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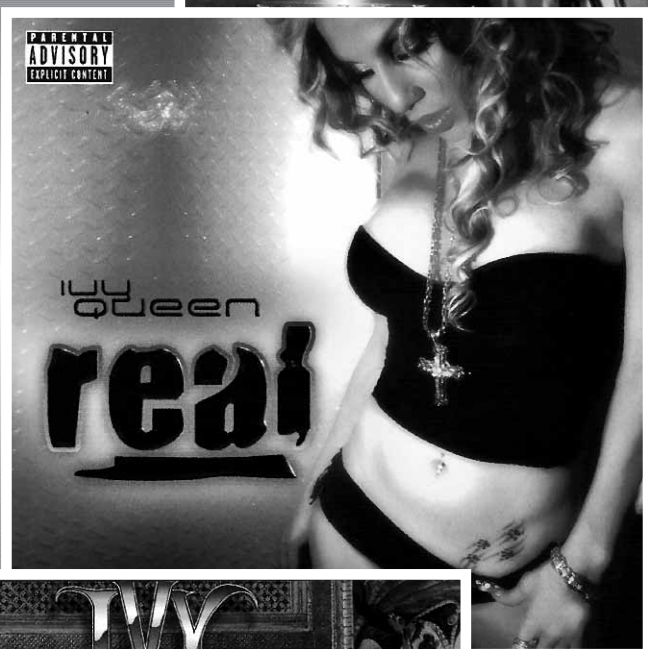
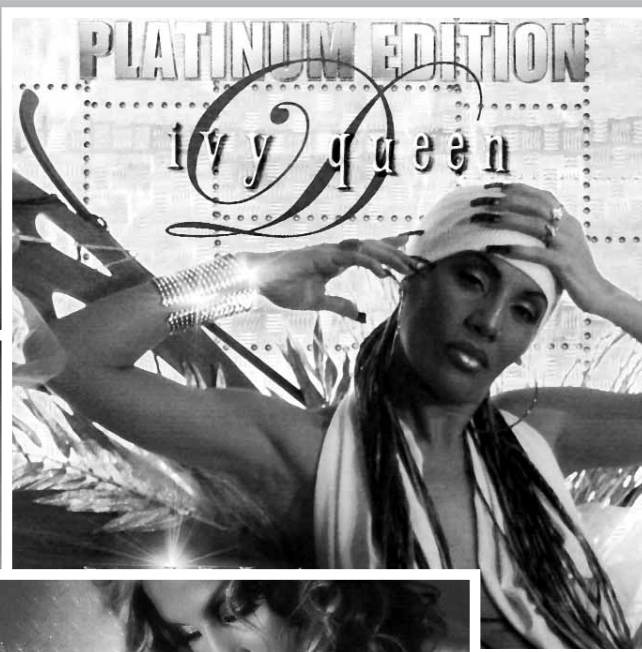
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# “*En mi imperio*”: Competing discourses of agency in Ivy Queen’s reggaetón

JILLIAN M. BÁEZ

## ABSTRACT

This paper argues for a more complex understanding of the intersection of gender and representation in reggaetón. Using the music and career trajectory of the female artist Ivy Queen as a case study, the author demonstrates how her music and self-representation in interviews simultaneously functions as a potential site of female agency within a male-dominated sphere while being constrained by transnational music industries and Latin American norms of femininity. More specifically, the essay offers a critical discourse analysis of the music, performances, interviews, and press reception of female reggaetón artist, Ivy Queen, otherwise known as the “queen of reggaetón,” to understand how she and the media construct her subjectivity and agency. Ultimately, the author argues that as reggaetón’s most popular female icon, Ivy Queen straddles a tenuous space in which her hybrid subjectivity is complex and at times seemingly contradictory. [Keywords: [reggaetón, popular culture, music, discourse, gender, hybridity]



*IQ's* CD covers (from top): *Diva—Platinum Edition* (Universal Music Latino, 2004), *Real* (Universal Music Latino, 2004) and *The Original Rude Girl* (Sony International, 1998).



# One can hear sounds

of the pulsating rhythm of reggaetón emanating from cars, houses, and dance clubs not only in Puerto Rico, but also in mainland U.S. cities such as New York City, Miami, and Chicago. As a hybrid<sup>2</sup> musical form, reggaetón is a fusion of dancehall reggae, rap, and sometimes salsa, merengue, and bomba, along with other forms of Latin American, Caribbean, and African American music. Similar to U.S. hip hop, reggaetón often “samples” from other reggae and rap hits from both the U.S. and the Caribbean alike. As such, reggaetón functions as an exchange of cultural production between Puerto Ricans on the island, Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland, other Latin Americans and Latina/os,<sup>3</sup> African Americans, and other peoples of the Caribbean. As with other hybrid genres such as salsa and reggae, reggaetón also functions as a global commodity in its crossover to an international audience. Reggaetón, like other popular music, is complex and embodies issues surrounding nation, race, gender, class, sexuality, and the commodification of difference in global popular culture.<sup>4</sup>

Since its inception in the late 1980s,<sup>5</sup> reggaetón<sup>6</sup> has sparked considerable debate surrounding issues of decency and authenticity across Puerto Rican communities, particularly on the island. Even after the crossover of reggaetón to wider audiences as a global commodity, the genre has become an ever-more powerful national symbol of *puertorriqueñidad*. Reggaetón, like other popular music of various generations, has been confronted with resistance from the Puerto Rican press and government officials on the island. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Puerto Rican press on the island understood *underground* in Puerto Rico as “obscene” and solely preoccupied with sex, drugs, criminal activity, and materialism (Salamán 2004a). In particular, the music was attacked for underscoring the objectification of women. Today, this argument extends to the contemporary genre of reggaetón. In the late 1990s, former actress and senator, Velda González, proposed to ban *el perreo*, a form of grind dancing to reggaetón, deeming such dancing “pornographic” (Salamán 2004a).

Though this legislation did not come into fruition, primary and secondary schools across the island continue to ban *el perreo* from school grounds. Considering that reggaetón and other underground genres originated primarily from marginalized communities (see Santos 1996), particularly those of black and working class origins, this policing of dance reproduces what Eileen Findlay-Suárez’s (1999) calls “imposing decency”—that is, the policing of women’s bodies (particularly those of the working class and of African origin) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Puerto Rico through discourses of morality using a “woman-as-nation” trope, in which women’s bodies embody the national body.

Reggaetón also continues to be questioned about its authenticity as Puerto Rican popular music among Puerto Rican communities on the island and the mainland. The genre has been criticized for a lack of originality as it was viewed by some as a sort of “copycat” of American rap and Jamaican dancehall. However, as Raquel Rivera (1993) argues regarding rap music in Puerto Rico, the music was not a mere “copycat” of U.S. and Jamaican music for three reasons. First, the lyrics were localized, addressing issues particular to the youth of Puerto Rico. Second, rap music in Puerto Rico infused Spanish Caribbean musical genres such as salsa and merengue. Third, Puerto Ricans, on both the island and the mainland, have been integral to the development of hip hop in general as part of the African diaspora. This discourse is similar to the one surrounding the tensions between *roqueros y cocos*,<sup>7</sup> in which *roqueros* (rock fans on the island) were criticized for listening to “American” music (meaning U.S. and non-Puerto Rican music) and *cocos* (salsa fans on the island) were seen as more “authentic” Puerto Ricans. Rivera (1993) argues that the initial fans of rap in Puerto Rico were the *cocos*, who also tended to be working class and thus, also likely to either experience migration to the U.S. mainland themselves or through other family members. As such, this movement between the island and the mainland was central to the birth of reggaetón and other cultural production.

Further, though much of the more popular reggaetón songs and the music videos that accompany them can rightly be accused of being misogynist and homophobic, reggaetón should not be considered monolithic. Overall, the content of the genre’s lyrics include a diverse range from romance to dance/partying to religion (mostly Christianity). Artists such as Tego Calderón and Ivy Queen (IQ) often include lyrics that contain social and political critiques of Puerto Rican society. For example, Tego Calderón, considered the “King of reggaetón,” has brought issues of racial inequality to the forefront on the island (though his music has been critiqued for being sexist),<sup>8</sup> while female artist IQ, known as the “Queen of reggaetón,” has focused more on class and gender inequities. As Rivera argues of rap in Puerto Rico, it is “neither monolithic nor homogenous. This genre is in constant struggle, dialogue, movement and change” (1994: 20). Reggaetón also occupies this tenuous and contested space.

The music of female reggaetón artist, IQ, is no exception to the hybrid and transnational<sup>9</sup> dynamics within this musical genre. Her music and status as a female icon of reggaetón are central to discourses of decency and authenticity. This essay focuses on IQ as case study for examining these issues surrounding reggaetón with a focus on gender and representation. In particular, her music, performances, and self-representation in interviews offer responses to both the male-dominated sphere of reggaetón and competing discourses of female agency. Ultimately, I attempt to illuminate some of the ways this artist navigates spaces of nation, race, class, and gender in very uneven and sometimes competing ways.



This essay is contextualized within the literature on Latin American and Caribbean popular music in general (i.e., Aparicio and Jácquez 2003; Cooper 1995, 2004; Harewood 2005; Manuel 1995a, 1995b) and Puerto Rican music in particular, especially genres such as danza, plena, bomba, and salsa (i.e., Bergman 1985; Aparicio 1998; Calvo Ospina 1995; Flores 1988, 2000; Quintero Rivera 1998). While Puerto Rican rap, reggae, and reggaetón (on both the island and the U.S. mainland) have recently been studied (de Barco 1996; Flores 1988, 2000; Gaztambide-Fernández 2004; Giovenetti 2003; Oquendo and Rivera 1995; Rivera 1993, 1997, 1998, 2003; Salamán 2004a, 2004b; Santos 1996), this research extends this scholarship through its focus on issues of gender. Building upon burgeoning research on Puerto Rican popular music and gender (i.e., Aparicio 1998, 2002; Salamán 2004a, 2004b), I examine gender and feminist articulations in Puerto Rican youth and urban music. While this essay is largely Caribbean-centered, it also draws from U.S. hip hop feminist research (i.e., Durham 2005; Morgan 1999; Pough 2004; Rose 1997) as a frame of reference for understanding reggaetón relationally. Furthermore, this essay also contributes to studies of youth music and subculture within cultural studies. Feminist scholar Angela McRobbie (1991) argues that gender is crucial to studying subcultures as we not only gain a more holistic understanding of the subculture, but also because young women have often been ignored in past research on these groups. Further, as feminist hip hop scholar Tricia Rose (1997) has called for, I am attempting to link feminist theory to practice—that is, examining how feminist theory is practiced in the everyday life of women of color, who may or may not necessarily identify themselves as feminists. To do so, this essay provides an analysis of IQ, otherwise known as the “queen of reggaetón” and the most highly visible female artist in this hyper-masculine genre. I suggest that IQ is one of the contemporary voices of Puerto Rican gender politics in reggaetón in particular and in Puerto Rican popular culture in general. Ultimately, as reggaetón’s most popular female icon, IQ straddles a tenuous space in which her hybrid subjectivity is complex and at times seemingly contradictory.

#### Notes on methodology and theoretical framework

This paper offers a critical discourse analysis of the music, performances, interviews, and press reception of female reggaetón artist, Ivy Queen, the most highly visible female artist in the genre of reggaetón. IQ was chosen as the focus of the analysis given her participation as one of the few females in a male-dominated genre of music, her commitment to feminist issues, and her location as a transnational artist, based in both New York City and Puerto Rico. In particular, I attempt to pay close attention to how both IQ articulates herself and the media constructs her in terms of race, gender, and nation, a method deployed by Angharad Valdivia (2000) to examine how Nuyorican actress Rosie Pérez is constructed both by herself through interviews and by the mainstream media. This is a cross-media analysis (similar to Molina Gúzman and Valdivia’s [2004] study of Latina iconicity in U.S. popular culture) of IQ’s music videos, concert footage, CD jackets, and video and print interviews with the press. Extending earlier studies of popular music that focus primarily on lyrics, I attempt to study her music holistically, emphasizing the importance of studying movement, or dance, in addition to the lyrics and the music itself in understanding the meanings of music texts. As such, the linguistic, visual, and aural aspects of musical production are integral to this analysis. This is an area that warrants much attention, given that dance and other forms of movement are undertheorized in cultural studies of music (Desmond 1997; Harewood 2005).

This paper begins with a brief biography of IQ and her transgressive role in this genre, followed by a critical discourse analysis of her music, performances, interviews, and reception by Puerto Rican (on the island) and New York Latina/o newspapers from 1997 through 2004.<sup>10</sup> This method was employed to understand the complex ways in which IQ and her publicity team construct and articulate her subjectivity within the constraints of the symbolic and political economy of the music industry. Lastly, the conclusion begins to work through the potential female agency in her work as well as with the contradictions inherent in her music, self-invention, and the media’s constructions of her.

This analysis is grounded in feminist media studies in looking at issues of gender and representation and transnational feminism in focusing on hybridity and transnational culture. This author uses transnational feminism as a framework to begin understanding how Puerto Rican women, in this particular case IQ, are disciplined by discourses, their agency within those discourses, and their potential for resistance. Transnational feminism, especially as it is articulated in the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), Ella Shohat (1998), and Angharad Valdivia (2004), provides an appropriate framework for studying women as transnational subjects who experience often painful, uneasy hybridity in their everyday lives (Valdivia 2004). In particular, it provides a template for studying how transnational flows intersect with everyday life in an increasingly more globalized world. This approach examines issues of power and agency across difference, understanding that identities are not monolithic and sometimes can be contradictory and competing. Transnational feminism additionally highlights the fluidity, mobility, and also immobility of people and cultural products. This perspective attempts to understand how commodified culture, such as reggaetón, may traverse borders, while the people who produce these products continue to be unwelcome (Fusco 1995; Lugo as cited in Valdivia 2004, 2005). Transnational feminism also leaves room for women’s agency and resistance within dominant global structures. As such, transnational feminism is extremely useful for a project such as this one, which examines the overlaps, convergences, and divergences in representation and also leaves room to simultaneously address the specificity of experiences of Puerto Rican women on the island and the mainland while maintaining an investment to global feminist issues across difference.

#### “Ya Llegó La Queen”: A short biography of Ivy Queen

Among the few other visible Puerto Rican *reggaetoneras*, such as Glory, Adassa, Camille, La Bruja, and Orquídea Negra, Ivy Queen reigns as the most popular female icon within U.S. and Puerto Rican media and responds to the sexist overtones of much of the lyrics, performances, and music videos of reggaetón. IQ, born Martha Ivelisse Pesante on March 4, 1972, is one of only a few visible female artists in the history of Puerto Rican urban music. IQ, like many Puerto Ricans and fellow reggaetón artists such as Tego Calderón, experienced circular migration (see Duany 2003) in that she was born in Añasco, Puerto Rico, raised in New York City, and then moved back to the island as a teen. In my analysis of New York Latina/o and Puerto Rican press coverage on the island and exploratory fieldwork, Ivy Queen was never referred to as black, nor did she identify herself as black.<sup>11</sup> However, her physicality marks her as at least of a mixed heritage, and she is dark enough to be read as non-white. Though there are not specifics in the media coverage about her youth in Puerto Rico and New York, IQ constantly invokes her working class roots in interviews with the press.

Her professional career as a reggaetón artist began when she moved to San Juan, Puerto Rico, at age 18 and met rapper and producer DJ Negro. Today, DJ Negro is a well-known reggaetón artist in both Puerto Rico and U.S. major cities. In 1995, she joined the all-male Puerto Rican underground group The Noise, comprised of artists, DJs, and club coordinators with the invitation of DJ Negro. With The Noise she released her first song, which she also composed, entitled “Somos raperos pero no delincuentes” (“We’re Rappers, But Not Delinquents”) responding to the criminalization of underground (see Santos 1996) by the Puerto Rican press, middle class, and members of the older generation on the island. In 1997, she released her first solo album, *En mi imperio*—from which she says she made no profit due to her lack of knowledge of the business world (interview, Universal Music Latino 2004). This album was released under a U.S.-based independent label, House of Music, and as such, was not distributed widely.

Like her male counterpart Tego Calderón, IQ identified herself as a rap artist (not a reggaetón artist) until reggaetón gained popularity in the late 1990s, when she released her second album titled *The Original Rude Girl* (1998). However, unlike Calderón, she has worked with dancehall tracks since the beginning of her career, but did not use the term because it was not in common usage at the time. Calderón refused to rhyme over dancehall beats because, in his words: “Back in the day I thought it was just a carbon copy of dancehall” (Cepeda 2005). Instead, Calderón only rhymed on rap/hip hop beats and only began identifying with reggaetón when he jumped on the crossover bandwagon as more major labels signed reggaetón artists and the genre began to sell globally. *The Original Rude Girl* (1998) was released under Sony Discos and featured a duet with Haitian hip hop star Wyclef. This collaboration placed her on the U.S. hip hop map and caught the attention of Universal Records, who immediately signed her to their Universal Music Latino label. Her third album *Diva*, the first under Universal Records, was released in 2003, with a 2004 “Platinum Edition” that included remixes and more featured artists than the original.

Her most recent album is entitled *Real* and was also released and distributed by Universal Records. *Real* differs from her previous CD jackets in its sexually explicit photos and shift in font from scriptlike and clean ones to one that somewhat resembles graffiti writing—a signifier of U.S. hip hop culture and urban youth. While IQ is provocatively dressed (to different degrees) in all her album covers, her image on the cover of *Real* differs from her other album covers in that the mid-section of her body (neck to upper thighs) are emphasized, hypersexualizing her body. In addition, it seems that the viewer is looking slightly down at IQ, into her cleavage area. This differs from her other CD jackets in that her body is usually shot in a medium, somewhat centered frame. In this way, IQ is reinscribed as overtly sexual, and at the same time given authenticity or “street credit” as a hip hop artist within a U.S.-centric framework. Her “new look” here and in her music videos, performances, and media coverage consists of lightened, straight hair, breast augmentation, and, overall, more sexually provocative outfits showing more skin. IQ takes responsibility for this “new look” in her interviews with the press, attributing it to her “growth as a person” (Tirado 2004b), but I want to suggest that this change may also be attributed to Universal’s identification of this album as a potential crossover album to U.S. mainstream (in addition to Latina/o and African American audiences) and global audiences. This is embodied by the title of the album, *Real*, as the word can mean “real” in both English and Spanish and “royal” in only Spanish harking to her

status as the “queen” of reggaetón. As is the case with other crossover stars such as Ricky Martin and Shakira, record labels often encourage makeovers that will “appeal” more to the mainstream market. All of IQ’s albums prior to *Real* equally featured songs about female empowerment, poverty, dancing, and to a lesser extent romance. However, songs about working class oppression and community empowerment are scarce in her most recent album. Even so, her articulation of ethnicity (as Puerto Rican) has remained unchanged for the most part despite this transition in image (i.e., she continues to embrace her puertorriqueñidad, making it clear that she does not prefer a pan-ethnic subjectivity such as Latina, Caribbean, or Latin American as opposed to Puerto Rican).

She often collaborates with other Puerto Rican male rap artists such as Kilates, El Gran Omar (her husband), Mexicano, and DJ Nelson in addition to male salsa singer Domingo Quiñones and male salsa-reggae group DLG. She also has worked with singer and former Miss Puerto Rico, and later Miss Universe, Dayanara Torres, and recently featured female Nuyorican salsa singer La India on her most recent album. IQ also plans on a duet with Nuyorican singer/actress/dancer Jennifer Lopez and fellow Puerto Rican female *merenrap* artist Lisa M. While the collaboration with La India is not surprising, given their shared sense of female empowerment in their lyrics, it would seem that IQ’s partnership with Torres and Lopez is part of a dual strategy to create an alliance with other female Puerto Rican artists and at the same time broaden her audience appeal in producing hybrid musical forms with pop (both U.S. and Latin American) and reggaetón. This collaboration also could have been used to assist her transition to both the English-language market and the more mainstream Spanish-language pop music.

### Competing discourses of agency

Theories of hybridity acknowledge the unstable and often contradictory nature of identity (see Canclini Garcia 1995; Valdivia 2004). Identity is constantly in a process of making and re-making itself and as such is constantly in flux. Often, different facets of identity may be in competition with one another. Feminists of color (i.e., Anzaldúa 1987; Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000) have pointed to intersectionality, or how forms of difference such as race, nation, gender, class, and sexuality all overlap to form our identities and the oppressions we face in our everyday lives. The following section is concerned with how IQ negotiates the different, intersecting facets of her subjectivity and how she articulates agency. As a discourse, the agency IQ asserts is simultaneously transgressive and conservative and as such, can neither be interpreted as subversive nor compliant with dominant ideologies, but instead remains complex, problematic, and ultimately hybrid.

### Transgressive lyrics and potential female agency

Unlike many of her male counterparts, the Puerto Rican press on the island has praised IQ for having “positive lyrics” that empower youth and that do not use “crude language” (López 1999). Many of her songs, mostly self-written, are pro-woman. She repeatedly states to the press that “yo nunca dejo de defender mi mujer” (Tirado 2004a).<sup>12</sup> While IQ has a large female following, like other U.S. hip hop artists, she also has many male fans, and as Tricia Rose (1997) has argued for many African American female rappers, she encourages dialogue between men and women regarding gender relations—something Rose argues has proved itself a very difficult task for mainstream feminist academics.

Through her lyrics, IQ asserts a specific space for herself within Puerto Rican underground. Even in the title of her first album and the title of this paper, *En mi imperio*, she makes claims to a cultural citizenship, or a belonging, in regard to the male-dominated genre of reggaetón. I consider her work a feminist intervention within what the Puerto Rican and Latina/o press and scholars such as Lorna Salamán (2004a; 2004b) have found to be a male-dominated, homophobic, and misogynist genre. IQ embodies what Carolyn Cooper (1995) calls “undomesticated female sexuality” in that she does not conform to a normative Puerto Rican femininity, particularly that of polite femininity (compared to her “rudeness,” hence, the title of her second album *The Original Rude Girl*) and respectability in the form of sexually conservatism (i.e., her call for female sexual agency in the form of dancing). However, her physical aesthetics have shifted and contradicted some of her lyrics. For example, during her early career she dressed in baggy jeans—a signifier of hip hop and masculinity—and now she dresses in much more hyper-sexual, hyper-feminine dress, conforming to norms for female Latin American and U.S. artists. As such, her lyrics may provide a counterhegemonic site, but her shift in physical aesthetics may construct IQ as an overall less subversive icon.

Like many male rappers, IQ exudes self-confidence, almost to the point of arrogance at times, and unlike her soft-spoken counterparts Lisa M. and Glory, she self-defines herself as a *feminista*<sup>13</sup> (Ayala 1998) and *una mujer de pantalones*.<sup>14</sup> She also calls herself *la gata* (literally cat, meaning girl or broad), *la perra* (bitch), *la potra* (a female mare), and *la abusadora* (the abuser) in an attempt to reappropriate these negative connotations of womanhood into female empowerment. In particular, *la potra* points to her calls for female sexual agency, as this metaphor is similar to the “black stallion” metaphor for phallic potency. IQ wanted to call her *Diva* (2003) album, *La potra*, but her new label, Universal Music Latino, would not sign off on the title, considering it too threatening (interview, DVD 2004). Here it is evident that in some instances her agency is limited by the symbolic and political economy of the music industry. Nonetheless, IQ asserts herself into the male-dominated sphere of reggaetón by her boasting of herself as “la nena del reggae” (“the girl of reggae”) and “la reina del reggaetón” (“the queen of reggaetón”) in many of her songs. This kind of boasting is common within African-American rap, and as such, IQ places herself within the realm of the top male rappers. Rose (1997: 307) identifies three categories in which female rappers discuss gender relations within their lyrics:

- (1) raps that challenge male dominance over women within the sexual arena;
- (2) raps that by virtue of their authoritative stance challenge men as representatives of hip hop;
- (3) raps that explicitly discuss women’s identity and celebrate women’s physical and sexual power.

IQ’s music embodies all three of these categories. In addition, she also dictates a sexual agency that is similar to female dancehall artists and dancers. Cooper (2004) argues that dancehall provides an alternative space for women to perform, or masquerade, as sexual agents. Susan Harewood (2005) makes a similar argument for women and calypso, though she asserts that this agency often still continues to promote sexism and homophobia. As such, IQ’s lyrics give a sense of this kind of

Caribbean female agency that is primarily expressed in terms of sexuality on the dance floor. For example, in one of her more popular and recent singles, “Yo quiero bailar” (*Diva* 2003), she asserts her desire to dance close to her partner, yet, she also is very clear that “eso no quiere decir que pa’ la cama voy.”<sup>15</sup> Here IQ makes a space for her, and all women, to perform a rite of sexual agency by asserting the right to dance provocatively with a man without being expected to sleep with her dance partner. In doing so, she challenges the pervasive virgin/whore dichotomy in suggesting that women can express their sexuality and still be respected and considered complex individuals. IQ also creates a space for asserting agency on a very grounded level with everyday interactions such as dancing.

IQ also calls for broader female agency outside of just dancing. For example, in the “Introduction” to her album *Diva* (2003), she asserts herself as “la reina” (“the queen”). Here, IQ uses the metaphor of a boxing match (using phrases such as “one more round” and “de esta boricua que se batalla año tras año entre los mejores”<sup>16</sup>) to express her role as the “queen” and “diva” of the genre of reggaetón. One can make the connection that boxing, like reggaetón, is a male-dominated arena. This song also alludes to her previous video for “Quieren tumbarme” (*The Original Rude Girl* 1998) in which IQ acts as a female boxer. In addition, she also refers to women’s power as underestimated when she says “donde el mas fuerte es el que todos creen es débil,”<sup>17</sup> as she explains on her DVD (2004). Similarly, In “Quieren tumbarme”, as in many of her songs, she speaks directly to men requesting that they not be cowards (“que no sean cobardes”). Similar to U.S. female rappers, such as MC Lyte and Queen Latifah, IQ speaks directly to men and “calls them out” on their cowardliness. In the next verse she argues that women are actively struggling for equality when she says “que las mujeres tiramos pa’delante/venimos fuerte.”<sup>18</sup> She then asserts “venimos fuerte y eso no es un fraude.”<sup>19</sup> In these particular lyrics, IQ is calling for a sense of female empowerment.

In “Pon atención” (*En mi imperio* 1997), IQ asserts a space for her voice to be heard on a local and national level. When she says, “Pon atencion, país, nación, asociación/Que ya llegó la Queen,”<sup>20</sup> she is demanding a voice and space in the public sphere in which women have historically been denied. Also, the music video for this song departs from her others because it is filmed in Spanish Harlem in New York City. Usually her videos are shot in Puerto Rico or in an indoor set depicting an ambiguous nightclub. Here she represents a hybrid subjectivity as a New York Puerto Rican in constant contact with both the island and New York City. As Frances Aparicio describes of the late salsa Queen Celia Cruz, her body serves “as a site for performing transnationalism” (1999: 224). In addition, IQ self-construction as a “diva” in the first set of lyrics described above is similar to Cruz’s identification as a “tropical diva” (226). IQ even likens herself to Cruz, saying: “soy como la Celia [Cruz] del underground”<sup>21</sup> (Ayala 1998: 4).

### Negotiating gender, sexuality, and nation

In the last section, I discussed the emancipatory potential of IQ’s lyrics. However, in this section I want to underscore the competing discourses surrounding how both IQ and the Puerto Rican press construct her subjectivity. Being one of the few women in this genre, IQ has also been criticized by some Puerto Ricans, as being too “butchy,”<sup>22</sup> arguing that sometimes in listening to her music they confuse her voice for a man. However, while during her early years she dressed more in what was coded as masculine—baggy clothes similar to that worn by male rappers in the U.S. and on the island—she is increasingly wearing more revealing, hyper-feminine clothes



following her Universal Records contract. This is characteristic of the trend in the transnational music industry in general, in which female artists are subjected to conform to the “sex sells” ideology. However, I also want to point out that it is not only the industry that has provoked this change in her gender performance—it is also the (island) Puerto Rican press and community, many of whom criticized IQ for being too “demasiada bucha”<sup>23</sup> in her attire, voice, and language and questioned her sexuality despite her being married to male reggaetón artist El Gran Omar. As such, IQ’s sexuality was policed through heteronormative discourses of the Puerto Rican press and community. Furthermore, in many press articles, IQ repeatedly constructs herself as an agent in her new self-invention, emphasizing that she did not make these changes to her image because she was trying to fit certain standards of beauty. Instead, she attributes this change in appearance to her growth as a person and an artist.

Similarly, the visual aspects of IQ’s concerts and music videos portray competing discourses of gender and sexuality. Her concert performances and music videos always include females dressed provocatively;<sup>24</sup> and only occasionally male dancers partnered with females mimicking a heterosexual relationship. While IQ does not dance el perreo—the notorious reggaetón dance of “grinding” or that which imitates the movements of sexual intercourse—her female dancers do perform this movement. While some may argue that performing this dance is a form of sexual agency that resists Anglo and Puerto Rican whiteness and middle- to upper-class norms on both the island and the mainland, it is arguable whether it subverts the standardized grammar, or structure, of reggaetón music videos. In performing el perreo, IQ’s dancers mimic the videos of male reggaetón artists in that they are highly sexualized and are only shown dancing (Salamán 2004a, 2004b). In this way, the use of female dancers in general reproduces a masculinist framework almost always employed by her male counterparts. At the same time, IQ’s predominant use of female dancers can also be read as transgressive. First, instead of reproducing the norm of male-to-female relations (embodied in the male artist surrounded by female dancers) through inverting this (by using all male dancers to support the female artist), her use of mostly female dancers advocates a pro-woman solidarity and female sexual agency. Second, IQ’s employment of female dancers also provides the potential for a queer reading of these performances.

In addition, IQ, like many iconic females, serves a symbol for the “nation” of Puerto Rico. In this way, she falls into what postcolonial feminists have called the “woman-as-nation trope” (see Rakow and Kranich 1991; McClintock 1995; McClintock, Mufti, & Shohat 1997; van Zoonen 1994). In the concert footage on IQ’s DVD, *Ivy Queen: The Original Rude Girl...*, IQ waves the Puerto Rican flag and proclaims her love for the island saying “yo soy tu hija.”<sup>25</sup> Sometimes, she even sings “Que bonita bandera”—a nationalistic song where the chorus heralds the Puerto Rican flag<sup>26</sup>—and often wraps a large Puerto Rican flag around her like a cape, similar to Nuyorican salsa singer Marc Anthony’s performances. This performance of nationalism is indicative of Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora in general as an assertion of cultural sovereignty despite U.S. colonialism (see Negrón-Muntaner & Grosfoguel 1997). I would suggest that her performances of nationalism are especially provocative because of (1) her fluid status as having lived on both the island and the mainland and because (2) reggaetón and other forms of hip hop are not considered part of “authentic” Puerto Rican culture by much of the press. As such, because IQ has been accused as being “inauthentic” she may be using these enactments to assert her puertorriqueñidad.

Lastly, IQ has attempted to counter the Puerto Rican (island) press’ accusations that she is a lesbian or bisexual due to her baggy style of dress in her early career and her “masculine” rapping voice. That her choice in dress has been coded as masculine or butch, despite so many young urban girls across the world wearing baggy clothes regardless of sexuality, points to her symbolic battles with Latin American and Spanish Caribbean norms. These accusations are similar to those of U.S. hip hop journalists’ assumptions of Queen Latifah as a lesbian, thus suggesting that any woman who is somewhat transgressive within urban music is automatically marked as homosexual and coded as sexually deviant. One of the strategies to “prove” her heterosexuality has been to feminize her appearance as described above. Another strategy has been to emphasize her marriage with male reggaetón artist El Gran Omar. She does this by including him in all her concerts and music videos, often with him performing in them. Recently, she appeared on the *Nancy* show on Univision with her husband to discuss her marriage with the talk show host. Nancy approved their marriage as a loving, healthy relationship, thus serving to legitimize and reinforce IQ’s heteronormativity. In this way, IQ’s desire to “prove” her heteronormativity is problematic in that it also displays a homophobic attempt (and perhaps fear) to avoid being read as a lesbian or bisexual woman.

### ***El reggaetón brinca el charco: Ivy Queen’s cross-over***

While I discussed IQ’s work primarily in terms of resistance to patriarchy in the previous sections, I want to acknowledge that her work is fraught with contradictions as is most popular culture. As her career has developed and her audience has broadened, the music industry has driven her to “whiten” herself in an attempt to reach a mainstream audience. For example, IQ has bleached and straightened her previously curly, sometimes braided, hair, much like other Latina and Latin American entertainers such as Jennifer Lopez, Shakira, and Paulina Rubio. Aparicio (2003) argues that while Jennifer Lopez and Selena challenged dominant beauty standards early in their careers, they both Anglocized their appearance (the former with lightening her hair and losing weight and the latter with liposuction) as Latinidad was appropriated by mainstream U.S. culture. In reference to these Latina “crossovers” María Elena Cepeda (2003: 221) writes:

It is as if by means of hair dye and weight loss (and in Aguilera’s case, brilliant blue contacts as well) these Latin(a) American women sought to mitigate their respective receptions within the US mainstream conscience, in essence manipulating the visual in a way that renders them more “user-friendly” to non-Latinos.

However, how non-U.S. audiences may read this shift in IQ’s appearance bares further ethnographic inspection.

IQ also has become more feminine and sexually provocative in her dress, hair, and make-up, in addition to recently deciding to augment her breasts through implants. Thus, in these ways IQ has disciplined her body in an effort to mimic codes of Anglo and Latin American white femininity (i.e. thinness, large breasts, and skin-tight and skin-revealing clothing). While mainstream feminists may critique such an act, she constructs this as an act of agency saying that she “chose” it not to conform to beauty standards, but to symbolize her class mobility, likening it to when she recently purchased a house (Tirado 2004b). When IQ was growing up working class,

plastic surgery was not an option for her and her family given its exorbitant costs, and so she expressed a sense of liberation and privilege in even having the option to purchase this procedure. While it can be read as problematic that IQ underwent plastic surgery to conform to an Anglo, colonial beauty ideal of large breasts, it must be understood that this decision may mean something different in non-U.S., or non-Western contexts. For example, Kathleen Zane (1998) and Fabienne Darling-Wolf (2004) argue that women in Asia who opt for plastic surgery experience a complex process of negotiation in which one is not solely conforming to Western ideals. Furthermore, they argue that for some Asian women plastic surgery is a more of a marker of class privilege than conforming to beauty ideals and in some cases can be potentially transgressive (Zane 1998). Thus, we must understand how both gender and class intersect and compete in how IQ and other women construct their sense of agency.

Despite the commodification and mainstreaming of reggaetón, there has been very little coverage of IQ in the U.S. mainstream press compared to her male counterparts Tego Calderón, Daddy Yankee, and her husband El Gran Omar. As such, reggaetón in many ways is still coded as hyper-masculine despite her presence in the genre. Although African American female rappers such as Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Da Brat were able to become popular artists in U.S. without performing an explicitly white-coded femininity, IQ changed her appearance specifically to prepare to crossover to the U.S. English-language market. I can only speculate that perhaps this is due to the U.S. entertainment industry's limited understanding of Latinas only in terms of hypersexuality and corporeality (Cepeda 2003).

Ultimately, IQ remains located within the symbolic and political economy of a media industry in which women of color are forced to whiten, thin, and hypersexualize their bodies. In this way, the case of IQ signals that for women the body is site of cultural struggle and contestation (Cepeda 2003; Shohat 1998). The paradox is that in order for IQ to succeed in this masculinist, competitive arena, she must sacrifice agency in choosing how she is physically represented. Although she has feminist agency in writing and performing her lyrics, IQ has little control over her physical image. In the end, IQ serves as a provocative case study for understanding the delicate negotiation between agency and constraint within the realm of reggaetón in particular and representation in general.



### **Conclusion: Inherent contradictions in articulating female agency**

This paper explored the tensions surrounding how IQ constructs herself vis-à-vis her lyrics, music videos, and interviews with the press along with how the Latina/o and Puerto Rican (island) press articulates her subjectivity. In particular, the contradictions embedded in her construction of self as an artist/musician and public persona is consistent throughout representations of IQ. Understanding her complex, hybrid subjectivity necessitates an understanding of intersectionality—that is, how forms of difference such as race, gender, class, and sexuality all overlap to form our identities and the oppressions we face in our everyday lives. Sometimes certain differences can be privileged over others (i.e., gender oppression over class or racial oppression) or some can compete with and contradict each other. IQ, and the genre of reggaetón in general, provide excellent case studies for understanding these complex processes. IQ's subjectivity is a hybrid one that is often uneasy, problematic and difficult to extrapolate. Ultimately, I would suggest that we return to the title of her first album and this paper *En mi imperio*, in understanding her subjectivity in her own right. While she is constrained by structural forces, particularly those of the transnational music industries, she constantly attempts to assert her agency in the choices she makes. It is unclear whether or how much “choice” she really has in producing her music and star image. However, it is apparent that while some of IQ's industry and self-representations may be problematic, she continues to provide a counter-hegemonic site of female empowerment when compared to her male counterparts. Moreover, in interviews IQ constantly invokes the discourse of agency in an attempt to reinvent herself as a social actor. In this way, interviews with IQ function as part of her representations of agency, and it is part of her celebrity persona to consistently assert this agency.

This paper also attempted to fulfill the feminist genealogy Frances Aparicio (2002: 146) calls for, that is:

the process of unearthing, historicizing, and inscribing the agency of women in the cultural politics of Latino/Caribbean popular music, thus serving as a discourse of countermemory (Foucault 1977) that contests the masculinist historiography of popular music.

Aparicio (2002) reminds us that it is uncommon for women to be producers of Latin music and that they are often limited to being consumers and dancers. Within this vein, I am writing IQ into history as a female musical producer. Further, analyzing the work of IQ presents a framework to begin interrogating alternative spaces of female agency and helps us to begin to articulate two words that are often placed in binary opposition to one another in both the U.S. and Puerto Rico context—that is a “hip hop feminism,” (see Durham 2005; Morgan 1999; Pough 2004) or in this case, a reggaetón feminism.





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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The title is taken from Ivy Queen's first solo album, *En mi imperio* (*In My Empire* or *In My Kingdom*).
- <sup>2</sup> Though hybridity has problematic origins in biological discourses, I employ it in this essay to refer to cultural formations that are produced through various and uneven influences. Hybridity points to a move from discourses of purity and authenticity, demonstrating that even the West is a hybrid space with hybrid bodies. It also points to the instability and contradictory nature of identity. See García Canclini (1995) and Valdivia (2004) for a further discussion of hybridity.
- <sup>3</sup> Latina/os refer to people of Latin American and Spanish Caribbean descent residing in the U.S.
- <sup>4</sup> I am using a cultural studies approach to understanding culture. As such I refer to culture as "shared meanings" of particular communities. Moreover, culture is "a process, a set of shared practices...[that] is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings" (Hall 1997: 2). As such, I understand culture as central in the process of signification and defining power relations. See Hall (1997) for a further discussion of the meaning of culture.
- <sup>5</sup> Like other hybrid musical forms such as salsa and hip hop, the origins of reggaetón are constantly debated, particularly because very little academic research has focused on the genre. Some argue that reggaetón has its origins in Panamá, others in Puerto Rico (i.e., Navarro 2005), and yet others as an exchange across the Caribbean (including Panamá) and the U.S. mainland. See Giovenetti (2003) for a discussion of the flows of roots reggae, rap, and to a lesser extent, dancehall to Puerto Rico from other parts of the Caribbean (namely Jamaica) and the U.S., and see Baker (2005) for a further discussion of the origins of reggaetón.
- <sup>6</sup> Though a fusion between reggae, rap, and other musical forms has existed in Puerto Rico at least since the 1980s, it has not always been referred to as reggaetón. Sometimes what would be considered reggaetón fell under the broad category of underground, which included rap and reggae and a fusion of the two (drawing primarily from dancehall, not roots reggae) and other Caribbean and Latin American forms (i.e., merenrap, which was a fusion of Dominican merengue, rap, and sometimes reggae). Underground was also referred to as *rap en español* or *reggae en español* (drawing primarily from dancehall, not roots reggae). I would argue that reggaetón has its roots in underground, though it was only one of the forms that fell underneath the umbrella category. What distinguishes reggaetón from other music that falls within the category of underground is the specific *dem bow* beat. Often, rap, reggae, and underground have been conflated in the press and academia. For the purposes of this essay I will use underground to refer to all Puerto Rican music that includes rap, reggae, and other genres together and reggaetón to the specific form of music with the dem bow beat.

- <sup>7</sup> See Ana Maria García's documentary *Cocolos y roqueros* (1992) for a more in-depth understanding of this phenomenon.
- <sup>8</sup> Calderón's interview with Rivera (2004) demonstrates that he is cognizant of these critiques, to which he responds by claiming that he is not sexist. Nonetheless, he blames the working Puerto Rican mother for the pitfalls of Puerto Rican society.
- <sup>9</sup> I use transnational to refer to flows of people and cultural products across borders of nations. An in-depth treatment of the transnational dynamics of reggaetón warrants an essay in and of itself and is beyond the scope of this study.
- <sup>10</sup> Please note that I did not include coverage of Ivy Queen in the U.S. mainstream press given that during the time frame studied there was very little about her compared to her male counterparts Tego Calderón and Daddy Yankee.
- <sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that not many Puerto Ricans identify as black regardless of skin color or ancestry. Consider the 2000 Census, in which 81 percent of Puerto Ricans on the island identified as "white" despite the black community and large mixed population on the island.
- <sup>12</sup> "I never stop defending my woman."
- <sup>13</sup> "Feminist."
- <sup>14</sup> "A woman who wears the pants."
- <sup>15</sup> "But that's not saying that I'm going to bed with you."
- <sup>16</sup> "Of this Boricua who fights year after year among the best."
- <sup>17</sup> "Where the strongest is the one who everybody believed was the weakest."
- <sup>18</sup> "Women will push themselves forward/We're coming strong."
- <sup>19</sup> "We are coming strongly and this is not a fraud."
- <sup>20</sup> "Pay attention country, nation, association/That the queen has arrived."
- <sup>21</sup> "I am like the Celia [Cruz] of underground."
- <sup>22</sup> During my exploratory research project on gender and reggaetón in the San Juan metropolitan area of Puerto Rico, I found that many my informants pointed to IQ being read as "demasiado bucha" ("too butchy") by both people on the ground level and in local newspapers and magazines on the island. In searching the archives for media coverage on Ivy Queen and her dress I found no specific references to her being butch. In addition, interestingly, I have also been told by Colombian friends and colleagues that some audiences in Colombia interpret IQ as a male cross-dresser upon first seeing her.
- <sup>23</sup> "Too butchy."
- <sup>24</sup> It is important to note that at one point Ivy Queen removed her dancers from her performances because she was concerned that they were being sexually objectified, but then employed them again later in her career arguing that the dancing is appropriate given that reggae is sensual (Ayala 1998).
- <sup>25</sup> "I am your daughter."
- <sup>26</sup> It should be noted that the music to "Que bonita bandera" is a plena beat that is also used to sing songs not necessarily related to the flag, especially local news on the island and the mainland.



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