afro-Latinidad while simultaneously addressing issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia. As a Latinx community, with a particular focus on the Puerto Rican community, we have neglected these preeminent conditions of intolerance with the superficial curtain of “ racial democracy.” In her book Remixing Reggaeton: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico, Petra Rivera-Rideau defines this racial democracy as the “ official rhetoric that purports that a history of race mixture has produced a racially harmonious society” (Rivera-Rideau 6). It is when analyzing the chapters of Tego Calderon and Ivy Queen that we become able to conceptualize the myth of racial democracy and how it has marginalized our Afro-Latinx communities. Though Reggaeton, and thus the artists, present contradictions in terms of cultural acceptance into a discriminatory Puerto Rican/nationalist identity, the platform serves as a station for community building. This community building becomes more powerful because it gathers the people that were so often cornered into facing discrimination and violence. Consequently, artists like Tego Calderon and Ivy Queen explore the Afro-

Latinx identity by means of working to understand the African Diaspora in efforts to interlink it with their music’s political statements on racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Tego Calderon is one of Puerto Rico’s prominent reggaeton artists. His acceptance into the dominant discourse of political Puerto Rican identity raises questions about the effects and contradictions of his music on the diverse Puerto Rican audience. The contradiction emerges accordingly: why was Tego Calderon embraced into this identity of racial democracy if he so adamantly acknowledges the Afro-Puerto Rican ancestry in his community? It is just that, his initial inclusion of Afro-Puerto Rican folkloric traditions, counting bomba, and his significant references to the town of Loiza— described as “ the center of Afro-Puerto Rican life and culture”— that generate a degree of associations between Tego Calderon and the folkloric blackness the elite audience in Puerto Rico are willing to accept. This is best described by Rivera-Rideau when she asserts, “ Calderon embodies a particular understanding of blackness that is easily encompassed within hegemonic representations of Puerto Rican identity.” (Rivera-Rideau 83). Following the end of the Anti-Pornography campaign that aimed to censor the genre, specifically the belief of the hypersexualizing of black women, increasing acceptance by elites and critics who had previously opposed Reggaeton meant new artists could reclaim the music into their own understanding of their Afro-Latinx identity. This occurred with Tego Calderon, who began to utilize his music as a platform to unpack the connection not between the folkloric blackness the elites accepted and his Reggaeton, but rather the relationship between the African Diaspora and its implications on the ensuing racism throughout not just Puerto Rico, but the world.

Tego Calderon related to an audience that had long been marginalized socially, politically, and economically through a connection between the understanding of the African Diaspora and its effect on the Afro-Latinx communities, with a particular focus on issues of racism. His music became a vehicle to make political statements about the forms of oppression the Afro-Puerto Rican communities, and thus other descendants of the African Diaspora, faced. For instance, Rivera-Rideau notes the following:

“…Calderon discounts the ‘ folklorization’ of Afro-Puerto Rican cultural practices as remnants of a romanticized past. Instead, Calderon portrays these practices as critiques of racial discrimination faced by contemporary Afro-Puerto Rican communities” (Rivera-Rideau 86).

This becomes reflected upon his music as he utilizes Puerto Rican musical traditions in songs that hold special significance to conditions of racism and other forms of marginalization such as colonialism and classism. In doing so, Tego Calderon engages new conceptualizations of Puerto Rican blackness not conforming to the hegemonic constructions of folkloric or urban blackness, but rather with a rooted understanding in the African Diaspora. Calderon’s articulation of Puerto Rican blackness becomes interlinked with other sites of the African Diaspora. Rather than isolating the island from the world, Tego Calderon acknowledges the interconnectedness Puerto Rico has with international forces through the diaspora. In part influenced by him having lived and visited Latin American countries and the United States, Calderon’s depiction of blackness relates them to “ similar systems of racial exclusion” that affect Afro-Puerto Ricans and other “ African diasporic populations” (Rivera-Rideau 87). As Rivera-Rideau elaborates, these connections “ provided critical tools that help Calderon to simultaneously critique racism in Puerto Rico, celebrate a uniquely Afro-Puerto Rican identity, and situate Puerto Rico within the broader African diaspora” (Rivera-Rideau 87). One of the most critical ways Calderon achieves this collectively is through his representation of Loiza. Once neglecting the resonance of Loiza to the hegemonic discourse that solely considers folkloric blackness as socially acceptable when shaping Puerto Rican national identity and the notion of racial democracy, Tego Calderon situates Loiza as a direct challenge to the discourse when centering blackness and African diasporic connections as roots to the town, and thus to his music. In fact, Tego Calderon metaphorically uses Loiza to establish connections “ between Black Puerto Rican communities and those in other places based on similar struggles with racial and class inequalities—or as he states, ‘ the same suffering, but different countries” (Rivera-Rideau 96). This international solidarity is what grounds Calderon’s music in making political statements on issues of race, poverty, and class inequality that plague Afro-diasporic communities in Puerto Rico and abroad.

Tego Calderon politicizes his music through his understanding of the African Diaspora and by grounding this knowledge in the predominantly Afro-Puerto Rican town of Loiza. Another reggaeton artist, Ivy Queen, also uses her music as a platform for making political statements. As a woman of color that appreciates her LGBTQ fans, her statements take on issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Ivy Queen achieves this by means of both her music and appearance, particularly her long nails. The “ Queen” of reggaeton uses her music to open a space for a more inclusive grasp of what it means to be Puerto Rican, not just in terms of blackness but also in sexual orientation. While dominant discourses of a racial democracy rely on heteropatriarchal hierarchies to suppress any nonheterosexual or an individual outside the normativity binary, Ivy Queen navigates through reggaeton not only to redefine blackness and the African Diaspora, but moreover to “ expand this to create affinities with other groups also misrecognized by discourses of racial democracy” (Rivera-Rideau 105). This contestation with the dominant discourse is enhanced through her appearance. Her long, fake nails embody the artificiality and “ unnaturalness” of the hierarchies and norms that construct race, gender, and sexuality in positions that favor whiteness at the expense of suppressing black Puerto Ricans and other marginalized groups (Rivera-Rideau 114). Accordingly, Ivy Queen’s lyrics tie into the call for the intelligibility and recognition of black womanhood in the context of the Afro-Puerto Rican racial democracy discourse. For example, Rivera-Rideau alludes to how “ Ivy Queen troubles the denial of nonwhite women’s humanity that is part of dominant discourses of racial democracy through her lyrics that recount the suffering that ensues either from not having love…or from abuse at the hands of a male partner” (Rivera-Rideau 119). In this sense, Ivy Queen’s lyrics demand the recognition of her pain, and therefore of her womanhood—

her humanity. This calling for respect and intelligibility in her lyrics and style directly contests the stereotypes of Puerto Rican black womanhood as nonhuman, for if she can experience suffering, she must be able to experience love; to suffer and to love is human.

Reggaeton is more than a musical genre. Artists such as Tego Calderon and Ivy Queen have used reggaeton as a vehicle for addressing issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia in Puerto Rico and abroad while embracing the diversity in backgrounds as Afro-Latinxs and humans. Through their lyrics, their rhythms, and beats, they build a sense of belonging amongst the audience. When we listen to it, we realize we do not face our pain alone. This sense of conviviality can empower us as individuals and later collectively to confront the dominant discourses that work to oppress us.