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“Ricky Martin Ain’t No Dixie Chick”: Or, How We Can Learn A Few Things About Citizenship And Invisibility From Popular Culture

CARMEN R. LUGO-LUGO

ABSTRACT

In a San Juan, Puerto Rico, concert held in February 2007, the pop singer Ricky Martin made an obscene gesture with his finger while singing a line about having his picture taken with President Bush. This essay uses the backlash emanating from the gesture to illustrate a two-part argument: (1) after September 11, 2001, American citizenship (both political and cultural) became a tenuously tied to ideas about patriotism and non-immigrant status, and (2) patriotism was linked to an unyielding support for President Bush and his administration. We can see demarcations between notions of “the citizen” versus “the other” in United States mainstream discussions of the finger incident. Responses to the reports about Ricky Martin’s gesture showed a distrust of his Puerto Rican body, which stemmed from a general distrust of deemed non- and un-American bodies. The essay outlines a specific relationship between social narratives, popular culture, and post-9/11 constructions of citizenship. [Key words: Ricky Martin, citizenship, colonialism, popular culture, Dixie Chicks, (un)Americanness]

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The big immigration bill is dead for now. Some are saying the Republicans didn't really want this bill because it's really more useful for them to have a wedge issue of illegal aliens, the same way they had gay marriage in 2004. That poor Ricky Martin. He just can't catch a break.

—BILL MAHER. QUOTED IN DANIEL KURTZMAN'S (2008) "IMMIGRATION JOKES"

The pride of Ricky's star persona is based on the fact that a certain packaging of Puerto Rican performative talent can be competitive in the marketplace and able to integrate the internal colonies to metropolitan—and global—circuits of accumulation without the need to alter the current political status or assimilate to the United States of America.

—FRANCES NEGRÓN-MUNTANER (2004)

Introduction: The "Incident" and Purpose of this Essay

In February 2007, on a warm Friday night, Ricky Martin gave a two-hour concert in San Juan, Puerto Rico. According to the local press, the concert was an average Ricky Martin show, nothing all that remarkable, with one particular exception: while singing the song "Asignatura Pendiente," an indulgent song about the perils of fame and the draining anguish of having too much money and material possessions, the usually well-behaved Martin proceeded to make an obscene gesture with his hand. But more than a random and momentary jump to the wild side, the hand gesture was strategically deployed during a specific line in the song about having his picture taken with President Bush. To be more precise, Ricky Martin showed the middle finger of his left hand when he sang President Bush's last name.

When studied in depth, the reactions in the mainstream United States to this seemingly trivial event support the two-part argument of this essay: (1) after September 11, 2001, the category "American" (including notions about American citizenship—whether political or cultural) became a tenuous category tied to ideas about patriotism and non-immigrant status; and (2) patriotism was synonym with an unyielding support for President Bush and the policies of his administration. In *Containing (Un)American Bodies*, Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo argue that beginning with the statement "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" in the wake of the 9/11 attacks,

the administration of former President Bush “reinvigorated a series of oppositional pairs through rhetorical means” (2010: 1). Another important feature of the Bush administration was the consistent attempt to (re)construct the notion of “the American people” or “Americans,” which, they argue “is constructed in a unified way” (2010: 19). Moreover, “[t]he American people are taught to guard against what is ‘un-American,’ while implicitly defining the very categories ‘American’ and ‘un-American’ in the process” (2010: 19). This constant quest to articulate un-Americanness as something distinctly separate from Americanness, leads post-9/11 U.S. culture and society to create a sweeping category “un-American” that includes everything from terrorists to enemy combatants, to immigrants, to same-sex couples (Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo 2010: 21). Since the Bush administration was at the forefront of this effort, and President Bush was the leading figure in this endeavor, any criticism of the President and his administration was seen as unpatriotic and more importantly, as a threat to the nation and its (American) people.

In the midst of all this, as the U.S. kept symbolically shoring up definitions of Americanness, “Americans” also engaged in tangible efforts to keep un-Americanness out, including the creation of the Homeland Security Administration, the Patriot Act, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and constant references to a fence dividing the Mexico-U.S. International border, the Guantánamo prison in Cuba, and Abu Ghraib in Iraq, which provided the American public with a plethora of images aimed at safeguarding the category “American.” The post-9/11 American versus un-American rhetoric is of particular importance, since the practices developed seem to be outlasting the Bush Presidency. That is, although some may claim that we are living in a new historical moment (i.e., a “post-post-9/11 era” or even more to the point, the “Obama era”), the elements and efforts developed during the post-9/11 era are still part of our realities for they were triggered by an event (i.e., the attacks on 9/11) that will remain fresh in the collective memory of Americans for years to come. They also became ideologies ingrained in people’s minds, and those ideologies morphed into a way of life for Americans. Pete Kuznick and James Gilbert make a similar claim about the Cold War when they argue that “much of what is usually thought of as Cold War culture outlasted the Cold War itself and will likely be with us for a long time” (2001: 2). The freshness of the event, along with the relentless, consistent, and systematic training Americans underwent for seven consecutive years are a guarantee that Americans will continue looking for (un)Americanness for a long time. In this essay, I use the backlash emanating from Ricky Martin’s “middle finger incident” to illustrate the connection between constructions of (un)Americanness, conceptions of citizenship, and demonstrations of patriotism toward the end of the George W.

Bush administration, and the positionality of Puerto Ricans. But, before I delve into a discussion of the incident itself, I would like to discuss the role that popular culture plays in the development of ideologies, and more specifically, the role of popular culture in efforts to shore up “Americanness” after September 11, 2001.

Popular Culture: Enforcing Tool and Vehicle of Disruption

Mainstream culture and popular culture are neither mutually exclusive, nor monoliths. In fact, popular culture is an integral component of the society from which it emerges and develops, expertly mimicking the fears and anxieties embedded in mainstream culture. Thus, while I agree with Edén Torres when she tells us that “popular culture greatly influences public discourse on any number of topics” (2003: 117), it is important to keep in mind that dominant/mainstream social narratives also influence the discourse of popular culture, creating a vicious cycle of sorts. But in order to clarify this connection I would argue that popular culture is part of mainstream culture, but not all mainstream culture is part of popular culture. It is also true that popular culture has managed to at times sever its connection with mainstream culture, providing an “alternative discourse,” and thus becoming a vehicle for disruption, signaling what Antonio Gramsci called “a crisis of hegemony” (1971: 210). But, even in instances in which popular culture deviates from or contests dominant narratives, mainstream ideologies tend to yield more power and have more endurance than the alternative discourse emerging from popular culture. For instance, during the post-9/11 Bush administration, a large segment of popular culture collaborated with the ideologies developed during this period, as movies, newscasts, songs, and celebrities complied with and in many cases celebrated these ideologies, or as Noam Chomsky (1993) would say, “marched in the parade.” The collaboration of popular culture with official Presidential rhetoric garnered two related and mutually supporting equations, which played a major role in the popular imaginary: (1) American = born in the U.S. + being fervently patriotic, and (2) being patriotic = believing in and reciting White House rhetoric + being submissive and supportive of any action taken by the Bush administration. Thus, anything that deviated from those two equations was at the very least looked at with suspicion or at the very most categorized as a threat to the country and its people (Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo 2010).

Within a context celebrating blind patriotic compliance and fear of (outside and inside) threats, popular culture socialized the people into dominant discourse, and at times served as a repressive force at the service of mainstream ideologies. However, if we look at the history of popular culture, we learn that, as mentioned above, throughout the most socially and politically repressive moments, it has demonstrated the capacity

to at times break away from dominant narratives and contest the very narratives and social systems that create those narratives. As John Storey argues, “whether the result of consuming popular culture is manipulation or resistance, or a complicated mixture of the two, is a question which cannot be answered in advance...” (2003: 112).

In this essay, I explore the connections between dominant social narratives developed as part of the post-9/11 efforts at unraveling Americanness from un-Americanness (including issues of citizenship) and popular culture, by way of “the middle finger incident,” with the idea that discussions of the incident among mainstream Americans (1) shed light into understandings about citizenship in the U.S. at the beginning of the twenty-first century, (2) provide insight into the way Americans interpreted and made sense of departures from dominant narratives, and (3) show the extent to which Puerto Rican U.S. citizenship is invisible among mainstream Americans. This third point is of utmost importance, for although popular culture can wave the banner of Empire, it can also point to what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001) deemed “the limits of imperialism,” by exposing what they referred to as “the outside of Empire.” As a clarification, I am not trying to argue for a positive take on popular culture, but to present the happenings within popular culture and the responses these happenings garner as a way to study and gain an understanding of a society’s workings within a particular time period.

Flipping off the President: The Gesture in a Context

I would like to return to Ricky Martin and the middle finger incident, as it is my contention that the reactions to it from mainstream American media and Americans are characteristic of the post-9/11 climate and characteristic of the treatment of Latinos (and by extension Puerto Ricans) within that climate, as Latinos were seen as immigrants and immigrants were seen as a threat to Americanness. For instance, in July 2010, a year and a half after President Bush left office, Gallup reported that 50 percent of Americans thought that “halting the flow of illegal immigrants” should be the U.S. government’s main focus when dealing with the issue of illegal immigration, and 45 percent thought that immigration (any immigration, not just “illegal”) should be decreased (Morales 2010). These perceptions, along with a barrage of reports of Latinos being harassed, beaten, incarcerated, detained, and deported tell us that the category un-American has been extended to include Latinos, and in many cases, without regard for citizenship status.

Perhaps because of his slight accent, and the constant media exoticization of his “Latino” body, Ricky Martin was/is seen as a Latino. In fact, if the individuals I quote below are any indication of how post-9/11 mainstream “Americans” see Ricky Martin,

the majority seem to agree that he is an immigrant, and therefore “not-American.” When news about his uncharacteristic behavior at the February concert surfaced in the U.S., Martin released a statement to the press explaining that by flipping off the President he was condemning the war in Iraq. In his words: “My convictions of peace and life go beyond any government and political agenda and as long as I have a voice onstage and offstage, I will always condemn war and those who promulgate it” (Associated Press 2007).

In fact, if the individuals I quote below are any indication of how post-9/11 mainstream “Americans” see Ricky Martin, the majority seem to agree that he is an immigrant, and therefore “not-American.”

News websites (most notably MSNBC, AP, CNN, and Fox News), bloggers, and online chatters had plenty to say about both the incident and the anti-war statement. But, since most outlets simply reproduced the Associated Press original news release, they ended up with the exact same narrative. Thus, when reporting on the incident, the majority of the news outlets emphasized that the San Juan crowd cheered (a bulk of the reports even said “in a frenzy”) when Martin “graciously” showed his middle finger to the then Commander in Chief. Although these reports provoked the most passionate responses from bloggers and chatters, statements about Puerto Ricans cheering a less than respectful gesture toward the President of the United States are the least interesting aspect of these reports. There really is no mystery in Puerto Ricans cheering a gesture that somewhat challenges the very person/office that controls their lives from afar. Any scholar with a vague notion of colonized/colonizer relations can explain this in her sleep. By the same token, there is no mystery in the number of news outlets reporting the incident, for the U.S. mainstream press is notorious for overdoing and sensationalizing stories on perceived out-of-the-ordinary behavior by celebrities. In this case, the out-of-the-ordinary behavior was considered an anti-Bush sentiment, which, as I mentioned above, within the post-9/11 climate translated into an anti-American sentiment in the minds of Americans. This explains why in responding to the news releases and blog posts, many chatters took Martin’s gesture and later statement as personal affronts, and thus tried to construct the gesture and him as un- or anti-American.

There were, however, two other assertions consistently made by news agencies and repeated by bloggers that, in my view, given the post-9/11/2001 climate über-patriotism, were of greater import: (1) “Martin, like other artists, has been highly

critical of the war in Iraq;” and (2) “The United States seized Puerto Rico in 1898 at the end of the Spanish-American War. Puerto Rico’s 4 million people are U.S. citizens and can be drafted into the military but cannot vote for president and have no voting representation in Congress. They also do not pay federal taxes.”

Why are these two statements important? The first one suggests quite a bit by not saying much. For instance, the “other artists” critical of the war alluded to in the statement are left unnamed, making us wonder whether those are other Puerto Rican artists, and/or other American artists. Or they could be other Latino artists or other artists around the world. It certainly is an unclear statement. But, within the context of the U.S. (where these news articles were released), an allusion to other artists being critical of the war immediately reminded the public of Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks, who on the eve of the Iraq invasion in a concert in London, made the following anti-war statement in support of anti-war protestors in the city: “Just so you know, we’re on the good side with y’all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas” (Eby 2008). In the U.S., the mainstream press released strategic parts of the statement (most venues ran the quote as “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas” (ABC, AP, CBS, *Los Angeles Times*, *Seattle Times*, *Time*, Fox News, and CNN) or as “We’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas” (*Boston Globe*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post*).

The reconstruction of Maines’ statement by the U.S. press turned it into an anti-President Bush sentiment more than an anti-war sentiment. In fact, many media outlets, including CNN and the *LA Times*, called Maines’ statement “Bush-bashing.” As a result, Natalie Maines and the Chicks were viciously chastised for being anti-Bush, which as I mentioned above, within the post-9/11 heightened state of patriotic fervor, translated into being anti-American. A paradoxical position to find themselves in, given that up to that point, the members of the trio were seen, treated, and heralded as Marty Maguire herself said once, “the ultimate Midwestern, middle-of-the-road all-American girls” (Friedman 2006). The Chicks went from the “top of the world” (the title of their tour in 2003) to being treated as traitors to the country, or as journalist José Dávila (2007) tells us, “the whipping gals of the right-wing hate machine.” Thus, even though his gesture was not received with the same intensity as Natalie Maines’ words, without saying much, the statement linking Ricky Martin’s politics to those of “other artists” easily positioned him within this particular crowd of anti-American Americans, a complicated positionality to which I will return below.

A Special Kind of Citizenship

On Not Paying Taxes

The second statement about the particularities of Puerto Ricans' U.S. citizenship is relevant, for it was included within reports of Ricky Martin's perceived anti-Bush behavior/sentiment. Germane to that statement is the fact that it places Puerto Ricans, including Martin within the fold of the U.S. by acknowledging their citizenship status, at the same time that it grants them a different position as citizens (i.e., they do not vote for the President, nor do they pay taxes). In fact, the part about Puerto Ricans not paying taxes puts them in a completely different realm from other American citizens, who regard paying taxes to the federal government a crucial component and obligation of their citizenship (as in the clichéd phrase "tax-paying Americans"—which generates over 13,000 hits in Google). And if you think about it, there is no equivalent phrase for "voting" (for instance, I have never heard the phrase "President-voting" Americans). The claims made in the second statement are stated independently from each other as if it were a matter of course and unrelated happenstance that Puerto Ricans cannot vote for President, do not have representation in Congress, and do not pay taxes. The wording of these claims is also interesting, for it leaves out accountability and, if anything, seems to place the burden on Puerto Ricans. That is, saying that Puerto Ricans cannot vote for President, as opposed to saying that an Act of Congress prevents Puerto Ricans from voting for President (a more accurate rendition of the situation), leaves the statement open to interpretation.

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Similarly, claiming that Puerto Ricans "do not" pay federal taxes, makes it seem as though they are just not paying taxes (because they do not want to, or because they are not required), not because according to the political tradition in the U.S., people should not be taxed without representation. So, the separate claims that Puerto Ricans "do not have representation in Congress" and "do not pay taxes" are actually related claims, with a direct causality. But, as worded, the claims suggest that Puerto Ricans have a certain kind of special citizenship (i.e., a special kind of treatment) that absolves them from the responsibility and duty of paying taxes, concealing the fact that since they have no representation in Congress, Puerto Ricans are not *required*

to pay federal (income) taxes, unless they work for the federal government or live in one of the fifty states of the union. Given that, more than half of Puerto Ricans do pay income tax to the federal government, including Ricky Martin, who in 2007 had his primary residence in Miami, Florida. Moreover, the thousands of federal employees on the island who are still not represented in Congress, and who are still not allowed to vote for the President, are required to and do pay federal income tax every year. Even more relevant is the fact that most news outlets used that claim (i.e., “they also do not pay federal taxes”) to end their reports, which means the reports began with the narration of a perceived anti-Bush/anti-American incident (that is, Ricky Martin being cheered when he flipped off the President), and finished by conveying a decidedly non-American trait (that is, Martin and those cheering him, do not pay federal taxes).

Puerto Rican Citizenship in the Post-9/11 U.S.

Ramón Grosfoguel (2003) tells us that in order to have a discussion about “the rights and obligations that citizenship implies, we need to understand the foundational myths, invented traditions, and imagined communities that states, dominant elites, dominant classes, and dominant racial/ethnic groups construct” (2003: 195). Aranda, Chang, and Sabogal go further to argue that “[c]itizenship sediments the boundaries of the nation,” creating and legitimizing hierarchies “through policies that aim to enforce the law” (2008: 154). Efrén Rivera Ramos takes up this notion of a hierarchical (or tiered) citizenship in the case of Puerto Ricans, for as he suggests, the recreation of a citizenship that is detached from the right of political participation “allowed for a new construction of the other” (2001: 108). And, as Isin (2004) has written, articulations of “the other” are key in contemporary constructions of citizenship.

Isin develops the notion of the “neurotic citizen,” a subject bestowed with first-class citizenship, and a subject who is governed by the management of fears and governs itself by anxieties. Although there are several “domains [e.g., the environment, the home, the economy, the border, and so forth] in and through which neurotic subjects have been increasingly incited to conduct themselves as neurotic citizens” (2004: 226), the neurotic citizen has a particular anxiety about the “other.” Within the post-9/11 U.S., this anxiety has been articulating itself through various of those domains, and specific, dichotomized discourses have been developed to manage anxieties over and “secure” them. One pertinent example is discourse around “the border” and immigration, which have resulted in attempts to secure the state and its people by deploying massive border controls and surveillance technologies, creating the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement equipped with multiple detention centers, the formation and growth of the Minuteman Project, and so forth, all projects aimed

at creating a clear division between the “us” and the “them.” Isin concludes that “the formation of neurotic claims reproduces illusions of the neurotic citizen and enables it to shift responsibility to objects outside itself with hostility” (2004: 233).

Clearly informed by perceptions on immigration, we can see strict demarcations of the citizen versus the other in U.S. mainstream discussions of the middle finger incident. Given the post-9/11 context in which they took place, responses to the reports about Ricky Martin flipping off the President were raw and callous, but altogether predictable: they showed a distrust of Martin’s Puerto Rican body (perceived as an immigrant body), which stemmed from a general distrust of non- and un-American bodies (seen, of course as “the other”). To illustrate certain aspects of the relationship between social narratives, popular culture, and constructions of citizenship, I would like to share some online responses to Martin’s “middle finger incident.” I divided the responses in three categories: (1) Ricky Martin as gay and threatening; (2) Ricky Martin as a threatening non-citizen; and (3) Ricky Martin as a threatening entertainer. The quotes are from chatters who were responding to online news articles or blog postings on the middle finger incident. Though small in numbers and definitely not a scientific sample or an exhaustive list, the quotes I am sharing here are representative of the sentiments that the news stories and blogs arouse on Americans reading them.¹ Also, since threatening categories overlap in the minds of Americans, and though certainly distinct, the responses I include in each category overlap with the other two.

Ricky Martin as a Threatening Gay

Despite the fact that Ricky Martin never made any official pronouncements about his sexual orientation until three years after the incident on March, 2010,² and in fact any pronouncement about his sexuality had signaled that he was straight, and despite the fact that his professional persona usually surrounded itself with hot, young girls, Ricky Martin’s alleged gayness became a tool for explaining Martin’s behavior when mainstream Americans were debating the middle finger incident. This correlates with ideas at the time methodically and consistently connecting Americanness with a stars-and-stripes flag-waving, heterosexual Whiteness. And anything that deviated from that specific construction of Americanness was seen and treated as a threat to the country, its society, and its people (Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo 2010). It’s a case of anything non-heterosexual as being definitely anti-American, but also, anything anti-American having something wrong with it, thus it must be non-straight, or non-White, or non-Christian. We can see this unfolding in several online reactions to Ricky Martin’s middle finger salute to President Bush. Here are four of those responses to the incident that illustrate that connection.

1. I have two words for Ricky Martin & the clowns who support him F U & F him! I am tired of people hating this country and bashing our president. Like you can do better, bunch of hollyweird freak's your [sic] all liberal trash! burn in hell you moralless [sic] mo fo's. You're queer anyway Ricky Martin (*Us Magazine* 2007).
2. What a fuckin [sic] joke ricky martin [sic] is. Deport this queer communist (*Us Magazine* 2007).
3. How can he love the president—he is gay after all... (Chatter R2K, in a piece by Latin Gossip 2007).
4. Ricky, do we want to make comparisons? You are a, er, man, who can't even admit his homosexuality in public, yet you'll bad mouth our country to strangers. On the whole, who has more credentials, you or our president? He does more than shake his bon-bon for a living (*Us Magazine* 2007).

These four examples are a good representation of comments made by online chatters connecting Ricky Martin's alleged gayness at the time to his perceived anti-Americanness. The comment "he is gay after all" anteceded by "how can he love the president" is very telling, for this comment signals that loving (and perhaps respecting) the President can only be done by straight Americans. The accusation of being a "queer communist" adds another layer to the sentiment, capturing the relationship between Americanness and "the other," insofar as a communist has been the quintessential anti-American figure for over a century now, and insofar as homosexuality has been dubbed a threat to the civilized world by U.S. politicians. But overall, the swift invocations of morality, strangers, communists, and gays shows the particular ways in which Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century are drawing lines between Americanness (us) and un-Americanness (them). These also show the level to which Ricky Martin's body as a perceived gay man is seen as outside the realm of who is an American (which is, presumably, why he should be "deported" according to the one chatter).

Ricky Martin as a Threatening non-Citizen

As a Puerto Rican, Martin was born a U.S. citizen (so were his parents, for that matter, and the majority of his grandparents as well). Interestingly, even though the bulk of the news reports emphasized that Martin was (and the Puerto Ricans cheering him on were) U.S. citizen(s), many chatters missed the history lesson, as a clear illustration of the power of social narratives (i.e., Latino = immigrant [or "the other"] = threat). As a Latino, Martin triggers a set of assumptions in the collective U.S. imaginary. And although some of those assumptions have evolved into what Arlene Dávila (2008) calls "contrasting definitions of Latinos," there is a general collective understanding

of Latinos as being socially, culturally, and legally foreign to the country. As Dávila tells us: “citizenship has never shielded racially marked Latinos from being suspected as ‘immigrants’—just as it has never shielded racial minorities from second-class citizenship status” (2008: 9). The examples in this section show how the reports of the incident triggered mental images (that is, perceptions) of foreigners disrespecting and laughing at the President take precedent over the reality of U.S. citizens exercising their first amendment rights. Here are five examples:

1. Love the country or leave the country. I'm sure Mexico would love to take your [shitty] ass (*Us Magazine* 2007).
2. Damn foreigners. He probably couldn't do that to his country's leader wherever he's from [sic] (Yahoo Answers 2007).
3. Ricky Martin is so 5 years ago. Who cares what he thinks about Bush anyways...he's not even an American citizen (*Us Magazine* 2007).
4. You're not even an American citizen so I could care less what you think of Bush (*Us Magazine* 2007).
5. Yeah, Ricky Martin is the one who needs to be flipping off the “American” President. That's what is wrong with this country. We get all these new immigrants over here who have NO respect for our government or officials, but they sure want to live here. They leave their dictators to come over here and tell Americans what is wrong with their country and what they need to do to fix it. By golly, I bet he doesn't want to leave and go back to live in his own country...bet he couldn't get away with that in Cuba or wherever he is from. Absolutely sickening!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (Celebitchy 2007).

As a Puerto Rican (and presumably as a Latino) Ricky Martin is so foreign to the U.S. mainstream that these chatters can only see Martin as non-American. What is relevant here is that his alleged non-Americanness is translated into an affront to Americanness (i.e., “love the country or leave the country,” and “we get all these new immigrants over here”), and within this framework, Ricky Martin's citizenship evaporates (“he's not even an American citizen”). Martin's citizenship is so invisible within the U.S. mainstream culture that even those chatters who supported his views about the President and the war are not able to see him as an American citizen. This comment captures it best: “Glad to see that Bush is hated internationally, as much as he is nationally” (*Us Magazine* 2007). In this statement Puerto Rico, a U.S. colony becomes an international arena, and Ricky Martin, presumably, an international performer. The most telling response showing Martin's invisibility as a U.S. citizen, however, came from *Us Magazine* (2007). In an online article titled “Ricky Martin Flips Bush the Finger Loca,” the magazine reports the following: “Ricky Martin's dislike of President George W. Bush goes well beyond words—it actually exists in one appendage...” (*Us*

Magazine 2007). The narration of the incident by *Us Magazine* was not that different from other reports, as it also mentions the song he was singing, the exact line that elicited the gesture, and that when Martin gave the President “the F-you treatment,” “the crowd of 18,000 fans went crazy and cheered.” What was different about *Us Magazine* was the final statement: “Now that right there is international foreign relations at it’s [sic] finest, folks” (*Us Magazine* 2007). This statement is relevant, for it tells us that the invisibility of Puerto Rico’s political status within U.S. mainstream culture translates into Puerto Ricans being seen as foreign and foreign as un-American.

There are three more statements made by chatters that I would like us to discuss here, for they complicate Martin’s positionality vis-à-vis the U.S. The first chatter tells us: “The ‘funny’ part will be when ... [a] terrorist annihilates hundreds of thousands of these liberal retards by popping a nuke over one of their liberal strongholds (a city)” (*Us Magazine* 2007). Taken at face value, this is, perhaps the most violent response to Martin I have shared in this essay thus far. Paradoxically, it is also one of the few responses that grant Martin a space within the U.S. That is, on the one hand, within our reality, a threat to Americanness usually invokes terrorism and alien bodies. In that way, this response is both predictable and in keeping with what we have seen since 9/11/2001. On the other hand, however, calling Martin a “liberal retard” actually grants him a space within the political landscape of the U.S., which means this chatter is conceding Martin a level of citizenship not found in the statements made by other chatters. The second statement I want to discuss is slightly more involved but it also allows a level of citizenship to Martin while simultaneously relegating him to the “side” of terrorism. In this chatter’s words:

He shouldn’t even be allowed in this country. I don’t care if he is a Democrat or a Republican, when you go to other countries you don’t flip the President of your country the finger. He has no class, he is another low life with money. When terrorists see that it adds fuel to the fire. I say Ricky Martin is on the “TERRORIST SIDE”! (chatter Marie , in response to a piece by TMZ Staff, 2007)

By acknowledging that he could be a Democrat or a Republican and admonishing him for flipping off the President of his own country, this person bestowed upon Martin U.S. citizenship, but by also arguing that he is on “the terrorist side,” this chatter turned Martin into a threat: a threat that must be kept away and not allowed in the country. Martin’s perceived threat and un- and anti-Americanism was an all too powerful reality for some. That is why the statement from the third chatter went straight to the point in perhaps the most violent response to the middle finger incident I read: “Terrorist. Bomb him” (BWTorrents.com).

Ricky Martin as a Threatening Entertainer

I am not the only one who thought of the Dixie Chicks reading the reports invoking other artists opposing the war in Iraq. Many bloggers and online chatters also made the connection, even though as I said earlier, the reports themselves did not name any names. Here is what a chatter had to say: “The Dixie Chicks were right. Ricky Martin was right. Everyone is fed up with this administration, except for those with their heads in the sand. And honestly, I am not ashamed Bush is from Texas... I am ashamed he is even an American” (*Us Magazine* 2007). Others made the same connection between Martin and the Chicks but were considerably less supportive: “Maybe Ricky and the Dixie Chicks can tour together...wait a second, the Dixie Chicks can't sell tickets and who would really go see Ricky Martin? Must be Chapter 5 in the Hollywood manual of extending your celebrity... ‘trash the president’...” (*Us Magazine* 2007). The most time-specific of these responses, the one that connects Martin not only to the Chicks, but also to constructions of the unyielding flag-waving, abide-by-the-government Americanness that developed after 9/11, was the one provided by this chatter: “Another artist that [sic] thinks that the public needs or wants to hear their opinions about Iraq or the war-on-terror [sic] or any other topic. Ricky, just like any other ‘entertainer’ needs to just shut up and sing or act” (*Us Magazine* 2007).

The “shut up and sing” command used by this person was continually used against the Dixie Chicks after the incident in London, which prompted them to include the line in one of their new songs, and release a documentary with it as the title. The paradox embedded in the command is revealing (technically, a person can either shut up or sing, for singing requires an open mouth). The assumption made in the statement is that singing only requires a person to recite already predetermined words—words the audience knows beforehand and consequently can anticipate—without much thought involved in the process, while talking presumably involves an element of improvisation (and thus, cannot be anticipated by the audience). For all intents and purposes, the command “shut up and sing” is telling the person (in this case the artist) to stop communicating their (unpredictable) thoughts and to limit themselves to the predictability of the lyrics in their songs. Telling Ricky Martin, a Puerto Rican male to shut it, in the same way that Natalie Maines, a White, Texas girl was told to shut it reveals an interesting equivalency of these two bodies. This equivalence speaks volumes about a country construing anything other than a blind acceptance of U.S. domestic and foreign policy as a hatred for the country and its people, and about a country that has historically and systematically given different meanings to the bodies of white women and Puerto Rican men.

But the equivalency of these two bodies could only go so far, for ultimately, Maines' body is seen as an anti-American American, while Martin's is seen as an anti-American

non-American. It becomes obvious that the connection between Martin and Maines has nothing to do with their citizenship, because even though they are both U.S. citizens, Martin has been perceived in a different category. That is why the Chicks were cast as traitors (after all a traitor belongs inside the group she is betraying) and Martin was called a terrorist and was asked to be deported or bombed as only non-American bodies can be. I return to this point in the conclusion.

But the equivalency of these two bodies could only go so far, for ultimately, Maines' body is seen as an anti-American American, while Martin's is seen as an anti-American non-American.

Some chatters linked celebrity status to citizenship, suggesting that the privileged position from which celebrities make their political statements puts them in a different category. Here is one example:

When the famous use part of their cushy lives to rail against “the man” I could care less what comes out of their mouths [sic]. Their words hold no weight in my decisions. Any jackass can flip someone off. If you really care, get involved in politics. Join the army. Actually have a leg to f*cking stand on before you open your mouth or unfurl your pampered finger. (*Us Magazine* 2007)

Not having “a leg to f*cking stand on” because he is not in politics, has not served in the military and (presumably, according to the news reports) has not voted for President and has not paid taxes, means, once again, Ricky Martin stands outside the category of American. Interestingly, in this case, his non-Americanness stems from his status as a celebrity, a condition that puts him in a “pampered” position, differentiating him from the majority of Americans.

Embedded within these quotes we can find a story crafted by powerful social narratives about Americanness, othered bodies, and perceived threats. For the most part, these narratives stripped Ricky Martin, and by extension Puerto Ricans in general, of their citizenship. Moreover, the narratives positioned them as threats to Americanness. This is a new turn of events for Martin in particular, who was marketed in the U.S. as a non-threatening, all-smiles, light-skinned Latino. In fact, different from so many other Latino celebrities, with his clearly artificially tanned skin, blond highlights, and European features, Martin could almost pass as white. Almost. It was

his slight non-American and non-European accent along with his regular mentioning of Puerto Rico, and the heavy marketing as Latino that accompanied his crossover, which kept him from fully passing and unequivocally placed him outside of the category White. I used to agree with Frances Negrón-Muntaner's assertion that "the carefully crafted hologram named Ricky Martin [exposed] a largely unseen [Puerto Rican] identity worldwide, [that of] white upper-class islanders" (2004: 247). Although that may have been true at first, for Ricky Martin did/does embody the island's light-skinned upper middle class character, it is obvious from the quotes above that the message was lost in translation and tampered with by the post-9/11 climate of looking for and dealing with un-Americanness. But Negrón-Muntaner also understands that when it comes to Puerto Ricans, even an international phenomenon like Martin, things are a bit more complicated. As she tells us: "Like many Boricuas of his background, Martin is simultaneously Paulo Coehlo and Deepak Chopra, Madonna and Celia Cruz, queer-as-folk haircuts and Armani suits" (Negrón-Muntaner 2004: 248). "That is why," she continues, "as José Quiroga eloquently put it, 'Ricky is a difficult doll to play with'" (2004: 248). In fact, invoking the few examples of light skinned Puerto Ricans who have managed to make it to the U.S. popular imaginary, Negrón-Muntaner concludes that "[b]efore Ricky, Puerto Ricans were, to some extent, all the 'same.' After Martin, some are more Puerto Rican than others" (2004: 248). But Martin also represents the broader category "Latino" that, as Arlene Davila (2001, 2008) suggests in her work, has been dichotomized into two parallel categories: the affluent, authentic cosmopolitan consumer subject who embraces mainstream American values (i.e., the good Latino), and the poor, marginal, unemployed, and/or politically active Latino (i.e., the bad Latino). The bad Latino is the one that is seen as foreign (and a threat) to the U.S. It is safe to assume that the middle finger incident during the singing of his ballad seemed to activate the "bad Latino" image for Ricky Martin.

After analyzing the statements made by the chatters, we can conclude that Martin may be seen by the American mainstream as a Latino of some sort who may be upper class in virtue of being a "pampered celebrity," but not a citizen, insofar as citizenship in the U.S. during this historical time is associated with Whiteness, U.S.-"bornness" and an unconditional patriotism (the makings of post-9/11 "Americanness"). Thus, since he was seen and treated as non-American (as more importantly, as a non-American threat) by online chatters, we have to conclude that, without a doubt, he is perceived as non-White. Before concluding this essay, there is one last aspect of responses to "the middle finger incident" that I would like to address: although those who responded to the incident and Martin's statement made connections between his sexuality and his perceived un-Americanness, and his Latinness and his perceived un-Americanness,

there were no comments connecting all three, that is, his sexuality, Latinness (or Puerto Ricanness), and his alleged un-Americanness (i.e., no comments about being an Anti-American, queer Puerto Rican). Similarly, nothing was made (by Martin himself or those responding to him) about the incident as a critique of Puerto Rico/U.S. relations. The first one can be explained in terms of the dichotomies explained earlier, that is, Martin is not seen as an anti-American queer Puerto Rican because Americans have been trained to compartmentalize threats by way of dichotomies. The “us” versus “them” binary only allows room for one category at a time where the “them” takes one shape, even if it belongs to the general category of “threat,” and as I discussed above, that category is inhabited by a multitude of bodies. In terms of Martin’s gesture and U.S.-Puerto Rico relations, though the gesture may not have been intended as a direct critique of the relationship between the island and the mainland, it must, nonetheless, be understood within the context of a subject of an “absent state” (Picó 2007) bantering with fellow citizens. A subject, nonetheless, who has claimed to have family members serving the U.S. military (Stevenson 2007). Thus, U.S.-Puerto Rico relations and their repercussions are at the heart of any critique leveled by a citizen-subject like Ricky Martin.

Final Thoughts

So on that February night, Ricky Martin showed more than his middle finger: he showed some of the nuances involving constructions of (Puerto Rican) citizenship in the U.S. at the beginning of the twenty-first century. According to journalist José Dávila’s analysis, right after the incident, “Martin may not have the courage to openly discuss his sexuality, or to sustain his criticism of the President, but even his staunchest critics would have to agree that he’s become a much more thoughtful citizen than the hunk who took the stage at the inaugural ball in 2001” (Dávila 2007). Martin, who claimed to be honored to be a part of the first inaugural celebration of the twenty-first century,” was condemned for participating by some within the Latino community, including longtime friend and songwriter and performer Robi Draco Rosa, who stated that “singing the ‘Cup of Life’ at George Bush’s inauguration is like playing the fiddle while Rome burns” (Jeckell 2001). But anyone following Martin’s political trajectory from that inaugural ball in 2001 would have to agree with José Dávila, for even before expressing his views on war in 2007, Martin had become quite political. For instance, he was very vocal about Vieques, taking the opportunity to tell Vieques residents that he supported their cause on different stages and venues, and even including his name on an Open Letter to President Bush signed by multiple Puerto Rican performers and athletes asking him to stop the bombing of Vieques. The letter was published in major

U.S. newspapers. He also established the Ricky Martin Foundation in 2002, which, according to its mission, “advocates for the wellbeing of children around the globe in critical areas such as social justice, education and health” (Ricky Martin Foundation 2010). Still, he claims not to be a political figure, as he told journalist Jane Stevenson (2007) in an interview, explaining the middle finger incident. In his words:

“I swear to God it was not planned.... It was things that you feel at a specific time. I’m pro-peace, and you get your ups and downs. I have family, relatives, that are right now in Iraq or on their way to Iraq. And you get kind of frustrated at times, with this issue. You don’t want to see your people hurt, and I guess that was what it was all about. At the same time, that’s not my priority at the moment. I’ve never been political about anything. Right now, the only thing I’m political about is my foundation [formed five years earlier to fight human trafficking in the sex trade]. (Stevenson 2007)

But, regardless of Martin’s growing “thoughtful citizenship,” as I discuss above, within a post-9/11 climate of “us” versus “them,” the gesture involving his middle finger turned into a political statement that carried certain consequences. And there is much to be learned from a crude gesture that is met with such level of contempt and that is used as a means of scapegoating perceived anti-Americanness. The responses to the middle finger incident showed that more than being “foreign in a domestic sense” as the United States Supreme Court proclaimed at the beginning of the twentieth century (Burnett and Marshall 2001), Puerto Ricans are, a hundred years later, foreign in a very threatening way.

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Popular culture can be used to understand a particular society during a particular historical juncture. And as Hardt and Negri suggest: “History has a logic only when subjectivity rules it, only when the emergence of subjectivity reconfigures efficient causes...” (2001: 235). Those efficient causes are reconfigured by way of social narratives and social narratives can make our head spin, for they can be contradictory. That is why, in a weird, convoluted way, and without realizing it, some online chatters granted a level of Americanness to Ricky Martin by comparing him to the Dixie Chicks, and placing all four of them within the category of Un-Americans. In

addition, online discussions served to symbolically sever Martin's relationship to the U.S. even further, as Martin's citizenship was consistently ignored or dismissed. This paradox played out in popular culture tells us a few things about the current fragility of Americanness, which can be bestowed upon or taken away from someone based on how much they fit the archetype of the post-9/11 American: mainland-born, ultra-conservative, fundamentally Christian, docilely pro-government, supportive of U.S. aggression around the world, and hyper-ignorant of his or her own history.

Something I would like to reiterate is that U.S. pop culture's grip, though massive, is not as strong as we assume, for it can be shattered by the stories created by social narratives. That is why I saved for last the most illuminating of the comments made by anyone after Ricky Martin's middle finger incident. The comment came from an online chatter, who simply yet emphatically wrote "Ricky ain't no Dixie Chick!" (*Us Magazine* 2007). This statement has a multilayered truth captured in just five words. As discussed above, U.S. history shows us that the chatter's statement is self-evident, for no complete equivalency can be found between Martin and the Chicks. And, at face value, it is true that Ricky isn't a Dixie Chick, for the Dixie Chicks are accomplished musicians, while Ricky Martin is more of a pop culture icon. But more profoundly, Ricky Martin isn't a Dixie Chick, for ultimately, he is not seen as an American. Martin's perceived trespasses are those of a queer, un- or anti-American communist who summons terrorism by opposing the war. So, no, "Ricky Martin ain't no Dixie Chick" even though they all dealt with similar issues after their behavior in a concert, in the same way that a Puerto Rican (even a light skinned one) "ain't" no White American even though they are both U.S. citizens.

We can learn valuable lessons about history and citizenship from reactions to popular culture incidents. For instance, if we are to understand how is it possible that Puerto Rico has remained an unincorporated territory of the United States of America even after countless bills seeking to discuss and address the island's status have been introduced to Congress since 1898, mainstream knee-jerk reactions to Ricky Martin's middle finger incident provide quite an insight. That is, how can Puerto Rico become anything other than a colony and Puerto Ricans anything other than second-class citizens, when U.S. first-class "neurotic" citizens do not have the tools to recognize Puerto Rico as a territory and Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens? Or, how can Americans understand the nuances of race relations in their own country, when they don't even know who is a citizen of the country? In the end, reactions to the middle finger incident underscore the invisibility of Puerto Ricans in the mainland, and on a broader level, the vulnerability of any racialized subject, regardless of citizenship status. But the biggest lesson we can learn from the middle finger incident is that, citizenship notwithstanding, as long as "Ricky Martin ain't no Dixie Chick," Puerto Ricans will continue to be invisible to the citizens of the "absent state."

NOTES

¹ Although I use responses to Ricky Martin's gesture and statement from different mainstream online sites, the bulk of the responses I use for my analysis come from USMagazine.com, a site that was created by *US Weekly* in 2006. Although the reliance on responses posted to this online magazine may seem like a limited approach to documenting responses to the event, I would like to make a case for the importance of this magazine in contributing to public perceptions in the U.S. According to the marketing firm Quancast, the online version has a readership of over 1 million people, including over 869,000 U.S. readers. The demographics of its U.S. readers are the following: 64 percent are female and 36 percent are male; 73 percent are between the ages of 18–49; and 84 percent are White, 7 percent Latino, 6 percent African American, and 1 percent Asian.

² On March, 2010, Ricky Martin posted the following statement in his website: "I am proud to say that I am a fortunate homosexual man" (Duke 2010).

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There is a very popular half-true story about a sea captain and his mother, which explains how it happened. As legend has it, Mrs. Gregory sent her son, Captain Hanson Gregory, on one of his sea voyages with several doughnuts and her recipe to make more. But Hanson didn't like nuts, so he took them out and ordered the ship's cook to prepare all doughnuts with holes in the centre. We may never know if Captain Gregory really invented the first doughnut hole. However, we can be sure that this hole was a very positive change. Now it was much easier to get well-done and cooked-through dou