

Puerto Rican Spanish, Reggaetón Style!

The (Socio)Linguistics
of Urban Music

Edited by

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Para mi nieto Dylan, quien desde los dos años
me habla en puro español puertorriqueño:

con la *r* velar,
con lateralización,
con la oclusiva glotal...

Con todo mi amor,
Güelo Tato

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Contributors

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Kendall Medford is a Ph.D. Candidate in linguistics at Tulane University. Her research focuses on language contact in the Caribbean, with a particular interest in contact between varieties of Spanish and Haitian Creole. She holds a B.A. in Hispanic Linguistics from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an M.A. in Linguistics from Tulane University. Her writing has been published in the *Journal of Language Contact*, *NACLA*, and in several edited volumes. Her current project is as editor of the volume *Ports of Entry: Language in Caribbean Migrations* (University Press of Mississippi). She has lived, worked, and researched in the Caribbean for nearly a decade.

Derrek Powell is a lifelong *perreo* enthusiast and Ph.D. student in Iberian and Latin American Linguistics at The University of Texas at Austin, with a Master's in Hispanic Linguistics from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Under the guidance of Dr. Almeida Jacqueline Toribio and Dr. Sandro Sessarego, his research merges critical sociolinguistics, raciolinguistics, ethnomusicology, and media studies, with a focus on phonetics and phonology. Rooted in a Black Feminist decolonial perspective, his work investigates the linguistic stylization of reggaetón as a lens for exploring racial, gendered, and sexual enregisterments and (dis)identifications in Puerto Rico and the broader Latin Urban musical enterprise. Through his research, Derrek aims to push the boundaries of canonical sociolinguistics by fostering more holistic conversations around language, music, and the politics of cultural and identity formation.

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Erin Trybulec is a Ph.D. student in Spanish Linguistics at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Her contribution to this volume was completed under the mentorship of Dr. Anna María Escobar. Erin's interest in Puerto Rican Spanish came from her adoptive uncle, Félix (born in Barranquitas) and growing up in Chicago. Her interest was furthered by an undergraduate internship in Ponce, Puerto Rico, where her Spanish and music interests became heavily influenced by conversations with collaborators and community members, as well as subsequent visits. Her current research focuses on the semiotics of protest in Puerto Rico, language contact, and intersections between language and music, rooted in linguistic anthropology.

Wilfredo Valentín-Márquez was a dedicated scholar and professor of Spanish at Millersville University, with a Ph.D. in Romance Languages and Linguistics from the University of Michigan. His research intersected sociolinguistics, phonology, and Puerto Rican identity, focusing on the sociolinguistic distribution of liquid variables in Puerto Rican Spanish. Wilfredo was also a passionate advocate for Puerto Rican communities, contributing to scholarly works like *Dialects from Tropical Islands: Caribbean Spanish in the United States* (2019) and *Puerto Rican Spanish, Reggaetón Style: The (Socio)Linguistics of Urban Music* (2024). He combined his research with community activism, using his platform to support Puerto Rican visibility and advocacy during crises like Hurricane María and the COVID pandemic.

Julio E. Vega Cedeño holds a Ph.D. in Culture and Teaching from the University of Minnesota and a Master's in English Education from the University of Puerto Rico Mayagüez. With over 12 years of experience, he specializes in English language instruction and curriculum development. Currently, he serves as the bilingual coordinator at Colegio Bennett in Cali, Colombia, leading initiatives to enhance language acquisition and integrate content-based instruction. Julio's academic focus is deeply tied to his passion for reggaetón music. His master's thesis, "Seeking Social Justice: A Critical Understanding of Reggaeton Narratives," explores the genre's links to social justice and human rights issues. His Ph.D. dissertation, "Puerto Rican Cultural Nationalisms: How Bad Bunny and Residente Portray the Archipelago's Culture," incorporates his podcast, *Descolonizándolos*

con Dembow, analyzing narratives in urban music. Through his work, Julio contributes to discussions on language, music, and cultural identity.

Marién Villanueva Vega is professor and Associate director at the University of Puerto Rico- Mayagüez. Her research focuses on the different manifestations of popular culture, media, and feminist theory. Her master thesis, “Fairy Tales and Reggaeton Narratives: Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes Inherent in Puerto Rican Popular Culture,” is part of an ongoing project that explores the ramifications of music in the production of gender discourse. Her participation as co-host in a reggaetón podcast, *Descolonizándolos con Dembow*, with her colleague Professor Julio Vega-Cedeño (producer and host) is an example of her interest in popular culture, gender discourse, and reggaetón. She is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Caribbean Literature at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus. Her new home is in Mayagüez, where she lives with her dog Letra Minúscula.

Piero Visconte is a Ph.D. candidate in Iberian and Latin American Linguistics at The University of Texas at Austin. His research explores variationist sociolinguistics, contact linguistics, and L2/L3 acquisition and teaching, with a focus on the Spanish Caribbean, Latin America, and Hispanic and Lusophone communities in the U.S. His interdisciplinary work bridges Linguistics with African-American, Diaspora, Latino, and Diversity Studies. Visconte has published widely across various linguistic branches and teaches courses in Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian at both lower- and upper-division levels at UT-Austin.

Acknowledgments

We are ever thankful to Wilfredo Valentín-Márquez, whose passion, creativity, and unwavering commitment to the Puerto Rican community sparked the creation of this volume. As a visionary in exploring the often-overlooked phenomena of Puerto Rican Spanish, Wilfredo continually expanded the frontiers of linguistic research. This volume stands as a testament to his extraordinary work and enduring legacy.

To all the *reggaetoneros* who have fought to have their voices heard and have influenced our Spanish in innovative ways, we extend our heartfelt thanks. Thank you for not only entertaining us as fans but also for inspiring and fueling our investigative work.

We also wish to express our profound gratitude to the scholars who provided invaluable expertise and feedback: Alba Arias, Alexandra Morales, Antonio Medina-Rivera, Ashlee Dauphinais, Brandon Rogers, Derrek Powell, Gabriela Alfaraz, Greg Thompson, John Escalante, Julio Vega Cedeño, Julia Oliver Rajan, Mary Beaton, Melvin González-Rivera, Michelle Ramos Pellicia, Piero Visconte, Teresa Satterfield, Timothy L. Face, and Whitney Chappell. Thank you for helping to elevate the quality of this very special volume.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the Vernon Press team. Thank you for the opportunity to collaborate on this publication, and for your patience and guidance, particularly as the project transitioned to a new team of editors.

¡Gracias a todos!

Foreword

Teresa Satterfield
University of Michigan

“Puerto Rican Spanish, Reggaetón Style!: The (Socio)Linguistics of Urban Music” is the long-awaited brainchild of Dr. Wilfredo Valentín-Márquez. Wilfredo was a highly respected and dedicated Puerto Rican sociolinguist, gifted musician, community leader and humanitarian who passed away unexpectedly in May of 2023.

I initially came to know Wilfredo in the fall of 2000 when I was an assistant professor teaching my first graduate linguistics course (“Issues in Bilingualism”) at the University of Michigan. I was using novel Spanish-English codeswitching data from Afro-Panamanian communities for class analyses. Wilfredo was a first-semester “nontraditional” graduate student in the course. I mention ‘nontraditional’ only because he was older, driven to excel and unapologetically representing Boriquén in a space where there were no other Latino students or students of color. He would often approach me with curiosity about similar “under the radar” language phenomena that he had attested in Puerto Rico and in U.S. Puerto Rican communities.

Our ‘Panama-meets-Puerto Rico’ conversations in which we marveled at the sheer creativity and vibrancy of Caribbean Spanish became a standing meeting that always touched on music. From there, it was very easy to feed our rather guilty linguistic pleasure of tracking innovations in the then emerging reggaetón genre. At the time and for reasons that have been well documented, reggaetón spanning Panama to Puerto Rico was not a musical form that was known to—or viewed favorably by U.S.— and Caribbean-based scholars. Wilfredo and I joked that we were uniquely qualified to introduce the language of reggaetón to the linguistic community—who else could grasp the genius of Crooked Stilo’s calque “*retrásalo, baby, tú sabes cómo lo hacemos*” (back [that thing] up, you know how we do it)? But I was untenured faculty and Wilfredo, a beginning graduate student. We put our dream project on hold, but continued to monitor this uncharted linguistic spectrum as reggaetón’s popularity and visibility grew.

Post-dissertation, Wilfredo turned his meticulous sociolinguistic lens to “life imitating art” as he investigated emergent glottalization in youth on the island (2007). He attributed this previously unreported feature to the robust presence of reggaetón. Post-tenure, I developed a Spanish linguistics course “*Lengua reggaetona*” to formally examine lexical, phonological, morphosyntactic

and semantic features of reggaetón songs, with an eye to African diasporic contributions. The class is still popular today. In terms of research, I was fascinated by the *giros sintácticos* that were coming “fast and furious (*ya tú sabes*)” by Puerto Rican reggaetón artists who I classified as “closet bilinguals.” For instance, the mid-2000s codeswitching flows from NY-PR artists Arcángel and De La Ghetto remain unequaled today. Puerto Rican icons Ivy Queen and Tego Calderón have strong ties to the Island, but they also were either born or lived an extended period in the Eastern U.S. in their youth (although this fact is not always evident due to their strong public preference for Spanish). Still, there is a systemic African American English influence filtering into their spoken Spanish syntax (Satterfield & Alexander, 2006) and phonology (Satterfield & Benkí, 2009, 2019) that includes agile calques, hyper-negative concord and iconic AAE sound transfers to Spanish. These recastings are important, since not only do they conform to the grammaticality of native Spanish, but they are also quite ordinary structures for kids of color who navigate ‘growing up bilingual’ (Zentella, 1997). I argue for the likelihood of an Afro-American Spanish variety, on par with African American English such that it contains lexical and grammatical distinctions not found in the Standard/Mainstream Spanish counterpart. In fact, this area of inquiry’s time has come precisely due to the now international scale of reggaetón. Is the genre more commercialized? Yes. But it also is being enriched through ‘collabs’ that highlight a new generation of bilinguals and ‘closet bilinguals’ (—We see you, Rauw!).

As Wilfredo and I were comparing linguistic notes on the reggaetón-centered Chilean-Puerto Rican telenovela “Don Amor,” Raquel Z. Rivera (2008) published the tour de force edited volume on reggaetón. I was beyond thrilled, and I absorbed every page—the high level of scholarly analysis and rigorous probing of the genre were affirming and validated this expression of music on all counts. To my dismay, while the content of *Reggaetón* covers a myriad of psychosocial, musical, historical and cultural aspects, there is no substantive linguistic analysis among the chapters. Yes, there are surface comments on Spanish versus English, or a nod to African language origins, but in the totality of the book, the absence of an expert linguistic perspective on reggaetón has always been a conspicuous void for me.

Fortunately, a body of solid academic research on linguistic questions of reggaetón now exists, and in my estimation the scholarship has taken on even greater momentum since 2020. People are exploring reggaetón within the core areas of linguistics, but also in nuanced and important ways that link it to raciolinguistics and social justice. All of which brings us full circle to our year 2000 ‘linguistics of reggaetón dream project.’ Wilfredo and I had published respective articles on reggaetón over the years, but he reminded me: “*no olvidés que tenemos pendiente trabajar juntos con lo del reggaetón* (don’t forget we’re

going to work together on reggaetón).” Of course, had I known that our 20-year conversation was about to come to a sad and abrupt halt, I would have dropped my other projects to focus on this important work. In the end, I am happy to have given Wilfredo my blessing to move forward on this volume, to have provided moral support, and to have served without hesitation as a reviewer when asked.

Wilfredo was truly qualified to document the linguistics of Puerto Rican reggaetón. He never forgot his roots. He spent time and money organizing support for Puerto Rico during the catastrophic Hurricane María and the COVID pandemic. He wrote Op-Eds to the local newspapers to make the Puerto Rican experience visible and had a social media presence on Twitter/X for Puerto Rican issues (#profesorwilfre). *Puerto Rican Spanish, Reggaetón Style! The (Socio)Linguistics of Urban Music* is therefore an excellent resource that taps into the reggaetón movement from the perspective of linguists and language specialists. It is also a loving tribute to Dr. Wilfredo Valentín-Márquez’s lifelong vision and dedication to his field and to his beloved Puerto Rican community.

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