

3-1-2018

# “If I Were You”: Tego Calderón’s Diasporic Interventions

Petra R. Rivera-Rideau  
priverar@wellesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.wellesley.edu/scholarship>

**Version: Post-print**

---

## Recommended Citation

Petra R. Rivera-Rideau; “If I Were You”: Tego Calderón’s Diasporic Interventions. *Small Axe* 1 March 2018; 22 (1 (55)): 55–69. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-4378924>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research and Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact [ir@wellesley.edu](mailto:ir@wellesley.edu).

## “If I Were You”: Tego Calderón’s Diasporic Interventions

Petra R. Rivera-Rideau

We follow the man through the thick vegetation. He wears shorts, sandals, a tank top, and shoulder-length dreadlocks. Palm trees shroud the path as he makes his way to a small wooden cabin, painted a pastel blue, where his friend takes a few items out of a red Toyota and passes them to him in a black bag. The man brings the bag to a small boat docked in a secluded cove. He starts the boat and steers it towards another inlet, where he sees a group of people exit a small motorboat and run into the forest. The man follows them to meet a young woman and her son. They sit in the back of his car as he drives them away from the scene, until a police officer stops them. The officer peers at the man driving the car, and the mother and son cowering in the back seat. Astonished by what he sees, the officer eventually lets them go, and the man quickly drives away.

This is the visual narrative that accompanies the music video for Tego Calderón’s 2012 song, “Robin Hood,” from his mixtape, *El Original Gallo del País*. The video’s release received much fanfare, especially because media coverage of the video’s production stressed that “Robin Hood” deliberately tackled Dominican immigration to Puerto Rico. Dominicans are the largest immigrant group to Puerto Rico, and subject to xenophobic stereotypes that paint them as backward, criminal, deviant, and lazy. Stories of Dominicans arriving on *yolas*, or rafts, surface frequently in the Puerto Rican media. Although they are never identified as Dominicans, the imagery of people arriving to a secluded Puerto Rican beach in a small boat brings to mind the stories of the Dominicans who travel across the Mona Strait onto the island. Moreover, the individuals on the boat appear phenotypically black, a depiction that is consistent with the racialization of Dominicans in Puerto Rico as black subjects.

Beyond simply recounting a journey of Dominicans into Puerto Rico, “Robin Hood” articulates a diasporic blackness that links Puerto Ricans and Dominicans together. These connections disrupt the assumptions that Dominicans and Puerto Ricans are perpetually in conflict, and that these groups always distance themselves from blackness. Antiracist racism certainly exists in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, dominant definitions of Puerto Rican and Dominican national identities privilege whiteness. However, more nuanced analyses of racial formation in both places provide evidence that, despite their reputations, there are many Puerto Ricans and Dominicans who embrace blackness. “Robin Hood” illustrates the connections forged between Puerto Rican and Dominican communities based on their shared experiences as black diasporic subjects. In so doing, the video has larger consequences for our understandings of the links between blackness, Spanish Caribbean identities, and African diaspora theory. The video for “Robin Hood” centers the experiences and perspectives of black Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in ways that expose the contradictions inherent to the whitening of national identities in the Spanish Caribbean as well as the exclusions within contemporary African Diaspora theories. In turn, “Robin Hood” presents alternative ways of imagining the place of Afro-Latinos within the Spanish Caribbean and the African diaspora more broadly.

### **Looking for Afro-Latinos in African Diaspora Theory**

Calderón’s “Robin Hood” disputes many common assumptions about Puerto Rican and Dominican relationships to blackness and the larger African diaspora. Several contemporary African diaspora theorists argue that communities actively create and maintain African diasporic connections across geographic sites and across difference.<sup>1</sup> These theorists also expand our

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on establishing links across the African diaspora, see Jacqueline Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1998): 291-325; Tina M. Campt,

notions of where and how diaspora happens while acknowledging the diverse understandings of blackness that circulate in various spaces. Considering diaspora in this way offers opportunities to integrate previously neglected sites, histories, and cultural practices into theorizing blackness and diaspora.

And yet, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, along with many other Afro-Latin American and Afro-Latino populations, have often been left out of conceptualizations of the African diaspora despite the presence of substantial African-descended populations, histories of black resistance, and African-based cultural practices there. What explains this lack of attention to Latin American and Latino communities in theorizing diaspora? Some scholars contend that English-language dominance in the academy has privileged the United States and Anglophone Caribbean in theories of the African diaspora.<sup>2</sup> Others have argued that the African American experience in the United States has become hegemonic within conceptualizations of diasporic blackness, and therefore constitutes the “standard of comparison” against which others’ experiences are measured.<sup>3</sup> This point is particularly important for situating Afro-Latinos within African diaspora theory since, whereas previous comparisons between the U.S. and Latin America described the latter as a “racial paradise,” currently these comparisons can result in presumptions that Afro-Latin Americans and Afro-Latinos are somehow more prone to denying their blackness than U.S. African Americans.

---

“The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diasporic Relation,” *Radical History Review* 83, no. 1 (2002): 94-113; Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Uses of Diaspora,” *Social Text* 19, no. 1 (2001): 45-73; Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jean Muteba Rahier, Percy C. Hintzen, and Felipe Smith, eds., *Global Circuits of Blackness: Interrogating the African Diaspora* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, “Uses of Diaspora,” 48; Agustín Laó-Montes, “Decolonial Moves: Trans-locating African Diaspora Spaces,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2-3 (2007): 309-338; Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D.G. Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (2000): 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, “Black Liverpool”; Campt, “Crowded Space of Diaspora”; Patterson and Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations,” 20.

The organization of academic units also contributes to this invisibility of Afro-Latinos in African diaspora theory. Many Spanish-speaking places become integrated into Latin American and/or Latino Studies programs, while academic study focusing on interrogating blackness and the African Diaspora (including from the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean) is placed within Africana or Black Studies, thus mirroring the perceived distinctions between blackness and Latinidad more generally.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the Spanish Caribbean's connections to blackness and the larger African diaspora become obscured by assumptions that the region embraces a more whitened, "Hispanic" identity.

Puerto Ricans and Dominicans are particularly vulnerable to charges of attempting to downplay or even erase any connection to blackness in their societies.<sup>5</sup> For example, frequent mentions that the majority of Puerto Ricans selected "white" on the U.S. census (approximately 80% on the 2000 census and about 75% on the 2010 census) seemingly confirm Puerto Rico's longstanding reputation as "the whitest of the Antilles." However, U.S. Census categories do not match with colloquial definitions of race on the island, and, in fact, when presented with more relevant categories, Puerto Ricans tend to identify themselves as *trigueño* rather than white.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ada Ferrer, "History and the Idea of Hispanic Caribbean Studies," *Small Axe* 20, no. 3 51 (2016): 51; Tatiana Flores and Michelle Stephens, "Contemporary Art of the Hispanophone Caribbean Islands in the Archipelagic Framework," *Small Axe* 20, no. 3 51 (2016): 84; Vanessa Pérez-Rosario, "On the Hispanophone Caribbean Question," *Small Axe* 20, no. 3 51 (2016): 24-25.

<sup>5</sup> The Spanish Caribbean includes the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Although these places share many characteristics, especially Spanish language, they also present stark differences in terms of their histories of slavery, colonialism, geopolitical characteristics, and relationships to blackness. Cuba remains an outlier when considering the place of the Spanish Caribbean within African Diaspora theory since it is one of the few sites in the Spanish-speaking Americas that has received attention from African Diaspora theorists. For example, see Frank Andre Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Antonio M. López, *Unbecoming Blackness: The Diaspora Cultures of Afro-Cuban America* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Nancy Raquel Mirabal, "Scripting Race, Finding Place: African Americans, Afro-Cubans, and the Diasporic Imaginary in the United States," in *Neither Enemies nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*, eds. Suzanne Oboler and Anani Dzidzienyo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 189-207.

<sup>6</sup> Literally translated as "wheat-colored," *trigueño* refers to a racially mixed person in Puerto Rico; some have argued that the term can also reference blackness depending on the context. Carlos Vargas-Ramos, "Black, Trigueño, White...?: Shifting Racial Identifications among Puerto Ricans." *Du Bois Review* 2, no. 2 (2005): 267-

Similarly, Silvio Torres-Saillant argues that popular media and scholarship generally represent Dominicans as especially unique in their denial of blackness and racism towards Haitians; however, he writes, *antihatianismo* and “Negrophobia” are not actually exclusive to the Dominican Republic, but can be found throughout the Western hemisphere.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, U.S. (neo)colonial projects in both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic influence their national and racial discourses.<sup>8</sup> Portrayals of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans as particularly antiblack or pathologically prone to whitening ignore the realities that many people in these places embrace blackness, and the histories of activism and collaborations between black-identified communities across the Spanish Caribbean.

Of course, antiblack racism persists in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Elite constructions of national identities in both countries have historically stressed their ties to Spain and whitening through race mixture. Moreover, they have also tended to ignore evidence of antiblack racism despite their own valorization of whiteness. For example, dominant definitions of Puerto Rican national identity present the island as a “racial democracy” or the “great Puerto Rican family” in which a racially mixed population with Spanish, African, and Indigenous ancestry allegedly lives in racial harmony. However, Puerto Rican racial democracy also upholds Spanish heritage and culture while reducing African and Indigenous cultures to stereotypical tropes presumed to have “limited” influence in Puerto Rico. Rather than consider these discourses as evidence of some sort of pathology, we are better served to think about them as motivated by a logic, albeit a flawed one, that aims to align these countries with the white(ned)

---

285; Isar P. Godreau, Hilda Lloréns, and Carlos Vargas-Ramos, “Colonial Incongruence at Work: Employing US Census Racial Categories in Puerto Rico.” *Anthropology News* (2010): 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Silvio Torres-Saillant, “One and Divisible: Meditations on Global Blackness.” *Small Axe* Number 29, 13, no. 2 (2009): 4-25.

<sup>8</sup> Lorgia García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Isar P. Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and U.S. Colonialism in Puerto Rico* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

ideals of what Barnor Hesse has called global “racialized modernity” by downplaying their racially mixed populations.<sup>9</sup> The integration of antiblackness into hegemonic constructions of Dominican and Puerto Rican national identities, then, needs to be approached as part of a strategic, though problematic, move by elites to represent themselves within the racist frames of Western modernity rather than any automatic, latent desire on the part of the majority of the population to be white.

Approaching Dominican and Puerto Rican national discourses of whitening this way opens up new avenues to consider the contestations and transformations of these discourses over time. As Isar Godreau argues, racial and national identities often follow certain “scripts” shaped by “dominant *stories* and ideological templates” that determine what sorts of identities could be compatible with the nation.<sup>10</sup> In turn, critics of these scripts point out their contradictions and exclusions. Godreau’s examination of three dominant scripts (benevolent slavery, Hispanicity, and race mixture) that define Puerto Rican national identity reveals that whitening has never been a given in Puerto Rico, but rather is constructed and routinely contested by various constituents on the island.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, while some elites sought to define Puerto Rican identity as a whitened, Spanish one, many scholars and activists challenged this notion. For example, Isabelo Zenón Cruz’s two-volume exposé, *Narciso descubre su trasero*, tackled racism in Puerto Rico, and detailed the contributions of Afro-Puerto Ricans to the island’s life and culture.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, scholars

---

<sup>9</sup> Barnor Hesse, “Racialized Modernity: An Analytics of White Mythologies.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 4 (2007): 643-663.

<sup>10</sup> Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Isabelo Zenón Cruz, *Narciso Descubre su Trasero: El Negro en la Cultura Puertorriqueña*. Humacao: Editorial Furidi, 1974.

have documented antiblack racism in literary and cultural representations,<sup>13</sup> education and curricular development,<sup>14</sup> housing policy,<sup>15</sup> and linguistic practices,<sup>16</sup> among other social arenas in Puerto Rico. Similarly, scholars have documented Dominicans' embrace of blackness and collaborations with Haitians in the face of dominant discourses that suggest such alliances are impossible.<sup>17</sup> In addition, shifting social, economic, and political contexts, including migration to the United States, have created the conditions of possibility for introducing new understandings of blackness that jar with the dominant depictions of whitened Dominicaness and Puerto Ricanness.<sup>18</sup> Tego Calderón's music video for "Robin Hood" thus follows a long history of acknowledging blackness and African diasporic connections in Puerto Rican and Dominican spaces.

Like much of Calderón's other work, the music video for "Robin Hood" situates Puerto Rican blackness within the African diaspora through its emphasis on the links between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans as black subjects. Consequently, "Robin Hood" resists the assumption that an inherent tendency to deny blackness exists within these communities, which, as Tiffany

---

<sup>13</sup> Juan A. Giusti Cordero, "AfroPuerto Rican Cultural Studies: Beyond cultura negroide and antillanismo," *Centro Journal* 8, nos. 1-2 (1996): 56-77; Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). Yeidy M. Rivero, *Tuning Out Blackness: Race and Nation in the History of Puerto Rican Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Isar P. Godreau, Mariolga Reyes Cruz, Mariluz Franco Ortiz, and Sherry Cuadrado, "The Lessons of Slavery: Discourses of Slavery, *Mestizaje*, and *Blanqueamiento* in an Elementary School in Puerto Rico," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 1 (2008): 115-135.

<sup>15</sup> Zaire Z. Dinzey-Flores, *Locked In, Locked Out: Gated Communities in a Puerto Rican City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness*.

<sup>16</sup> Manuel Álvarez Nazario, *El elemento afronegroide en el español de Puerto Rico*. San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1974; Isar P. Godreau, "Slippery Semantics: Race Talk and Everyday Uses of Racial Terminology in Puerto Rico," *Centro Journal* 20, no. 2 (2008): 5-33.

<sup>17</sup> Ginetta E.B. Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Anne Eller, "'Awful Pirates' and 'Hordes of Jackals': Santo Domingo/The Dominican Republic in Nineteenth-Century Historiography," *Small Axe* 18, no. 2 (2014): 80-94; García-Peña, *Borders of Dominicanidad*; Edward Paulino, *Dividing Hispaniola: The Dominican Republic's Border Campaign against Haiti, 1930-1961* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016); Kimberly Eison Simmons, *Reconstructing Racial Identity and the African Past in the Dominican Republic* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009); Silvio Torres-Saillant, "The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity," *Callaloo* 23, no. 3 (2000): 1086-1111; Torres-Saillant, "One and Divisible."

<sup>18</sup> Juan Flores, *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

Patterson and Robin D.G. Kelley argue, has resulted in the neglect of Spanish Caribbean communities in much of African diaspora theory.<sup>19</sup> Critical analysis of “Robin Hood” reveals a more nuanced approach to understanding how African diasporic connections across these oft-neglected sites not only make our definitions of the African diaspora more inclusive, but also expose us to alternative ways of imagining blackness that have typically been overlooked.

### **Blackness and the Puerto Rican-Dominican Connection**

In addition to countering erasures of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic in African diaspora theory, “Robin Hood” also challenges the dominant narrative that Puerto Ricans and Dominicans are always in conflict. “Robin Hood” contributes to a larger body of literature and cultural production that highlights the connections between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and the United States.<sup>20</sup> Jorge Duany notes that Dominicans have a long presence in Puerto Rico stretching back to colonial times. Duany argues that as Dominican migration to Puerto Rico increased in the 1970s, they encountered more animosity from Puerto Ricans.<sup>21</sup> Dominican immigrants to Puerto Rico tend to work in low paying service occupations such as

---

<sup>19</sup> Patterson and Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations,” 21. There are some exceptions to this trend; for example, see Mark Anderson, “Comparison and Connection in the Study of Afro-Latin America”, *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 5, no. 1 (2012): 35-48; Guridy, *Forging Diaspora*; Laó-Montes, “Decolonial Moves”; López, *Unbecoming Blackness*; Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*; Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, Jennifer A. Jones, and Tianna S. Paschel, eds., *Afro-Latin@s in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> For analysis of Puerto Rican-Dominican connections in literature, see Danny Méndez, *Narratives of Migration and Displacement in Dominican Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2012), Rita de Maeseneer, “Sobre dominicanos y puertorriqueños: ¿movimiento perpetuo?”, *Centro Journal* 14, no. 1 (2002): 53-73, and Sherezada Vicioso, “Julia de Burgos: Our Julia,” trans. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Callaloo* 17, no. 3 (1994): 674-683. For discussion of Dominican-Puerto Rican musical connections, see Deborah Pacini Hernández, “Dominicans in the Mix: Reflections on Dominican Identity, Race, and Reggaeton,” in *Reggaeton*, eds. Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) and Raquel Z. Rivera, “New York Bomba: Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and a Bridge Called Haiti,” in *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Remembrances*, eds. Ifeoma C.K. Nwankwo and Mamadou Diouf (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Jorge Duany, “Racializing Ethnicity in the Spanish-Speaking Caribbean: A Comparison of Haitians in the Dominican Republic and Dominicans in Puerto Rico,” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2006): 238; see also Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, “De Ilegales e Indocumentados: Representaciones Culturales de la Migración Dominicana a Puerto Rico,” *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 4 (1998): 147-173.

construction, driving taxis, or food service, as well as in the agricultural sector. In the context of Puerto Rico's deteriorating economy, Dominicans are often perceived as "rivals of Puerto Rican workers."<sup>22</sup>

In addition to xenophobia, Dominicans also face antiblack racism in Puerto Rico. As Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel notes, "the Dominican serves as an excuse to externalize the Afro-Caribbean dimension of Puerto Rican identity, since to be black or *mulato* in Puerto Rico ultimately has turned into being confused for a foreigner or a Dominican."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Jorge Duany argues that the perception of Dominicans as black subjects positions them as "foreign others" within Puerto Rican society.<sup>24</sup> Equating blackness with Dominicanity in Puerto Rico contributes to dominant depictions of Puerto Ricans as whitened since Dominican can serve as the black "other" against which Puerto Rican "whiteness" can be measured. This obfuscates Puerto Rican blackness and forecloses the possibility of African diasporic connections between these groups.

However, Alai Reyes-Santos points out that representations of the "foreign, black Dominican other" overdetermine ideas about Puerto Rican-Dominican relations and ignore the "transcolonial kinship" narratives that link these groups together. She writes, "Dominican-Puerto Rican solidarity is often an act of transcolonial mutual recognition between racialized and criminalized working people on the island."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, many black Puerto Ricans and Dominican immigrants face similar racist stereotypes that portray them as lazy, unintelligent, criminal, and

---

<sup>22</sup> Alai Reyes-Santos, *Our Caribbean Kin: Race and Nation in the Neoliberal Antilles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 150, 156.

<sup>23</sup> "El dominicano sirve como pretexto para exteriorizar la dimensión afrocaribeña de la identidad puertorriqueña, pues ser negro o mulato en Puerto Rico se ha convertido en ser confundido con extranjero or dominicano." Martínez-San Miguel, "De Ilegales," 166.

<sup>24</sup> Duany, "Racializing Ethnicity."

<sup>25</sup> Reyes-Santos, *Our Caribbean Kin*, 162.

suspicious.<sup>26</sup> These stereotypes situate blackness within the urban, working-class neighborhoods where both Dominicans and Puerto Ricans reside, and have served as alleged justification for harsh social policies like *Mano Dura contra el Crimen* that targeted and stigmatized these communities under the guise of protecting the Puerto Rican public from violent crime.<sup>27</sup> As Reyes-Santos describes, “the Dominican [in Puerto Rico] finds himself or herself racialized by criminalization as an undocumented migrant as well as in relation to the racialization of the impoverished Puerto Rican communities receiving him or her.”<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, the parallel stereotypes attributed to urban, working-class Puerto Ricans and Dominicans demonstrate the extent to which *all* black communities are subject to racism on the island, regardless of nationality. These comparable experiences of racialization produce the conditions of possibility for African diasporic connections to emerge within and between these communities.

The popular music reggaetón comprises one space where these diasporic connections manifest. Reggaetón emerged from the long and complex histories of migrations between the Caribbean and the United States as well as within the Caribbean basin. Although reggaetón has generally been associated with Puerto Ricans on the island, Nuyoricans (Puerto Ricans in New York), Jamaicans, Panamanians, and Dominicans have all played important roles in the music’s development. Musically, reggaetón draws from various urban genres across the African diaspora in the Americas (most notably U.S. hip-hop and Jamaican dancehall), providing audible evidence of the multiple streams of migration across the Caribbean that gave rise to reggaetón’s development.<sup>29</sup> In addition to fostering musical exchanges, migration also linked communities

---

<sup>26</sup> Jorge Duany, “Dominican Migration to Puerto Rico: A Transnational Perspective,” *Centro Journal* 17, no. 1 (2005): 242-269; Martínez-San Miguel, “De Ilegales”; Reyes-Santos, *Our Caribbean Kin*.

<sup>27</sup> Dinzey-Flores, *Locked In, Locked Out*; Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*.

<sup>28</sup> Reyes-Santos, *Our Caribbean Kin*, 157.

<sup>29</sup> Wayne Marshall, “From Música Negra to Reggaetón Latino: The Cultural Politics of Nation, Migration, and Commercialization,” in *Reggaeton*, eds. Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*.

together through shared experiences of marginalization as working-class, black subjects. Tego Calderón is perhaps the artist best known for using reggaetón as a platform to discuss racism and Puerto Rican blackness; however, other artists such as Don Omar and Eddie Dee also address these issues in their music and interviews.<sup>30</sup> Thus, reggaetón constitutes a cultural practice of diaspora that highlights Puerto Rico's connections to the African diaspora and to larger efforts to contest antiblack racism.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, as Alai Reyes-Santos notes, reggaetón could potentially homogenize black experiences on the island in ways that can either make Dominicans invisible, or mark them as “inauthentic” vis-à-vis Puerto Rican blackness despite Dominican contributions to the music.<sup>32</sup> Dominican producers such as Luny Tunes and artists such as Nicky Jam (who has a Puerto Rican father and Dominican mother) have played a critical role in reggaetón's development.<sup>33</sup> Dominican music also influences the genre. Hernandez and Marshall identify the 1991 album *Meren-Rap* that featured multiple artists singing combinations of merengue, rap, and reggae en español as a precursor to the development of underground and, later, reggaetón.<sup>34</sup> More generally, reggaetón incorporates musical aesthetics from Dominican music, especially bachata, with artists such as Tego Calderón, Don Omar, and Ivy Queen including “bachatón” fusions in their repertoires.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, representations of reggaetón as a Puerto Rican phenomenon obscure Dominican contributions to the genre and assume inevitable Dominican-Puerto Rican

---

<sup>30</sup> Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*; Jennifer Rudolph, “‘Pidieron Cacao’: Latinidad and Black Identity in the Reggaetón of Don Omar,” *Centro Journal* 23, no. 1 (2011): 30-53.

<sup>31</sup> Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*.

<sup>32</sup> Reyes-Santos, *Our Caribbean Kin*, 169, 172.

<sup>33</sup> Hernandez, “Dominicans in the Mix”, 150.

<sup>34</sup> Hernandez, “Dominicans in the Mix”, 140-142; Marshall, “From Música Negra to Reggaetón Latino”, 35.

<sup>35</sup> Hernandez, “Dominicans in the Mix”, 144.

conflict.<sup>36</sup> Thus, reggaetón can potentially reinforce social hierarchies that discriminate against Dominican communities.

Despite these limitations, reggaetón still provides opportunities to establish Dominican-Puerto Rican connections on the grounds of shared experiences as black diasporic subjects. In her analysis of “Retrato del dominicano” by Magaly García Ramis, Reyes-Santos notes that the relationship between the Dominican lead character Asdrúbal and his Puerto Rican peers is rooted in the embrace of African diasporic signifiers from hip-hop and reggaetón. Consequently, this solidarity exposes a “secret” yet publicly legible understanding of Puerto Ricanness rooted in an urban, black aesthetic that “elite, whitened narratives of the great Puerto Rican family wish to silence.”<sup>37</sup> Reyes-Santos’ argument is particularly useful for my reading of “Robin Hood” because it acknowledges the very real consequences of xenophobia and racism facing Dominicans in Puerto Rico without contributing to the overdetermination of these discourses in defining Dominican-Puerto Rican relations. Instead, there remains the possibility of connections between these communities based on their shared experiences of marginalization and commitments to combating antiblackness.

### **Flipping the Scripts: Diasporic Blackness in “Robin Hood”**

In “Robin Hood,” Tego Calderón exposes Puerto Rico’s “secret” blackness that Alai Reyes-Santos outlines through flipping the scripts that define Puerto Ricanness as whitened and distinct from Dominicans. The video’s visual and sonic cues, especially the opening bomba interlude, articulate alternatives to the dominant scripts of benevolent slavery, racial harmony, and the folklorization of blackness that support racial democracy discourses on the island. As he

---

<sup>36</sup> Hernandez, “Dominicans in the Mix”; Reyes-Santos, *Our Caribbean Kin*, 172.

<sup>37</sup> Reyes-Santos, *Our Caribbean Kin*, 172.

does elsewhere in his repertoire, Calderón's critique of Puerto Rican race relations creates African diasporic connections with other communities, in this case Dominicans.

The song's lyrics recount the life of "*un Robin Hood moderno*" who begins working in some sort of smuggling operation after the death of his grandmother. We know that he has customers, that whatever industry he participates in involves monitoring by the government (*federicos*), and *troteos*, or shootings, that he claims "*espantan a los clientes*" [scare the clients]. We also know that he fears arrest or death, and that his customers purchase his wares clandestinely. Though never explicitly stated, the lyrics suggest that the Robin Hood *moderno* deals drugs. While on the surface, "Robin Hood" might be interpreted as a glorification of violence and criminal activity, the song also critiques structural discrimination facing black communities on the island. The title "Robin Hood" references the fictional character who steals from the rich and gives to the poor, implying that individuals involved in the informal economy actually help the people more than the state does. Tego Calderón described, "These figures exist and are loved, I have known many of them, we have this common denominator that they are not bad, they have suffered."<sup>38</sup> Calderón emphasizes the structural dynamics that cause "suffering" and subsequently motivate many individuals' decisions to pursue illegal activity. The Robin Hood *moderno* acts in response to the failure of the island's institutions to provide sufficient support for impoverished communities. Calderón thus positions the Robin Hood *moderno*'s activities in relation to larger structural problems of unemployment and poverty that disproportionately affect nonwhite communities in Puerto Rico.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> "Son queridos y existen los personajes, he conocido muchos, tenemos ese denominador común de que no son malos, han sufridos." *El Colombia.com*. September 19, 2012, [http://www.elcolombiano.com/historico/el\\_cantante\\_tego\\_calderon\\_hara\\_desde\\_hoy\\_reggaeton\\_pensando\\_en\\_sus\\_hijos-FFEC\\_207705](http://www.elcolombiano.com/historico/el_cantante_tego_calderon_hara_desde_hoy_reggaeton_pensando_en_sus_hijos-FFEC_207705)

<sup>39</sup> Kelvin A. Santiago-Valles, "Policing the Crisis in the Whitest of the Antilles," *Centro Journal* 8, nos. 1-2 (1996): 42-57.

The lyrics' focus on drug dealing departs from the music video's visual narrative that offers a striking image of the arrival of Dominican immigrants to Puerto Rico, focusing on a young woman and her son. However, the music video similarly addresses social inequalities. The emphasis on the woman and child aligns with the prevalence of Dominican women making the dangerous journey across the Mona Strait to Puerto Rico to escape the stifling poverty they experience in the Dominican Republic.<sup>40</sup> As I mentioned previously, once in Puerto Rico, these Dominican migrants share many of the neighborhoods plagued by the same social, economic, and political inequalities as working-class and black Puerto Ricans. In this context, the visual narrative of the young woman and her son coming to Puerto Rico can be read as a political critique of rampant social inequalities and inadequate policies that adversely affect nonwhite, poor communities.

Other important visual and sonic cues converge in "Robin Hood" to amplify Calderón's critique of racism and his expressions of diasporic blackness. The very beginning of the video - the bomba interlude, "*Si Yo Fuera Usted*" - offers the most critical starting point for understanding the diasporic politics of "Robin Hood." Bomba is an Afro-Puerto Rican folkloric music and dance considered emblematic of the African branch of Puerto Rico's racial triad. Hegemonic constructions of folkloric blackness often reduce African contributions to Puerto Rican culture to music, food, or spirituality, ultimately rendering blackness pre-modern and the "least" important of Puerto Rico's three cultural influences.<sup>41</sup> Folkloric blackness is emplaced in specific areas of the island, such as Piñones where Calderón and director Kacho López filmed "Robin Hood." These places' geographic boundaries presumably contain blackness as a symbol

---

<sup>40</sup> Milagros Ricourt, "Reaching the Promised Land: Undocumented Dominican Migration to Puerto Rico," *Centro Journal* 19, no. 2 (2007): 225-243; Sheila I. Vélez Martínez, "Desde Quisqueya hacia Borinquenia: Experiences and Visibility of Immigrant Dominican Women in Puerto Rico: Violence, Lucha, and Hope in their Own Voices," *ILSA Journal of International & Comparative Law* 18, no. 3 (2012): 683-706.

<sup>41</sup> Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness*; Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, "From Carolina to Loíza: Race, Place, and Puerto Rican Racial Democracy," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 20 (2013): 616-632.

of the “authentic” and “static” African heritage of Puerto Rico. The essentialized and limited nature of folkloric blackness is often explained by the presumed isolation of those communities where it has been emplaced from the rest of the allegedly more “modern” and “whitened” Puerto Rico.<sup>42</sup> By relegating blackness to these limited scripts, folkloric blackness can be easily integrated into Puerto Rican racial democracy discourses without compromising their commitment to whitening or their false claims of racial harmony.<sup>43</sup>

Both bomba and Piñones figure prominently in “Robin Hood”; however, rather than reinforce folkloric blackness, Calderón utilizes bomba and Piñones to express African diasporic connections between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. As we watch Calderón prepare to pick up the migrants on his boat, we hear a bomba song with the refrain: “*Si yo fuera usted, yo me quedo por allá*” [If I were you, I would stay over there]. In relation to the video’s commentary on Dominican immigration, it is clear that this is not a xenophobic or threatening message. Rather, “*Si yo fuera usted*” functions as a warning. More than the potential obstacles that undocumented immigrants face, this warning revolves around the recognition of the pervasive antiblack racism that impacts both Dominican immigrants to the island and Afro-Puerto Ricans.

Tego Calderón is known in part for his unabashed embrace of black identity, including his virulent critiques of Puerto Rican race relations and his celebrations of blackness. Many of Calderón’s songs, most notably “Loíza” on his first album, *El Abayarde*, directly call out the myth of Puerto Rican racial democracy by exposing how Afro-Puerto Ricans remain subject to racial discrimination despite rhetoric that celebrates racial harmony. Moreover, Calderón repeatedly describes his own experiences with racism on the island in interviews and his own

---

<sup>42</sup> Rivera-Rideau, “From Carolina to Loíza.”

<sup>43</sup> Deborah Thomas documents similar tensions in Jamaica, where folkloric constructions of blackness are integrated into the island’s national identity while expressions of what she terms “modern blackness” epitomized by diasporic cultural practices like dancehall counter such restricted definitions of Jamaicanness. See Deborah Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

writing. In his widely circulated *New York Post* editorial, “Black Pride,” Calderón details his experiences with racism in Latin America and in Puerto Rico. For example, he recounts an incident when he shared an elevator with a white woman in his affluent condominium complex: “It’s hard in Puerto Rico. There was this Spaniard woman in the elevator of the building where I lived who asked me if I lived there. And poor thing - not only is there one black brother living in the penthouse, but also in the other, lives [Afro-Puerto Rican boxer] Tito Trinidad. It gets interesting when we both have our tribes over.”<sup>44</sup>

This passage reveals two key aspects of race relations on the island. First, the implication of the white woman’s surprise at learning there was a “black brother living in the penthouse” exemplifies how residential segregation on the island occurs along both race and class lines. Zaire Dinzey-Flores has demonstrated how the construction of residential neighborhoods and public housing developments in Puerto Rico produce racial segregation such that middle- and upper-middle-class areas are imagined as “white” while working-class neighborhoods and public housing developments are associated with blackness.<sup>45</sup> In this context, Calderón’s residence in the penthouse appears out of place since it does not follow the typical pattern of residential segregation on the island.

Second, Calderón’s statement “it gets interesting when we both have our tribes over” suggests the continued racism that he and other Afro-Puerto Ricans encounter with the ambiguous descriptor “interesting,” as well as his tongue-and-cheek use of the word “tribes,” which carries pejorative connotations that reference stereotypes of primitive Africans. Indeed, elsewhere in the editorial, he alludes to the everyday microaggressions that he endures in Puerto Rico. Calderón characterizes white Puerto Ricans’ ignorance of racism on the island with a

---

<sup>44</sup> Tego Calderón, “Black Pride,” in *Reggaeton*, eds. Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009): 325-326.

<sup>45</sup> Dinzey-Flores, *Locked In, Locked Out*.

summary of the typical response they give him when he discusses the racial discrimination he faces: “‘Those things happen and it’s not because of color, Tego, but because of how you look, how you walk, what you wear, what credit card you have.’ Then, they spend a couple of days with me, sort of walk in my shoes, and say ‘Damn, *negro*, you were right.’”<sup>46</sup> As a celebrity, Calderón likely confronts different obstacles than other people; in fact, he acknowledges this in his editorial when he argues that he encounters more racism in the United States *not* because Latin America is “less” racist, but rather because he is more well-known in Latin America.<sup>47</sup> Still, the stories he relates in his editorial correspond to many first-hand accounts of Afro-Puerto Ricans (and other Afro-Latinos) with racism in Puerto Rico and with Puerto Rican communities in the United States.<sup>48</sup> Calderón’s experiences with racism form the basis of his warning in “Robin Hood.”

Calderón employs bomba and Piñones, both common signifiers of folkloric blackness, to make his critique legible; however, he transforms these signifiers into tools for resistance to antiblack racism. In “Robin Hood,” Piñones changes from a static site of romanticized and pre-modern blackness to a place where Afro-Puerto Ricanness and Afro-Dominicanness come together. On the most basic level, the bringing together of different African diasporic communities there reveals that Piñones does not exist in absolute isolation from other places, this disrupting the assumption that Piñones, and Loíza more broadly, are always separated from the rest of Puerto Rico. Indeed, the municipality of Loíza has not been as isolated as dominant histories would allow. For example, the history of sugar plantations there during Spanish rule and as U.S. corporations purchased lands after 1898 implies a history of movement of people and

---

<sup>46</sup> Calderón, “Black Pride,” 325.

<sup>47</sup> Calderón, “Black Pride,” 325.

<sup>48</sup> For several stories by Afro-Puerto Ricans about confronting racism, see Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, eds., *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

goods through the area. In the case of “Robin Hood,” depictions of Puerto Ricans helping Dominicans into the island discredits the notion that an isolated group of black Puerto Ricans live there as well as assumptions of inherent Dominican-Puerto Rican conflict. Although many Dominican migrants disembark in the western coast of Puerto Rico, Dominicans have a presence in Piñones, particularly as cooks in the area’s famous kiosks. Locals and tourists alike patronize Piñones’ kiosks that sell popular *fritura* that reflects Puerto Rico’s African roots. Dominicans and Puerto Ricans in Piñones and Loíza have worked together in community organizations in response to development projects that threaten the natural resources and cultural institutions there.<sup>49</sup> These multiethnic collaborations in Piñones – both on the ground in terms of organizing of kiosk workers, for example, or metaphorically as in the “Robin Hood” video – transform it from a site of isolated, premodern blackness into a place marked by African diasporic connections and resistance to dominant institutions.

The video’s visuals of lush vegetation, deserted beaches, and clandestine activity contribute to the depiction of Piñones as a site of resistance by conjuring images of *cimarronaje*, or marronage. The relatively small percentage of enslaved people in Puerto Rico compared to other Caribbean islands led to a perception that slave owners treated them more leniently, which allegedly produced more “passive” slave populations. However, scholars since the 1970s have challenged these perceptions in part by documenting various forms of resistance against slavery in Puerto Rico, including marronage and revolts.<sup>50</sup> Whether by fleeing to forests in the mountains and secluded beaches, or taking to the sea, *cimarrones* in Puerto Rico utilized natural resources

---

<sup>49</sup> Margarita Persico, “The Struggle of Piñones: Saving Ancestral Homes and the Environment,” *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America* 7, no. 3 (2008): 42-43.

<sup>50</sup> Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness*, 71-73.

at their disposal to resist slavery.<sup>51</sup> Resistance by *cimarrones* counters the script of benevolent slavery by revealing that the enslaved did not passively nor happily accept their situations. “Robin Hood”’s setting brings to mind images of *cimarrones* living in forests and moving secretly across land to avoid capture, thus reframing Piñones as a site of resistance to racial oppression.

Calderón’s integration of bomba into the video further destabilizes hegemonic scripts of folkloric blackness. While the inclusion of bomba in the video locates Calderón within an Afro-Puerto Rican space, he builds upon bomba’s history as a music that provided respite from and denunciations of the racism faced by its Afro-Puerto Rican and Afro-Caribbean practitioners. Calderón combines bomba with reggaetón and rap aesthetics, thus removing bomba from the folkloric realm, a strategy that he employs throughout his repertoire.<sup>52</sup> These connections also create a genealogy that situates reggaetón in relation to the long history of critical Afro-Puerto Rican musical expressions on the island. Significantly, this move rejects the insularity of Puerto Rican racial democracy by acknowledging the persistence of racism on the island, Afro-Puerto Ricans’ history of resistance, and Puerto Rico’s ongoing connections to the African diaspora.

The bomba’s refrain, “*Si yo fuera usted, yo me quedo por allá*”, underscores the song’s diasporic politics, especially with its emphasis on “*allá*”, or “over there.” The term “*allá*” connotes the phrase “*de aquí y de allá*” [from here and from there] that resonates in the context of Puerto Rican migrations between the United States and the island in which those from “*aquí*” – the island – are often seen as more authentically Puerto Rican than those from *allá* – the United States. One hears common stories of return migrants to Puerto Rico facing rejection from island Puerto Ricans due to their racialization in the US. Those from *allá* are often considered closer to

---

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Nistal-Moret, *Esclavos Prófugos y Cimarrones: Puerto Rico, 1770-1870* (Río Piedras: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1984).

<sup>52</sup> Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*, 94-95.

blackness due to stereotypes of the U.S. Puerto Rican community (especially in New York City) and their ties to the African American community.<sup>53</sup> The imposing of blackness onto Puerto Ricans abroad further displaces blackness from the island. On the other hand, as with bomba, Calderón resignifies the term *allá* not as a place of inauthentic Puerto Ricanness, but one that is a safer and more accepting place for black people than the island.

As with most forms of popular culture, there are limits to Calderón's critique, especially its gender politics. Alai Reyes-Santos points out that many expressions of solidarity between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans stress heteronormative gender relations and a shared "brotherhood" in which the dominant actors facilitating these connections are men.<sup>54</sup> In "Robin Hood," men serve as the gatekeepers for the Dominican woman and her son entering the island – Calderón, who transports them, and the white, male police officer who lets them go. The scene in which Calderón, the immigrants, and the officer interact reveals the uneven gender relations in the story. While the officer peers into the car with his flashlight, Calderón faces him directly until the officer shifts his attention to the backseat, when Calderón finally looks towards the steering wheel seemingly upset. The woman in the back, however, looks down, away from the officer, while her son peeks at him from the side. Upon seeing the young boy, the officer appears more sympathetic, and turns away to let them go. One could read this scene as an exposure of Puerto Rico's "secret" blackness since, as an agent of the state, the officer's reluctantly allowing Calderón to pass through could be a metaphor for the larger acknowledgement of blackness that occurs on the island despite the emphasis on race mixture and Spanish heritage.<sup>55</sup> This secret's reveal occurs through the glances between three men (the officer, Calderón, and the Dominican boy) while the woman remains passive. Representing men as the primary agents who make

---

<sup>53</sup> Flores, *Diaspora Strikes Back*.

<sup>54</sup> Reyes-Santos, *Our Caribbean Kin*.

<sup>55</sup> Reyes-Santos, *Our Caribbean Kin*.

possible the acknowledgement of blackness and Puerto Rican-Dominican diasporic connections reinforces the “brotherhood” through which transcolonial connections have historically been understood.

Despite these limitations, “Robin Hood” remains an important critique of the assumptions of Puerto Rican racelessness that have both maintained racial inequality on the island and obscured Puerto Rico’s connections to the broader African diaspora. Calderón’s warning is legible precisely because of a general understanding of blackness that departs from hegemonic portrayals of Puerto Rico as a racial democracy. His use of bomba and Piñones demonstrate that Afro-Puerto Rican cultural practices and symbols remain important expressions of black identities on the island and antiracist protest. Calderón is able to revise the meanings of these signifiers because others can identify with them as symbols of blackness outside of the dominant paradigm of folkloric blackness. In so doing, Calderón exposes the contradictions of racial democracy discourses in Puerto Rico that employ folkloric blackness to celebrate race mixture while simultaneously keeping racial hierarchies and antiblackness intact.

The creation of diasporic links between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans makes blackness central to this critique since these links develop out of the recognition of experiences with racism. As a black person in Puerto Rico, Calderón knows that racial democracy is a farce. “*Si yo fuera usted, yo me quedo por allá*” is a warning to his fellow African diasporic subjects that the “promised land” of Puerto Rico is not what it seems and, therefore, is not worth the dangerous journey. It is to point out the ways that antiblack racism continues to limit the opportunities of *all* black people in Puerto Rico, regardless of their country of origin. His warning is both a commentary on Puerto Rican race relations and a nod to the global, systemic antiblack racism that Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other people of African descent struggle against.

“Robin Hood” is but one example of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans embracing black identities, and of the establishment of African diasporic links across the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. It makes evident that, while dominant constructions of Puerto Rican and Dominican identities often privilege whiteness and Spanish heritage, this is not the whole story. Taking Puerto Rican and Dominican engagements with blackness and diaspora seriously makes several important interventions. First, and perhaps most obvious, integrating these stories into African diaspora theories fills in a substantial gap in the literature, and foregrounds blackness as a key element that links the Spanish Caribbean to other sites in the Caribbean and elsewhere. On the local level, this move continues to disrupt dominant discourses that aim to whiten Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. More broadly, this makes blackness central to the project of imagining a broader Spanish Caribbean studies that, as Ada Ferrer contends, is “open to seeing and engaging the way those societies interact with, shape, and are shaped by others.”<sup>56</sup> Finally, the integration of experiences, struggles, and contributions of the Spanish Caribbean into African diaspora theory introduces us to other ways of imagining blackness and diasporic connections. They also teach us about alternative modes of struggle for racial equality. As Tego Calderón makes clear in “Black Pride,” Latin America is not “less” racist than the United States. Rather, racism in Latin America operates differently. Taking into account the contestations around blackness and racism in the Spanish Caribbean offers a fuller picture of the range of strategies individuals employ in order to produce more egalitarian societies. Such a project not only enhances our understandings and theorizations of the African diaspora, it is also vital for the realization of a global antiracist society.

*Acknowledgments:* Thanks to Lia Bascomb for her comments on a previous version of this essay, and to the anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback.

---

<sup>56</sup> Ferrer, “History and the Idea,” 56.

