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“The Colors and Flavors of My Puerto Rico”: Mapping “Despacito”’s Crossovers

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As relieved evacuees from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands disembarked the Royal Caribbean cruise ship, they waved Puerto Rican flags, shouted “Puerto Rico!” and “¡*Puerto Rico se levanta!*” (rise up, Puerto Rico!), and listened to salsa tunes and Luis Fonsi’s hit song, “Despacito”. After losing electricity and water in the wake of Hurricane Maria, over 3,800 evacuees from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands finally made it to the mainland. The majority of the arrivals were Puerto Rican residents who had never lived anywhere but the island, and some of the passengers were stranded tourists, grateful to return home. The ship, named the Adventure of the Seas, carried U.S., U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rican flags proudly on its balcony. “Despacito” and Marc Anthony salsa tunes played as evacuees were reunited with loved ones who eagerly awaited their arrival.¹ Although salsa has long been associated with Puerto Ricanness, “Despacito” is a new symbol of Puerto Rican national identity.² Fonsi’s hit thrust Puerto Rico into the limelight shortly before the hurricane. Just two days after Maria struck, Fonsi described how “the world is upside down.”³ As Fonsi performed his greatest hits, including “Despacito”, on his U.S. tour, he, crewmembers, and the audience struggled with being out of contact with family members on the island.⁴ One can’t help but see how “Despacito,” for better or for worse, has become a symbol of Puerto Rican identity.

That “Despacito” has become a metonym of sorts for Puerto Rico is not surprising given the song’s incredible success. In April 2017, the “Despacito” remix by Luis Fonsi featuring Daddy Yankee and Justin Bieber became the first predominantly Spanish-language song to reach

number one on *Billboard's* Hot 100 Chart since Los Del Río's "La Macarena" in 1996. The media frenzy that ensued credited Justin Bieber with bringing the song to the mainstream. However, "Despacito" had already achieved tremendous popularity prior to Bieber's collaboration on the remix. When Puerto Rican artists Fonsi and Daddy Yankee originally released "Despacito" on January 13, 2017, the song broke numerous records for streaming sales and YouTube views, becoming number 1 on YouTube's global music chart and number 3 on Spotify's Global Top 50. It also dominated the Latin music charts for much of 2017, holding steady at number 1 on the Hot Latin Songs Chart for a record-breaking 52 weeks.⁵ The remix, which included an English-language introduction by Bieber, amplified the success of "Despacito," quickly surpassing one billion views on YouTube and shattering the records for the most streams for a Spanish language song in one week, with 24.1 million streams the week of April 20. Beyond sales, "Despacito" broke new ground as a Spanish-language song nominated for "Record of the Year" and "Song of the Year" Grammys, and Fonsi and Daddy Yankee performed it on stage during the live telecast of the awards show.

Despite Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee's tremendous success with the song, it is not surprising that Justin Bieber frequently received credit for "Despacito." This is a well-worn strategy of media coverage of Latina/o musicians identified by Wilson Valentin-Escobar as the "Columbus effect," in which, María Elena Cepeda elaborates, established Latina/o and Latin American artists are "repackaged as 'debut artists' and 'discoveries' of mainstream record companies."⁶ Many accounts of "Despacito"'s ascent to the mainstream ignored the song's prior success on the Latin charts as well as the lengthy careers of Luis Fonsi, his co-writer Erika Ender, and Daddy Yankee, who all had number one songs and hit albums prior to "Despacito." In response, critics admonished media coverage that presented Fonsi, Ender, and Yankee as

newcomers or that ignored the song's pre-Bieber success. Many also charged that Bieber engaged in a form of cultural appropriation, taking advantage of the song's popularity for his own gain without any authentic connection to reggaeton or Latin music, a charge that was magnified when it became evident in multiple live performances that Bieber did not know the lyrics through his use of "mock Spanish" and, in Montreal, his outright confession that "I can't do 'Despacito', I don't even know it."⁷

While the problematic media coverage of Bieber's participation in "Despacito" certainly merits critique, questions of cultural appropriation extend to Luis Fonsi, as well. Fonsi recorded "Despacito" for his ninth studio album. As several media outlets pointed out, the song reflects a departure from Fonsi's typical ballads and pop songs over the course of his almost twenty-year career, instead integrating the dembow beat typical of reggaeton. In Puerto Rico, reggaeton developed from poor, urban communities in the 1980s and 1990s. Reggaeton integrated sounds, language, fashion, and other stylistic elements from music such as hip-hop and dancehall that affiliated Puerto Ricans with other African diasporic communities in the Caribbean basin. Although primarily party music, reggaeton provided a space to talk about issues such as poverty and racism. These narratives directly contradict the notion that Puerto Rico is a racially harmonious society referred to as *la gran familia puertorriqueña* (the great Puerto Rican family).⁸ However, as reggaeton grew more popular, some have accused the genre of becoming detached from its origins. By the early-2000s, reggaeton artists like Daddy Yankee, Don Omar, and Wisin y Yandel became integrated into the Latin music mainstream, with reggaeton becoming the highest selling genre in the Latin music market. However, by 2006, some analysts reported that the reggaeton "bubble" had burst due to declining record sales.⁹

Despite this pessimism, reggaeton persisted and continued to influence Latin music. In 2014, Enrique Iglesias, Gente de Zona, and Descemer Bueno released their smash hit “Bailando,” a reggaeton-flamenco inspired fusion that arguably began a new wave of reggaeton-pop. By 2017, other Latin pop stalwarts such as Ricky Martin, Thalia, and Shakira had also produced reggaeton-pop fusions featuring reggaeton artists such as Maluma and Nicky Jam. In describing the process of defining his new sound, Luis Fonsi told *Billboard*, “I treat every album as a new beginning, so I’m asking myself, ‘What is pop music now? What are people consuming?’ And I take these things into effect.”¹⁰ Similarly, his co-writer Erika Ender noted that “everyone is making this type of fusion.”¹¹ In other words, Fonsi and Ender both recognized the market potential of the reggaeton-pop sound. Consequently, it is critical to examine not only how Justin Bieber may have appropriated reggaeton for his own gain, but also the ways that Luis Fonsi capitalized on reggaeton’s popularity to thrust his career back into the spotlight.

This paper explores the racial politics surrounding the original and remix versions of “Despacito” with particular attention to how performances and media coverage of the song reproduce stereotypes of a tropicalized (Afro-)Latinidad. Although “Despacito,” like other reggaeton-pop fusions, seems to obscure reggaeton’s ties to broader African diasporic aesthetics, Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee’s music video for “Despacito” ultimately makes blackness hypervisible by featuring stereotypical images of blackness that have long circulated in the Americas. These images situate Fonsi within the reggaeton sphere while reinforcing his own whiteness. Ironically, once “Despacito” entered the U.S. mainstream, these same stereotypes of blackness became interpolated onto Luis Fonsi, thus presenting him as the tropicalized racial Latina/o other in relation to white Canadian Justin Bieber. Through close analysis of “Despacito”’s music video and media coverage of both the original version and the remix, we

demonstrate how “Despacito” reproduces stereotypes of blackness and sexuality that are central to the tropicalization of Latinidad. In turn, these same stereotypes allegedly “authenticate” Fonsi’s foray into reggaeton and make him legible to the U.S. mainstream market.

“Despacito” and the Two Mainstreams

In his *New York Times* editorial titled “The Meaning of ‘Despacito’ in the Age of Trump,” Moises Velasquez-Manoff explained, “[“Despacito” is] promiscuous. It doesn’t respect borders or stick to racial categories. It borrows willy-nilly, encouraging cross-fertilization of cultures and styles. It courses with energy from the African diaspora.”¹² For Velasquez-Manoff, this “promiscuity” provided a powerful counterpoint to the nativism of President Donald Trump, revealing that U.S. Americans were more open-minded than political rhetoric would allow. But, it is not beyond the pale that U.S. mainstream audiences can embrace Latina/o cultural practices and anti-Latina/o prejudices simultaneously. In many instances, Latina/o(-inspired) cultural practices and representations that enter the U.S. mainstream, from Cinco de Mayo to Zumba Fitness® to *Modern Family*’s Gloria Pritchett, actually reinforce stereotypes of Latinidad as a hypersexual, exotic other. “Despacito” is no different, evident in Velasquez-Manoff’s own language. Describing the song as “promiscuous” or “encouraging cross-fertilization” brings to mind stereotypes of a virulent, uncontrollable sexuality that has been imposed onto Latina/o populations. Similarly, references to “borders” and “race mixing” directly signal historical anxieties about Latina/o populations “invading” the United States. Of course, Velasquez-Manoff’s attempts to mock that same rhetoric for stoking unsubstantiated fears of the “Latina/o threat.”¹³ Nevertheless, he ultimately reproduces some of these same stereotypes when he explains, “It courses with energy from the African diaspora.”

African diasporic populations across the Americas have long been associated with stereotypes of hypersexuality. In Puerto Rico, for example, dominant representations of black women have centered concerns about their potential to “corrupt” the Puerto Rican population with their presumed hypersexuality, from anxieties about prostitution in the nineteenth century to the effects of reggaeton music video dancers on youth in the early 2000s.¹⁴ Underlying these various moral panics was a larger concern about maintaining dominant representations of Puerto Rico as “whitened” despite rhetoric celebrating race mixture. The discourse of “*la gran familia puertorriqueña*” (the great Puerto Rican family) represents the island as a racially harmonious society characterized by race mixture between Spanish, African, and Indigenous ancestors. Despite this celebration of race mixture, however, several scholars have documented how this rhetoric ultimately attempts to affiliate Puerto Rico with modern whiteness.¹⁵ In this context, Velasquez-Manoff’s mention of “promiscuous,” “race mixing,” and “the energy of the African diaspora” connote the contradictory and problematic assumptions inherent to discourses of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*.

One of the central contradictions of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* is its celebration of African heritage as integral to Puerto Rico’s national identity while simultaneously reinscribing racist stereotypes of blackness.¹⁶ Although the alleged hypersexuality of blackness threatened *blanqueamiento*, or whitening, in Puerto Rico, stereotypes that equate blackness with musicality, rhythm, and sensuality are also extolled. *La gran familia puertorriqueña* and similar discourses from other Latin American countries identify music and dance as prime signifiers of their African heritage. Indeed, despite the underrepresentation of Afro-Latinos in elite positions in Latin America, they remain hypervisible in the popular music scene.¹⁷ On the other hand, not all musical practices are valued equally in this regard. For example, while the African-based

folkloric music and dance bomba may now be readily accepted as a symbol of Puerto Rico's African heritage, the African diasporic reggaeton has generally *not* been considered part of Puerto Rico's national culture, although it received growing acceptance when its commercial viability expanded in the mid-2000s.¹⁸ Precisely at this time of growing acceptance of reggaeton when the music spread beyond the urban, working-class, and predominantly non-white communities where it originated, reggaeton's aesthetics began to shift towards what some critics have described as a "whitening" of the music, or what Wayne Marshall identifies as the transformation from "música negra to reggaetón latino."¹⁹ This includes "watered-down," pop musical aesthetics as opposed to the more percussive and less melodious hip-hop and dancehall sounds of the 1990s, as well as the elevation of artists who embody the so-called "Latin look," featuring tan skin, straight or wavy dark hair, and European features.

This whitening of reggaeton is not unique. Other Latin music genres, from mambo in the 1950s to the salsa of the 1990s, have faced similar accusations.²⁰ Nevertheless, in each case, this modification of the music has helped to propel it into mainstream markets in both the United States and Latin America. As Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez writes of Desi Arnaz and Carmen Miranda's mainstream success, "Their performances of blackness speak for the African demographic component of [Cuba and Brazil, respectively], but, in both musical acts, the African is made invisible...Instead, two successful entertainers who are white have taken African culture and have appropriated their own re-presentation [*sic*]."²¹ Moreover, these artists "perform the African components of their respective countries by using stereotypical elements that define the African other: vivacity, vitality, rhythm, brilliant colors and exoticism."²² These stereotypes resonate across the Americas. For example, in David García's analysis of mambo's mainstream popularity in the United States, Mexico, and Cuba during the 1940s and 1950s, he notes that

critics from all three countries associated mambo with stereotypes of primitive Africanness, and they concluded that the music needed to be refined in order to appeal to broader audiences.²³ The whitening of reggaeton thus follows a long history of similar processes of whitening Afro-Latina/o musical practices as they expand their audiences in the Americas. In 2017, “Despacito”’s writers and producers made similar arguments about the song’s more “refined” sound and lyrics relative to other reggaeton songs.

The same trope of the rhythmic, exotic other associated with stereotypes of Afro-Latina/o cultural practices is also attributed to the white(ned) Latina/o musicians who perform these genres once they crossover into the United States. Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman term the process of imbuing Latina/o people and cultures with these stereotypes “hegemonic tropicalization,” which they define as “instances in a long history of Western representations of the exotic, primitive Other, are deployed through particular discursive strategies.”²⁴ Assumptions of an unbridled sexuality are one “powerful and pervasive variant of hegemonic tropicalization.”²⁵ Although Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman highlight the discursive in defining tropicalization, their concept is also useful for performance and popular music, where similar tropes abound. Foregrounding “tropical” within the concept of “tropicalization” specifically connotes the places “South of the Border” where alleged “Latin foreign others” reside. In turn, this reveals both the anxieties about those populations (e.g. in fear mongering about the so-called “invasion” of Latin Americans into the U.S.) as well as fantasies of exotic cultures, lush vegetation, and attractive locals marketed to U.S. tourists.

Multiple streams of tropicalization are at work in “Despacito” simultaneously. Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman note that Latin American and Latina/o cultural producers can potentially “tropicalize the other,” through reproducing racial stereotypes of blackness or indigeneity within

their communities.²⁶ For example, Arnaz and Miranda's stereotypical renderings of Afro-Latina/o music and dance enabled them to fulfill stereotypes of the "Latin foreign other" in the United States.²⁷ Similarly, Licia Fiol-Matta argues that Puerto Rican pop star Ricky Martin did not engage in "Afro-Latin sounds" until just prior to his English-language crossover. She writes that for U.S. mainstream audiences, "The appeal is to a 'Latin tinge,' featuring a glossed over, commercial use of 'Afro' musical elements (separating black music from certain instruments such as guitars and violins, and assigning it horns and percussion only)."²⁸ Most recently, Luis Fonsi "tropicalizes the other" in the original version of "Despacito" through the promotion of stereotypes of blackness, and reggaeton in particular. However, Fonsi became subject to hegemonic tropicalization once "Despacito" moved into the U.S. mainstream. In order to untangle these multiple threads of tropicalization, it is necessary to identify the two distinct markets - the Latin mainstream and the U.S. mainstream - in which "Despacito" circulated.

Typically, mainstream is discussed solely in terms of the U.S. market, referencing the musical practices that are consumed and accepted by the largest possible audience. Within this framework, Latin music is generally considered a "niche" market relative to the U.S. mainstream. Focusing definitions of mainstream on U.S. markets ignores the ways that similar dynamics occur within Latin music itself. The Latin music market is substantial and growing. A *Billboard* article in 2017 noted that "Latin America leads the way in music revenue growth" globally, with a 57% increase in streaming and an overall 12% increase in revenue, "the highest increase for any region internationally"²⁹; these statistics do not include Latin music consumers in the United States who also comprise a substantial market. In fact, the Latin music market is large enough that artists such as Romeo Santos have stated that they do not consider it necessary to crossover into the U.S. mainstream.³⁰ Still, it is important to point out that this Latin music

market is not undifferentiated, but rather contains several different music scenes, including what we term the “Latin mainstream.” Like the U.S. mainstream, the Latin mainstream encompasses the largest audience within Latin music. The primary distinction between the U.S. and Latin mainstreams is language, with the former in English and the latter in Spanish. At the heart of the Latin mainstream is the pop ballad, which Daniel Party argues is marked by “placelessness,” as opposed to Latin regional musical genres like tejana, merengue, or banda that are easily mapped onto specific places and audiences.³¹ In addition to placelessness, Party identifies a distinct Latin pop sound marked by “Afro-Latin percussion, flamenco-like fast runs on nylon-string acoustic guitar, Santana-like rock solos, and a mild funk bass.”³² In many ways, “Despacito” reflects these sounds with the reggaeton dembow, which serves as an “Afro-Latin percussion” sound and the “mild funk bass,” while the cuatro, though a uniquely Puerto Rican instrument, plays the “flamenco-like” riffs.

In addition to audience and sound, the term mainstream also has racial implications. In the United States, “mainstream” racially connotes whiteness, evident when Latin artists aim to crossover into the United States.³³ “Crossover” denotes moving from a “secondary” market to a “mainstream” market. Analysis of crossover Latin artists in the U.S. has focused on the ways they shifted their aesthetics to appeal to U.S. audiences.³⁴ For example, María Elena Cepeda writes that, “despite Shakira’s attempts to artistically and commercially separate herself from the latest incarnation of the Latin(o) music ‘boom’ of the late 1990s, her representation within the US mainstream media traces a pattern similar to those of most Latin(o) American artists.”³⁵ This involved an emphasis on hypersexuality, particularly Shakira’s belly-dancing and bare midriff, as well as a shift to a more Anglicized look featuring blonde hair.³⁶ Shakira’s example demonstrates that static images of the tropicalized Latina/o other become imposed onto Latin

artists in part to make them more identifiable within the US mainstream, which has long promoted these images. The process of crossover therefore can reproduce racial stereotypes, even if on the surface the success of a Latin artist might appear to indicate a greater acceptance of Latin music or even Latina/o people, as Velazquez-Manoff's editorial argues. However, analyzing these dynamics only within the U.S. mainstream ignores how similar processes are at work in the Latin mainstream. "Niche" Latin musical genres also cross over into the Latin music mainstream. More than expanding markets, these crossovers similarly reproduce racial boundaries within Latina/o contexts. For example, "Despacito" reinforces stereotypes of blackness as hypersexual "other" even as it relies on reggaeton aesthetics for its success. To that end, considering how "Despacito" first circulated in the Latin mainstream and then in the U.S. mainstream offers a rare opportunity to witness shifting dynamics of Latinidad across these audiences.

Calling attention to these distinct mainstreams reveals unequal power relations not only between Latina/os and dominant U.S. society, but also *within* Latina/o communities themselves. It is, of course, important to understand how stereotypes of Latinidad circulate in popular culture, and how they perpetuate structural inequalities that disenfranchise Latina/o populations. But, it is equally important to understand how similar processes reproduce racial inequalities within Latina/o communities. Considering the distinct ways that the Latin mainstream and the U.S. mainstream operate underscores the antiblackness that remains embedded within dominant constructions of Latinidad despite celebrations of Afro-Latina/o cultures. "Despacito"'s reliance on Afro-Latina/o cultural practices for its sound and aesthetic combined with its unparalleled success in the Latin and U.S. mainstreams makes it the perfect case study to examine these processes at work.

Reggaeton with “a Touch of Class”

Luis Fonsi never intended for “Despacito” to cross over into the U.S. mainstream; instead, he wanted to create a hit in the Latin music market. Fonsi had previous number one hits, like “No Me Doy por Vencido” (2008), but they followed a more typical ballad or pop-rock format. “Despacito” thus presents a stark departure from Fonsi’s previous work. As reggaeton has grown over the past decade, it has become the foundation of contemporary Latin pop, evident by songs like Enrique Iglesias and Gente de Zona’s 2014 hit “Bailando,” or Shakira’s 2017 hits “Me Enamoré,” “La Bicicleta” with Carlos Vives, and “Perro Fiel” with Nicky Jam. As Leila Cobo observes, the Latin market “is increasingly shifting to a singles industry where pop/urban fusions rule.”³⁷

Nevertheless, Fonsi describes making “Despacito” in an organic way, that it came to him in a “dream” and he woke up one morning with the idea for the chorus, which resembled more of a cumbia, stuck in his head.³⁸ Co-writer Erika Ender came over to his house, and the two developed a story for what Fonsi describes as an “up-tempo, happy, sexy, very sexy song.”³⁹ Fonsi then went to Colombian producers Andres Torres and Mauricio Rengifo where it was decided “Despacito” needed an “urban beat.”⁴⁰ Still, the team did not intend to produce a conventional reggaeton song. “We think that the reggaeton is pop now,” said producer Rengifo. His partner Torres added, “We were, like, trying to do reggaeton without doing reggaeton.”⁴¹ Ender claimed this fusion would “give a touch of class” to reggaeton.⁴² With the decision to create this reggaeton-pop fusion settled, they enlisted Daddy Yankee to “brin[g] his street-level credibility and pop savvy” to the track.⁴³ Fonsi felt that Yankee’s presence added “a moment of explosion” and an “extra shock of energy” to “Despacito”, describing the song as “raw.”⁴⁴

Discussions with “Despacito”’s producers and songwriters reveal that the decision to create a reggaeton-pop fusion emerged in response to the popularity of similar sounds in mainstream Latin music. Fonsi’s sonic shift was strategic, a move that incorporated a genre he had hitherto not engaged with to make his new album relevant and exciting. In so doing, he facilitated a crossover of reggaeton, a genre that had long been stigmatized in Puerto Rico and elsewhere, into the Latin music mainstream. Torres’ idea of “doing reggaetón without doing reggaetón” and Ender’s adding a “touch of class” demonstrate the racial dynamics of this crossover move. On one hand, “doing reggaetón without doing reggaetón” might reference sonic shifts to a more pop and less percussive aesthetic. But it also connotes the place of blackness within the narrative of reggaetón’s origins. Puerto Rican race relations have sometimes erroneously been understood through the lens of socioeconomic class. Thus, “giving a touch of class” not only attempts to distance “Despacito” from reggaetón’s hypersexual reputation, but also from the working class and predominantly black communities that created it. Similarly, “doing reggaetón without doing reggaetón” implies that the makers of “Despacito” borrow from reggaetón, but are fundamentally different from the communities where reggaetón developed. In turn, it reflects the contradictory way that blackness forms part of the racially mixed *gran familia puertorriqueña*, but becomes marginalized through the whitening project that informs Puerto Rican identity. As Wayne Marshall makes clear in his criticism of Torres and Rengifo, “To be so explicit about gentrifying a genre might seem bold, but this is a longstanding pattern in the history of popular music. A litany of working-class dance music associated with public acts of bodily pleasure — and accordingly racialized as threats to the social order — has been subjected to this process, edges polished soft for mass consumption by the middle class.”⁴⁵

Marshall's comments reference reggaeton's shifting standing within the music industry over the past two decades. In Puerto Rico, early reggaeton of the 1990s (then called "underground") emerged from the working class urban neighborhoods left behind by austere, neoliberal policies that shaped the island's economy.⁴⁶ Many of these neighborhoods were racialized on the blacker end of Puerto Rico's racial spectrum.⁴⁷ Moreover, reggaeton was often blamed for promoting violence, drug use, and illicit sexual behavior through the imposition of racial stereotypes on the genre's artists and fans. In fact, reggaeton faced two censorship campaigns in 1995 and 2002 meant to hinder the music's expanding popularity across racial and class lines. These censorship campaigns unwittingly provided publicity for many artists, and shortly after the 2002 campaign, Tego Calderón released *El Abayarde*, ushering in the mainstreaming of reggaeton on the island. By the mid-2000s, reggaeton became the "soundtrack" of Puerto Rico and the "island's primary musical export."⁴⁸ Reggaeton's shift over time shows how music crosses over even *within* the Latin market; that is, a "niche" music associated with working class, black communities moved to more "mainstream" Latin pop markets, without necessarily crossing over into the U.S. mainstream.

Still, reggaeton never completely shed its seedy reputation. Indeed, reggaeton's crossover into the Latin mainstream potentially reproduces stereotypes of blackness, just as the process of crossover of Latina/o artists in the U.S. mainstream does. Despite "Despacito"'s "gentrifying a genre," it still reinforces stereotypes that equate blackness with sexuality in Puerto Rico and elsewhere. This is particularly evident in the song's music video, which Fonsi has described as his homage to Puerto Rico. In April 2017, he told *El Nuevo Herald*, "This song takes the flavors and colors of my country, Puerto Rico, which is something that I couldn't do with my ballads, even though I always wanted to. It's a small homage to the land where I was born that gave me

my love of music... what I wanted to capture was Puerto Rico's beauty and colors, but not from an obvious point of view, filming in tourist locations. I didn't go to the most famous beach in Puerto Rico, I didn't want to film where all the people go. [We filmed in] the places you won't see if you go to Puerto Rico for the weekend on a cruise. I wanted to show people what they should know, the heat, the smile of the people, that hug they give you, and mix it with the sensuality that the song's lyrics bring along with the dancing, the party, and the happiness, who we Latinos really are."⁴⁹ Beyond the visuals of the video, Fonsi credits "this urban feel in the rhythm [that] we breathe in and out" as part of the Puerto Rican and Latina/o ethos.⁵⁰

Fonsi's point that this "urban rhythm" - the reggaeton beat underlying "Despacito" - represents Puerto Rico more than his ballads makes sense given both the aforementioned placelessness of Latin pop and the associations between Puerto Rico and reggaeton. However, he couches his claims of "Despacito"'s Puerto Rican authenticity within several problematic tropes that reproduce both fantasies of the exotic "foreign Latino other," and stereotypes that equate blackness with musicality and sensuality. Regarding the former, in his attempt to show the "real" Puerto Rico beyond Old San Juan's cruise ship piers, Fonsi emphasizes stereotypes of sensuality ("heat"), *fiesta* ("dancing", "the party"), and submissiveness ("the smile of the people", "the hug they give you"). To be sure, it is possible that fostering close relationships, accepting others, and a politics of fun could be part of Puerto Rican cultural production. However, Fonsi's comments here do not make clear that that is what he is referring to. Consider the similarities of Fonsi's depiction of Puerto Rico as "the dancing, the party, and the happiness, who we Latinos really are" alongside the following descriptions of "Despacito" from various press outlets: one characterizes it as "inherently danceable, one that makes you think of sun, sand, sweat, and sex" (*NewStatesmen*), or another as a song that "sounds like that ninth glass of box wine by the pool"

(*The Guardian*).⁵¹ Or, even more explicit, this description from *Noisey from Vice*: “Try listening to “Despacito” and not feeling immediately transported to a balmy paradise where dust gives the air a physical presence and everyone smells like salt mixed with coconut oil and you are day drunk on something you sucked out of a pineapple with a straw.”⁵² All of these descriptions, whether from Fonsi or this English-language media coverage of “Despacito,” reproduce stereotypes of Puerto Rico as an exotic, tropical, party locale filled with “happy” people who “smell like salt mixed with coconut oil” available for the carefree consumption by foreign tourists looking for an escape. In so doing, they reproduce old stereotypes that distinguish the supposedly more civilized Western world from, in this case, Latin America and the Caribbean. The music video furthers this image with its emphasis on what Fonsi calls the “colors and flavors of Puerto Rico.” It begins with a sweeping view of waves crashing on the seawall of the San Juan neighborhood La Perla. The neighborhood’s brightly colored homes, rustic alleyways, and graffiti reinforce the stereotypes of Puerto Rico as an exotic, tropical landscape available for tourist consumption. In fact, following “Despacito”’s tremendous success, tours visiting the sites where the video was filmed catered to foreigners eager to experience this “authentic” Puerto Rico.⁵³

Although Fonsi insists on moving beyond “tourist” Puerto Rico, he himself appears as a tourist in the video. In part this has to do with the racialized geography of Puerto Rico itself. Like other working class urban neighborhoods in Puerto Rico, La Perla has historically been associated with violence and delinquency in the popular imagination; in fact, Oscar Lewis conducted his ethnographic research for his widely-cited and award-winning book, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty* (1966), partially in La Perla, a place whose inhabitants he characterized as a pathologically obsessed with sex and focused primarily on

parties, fun, and drinking rather than hard work or morality.⁵⁴ Similar stereotypes have long been imposed onto working class communities throughout Puerto Rico. Moreover, Puerto Rican geography is also racialized such that urban, working class neighborhoods and housing developments are understood to be marked by stereotypical notions of blackness while upper-class areas are seen as more white.⁵⁵ This racialization of space fundamentally ignores the structural inequalities that perpetuate racial and class segregation on the island, instead reinforcing longstanding stereotypes and racial hierarchies. Carol Vernallis argues that music video settings can convey a sense of authenticity for a song; for example, she points out that filming rap videos in the “street” imply connections to rap’s origins.⁵⁶ Setting “Despacito” in La Perla marks it as authentic for different audiences. La Perla’s reputation aligns with many stereotypes associated with the urban communities in which reggaetón developed, thus signaling the genre’s origins in ways similar to Vernallis’s observation of street scenes in U.S. rap videos. In addition, La Perla’s importance in the history of Puerto Rican popular music and cultural production also locates Fonsi firmly within a Puerto Rican cultural space. And yet, once “Despacito” crossed over into the U.S. mainstream, the crashing waves and colorful backdrop of La Perla’s iconic buildings reference stereotypes of the exotic, tropical Caribbean. Fonsi thus appears out of place for those familiar with Puerto Rico’s racialized geography while fulfilling stereotypes of the foreign Latino other within the U.S. mainstream.

Background figures in the music video for “Despacito” contribute to Fonsi’s appearing out of place in La Perla. Most notable is the number of black people in the background of the video. As Carol Vernallis argues, background figures become important not only for establishing the narrative of the music video, but also for “color[ing] our relation to the star.”⁵⁷ In this case, the blackness of the background figures in “Despacito” alongside the landscape of La Perla

underscore Fonsi's whiteness within the Puerto Rican context. Vernallis writes that background figures appear as a "caste different from that of the lead," evident in their lack of agency or ability to speak within the video.⁵⁸ "Despacito" places black figures in the background of the frame; often, they have little or no interaction with Fonsi or Daddy Yankee, save for a few elderly men playing dominos outdoors. Others gather in the bar that provides the backdrop for the second half of the video. In one shot, a younger black man and his elder listen to a boombox together. In another, one young man cuts a boy's hair. Although the dancers are multiracial, one woman with long dreadlocks stands out in particular, often centered in the frame or at one point dancing atop a car. Similarly, the group of musicians in the bar during the second half of the video feature several black drummers and dancers. The plethora of black bodies that dance, live, and laugh in the background of the video underscore Fonsi's own whiteness as he traverses their spaces.

The other two most visible bodies in the video - those of Daddy Yankee and Zuleyka Rivera, who plays Fonsi's love interest - further emphasize Fonsi's seeming out of place. Though neither Yankee nor Rivera are identified as black in the Puerto Rican context, both occupy a distinct racial and class position vis-a-vis Fonsi. Zuleyka Rivera, the former Miss Universe and *telenovela* actress from Salinas, Puerto Rico, may not be considered black, but she is also recognized as one of very few Latin American Miss Universes with "brown" skin that signals her racially mixed heritage; in addition, she had plastic surgery to "refine" her nose to be more in line with Eurocentric beauty standards.⁵⁹ In "Despacito," Rivera appears significantly darker than Fonsi, although her hair and facial features also distinguish her from the black bodies in the background. Music video director Carlos Perez explained that when considering casting the lead for the video, they had to select someone "credible in the environment" who was a "true

representative of the beauty in the Caribbean.”⁶⁰ Although Rivera is not racialized as black, her race mixture that aligns her with *la gran familia puertorriqueña* can also serve to mark her as a “brownier” other vis-a-vis Fonsi’s more whitened Puerto Ricanness. At the same time, the casting of Zuleyka Rivera authenticates the track as Puerto Rican via both her embodiment of the racially mixed Puerto Rican/Latina and her status as a Puerto Rican national representative in Miss Universe. Rivera’s embodiment of the racially mixed Puerto Rican makes her the ideal love interest for Fonsi to pursue in the music video.

Similarly, Daddy Yankee embodies the whitened Latin look associated with Latina/o celebrities. However, his self-identification as *mulato* (a term that references his mixed race parentage from his white mother and black father), his upbringing in the public housing development Villa Kennedy, and his status as a reggaeton singer prevent him from occupying the same type of whiteness as Fonsi, a clean-cut balladeer. Instead, his mixed racial heritage represents the racial mixing key to the narrative of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* because he is not black, white, or indigenous. Thus, the black bodies in the music video help to authenticate the song as Puerto Rican, but fail to fully embody Puerto Rican ideals in the way that Yankee can. This follows larger patterns of visual representations of Latinidad that frequently exclude Afro-Latinas/os. Nevertheless, Daddy Yankee’s status as a reggaeton pioneer and a figure associated with the racial and class dynamics of the genre lends credibility to Fonsi’s forays into reggaeton.

In addition to bodies, the cultural signifiers included in the video also indicate Afro-Puerto Rican culture. Bomba drums and dancing appear throughout “Despacito.” Bomba is an Afro-Puerto Rican folkloric music and dance that has been considered emblematic of the island’s African heritage within *la gran familia puertorriquena*. Despite this celebratory rhetoric, bomba

along with other African-descended folklore is typically understood to exist “in premodern times of idealizing black people as happy and rhythmic tradition bearers.”⁶¹ Representing bomba in this way reinforces the whitening that undergirds dominant discourses of Puerto Rican national identity. In this context, it could be argued that featuring young people, including Zuleyka Rivera, dancing and performing bomba in modern times could distance bomba from this premodern, romanticized history. But, read alongside Fonsi’s frequent declarations that “Despacito” reveals his true, authentic Puerto Rican self, the incorporation of bomba might also reinforce racist stereotypes that equate blackness with musicality and sensuality. Fonsi posits that “Despacito” allowed him to express his “other side,” explaining to Lyndsey Havens of *Billboard* that “this is who I’ve always been,” and that the rhythm is inherent to a “Latino culture.” He continued, “For us Latinos, this urban feel in the rhythm is what we breathe in and out...movement, dancing, and rhythm are engraved in my bones.”⁶² Fonsi thus presents this “urban rhythm,” which can be understood as a metonym for blackness, as something that always existed inside of him, but could never come out until “Despacito.” His equation of rhythm with biology is consistent with dominant rhetoric regarding Puerto Rican race mixture that posits that all Puerto Ricans, regardless of phenotype, have African heritage and that identify music as the site where African cultural influences are most evident. Stressing biological ancestry in this regard reinforces essentialized notions of musical and rhythmic blackness intimately tied to the body, thus reinforcing racial stereotypes that equate whiteness with reason and civilization, and blackness with corporeal instinct and primitivity. At the same time, his claims that this rhythm represents “who Latinos really are” follows the logic of whitening inherent to *la gran familia puertorriqueña*. Fonsi can embody this rhythm through the African ancestry he allegedly has as a member of the racially mixed Puerto Rican population even if he is read as white within the

Puerto Rican context. That Fonsi himself never actually dances or plays bomba in the video reinforces this assumption because it accentuates his difference from the other bodies, foregrounding his own whiteness without discrediting his claims to Puerto Rican authenticity.

In the end, Fonsi's whiteness is not compromised by his engagement in black cultural practices or his location in the racialized space of La Perla. Instead, the video follows the flawed logic of *blanqueamiento* and *la gran familia puertorriqueña* in Puerto Rico. Presenting Fonsi as "naturally" inclined to do reggaeton after many years of racially unmarked ballads reproduces the idea of a racially mixed whiteness as the norm in Puerto Rico. It also ignores the ways that Fonsi and his collaborators observed market trends in their calculated decisions to pursue an "urban" beat, and to create a more "refined" version of reggaeton, particularly regarding lyrics. Indeed, Erika Ender recalled that she told Fonsi, "Why don't we talk about a man that is trying to, you know, get to a woman in a very nice way? Because this genre is normally very aggressive with women and I think this song, it's very respectful."⁶³ Acknowledging the need to be "respectful" replicates problematic dichotomies between hypersexualized, "aggressive" reggaeton and respectable pop, which, in turn, reproduces racial hierarchies that equate whiteness with modern respectability and blackness as its opposite. This also reflects a typical move in the process of making something "mainstream" - allegedly "taming down" black cultural practices to make them more "palatable" to white audiences (though, it is worth pointing out that "Despacito" remains considerably sexually explicit despite attempts to distance the song's lyrics from reggaeton's presumed hypersexuality). In so doing, Fonsi can engage with reggaeton without absorbing the genre's reputation. The video's director, Carlos Perez, identified one of the "challenges" for "Despacito" was making a video that was "credible for Fonsi, that embraces the urban world that Yankee comes from, and at the same time shares different points

of the culture seamlessly among those elements.”⁶⁴ This “challenge” emerges from an understanding that Fonsi and Yankee’s “worlds” are fundamentally distinct, thus replicating the differences between reggaeton and pop. In this vein, the black bodies and cultural practices in the video legitimize Fonsi’s foray into reggaeton while keeping intact his own respectable whiteness, thus maintaining his “credibility” and that of “the urban that world Yankee comes from.” As a result, “Despacito”’s success within the Latin mainstream does not lead to greater acceptance of the communities associated with reggaeton, nor does it entail a serious attempt to grapple with the classism and racism that impact these communities. Instead, it replicates the racial divisions within Puerto Rico and inherent to the process of crossover more generally. And yet, the very same stereotypes associated with blackness that Fonsi reproduces in the Latin mainstream version of “Despacito” become attributed to him once the song crosses over into the U.S. mainstream.

“When I’m Romantic, I’m Full-On *en español*”

Like Luis Fonsi’s other work, “Despacito” was made for the Latin mainstream, but it nevertheless became a sensation in the English-dominant U.S. mainstream. One explanation for this is that the Latin mainstream is adopting the tastes of the U.S. market. However, Latin music has long influenced U.S. popular music. Moreover, recently several reggaetón-inspired songs have made Billboard’s ‘Top 100’ list, including “Shape of You” by Ed Sheeran, which also won the 2018 Grammy for Best Pop Solo Performance. Although “Despacito” excelled in both the Latin mainstream and the U.S. mainstream, the cultural dynamics surrounding the song’s success differ significantly. While the media coverage and music video emphasize Fonsi’s whiteness in relation to a hypersexual, black, reggaeton “other” within the Latin mainstream, he becomes

racialized within the U.S. mainstream as non-white. This is not surprising given the general racialization of U.S. Latinas/os as “brown” subjects existing somewhere between the black and white racial poles in the U.S. Part of this racialization involves the assumption that within the U.S.’s rigid racial categories, Latinas/os’ allegedly “unique” race mixture forecloses them from identifying or being identified as white. Consequently, the same stereotypical tropes of blackness that provide the foil for Fonsi’s whiteness in “Despacito”’s video become attributed to Fonsi himself within the U.S. mainstream via hegemonic tropicalization often imposed upon Latina/o stars.

Central to this process of tropicalization is the assumption that Latinas/os embody an “exotic foreign other.”⁶⁵ The almost mythical story of how Canadian pop star Justin Bieber discovered “Despacito” reflects this trend. The story goes: after hearing the sensational track by Fonsi and Yankee in a Bogotá nightclub, Bieber contacted his manager, Scooter Braun. Braun reached out to Fonsi’s record label to ask for access to the studio sessions. After practicing with a vocal coach, Bieber surprised everyone by singing the chorus in Spanish, despite having the option to do an English translation. The remix was released, and Fonsi appeared onstage with Bieber in Puerto Rico to perform the song. All of this happened in the span of about a week, the track being released just four days after Bieber recorded.⁶⁶ The remix shot up to number one and held the spot for sixteen weeks. Beyond merely “discovering” the song, media outlets credited Bieber with “weaponiz[ing] it” and called him the “missing ingredient” that led to the song’s success.⁶⁷ Such imagery credits Bieber with the success of the song, a gesture repeated in article headlines such as: “*Justin Bieber’s ‘Despacito’ Could Ignite a Tourism Boom for Puerto Rico,*” “*Beach-bound Beliebers! Justin Bieber’s hit song ‘Despacito’ leads to a 45% hike in tourism for Puerto Rico,*” “*The Story Behind Justin Bieber’s ‘Despacito’ Remix is Pretty Hilarious,*”

““Despacito” Could Signify A Latin Pop Resurgence Or Just *Justin Bieber’s King-Making Power*,” and “A Spanish Song at No. 1? All It Took Was *Justin Bieber*” (emphasis added).⁶⁸ Or, as Viv Groskop for the *New European* described, “Originally released in Spanish as a collaboration between *a singer and a rapper from Puerto Rico*, it became the most downloaded track in history when an English remix featuring Justin Bieber was released” (emphasis added).⁶⁹ Here, Yankee and Fonsi are not even named, thus identifying Bieber as both discoverer and key to the song’s success. Such rhetorical moves present Bieber as the most important actor in “Despacito”’s success and removes any agency or artistic skill from Yankee, Fonsi, or the other Latinos involved in “Despacito”’s production.

The story of Bieber’s participation in “Despacito” follows the typical portrayal of veteran Latin American artists who crossover into the U.S. mainstream market, reproducing narratives of colonial discovery of allegedly authentic, exotic, and foreign cultures.⁷⁰ Not only do such narratives ignore the histories of these musical practices, but they also obscure the power dynamics that happen within Latin music markets themselves; indeed, it is no accident that it has been Latin pop artists already dominant within the Latin mainstream who have most often been able to crossover into the U.S. mainstream. As María Elena Cepeda has documented in the case of the late 1990s success of so-called “Latin boom” artists Ricky Martin and Shakira, “the presumption that ‘America’ is synonymous with English and whiteness reigns as the veiled premise upon which much media coverage of Latin(o) music is constructed.”⁷¹ In other words, Latin music artists are always positioned as the “other” vis-a-vis white pop stars in the U.S. mainstream, as exemplified in the descriptions of Bieber’s “discovery” of “Despacito.” This is further emphasized by the reality that, as Puerto Rican subjects, both Daddy Yankee and Luis Fonsi are actually U.S. citizens, and Fonsi spent much of his life in Florida, while Justin Bieber,

a Canadian citizen, resides in the U.S. on an O-1 work visa, prompting calls for his deportation when in 2014 he was arrested for a DUI and street racing in Miami Beach.⁷² The emphasis on Fonsi and Yankee as foreign others within the pop music world thus reflects larger stereotypes of Latinas/os as perpetual foreigners in the United States as well as historically contested claims to U.S. citizenship by Puerto Ricans due to the island's colonial status vis-à-vis the United States.

But this mark as the “foreign” is also intrinsically racialized such that a Latina/o crossover star like Fonsi is understood to be non-white even if he embodies whiteness in the Puerto Rican context. In this vein, Bieber personified the “shiny pop” considered necessary to tame Despacito's “Latin urban” aesthetic.⁷³ As one critic mentioned, for a “Latin” track like “Despacito” to be so successful, it needed “Justin Bieber's whiteness to make it safe” for a mainstream audience.⁷⁴ The need for this “safety” measure stems from the association between Latino male performers and the stereotype of the irresistible yet dangerous “Latin lover.” Dated back to the 1920s films of Rudolph Valentino, Charles Ramírez Berg defines the Latin lover as “the possessor of a primal sexuality that made him capable of making a sensuous but dangerous - and clearly non-WASP - brand of love” marked by “eroticism, exoticism, tenderness tinged with violence and danger, all adding up to the romantic promise that, sexually, things could very well get out of control.”⁷⁵ The Latin lover stereotype exemplifies the gendered and sexualized dynamics of the racialization of Latinidad that impact both men and women, albeit through different archetypes. In this case, the Latin lover's allegedly uncontrollable sexuality represents him as the racialized “other” who, though alluring, threatens to upend the social order by attracting and “corrupting” the pure white woman.

In this context, Luis Fonsi transformed into the Latin lover once “Despacito” entered the mainstream. To be sure, “Despacito” is a thinly-veiled double entendre about sexual encounters

between men and women, as are many other pop songs. But, English-language media coverage of “Despacito”’s success emphasized the song’s sexual nature, often using especially alarmist tones. A key aspect of the Latin lover is the presumption that Spanish is inherently sexual. While sexualized Spanish construes the Latin lover as “dangerous,” this same quality is valued in white men. This can be best demonstrated by the utter astonishment expressed in media coverage about “Despacito”’s lyrics that characterized them as “deliciously suggestive”, “shockingly filthy”, and “absolute filth” when translated into English.⁷⁶ Malaysia even banned “Despacito” from the airwaves because of its alleged obscenity.⁷⁷ At times, Fonsi himself perpetuates assumptions about the sexiness of the Spanish language, such as when he told *NBC Latino*, “Oh baby, when I’m romantic I’m *en español*- full, all the way.”⁷⁸ Despite Fonsi’s complicity in aligning himself with stereotypes inherent to the Latin lover trope, Bieber still unfairly avoids any of the negative connotations of the song’s lyrics. Instead, Bieber is praised with headlines such as: “Justin Bieber Sings in Spanish in His Sexy New Collaboration” and “Justin Bieber Broke Out His Sexy Spanish Dictionary for his First Song of 2017.”⁷⁹ Spotify even went so far as to dub Bieber a “Latin King” because of his alleged Spanish prowess.⁸⁰ Fonsi is burdened with the hypersexualization of the Latin lover trope, while Bieber receives acclaim for his use of the language.

Taken together, the emphasis on the sexuality of “Despacito”’s lyrics in the media situate the song and Fonsi, especially, in relation to stereotypes of the Latin lover. Latin lovers embody the exotic excess associated with hegemonic tropicalization. The same race mixture mobilized to legitimate Fonsi’s reggaeton and underscore his whiteness within the Latin mainstream is thus used to present him as a Latin lover who does not respect racial boundaries within the U.S. mainstream. In other words, although Fonsi is understood to be nonblack in the U.S. context, his

racial mixture and subsequent ties to blackness position him as nonwhite and a racial Latina/o other. Therefore, many of the same stereotypes of blackness, particularly around hypersexuality, that are evident in the original version of “Despacito” in the Latin mainstream become attributed to Fonsi himself within the U.S. mainstream. Despite claims by Fonsi and others that “Despacito” has the capacity to dissolve racial divisions, the song actually reinforces them. Like other crossover stars before him, Fonsi becomes legible to the U.S. mainstream through the embodiment of stereotypes of the tropicalized Latina/o other (especially the Latin lover) that have circulated in the U.S. mainstream for decades. The popularity of “Despacito”, then, might just as easily be explained by the song’s satiating a desire to “eat the other”⁸¹ on the part of U.S. mainstream audiences rather than a greater acceptance of Latina/o communities. The result of this process is twofold: first, it further marginalizes and distorts the African diasporic roots of reggaeton, and second, it reinforces longstanding stereotypes of tropicalized Latina/o racial others within the United States.

Conclusion

While the media attention around “Despacito” portrays it as a groundbreaking hit for Latin music, it repackages old stereotypes of blackness and Latinidad as new, hip, and trendy. While we acknowledge the impact a Spanish-language song at number one for 16 weeks can have in the music industry, it is not wholly without problems. Despite the optimism of Fonsi and others that “Despacito” could break down racial barriers, especially in the Trump era, “Despacito” ultimately entrenches racial divisions through its perpetuation of racial stereotypes. The song takes part in a long tradition of the tropicalization of Latina/o music, culture, and bodies, while also marginalizing blackness within both Latin America and the United States.

Consequently, it is necessary to consider the Latin mainstream and U.S. mainstream in tandem in order to fully address how these multiple streams of tropicalization work together. Like the Latin Boom artists such as Ricky Martin and Shakira before it, “Despacito” shows that embodying tropicalizing stereotypes of Latinidad is critical for crossover success in the U.S. mainstream. But, it is no accident that these same artists first garnered success by implementing similar stereotypes of blackness in the Latin mainstream.⁸² This is evident in Fonsi’s use of black bodies and Afro-Latina/o cultural signifiers in his music video that divorces him from blackness within Puerto Rico while reinforcing dominant ideas of Puerto Rican *blanqueamiento*. “Despacito” participates in the whitening of reggaeton, a genre that originally criticized racial discrimination and anti-blackness. In so doing, “Despacito” reinforces problematic racial distinctions between Puerto Ricanness and blackness. However, once in the United States, similar stereotypes are imposed onto Fonsi, replicating racial divisions between U.S. whiteness and Latinidad. For this reason, it is important to consider the racial dynamics of both the Latin and U.S. mainstreams that, may appear different on the surface, but actually reproduce the same antiblackness and racist stereotypes.

At the height of “Despacito”’s success, critics predicted that it would result in more Latin-fusion hits entering the U.S. mainstream. Not surprisingly, the next potential song, J Balvin’s “Mi Gente,” also featured a white Latina/o performing a reggaeton-style song, this one originally recorded as “Voodoo Song” by Jamaican French producer Willy William.⁸³ But even with Beyoncé’s help on the remix, “Mi Gente,” though popular, could not achieve the tremendous success of “Despacito” before it. Of course, history has shown us that when Latin music hits cross over, they do not necessarily pave the way for subsequent Spanish-language songs to do so, nor does their success reduce racial discrimination. Instead, “Despacito”’s

incredible success has overshadowed and, to a certain extent, excused the ways in which it circulates and reinforces longstanding, problematic stereotypes of blackness and Latinidad.

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¹ Jenny Jarvie, "Thousands of Puerto Ricans Land in Florida, Fleeing the Misery Left by Hurricane Maria," *Los Angeles Times*, October 03, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-puerto-rico-florida-20171003-story.html>.

² We acknowledge the debates about salsa’s origins; however, we maintain that, regardless of such debates, Puerto Rico has embraced salsa as a symbol of the island’s national culture and heritage. As such, we contend that salsa can be understood as a symbol of Puerto Rican national identity.

³ Luis Fonsi, “Luis Fonsi on the Devastation in Puerto Rico: 'This Will Take Years to Rebuild',” *Billboard*, September 28, 2017, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/7980968/luis-fonsi-puerto-rico-hurricane-relief-rebuilding>.

⁴ Luis Fonsi, “Luis Fonsi on the Devastation in Puerto Rico.”

⁵ This reflects the number of weeks “Despacito” has remained at number one as of the April 28, 2018, chart at the time of this writing.

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- ⁶ María Elena Cepeda, *Musical ImagiNation: U.S.-Colombian Identity and the Latin Music Boom* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 52.
- ⁷ Tatiana Cirisano, “Justin Bieber Dodges Water Bottle From Crowd After Refusing to Sing ‘Despacito’: ‘I Don’t Even Know It,’” *Billboard*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/7832770/justin-bieber-water-bottle-stage-despacito>.
- ⁸ Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
- ⁹ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!: Hybridity and Identity in Latino Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010): 160-161.
- ¹⁰ Lyndsey Havens, “Luis Fonsi Explains His ‘Evolution of Sound’ on Runaway Success ‘Despacito’,” *Billboard*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/7720915/luis-fonsi-despacito-hot-100-song-interview>.
- ¹¹ Suzette Fernandez, “Erika Ender on Co-Writing ‘Despacito’: ‘This Song Made a Special Connection’,” *Billboard*, April 5, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/events/latin-awards/7751668/erika-ender-on-co-writing-despacito>.
- ¹² Moises Velasquez-Manoff, “The Meaning of ‘Despacito’ in the Age of Trump,” *New York Times*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/04/opinion/the-meaning-of-despacito-in-the-age-of-trump.html>.
- ¹³ Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013).
- ¹⁴ Eileen Suárez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*.

¹⁵ For example, Isar P. Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and U.S. Colonialism in Puerto Rico* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Miriam Jiménez Román, “Un hombre (negro) del pueblo: José Celso Barbosa and the Puerto Rican ‘Race’ Toward Whiteness,” *CENTRO Journal* 8, nos. 1-2 (1996): 8-29; Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*.

¹⁶ Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness*.

¹⁷ Monika Gosin, “The Death of ‘La Reina de la Salsa’: Celia Cruz and the Mythification of the Black Woman,” in *Afro-Latin@s in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas*, eds. Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, Jennifer A. Jones, and Tianna S. Paschel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 85-108.

¹⁸ Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Raquel Z. Rivera, “Reggaeton Nation,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* (November/December 2007): 35-39; Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*.

¹⁹ Wayne Marshall, “From Música Negra to Reggaeton 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), 19-76.

²⁰ For analysis of mambo see David F. García, “Contesting that Damned Mambo: Arsenio Rodriguez, Authenticity, and the People of El Barrio and the Bronx in the 1950s,” *CENTRO Journal* 11, no. 1 (2004): 155-175; and Christina D. Abreu, *Rhythms of Race: Cuban Musicians and the Making of Latino New York and Miami, 1940-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015). For analysis of salsa see Peter Manuel, “Salsa and the Music Industry: Corporate Control or Grassroots Expression?” in *Essays on Cuban Music: North American and Cuban Perspectives*, ed. Peter Manuel (Lanham, MA: University Press of America), 159-180.

²¹ Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, *José, Can You See?: Latinos on and off Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 55.

²² Sandoval-Sánchez, *José, Can You See?*, 56.

²³ David F. García, “Going Primitive to the Movements and Sounds of Mambo,” *The Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (2006): 505-523.

²⁴ Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, eds., *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 8. Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman argue that some cultural producers “re-tropicalize” these hegemonic tropes into “discursive weapons of resistance” (12). It is possible that “Despacito” may have provided chances for re-tropicalization for different audiences; for example, the numerous YouTube videos and remakes of “Despacito” offer potential opportunities to re-tropicalize the song. However, in this paper we focus on the hegemonic tropicalizations within “Despacito,” with a particular emphasis on how the song and video both “tropicalize the other” in relation to dominant Puerto Rican and U.S. culture.

²⁵ Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, *Tropicalizations*, 10.

²⁶ Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, *Tropicalizations*, 10.

²⁷ Sandoval-Sánchez, *José, Can You See?*, 59.

²⁸ Licia Fiol-Matta, “Pop *Latinidad*: Puerto Ricans in the Latin Explosion, 1999,” *CENTRO Journal* 14, no. 1 (2002): 38.

²⁹ Judy Cantor-Navas, “Latin America Leads the Way in Music Revenue Growth, Fueled by Gains in Streaming,” *Billboard*, April 25, 2017,

<https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/7775030/ifpi-report-latin-america-music-revenue-2016>

³⁰ Maria Sherman, "How Romeo Santos Blew Up Without Pandering to a Crossover Audience," *Complex*, August 1, 2017, <http://www.complex.com/music/2017/08/romeo-santos-golden-interview>

³¹ Daniel Party, "The *Miamization* of Latin-American Pop Music," in *Postnational Musical Identities: Cultural Production, Distribution, and Consumption in a Globalized Scenario*, eds. Ignacio Corona and Alejandro Madrid (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

³² Party, "Miamization," 69.

³³ Cepeda, *Musical ImagiNation*, 58.

³⁴ See Steven W. Bender, "Will the Wolf Survive?: Latino/a Pop Music in the Cultural Mainstream," *Denver University Law Review* 74, no. 4 (2001): 719-751; Cepeda, *Musical ImagiNation*; Fiol-Matta, "Pop Latinidad."

³⁵ Cepeda, *Musical ImagiNation*, 73.

³⁶ Cepeda, *Musical ImagiNation*, 73.

³⁷ Leila Cobo, "Latin Conference Preview: Honoring Hitmakers (In the Age of Trump)," *Billboard*, April 20, 2017 <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/7767677/latin-conference-preview-honoring-hitmakers>

³⁸ *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, "How I Wrote That Song: Luis Fonsi 'Despacito'," September 5, 2017, video, 3:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6W-7trFIsI&feature=youtu.be>.

³⁹ *The Tonight Show*, "How I Wrote That Song"

⁴⁰ Vevo, "Luis Fonsi - Luis Fonsi Explains The Slow Success Of 'Despacito'," June 15, 2017, video, 4:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJVJKwVmXok&feature=youtu.be>.

⁴¹ Chris Mench, “The Making of Luis Fonsi & Daddy Yankee’s “Despacito” With Mauricio Rengifo & Andres Torres,” *Genius* video, 8:23, July 14, 2017, <https://genius.com/a/the-making-of-luis-fonsi-daddy-yankee-s-despacito-with-mauricio-rengifo-andres-torres>.

⁴² Suzette Fernandez, “Erika Ender on Co-Writing ‘Despacito’”

⁴³ Wayne Marshall, “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About ‘Despacito’,” *Vulture*, August 22, 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/08/everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-despacito.html>;

“Despacito” was initially recorded with Nicky Jam, who later had to decline due to a conflict with his album release.

⁴⁴ Elias Leight, “‘Despacito’ Singer Luis Fonsi on His Surprise Spanish Smash,” *Rolling Stone*, May 31, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/luis-fonsi-on-spanish-smash-despacito-justin-bieber-cameo-w484727>; Pamela Bustios, “Luis Fonsi on Record-Breaking No. 1 ‘Despacito’: ‘I’d Be Utterly Lying If I Said I Saw This Coming’ (Exclusive Q&A),” *Billboard*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/8099208/luis-fonsi-despacito-interview>; Vevo, “The Slow Success Of “Despacito.””; Luis Fonsi’s accounts of the creation of “Despacito” vary slightly in multiple interviews over the past year. We base our retelling of “Despacito”’s origins on the most frequent elements in these interviews.

⁴⁵ Marshall, “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About ‘Despacito.’”

⁴⁶ Reggaetón’s origins are frequently debated. Some argue that Panamanians developed the genre initially as reggae en español. Others claim that reggaeton developed in Puerto Rico, but was influenced by Panamanian reggae en español. Still others contend that reggaeton is intrinsically transnational and cannot be located exclusively within one geographic location.

Because we focus on “Despacito” as a symbol of Puerto Ricanness, we have limited our comments to reggaeton’s connections to Puerto Rico.

⁴⁷ Zaire Z. Dinzey-Flores, *Locked In, Locked Out: Gated Communities in a Puerto Rican City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

⁴⁸ Negrón-Muntaner and Rivera, *Reggaeton Nation*, 36.

⁴⁹ Hernán Vera Alvarez, “Luis Fonsi: despacito se conquista el mundo,” *El Nuevo Herald*, April 27, 2017, <http://www.elnuevoherald.com/entretenimiento/revista-viernes/article147167329.html>

⁵⁰ Lyndsey Havens, “Luis Fonsi Explains His ‘Evolution of Sound.’”

⁵¹ Anna Leszkiewicz, “Why is “Despacito” so popular?,” *NewStatesman*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/music-theatre/2017/07/despacito-why-popular>; Sam Wolfson, “Costa del pop: How Despacito is Breaking Down Music’s Language Barrier,” *The Guardian*, June 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jun/30/how-despacito-breaking-down-music-language-barrier>.

⁵² Emma Garland, “Why a Spanglish Reggaeton Pop Remix Is Now Nearly As Big As the “Macarena”,” *Noisey from Vice*, May 5, 2017, https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/gvzb37/daddy-yankee-luis-fonsi-bieber-despacito-remix-billboard-singles-charts.

⁵³ Suzette Fernandez, ““Despacito’ Boosts Puerto Rico’s Economy,” *Billboard*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/7857756/despacito-fonsi-yankee-bieber-boosts-puerto-rico-economy>.

⁵⁴ Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966).

⁵⁵ Dinzey-Flores, *Locked in, Locked Out*

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- ⁵⁶ Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 75-76.
- ⁵⁷ Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 64.
- ⁵⁸ Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 67.
- ⁵⁹ Hilda Lloréns, “Latina Bodies in the Era of Elective Aesthetic Surgery,” *Latino Studies* 11, no. 4 (2013): 551-552.
- ⁶⁰ *ABC News*, “The Making of ‘Despacito’ and It’s Rise to be Summer’s Top Song,” December 29, 2017, video, 6:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCn1GhR15ek>.
- ⁶¹ Isar P. Godreau, “‘Folkloric Others’: Blanqueamiento and the Celebration of Blackness as an Exception in Puerto Rico,” in *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Productions of Blackness*, eds. Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 172.
- ⁶² Havens, “Luis Fonsi Explains His ‘Evolution of Sound’”
- ⁶³ *ABC News*, “The Making of ‘Despacito.’”
- ⁶⁴ Rebecca Schiller, “Watch ‘Despacito’ Director Carlos Perez Discuss Success of Video: ‘We Reached the Globe in Spanish,’” *Billboard*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/8383862/despacito-video-director-carlos-perez-interview>
- ⁶⁵ Sandoval-Sánchez, *José, Can You See?*
- ⁶⁶ Leila Cobo, “‘Despacito’ Producers Talk Making a Smash Hit and Why Justin Bieber Should be Respected,” *Billboard*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/7865833/despacito-producers-interview-justin-bieber-remix>.

⁶⁷ Garland, “Spanglish Reggaeton Pop Remix”; Julyssa Lopez, “What’s Next for Latin Music After the Summer of ‘Despacito’?” *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2017,

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⁶⁸ Stacy Leasca, “Justin Bieber's 'Despacito' Could Ignite a Tourism Boom for Puerto Rico,” *Travel and Leisure*, July 14, 2017, [http://www.travelandleisure.com/culture-](http://www.travelandleisure.com/culture-design/music/despacito-tourism-puerto-rico-justin-bieber)

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⁷⁰ Cepeda, *Musical ImagiNation*.

⁷¹ Cepeda, *Musical ImagiNation*, 58.

⁷² Ruben Navarette, Jr., “Revoke Justin Bieber’s Visa,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/01/14/the-most-debated-room-for-debates/revoke-justin-biebers-visa>; Gary Baum, “How Hollywood Plays Immigration Game to Get Shortcuts for Stars,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/how-hollywood-plays-immigration-game-889764>.

⁷³ Jamie Milton, “How ‘Despacito’ Became the Song of the Summer,” *NME*, July 14, 2017, <http://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/how-despacito-became-the-song-of-the-summer-2109946#IUqQPqcheQzrRXIw.99>.

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⁷⁵ Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 76.

⁷⁶ Moises Velasquez-Manoff, “The Meaning of ‘Despacito’”; Beck Pemberton, “Despacito is Absolute FILTH in English... Here’s What the Lyrics Really Mean,” *The Sun*, December 23, 2017, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/4067529/despacito-filth-english-lyrics/>.

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⁷⁸ *NBC News*, “Luis Fonsi On Justin Bieber's Spanish, 'Despacito' Hitting No. 1 | NBC Latino | NBC News,” May 19, 2017, video, 3:06, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIZWhmz-EyU>.

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⁸¹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

⁸² For example, Shakira’s “Hips Don’t Lie” (2006) employed African diasporic musical genres and aesthetics from her native Barranquilla, Colombia, that helped to secure the song’s success in English-language markets; for more analysis of “Hips Don’t Lie,” see Cepeda, *Musical ImagiNation*, pp. 172-178. Licia Fiol-Matta argues that Ricky Martin began engaging with prototypical Afro-Latino sounds in songs like “María” (1995) and “La bomba” (1998) as he prepared to cross over into English (see “Pop *Latinidad*”).

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