

Hip-Hop, Puerto Ricans, and Ethnoracial Identities in New York

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Word Up magazine did an article where they mentioned me and it was called "The Latinos in Hip-Hop." What's wack about that is that they have to separate us [Latinos] [from blacks]. And I hated that. I was in the same article as Kid Frost, you know, [who did the song] "La Raza." And I was like, come on, man, what do I have to do with Kid Frost? It's just totally different things and they're trying to funnel us all together. You never hear an article called "The Blacks in Hip-Hop."

The above is a fragment of a conversation I had in 1995 with Q-Unique, a skilled and feisty MC who is a member of the Arsonists (a popular New York underground rap group that released its debut album, *As the World Burns*, in August 1999 with Matador Records) and the Rock Steady Crew (the legendary hip-hop organization better known for its contributions to the dance form known as breaking). A self-described hip-hop¹ activist committed to nourishing a socially responsible, historically grounded, holistic hip-hop creativity, Q. deeply resents being segregated, as a Puerto Rican, from a hip-hop cultural core that is assumed to be African American.

The problem that Q. describes is two-fold. First, hip-hop is ahistorically taken to be an African American expressive culture. Latinos (Puerto Ricans included) are thus excised from the hip-hop core on the basis of a racialized panethnicity. Second, as Latino population numbers and visibility increase in the United States, a variety of national-origin groups (Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Dominicans, and so on) with different experiences of colonization, annexation, and/or immigration to the United States, as well as different histories of structural incorporation and racialization, are lumped under the Latino panethnic banner (Flores 1996a; Oboler 1995). This wider social phenomenon manifests itself within the hip-hop realm when Latinos are grouped together on the hip-hop margins under the presumed commonalities shared by Latino hip-hoppers.

What does a New York Puerto Rican MC like Q. have in common with a West Coast Chicano artist like Kid Frost? According to Q., the answer is,

not necessarily more than what he shares with an African American MC from New York City. The ethnic funneling that he criticizes relies on prescribed experiential and artistic commonalities based on a panethnic label. Facile and questionable panethnic connections are thus drawn—in this case, between Puerto Ricans and Chicanos on opposite coasts—which may actually serve to erase other more concrete, historically-based, transethnic connections—as those between Puerto Ricans and African Americans in New York.

Puerto Ricans in the United States are commonly thought of as being part of the U.S. Hispanic or Latino population. But Puerto Ricans are also considered an exception among Latinos. Their exceptionality is based on a history that diverges from what has been construed as the Latino norm and happens to share much in common with the experience of African Americans (Chávez 1991; Flores 1996a; Massey and Bitterman 1985; Smith 1994).

This essay explores the ways in which New York Puerto Ricans have navigated the murky waters of ethnoracial² identification within the hip-hop realm. My main contention here is that those Puerto Ricans who take part in New York's hip-hop culture construct their identities, participate, and create through a process of negotiation with the dominant notions of blackness³ and latinidad. Puerto Ricans fit in both categories and yet in neither.

What follows is an exploration of several moments in hip-hop's two decades and a half of history. Through it, I aim to discuss how constructions and experiences of class, ethnicity, and race have had bearing on the creative participation of Puerto Ricans in hip-hop culture. I maintain that certain articulations of class and ethnoracial identities have resulted in the construction of Puerto Ricans as virtual Blacks⁴, made them seem an exception for dominant definitions of Latino panethnicity, and facilitated their construction as part of a hip-hop Afro-diasporic "ghetto-ethnicity" (McLaren 1995:9).⁵ On the other hand, understandings of Puerto Rican identity that privilege a Latinidad constructed in opposition to Blackness have landed Puerto Ricans participating in hip-hop culture in the precarious position of defending their Afro-diasporic ghetto-ethnicity and their history and creative role in hip-hop. The privileging of this kind of Latinidad leaves Puerto Ricans who participate in hip-hop explaining why they take part in a culture (mis)understood to be African American cultural property.

Hip-hop is one of the most vibrant products of late-twentieth-century youth culture. New York Puerto Ricans have been key participants, as producers and consumers of culture, in hip-hop art forms since hip-hop's very beginnings during the early 1970s in the South Bronx (Cross 1993; Flores 1988; Rose 1994; Toop 1991). This essay is meant as a contribution to the history of Puerto Rican hip-hop heads in New York as well as a necessary angle from which the Latinization of New York must be explored.⁶ Useful insights can be obtained through studying how the younger generations of

the Latino group with the longest, most visible presence in New York—namely, Boricuas—have grappled with and been affected by said Latinization. So here we go.

THE 1970S: IT'S JUST BEGUN

The South Bronx is widely recognized as the place where the art forms that make up the expressive foundation of hip-hop—MCing, or rhyming; DJing; breaking (b-boying/b-girling); and graffiti writing—first came together under very specific terms during the first half of the 1970s. African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and West Indians were the groups most heavily involved in the development of these expressive forms (Rose 1994; Thompson 1996).

Puerto Ricans made up the majority of the population in the South Bronx at the time (Rodríguez 1991:109). Together with African Americans and other Caribbean people, they accounted for an overwhelming proportion of the population in this impoverished Bronx area in 1970. Consistent with these groups' class standing, hip-hop was created by poor and working-class youth. In the words of Q-Unique and b-boy Ken Swift, among countless others, it began as a ghetto phenomenon (Q-Unique 1995a; Verán 1991).

Hip-hop was an ethnoracially inclusive sphere of cultural production. During hip-hop's formative years, "the strongest move was unity" (as Sekou Sundiata [1998:4] says of the previous decade), but ethnoracial distinctions and tensions still manifested themselves. These distinctions and tensions varied depending on various factors, among them neighborhood and art form.

The participation and perceived entitlement of Puerto Ricans with respect to hip-hop art forms were contingent upon locality. The South Bronx and East Harlem evidenced relatively subtle ethnoracial rifts and more transethnic cultural interaction; these rifts seemed to be greater and transethnic interaction less pronounced in other neighborhoods, particularly those with greater ethnic residential segregation.

The perceived entitlement to hip-hop of Puerto Ricans also depended on the art form. Whereas graffiti and breaking were largely taken to be multi-ethnic inner-city forms, MCing and DJing—though widely practiced by various Afro-diasporic ethnic groups—were identified more with one group, namely, African Americans.

Puerto Ricans were, for the most part, welcome and active participants in hip-hop. But even during these early times, Puerto Ricans had to step lightly on hip-hop's cultural ground—particularly when it came to MCing and DJing. They were largely considered partners in creative production, although at times the bond was reduced to a junior partnership (Flores 1992–1993, 1996b).

The perception of Puerto Rican full entitlement to graffiti and breaking versus their perceived limited entitlement to MCing and DJing could be

traced to the overwhelming participation of Puerto Ricans in the first two. However, these different rates of participation may not have been the cause of these notions of entitlement but rather an effect. Most probably, rhyiming and DJing were from the beginning more ethnoracially identified with African Americans and closed to perceived outsiders by virtue of their relying on dexterity in the English language, being most easily traceable to a U.S. Black oral tradition, and primarily employing records of music considered to be Black.

Hip-hop's musical side seems to have been premised upon an Afro-diasporic urbanity in which, though the participation of Caribbeans was pivotal (Flores 1988; Hebdige 1987; Rose 1994; Toop 1991), it was often narrowly identified with an ethnoracial Blackness (Flores 1996b; Rivera 1996). A distinction must be made, however, between the experiences within the hip-hop realm of West Indian Caribbeans (primarily Jamaicans and Barbadians) and Latino Caribbeans (primarily Puerto Ricans). West Indians are commonly thought to stand comparatively closer to Blackness than Latino Caribbeans. That is the case even for black Latinos. Though West Indians may be perceived as not ethnically Black (i.e., African American), they are, as a group, thought of as racially black (Foner 1987; Kasinitz 1992; Waters 1996). Given their relative proximity to an ethnoracial Blackness, West Indian entitlement to hip-hop as a Black-identified musical expression has not been as much of an issue as it has been for Puerto Ricans.

The position of Puerto Ricans within hip-hop must be understood within the historical context of Puerto Rican migration to New York City, their placement within the city's racial and socioeconomic hierarchies, and their relationship with African Americans.

Puerto Ricans and African Americans, though having had a presence in the city since the previous century, became thought of as the new wave of immigrants during the 1920s. Both groups were incorporated into the lowest rungs of the labor structure under similar circumstances and since then have lived parallel experiences of racialization, marginalization, and class exclusion (Grosfoguel and Georas 1996; Rodríguez-Morazzani 1996; Torres 1995). Their histories of unemployment and underemployment, subjection to police brutality and racial violence, negative portrayals in academic literature and media (Pérez 1990; Rodríguez 1997), and housing and employment discrimination have been not only similar but also linked. Puerto Ricans have come to be considered a native minority that shares the bottom of the socioeconomic structure with African Americans (Ogbu 1978; Massey and Bitterman 1985; Gans 1992; Smith 1994). The histories of Puerto Ricans and African Americans in New York may not be identical, but they are certainly analogous, related, and at times even overlapping (Flores 1996a; Urciuoli 1996).

Puerto Ricans were initially a confusing lot because being even more visibly multiracial than African Americans, they could not be easily cast as

black or white. Eventually, Puerto Ricans became a new racialized subject, different from both but sharing with African Americans a common subordination to whites (Grosfoguel and Georas 1996). Puerto Ricans came to be racialized as dark, dangerous others who, though different from African Americans, share with them a multitude of social spaces, conditions, and dispositions. Points of contention and separation might arise between the two groups, but there is a fundamental shared exclusion from the white, middle-class world.

Hip-hop's ethnoracial inclusiveness must be contextualized not only within this common structural history of African Americans and Puerto Ricans but also within a long-standing history of political alliances (Rodríguez-Morazzani 1996; Torres 1995) as well as joint cultural production (Boggs 1992; Flores 1988; Toop 1991).

Youth culture is one of the sites where cultural interaction and hybridization between African Americans and Puerto Ricans have been most intense. Urciuoli uses Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*⁷ to illustrate how the experiences and actions of Puerto Ricans and African Americans are congruent given that their lives are structured by similar conditions and result in similar understandings of themselves and the world. She points out that the degree of congruence varies depending on other mediating factors such as gender, age, family role, and generation. Adolescent boys exhibit the highest levels of congruence (Urciuoli 1996:66). Hip-hop, as a youth cultural manifestation dominated by young males (Guevara 1987; Rose 1994), is the quintessential expression of this structural and cultural congruence.

Congruence, however, does not translate into an absence of rifts, tensions, and exclusions. The marginalizations experienced by Puerto Ricans in the hip-hop realm have not been fortuitous or circumstantial but are related to the historical relations between both groups and the particular position that each occupies in the city's racial and socioeconomic hierarchies. Cultural identity, production, and entitlement have most often been invested with the notion that Puerto Ricans are *like* blacks but *not* black. In Flores's words, "cultural baggage and black-white racial antinomies in the U.S. thus conspire to perpetuate a construction of Puerto Rican identity as non-black" (1992-1993:28). Part of this cultural baggage is a very eurocentric notion of *Latinidad* (Flores 1996a; Fox 1996; Pabón 1995; Thomas 1967). Puerto Rican *Latinidad* is constructed in such a way that precludes its coexistence with Puerto Rican Afro-diasporicity.

Furthermore, understandings of cultural identity and practice are frequently decidedly un-Afro-diasporic so that the connections between those who populate what Gilroy (1993) has termed "The Black Atlantic" are camouflaged. Hip-hop, as a site of internal movement and contentions, includes challenges as well as abidances to these un-Afro-diasporic understandings of history and culture. If, given these un-Afro-diasporic assumptions, the connections between African Americans and West Indians are disregarded,

the ruptures become even more intense in the case of Latino Caribbeans such as Puerto Ricans.

These un-Afro-diasporic visions have had direct bearing on hip-hop. Despite the fact that, in practice, hip-hop has been an Afro-diasporic form, it has still been marred by narrow understandings of blackness.

FROM 1979 TO THE EARLY 1980S: THE DAWN OF THE RAP GAME

During Spring 1979, a funk group called Fatback released what can be considered the first commercial rap record, entitled "King Tim III (Personality Jock)." But that record's popularity was no match for the wide commercial acclaim with which "Rappers' Delight" was greeted a few months later. "Rappers' Delight," released on Sugarhill Records by an unknown group that called itself the Sugarhill Gang, was undoubtedly the record that signaled the commercial rise of rap, reaching number 36 on the U.S. charts and becoming the biggest-selling twelve-inch record ever (Toop 1991:81). MCing and DJing thus began their steep rise in mass-mediated popularity with the release of "Rappers' Delight".

Though most of the artists popular during rap's first five years as a mass-mediated consumer product (1979–1983) were African Americans (some of them West Indian, such as Grandmaster Flash and Kool Herc), Puerto Ricans were far from absent in this scene. DJ Charlie Chase of the Cold Crush Brothers, The Fearless Four's Devastating Tito and DJ Master O.C., The Fantastic Five's Prince Whipper Whip and Rubie Dee, Prince Markie Dee Morales of the Fat Boys, and The Real Roxanne were popular figures in commercial rap's early times.

Given rap's identification as a Black (i.e., African American) musical form, Puerto Ricans participated within a perceived Black matrix. This had been the case since hip-hop's beginnings in the early 1970s. But rap's mass-mediated commodification in the late 1970s led to an even more intense ethnoracialization of rap. Furthermore, if the cultural entitlement of Puerto Ricans to rap was sometimes ambivalent in the New York context, this ambivalence was magnified in other locations, most often landing them on the outsider side of the fence. The Afro-diasporic New York context in which Blacks and Puerto Ricans are neighbors, friends, and allies is a precious exception and hard to conceive of in most other U.S. locations. Hip-hop's initial Afro-diasporic ghetto base was hard to translate into highly segregated contexts with no corresponding histories of transethnic, Afro-diasporic cultural production. Audiences unfamiliar with New York life for the most part did not (and could not) distinguish between Blacks and Puerto Ricans. After its commercialization, rap remained class identified, but its ethnoracial scope shrunk.

THE LATE 1980S: BLACK NOISE

After breaking and graffiti crash-landed in terms of mass-mediated popularity around 1985 following their brief but intense media-propelled flight,⁸ hip-hop became synonymous with the one art form that had from its inception been most intensely Black-identified, namely, rap. Subsequent creative developments and mass-marketing strategies (which did not operate independently of each other) further intensified this identification.

The explicit voicing of ethnoracial (African American) concerns by popular rap artists through rhymes, statements, and samples was one of the factors that further contributed to the ethnoracialization of hip-hop as African American (Henderson 1996; Rodríguez-Morazzaun 1996). In other words, the voicing of Black-identified perspectives and concerns led to the increasingly narrow identification of hip-hop with this specific group.

Throughout its history, rap music has manifested different approaches to and articulations of Blackness. Explicit references to Blackness in the early 1980s, though elaborated and displayed, were not omnipresent. The late 1980s and early 1990s, however, saw an explosion of Black nationalist sentiment (Allen 1996).

The ideological and aesthetic reverberations of this period are still being felt, for it set the stage for creations and transformations to follow. The Pro-Black, Afrocentric, or Black Nationalist school of rap had a lasting impact on the hip-hop collective imagination—its faddish qualities notwithstanding. These formulations of an explicit ethnoracial agenda cloaked hip-hop with garb that seemed several sizes too big (or small, depending on how one looks at it) for Puerto Ricans—among plenty of others.

Louis, a Puerto Rican teenage rap fan during rap's Black Nationalist phase, recalls that when he first heard Public Enemy, it was like a revelation. He went straight to the library to look up this Huey Newton they were talking about. That's when it really hit him that they were talking about important Black historical figures and events. His first reaction to the information to which he was being exposed was pride in "us Black people." But then it started dawning on him that he was not exactly Black, given the way Blackness was being formulated. It was a Blackness whose referents were not inclusive of his side of the Caribbean because they did not fully acknowledge the cultural hybridity and fluidity of the Black Atlantic. Louis realized that he and "his people" were not quite part of the history about which Public Enemy was talking and rhyming. This point was driven home by his close friends—many of whom were African Americans—who teased him with the question, "Why can't *your* people make good hip-hop?"

Louis's experience illustrates the ambivalent position that Puerto Ricans (and other New York Caribbean Latinos) held given hip-hop's growing identification with a musical expression increasingly perceived as exclu-

sively Black. Boricuas could be included or excluded, depending on the situation.

I mentioned earlier that both creative developments and marketing decisions worked together in the ethnoracialization of hip-hop as African American. So the issue was not as simple as Run DMC, Public Enemy, X-Clan, and others deciding to write African American-centric lyrics. The identification of hip-hop as Black must be contextualized in hip-hop's growing mass-mediation and popularity and, thus, its expansion outside territory where Puerto Ricans are a familiar presence—whether as neighbors, family, playmates, or artists. As hip-hop's scope of consumption and production grew, new players integrated themselves into the field of participation—players decidedly unfamiliar with Puerto Rican hip-hoppers. The imagined links between what was variably referred to as the hip-hop community or hip-hop nation were increasingly premised upon African Americanness so that hip-hop's Afro-diasporicity became increasingly obscured, even in its New York breeding grounds (which remained a fertile and influential spot of hip-hop creativity).

Hip-hop's Black identification must also be contextualized in the vilification/romanticization of African Americans in U.S. popular culture (Allinson 1994; Ross 1989) and the profitability of its commercial packaging. One of the hottest selling points of hip-hop has been its association with a raw, outlaw, ghetto-based, Black-identified (and particularly male) experience and image (Allinson 1994; Rose 1994; Samuels 1995). Allinson argues the relationship between rap's appeal and "a long-established romanticization of the Black urban male as a temple of authentic cool, at home with risk, with sex, with struggle" (1994:449).

Puerto Ricans, though considered virtual Blacks for some purposes, are considered nonblacks for others. Within the U.S. context, they have always had their ghetto nonwhite credentials up to date; their blackness, however, has been a different issue. So if hip-hop's mass-mediated popularity is closely connected to a romanticization/exoticization of blackness, why risk investing in a tepid/lighter/unstable version of blackness—in the form of a Puerto Rican—when you can have the real thing (Báez 1998)?

Puerto Ricanness in rap was (and still is, but less so) deemed a potential liability. Numerous Puerto Rican MCs recount being explicitly told by artists and repertory executives (A&Rs) and other industry people that they were talented but that their ethnicity worked against them.

Puerto Rican marginalization in rap has also been related to purist and narrow definitions regarding what is Black expressivity and what is Latino expressivity. Rap has been viewed as a new expression among a Black-music continuum and deemed as a breaking away from Latino music.

Rap presented similar problems for the perceived boundaries of Latino musical expression, as those that the Latin soul (which included bugalú) of the 1960s and early 1970s had presented (Flores 2000; Roberts 1979; Salazar, 1992). Though many of the critiques of Latin soul emphasized the musical

inexperience of its musicians and its faddish qualities, much of the discomfort with this genre harked back to a deviation from tradition. Unflatteringly described by bandleader Willie Rosario as "American music played with Latin percussion" (Roberts 1979:167), bugalú violated the bounds that kept distinct what was Black and what was Latino/Puerto Rican.

Hip-hop's African Americanization to the exclusion of Puerto Ricans was not a product of circumstance. Neither can it be explained away by invoking only African American creative volition. The increasing Black identification of hip-hop must be understood within the steadfastness of ethnoracial categories in this country. These categories translate into a perceived limited potential for transethnic cultural production, solidarity, and political organizing. Cultural hybrids such as hip-hop threaten those categories and the comforting, simplifying myths built around them.

THE LATE 1980S: WHAT IS THIS "LATIN" IN LATIN HIP-HOP?

A twist in the story of Puerto Ricans in hip-hop came with the commercialization and popularity of two Latino-identified genres: freestyle in the late 1980s and Latin rap in the early 1990s. Terminology here provides a bit of confusion, because both were also often referred to as Latin hip-hop. But this apparent terminological confusion actually proves to be illuminating. The term *Latin hip-hop* points to the fact that both genres were somehow related to, yet distinct from, hip-hop; and key in their difference from hip-hop was a shared Latin element.

Toop describes freestyle as "faithful to the old electro sound of 'Planet Roc' adding Latin percussion elements and an overlay of teenage romance" (1991:174). Others describe it in starkly unflattering terms as the "synth-heavy bubble-salsa of Lisa Lisa and her big-haired descendants" (Morales 1991:91) and "bubble-gum ballads over drum-machine beats" (del Barco 1996:84). Groups such as Cover Girls, Exposé, TKA, and Latin Raskals and artists such as George LaMond, Sapphire, and Brenda K. Starr were among the best-known freestyle artists. The overwhelming majority of these were New York Puerto Ricans. Freestyle's audience was also primarily Puerto Rican.

In terms of vocal style, lyrics, and sound, freestyle was very different from the rap music of the time. Freestyle vocalists sang (not rapped) sticky-sweet (at times bittersweet) lyrics centered on the vagaries of love, whereas hip-hop MCs broached topics more concerned with ghetto life, racial strife, and personal/artistic prowess. Freestyle's sound was electropop, while hip-hop was usually backed by harsh funk with booming bass lines.

Toop talks of a division arising between African American and Hispanic audiences in 1987, which he attributes to "Hispanics stay[ing] faithful to the old electro sound of 'Planet Roc' " in the form of freestyle while African Americans followed the increasingly Black-identified rap music of the time (1991:174). But he offers no possible explanations and leaves one wondering, why did that separation happen?

Popular taste and cultural production can hardly ever be fully or accurately explained in cause-effect fashion. However, influential factors can be identified with relative certainty. One of the factors at play in the late 1980s schism along ethnoracial lines between hip-hop and freestyle audiences had to do with notions of cultural property and entitlement.

The growing African Americanization of hip-hop during the 1980s—largely media-driven, premised upon a reductive notion of blackness, and suffering from severe cultural-historical amnesia—prefaced the increasing alienation of Puerto Ricans (and other New York Caribbean Latinos) from hip-hop. Cultural entitlement to hip-hop was explained as a non-Latino-inclusive “Black thing” (Allinson 1994; Hochman 1990).

Freestyle, as a new genre, was in great part young Latinos’ response to media marginalization—which included marginalization in rap (Rodríguez 1995; Panda 1995; Q-Unique 1995a). Discussions of the emergence, popularity, and cultural significance of freestyle must take into account this desire of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos to see “their own” in the limelight, to have a music that was theirs.

George LaMond, a popular freestyle singer during the 1980s, recalls: “I felt like I was representing my hometown and my Puerto Rican people. It made me that much more proud of being a Latino” (Parris 1996:31). Andy Panda, a key song writer, producer, and media personality of what he terms “the freestyle movement,” adds: “I think it gave kids a sense of identity because finally we had something that was ours. We didn’t have much of a cultural identity in the music industry other than Spanish-language music” (Parris 1996:30).

Such desires must be contextualized within Latino invisibility in mass media (E. Morales 1996; Rodríguez 1997), in general and the prevailing notion that hip-hop was Black cultural property in particular. They must also be understood with respect to the will of second- and third-generation Puerto Rican (and other Latino) youth to expand the bounds of collective expression outside of Spanish-language Latin music.

What was perceived as culturally theirs by these youths exceeded the bounds of Latinidad orthodoxy, which considered Spanish language and Latin American-originated sounds as a necessary component of music worthy of the label *Latin*. Latinos and so-called American music seemed disparate partners in terms of cultural legitimacy. In that sense, the participation of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in Latin soul (in the 1960s), hip-hop (in the late 1970s and 1980s), and freestyle (in the 1980s) all shared an element of challenge to the dominant notions of Latinidad.

Resistance to this challenge to Latinidad took many forms: Willie Rosario’s insistence on identifying bugalú as “American” music (Roberts 1979:167), Puerto Rican parents complaining of their children’s fascination with so-called nigger music (i.e., hip-hop), A&Rs refusing to sign Puerto Rican MCs because “Puerto Ricans don’t sell,” George García being per-

sueded by his label to launch his freestyle career as George LaMond because his last name was considered a commercial drawback (Parris 1996).

Though grassroots perceptions are often more responsive to innovations and changing conditions than market-oriented ones, both coincided in their difficulty to grapple with the younger generation’s will to embrace their New York-based, English-dominant, Afro-diasporic, lived cultural experiences. Freestyle was, in this sense, an artistic liberation from stifling (in terms of creativity and cultural identity) parameters of conformity with the reigning notions of Latinidad.

At the same time, though, that freestyle pushed the envelope with respect to second- and third-generation identity and artistic production, it also reproduced other reductive notions of identity, experience, and solidarity. It reinforced the myth of pan-Latino commonality and the drawing of puer-torriqueñidad and latinidad as identity categories in great part defined through nonblackness.

Orsi proposes that the fissures and conflicts between racialized groups have much to do with anxieties regarding group definition. “Strategies of alterity” have served to define “self-constitution through the exclusion of the dark-skinned other” (1992:336). His study of East Harlem reveals how Italians struggled to separate themselves from the “dark” African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Caribbean immigrants. “Proximity—actual and imagined—to the dark-skinned other was pivotal to the emergence of the identity ‘Italian American’ ” (1992:318). Similarly, Puerto Ricanness and latinidad have been informed by a desire to distinguish these groups from the darker African Americans.

These anxieties regarding ethnic and racial identity affect understandings of artistic production in peculiar ways. Not only can a certain mode of expression, such as freestyle, be said to be Latino because New York Puerto Ricans are the most distinguished, popular, or numerous participants, but a certain genre can also be said to be Latino because it is informed by specific modes of speech or experiences that are identified with Latinos living in the United States. But also certain myths based on a stereotypical ethnoracial ethos come to define what may or may not be Latino. Panda directed the following comment at George LaMond during an interview: “George, you never sounded black and yet everyone respected your talent as a vocalist because what you did was uniquely Latino. Black artists traditionally sing with soul. We sing with passion. We sing with sex. We sing with emotion” (Parris 1996:31).

Panda’s belief in a self-evident soulful black sound distinct from a Latino sex-heavy sound is by no means peculiar to him, freestyle, or those of his generation. Similar essentialized and naturalized identity markings are often thrown around in the media, street corner cyphers, and domestic conversations.⁹ These essentializing myths serve to cement difference as further strategies of alterity.

The list of areas in which difference is believed to be patently clear thus grows. Ethos, aesthetics, themes, ideas, language, and musical references and sources can all be pointed to as examples of group difference. What is African American can thus be pretended to be easily discernible from what is Puerto Rican or Latino.

Whereas certain audience segments and critics celebrated the dawn of Latin hip-hop, there was a strong feeling of suspicion and betrayal among those who felt themselves part of an urban Afro-diasporic, Black-matrixed hip-hop culture. Edward Rodríguez (1995), a Puerto Rican hip-hop journalist, bitterly explains the appearance and popularity of freestyle as a denial of Latino Afro-diasporicity.

Freestyle began as an artistic outlet within a context of Latino media marginalization and a prescribed latinidad orthodoxy. Ironically, it also had ghettoizing and stifling consequences in terms of media perception as well as popular cultural identity. Many Puerto Ricans divested themselves from hip-hop to pursue something that was truly their own. The fickleness of mass-mediated taste did away with the basket in which many Puerto Ricans had placed their eggs. The commercial popularity of freestyle ended up taking a nosedive that affected not only its artists but also Puerto Rican MCs. Freestyle, as Latin hip-hop, cemented the idea that Puerto Ricans were marginal to the hip-hop core.

Freestyle was only one side of Latin hip-hop. Latin rap fell under the same rubric. Compared to freestyle, Latin rap stood a lot closer to hip-hop in terms of form and style. Vocal flows were rapped, and topics were ghetto-centric. It was basically rap music done by Latinos, often code-switching, with topics and references particular to inner-city Latino communities.

Contrary to freestyle, whose artists were overwhelmingly New York Puerto Ricans, Latin rap was largely coming out of the West Coast and had few Puerto Rican exponents. Kid Frost (nowadays known simply as Frost), a Los Angeles Chicano who released his first album, *Hispanic Causing Panic*, in 1990, was one of the first Latino rappers to receive wide media recognition. Other artists that came out under the Latin rap rubric were Mellow Man Ace (a Cuban, also from Los Angeles), Latin Alliance (headed by Frost), and the infamous Gerardo (an Ecuadorean, aka Rico Suave).

New York Puerto Ricans never ceased being active in the local underground hip-hop scene. But in terms of Latin rap's mass-mediated exposure, they were nearly invisible. Latin Alliance had two New York Puerto Rican members, Rayski and Markski. A Nuyorican duo by the name of Latin Empire had garnered some local exposure earlier in the 1980s and even landed a deal with Atlantic Records; however, they never achieved the popularity of later Latin rap artists.

Though most commonly treated as such, Latin rap is neither a self-explanatory nor unproblematic label. Is it simply rap done by Latinos, regardless of style or content? Is it rap done by Latinos that is also necessarily

related to Latino life or a Latino aesthetic? How could that reality or that aesthetic possibly be defined? Whose definition do we use? Can non-Latinos who use Spanish in their rhymes or other elements of that hypothetical Latino aesthetic also make Latin rap?

The Latin rap label has been used to categorize artists such as Kid Frost, Mellow Man Ace, Gerardo, Latin Alliance, and Latin Empire—all U.S.-based Latino artists whose music, rhymes, and themes include elements commonsensically identifiable as Latino. It has also been used to describe Latin America-based artists such as Vico C., Lisa M., and El General (Manuel 1995) whose rhymes are in Spanish (though sometimes incorporating words in English here and there). For my present purposes, the most difficult questions regarding definition and inclusion within the Latin rap category have to be asked when U.S.-based Latino artists create music that doesn't conform to the most commonly accepted bounds of Latino identity, experience, or creativity.

Cypress Hill, for example, was criticized for being too Anglocentric (Morales 1991). This Los Angeles-based trio is made up of Sen Dog (a Cuban—and incidentally, Mellow Man Ace's brother), B-Real (a Chicano), and DJ Muggs (an Italian American who spent his early childhood in Queens, New York). The assumption seems to have been that because two of its three members were Latinos, Cypress Hill had to conform to a certain mold of latinidad. They, however, never claimed to be doing Latin rap. In fact, they scoffed at the thought and explicitly resented being boxed into the category to which others presumed they belonged (Cross 1993).

Sen Dog and B-Real were actually the first Latino artists to be deemed part of the hip-hop core—as opposed to the fringes that Latin rap artists occupied. These discussions of how Latino or Anglocentric their artistic production is or is not completely lose sight of other aspects of their music, which are more directly relevant to the social milieu in which rap is produced and consumed.

Morales has defined Latin hip-hop as “the polyphonic outburst of recent rap-oriented records” such as *Latin Alliance* (Virgin), *Dancehall Reggaespañol* (Columbia), and *Cypress Hill* (Columbia), which is “in step with the world-wide Afrocentric cultural revolution that will carry us into the next century.” One of its virtues, according to Morales, is its “development of a nationwide Latino/American hip-hop aesthetic” that permits artists from both coasts who were once strangers to “become one nation kicking Latin lingo on top of a scratchin', samplin' substrate.” He argues for an inclusive notion of this aesthetic so that Cypress Hill doesn't have to be dismissed as “de-Latinized, stoned-out Beastie Boys.” Though their rhymes are mostly English, they still kick some bilingualism and their “relative Anglocentrism” doesn't necessarily “mean they're not reaching *vatos* in the hood” (1991:91).

Instead of questioning the stifling assumptions regarding ethnoracial identity and artistic expression that underpin this charge of Anglo-centrism,¹⁰ Morales explains what he sees as Cypress Hill's redeeming qualities. After all, they do inject some Spanish into their rhymes, plus they are probably reaching a vato audience. Seeking redemption through these means seems less pertinent than asking why Latino artists are, in the first place, expected to adhere to a certain orthodox Latino aesthetic (in terms of language, topics, and/or music) or to cater to a Latino audience.

This issue becomes particularly relevant in the case of Puerto Ricans in New York, whose cultural production and identity have been so tightly linked with that of African Americans that it begs the question, Why assume the naturalness or necessity of a Latino aesthetic and cultural product (myopically defined, to boot) over and against Afro-diasporic ones?

The Hispanocentric bent of the dominant definitions of *latinidad* (Fox 1996; Pabón 1995) has (at times) led to Puerto Ricans placing themselves and (often) being placed by others outside the bounds of *latinidad*. A cornerstone aspect of the Latin rap aesthetic was the use of bilingualism or only Spanish. However, many of those Puerto Rican participants who rejected what they perceived as the Latin rap pigeonholing sought to emphasize a U.S.-based Afro-diasporic identity. Edward Rodríguez (1995, personal communication) explains why some MCs refused to go the Latin rap route: "MC's don't wanna come out as exclusively Spanish 'cause they don't wanna exclude people. Black people are their people."

Then there's also the issue of second- and third-generation Puerto Ricans (and other Latinos) expressing themselves more comfortably in English than in Spanish. As the South Bronx's Fat Joe (Joseph Cartagena) says, even though—by virtue of being Puerto Rican—promoters expected him to rhyme in Spanish, "I can't really kick it in Spanish, I couldn't really feel the vibe, so I'm not even gonna try and make myself look stupid." Prince PowerRule (Oscar Alfonso) has the following comment to add: "There's so many Latino people in the United States that don't speak Spanish, so they don't wanna hear that bilingual rap. They're just like us; they're Americans." (del Barco 1996:82)

Similarly to the case of freestyle, the appearance of Latin rap as a Latino-specific realm within rap music on the one hand expanded the bounds of participation and expression of Latinos in hip-hop but on the other hand also ended up making the existing divides between Puerto Ricans and African Americans even deeper. The nonblack *latinidad* on which Latin rap was based further put into question the Afro-diasporicity of Puerto Ricans and their position within hip-hop as a Black-matrixed culture.

THE 1990S: GHETTOCENTRICITY, BLACKNESS, AND LATINIDAD

The Afrocentric emphasis in rap of the late 1980s started shifting toward a more ghettocentric (Kelley 1996; McLaren 1995) approach in the early 1990s

(Boyd 1997; Smith 1997). Blackness did not cease being a crucial identity marker within rap's discourse; it just became more narrowly identified as a *ghetto* blackness. According to Smith, "in rap's dominant market paradigm, blackness has become contingent, while the ghetto has become necessary" (1997:346).

As rap's discursive and performative focus shifted from a blackness primarily defined through (a narrow, nondiasporic take on) African American history and ancestry to one more based upon contemporary socioeconomic conditions and lived culture (as opposed to traditional, inherited, or ancestral culture), a slight relaxing of blackness's ethnoracial scope occurred. The blackness formerly restricted by the bounds of an ethnoracialized African Americanness began expanding to accommodate certain Latino groups—most notably, Puerto Ricans—as a population whose experiences of class and ethnoracial marginalization are virtually indistinguishable from the ghettocentric African American experience.

Hip-hop, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, used to be frequently described by participants as "a Black thing, you wouldn't understand"; since the mid-1990s it has become increasingly common to hear hip-hop explained in everyday conversation, as well as in mass-mediated and academic forums, as a Black and Latino phenomenon (Dennis 1992; Jiménez 1997; Lascaibar 1997; McLaren 1995; Smith 1997). Today's near-dominant convention of describing hip-hop culture (and within it, rap) as Black and Latino and the increased mass-mediated visibility of Latinos/Latinas within hip-hop would not have come about had it not been for this shifting conception of blackness that emphasizes the ghetto experience.

Rap is a central part of mainstream U.S. pop culture, has multiracial audiences all over the globe, and is immersed in the politics of the transnational music industry. Still, hip-hop authenticity—signified through the tropes of a class-identified blackness/nigganness—is contentious ethnoracial territory, and its borders are zealously policed by its participants. The ethnoracial scope of authenticity has been expanded somewhat but only to incorporate (though not always smoothly) the Latino experience.

Authenticity has been broadened to accommodate a group that is perceived to be quite close to Blackness to begin with. Latino blackness, or virtual Blackness, is thought of as a product of social, political, and economic circumstances that have led to shared lived and historical experiences in the ghetto with African Americans. But Latino authenticity is not only conceived within hip-hop in terms of socioeconomic structures; it is also constructed as related to Afro-diasporic ethnoracial identities, cultural history, and cultural formations.

But hold up! Wait a minute. To talk about a shared Afro-diasporicity between African Americans and Latinos entails that we must be talking about only a sector of Latinos, namely, Afro-diasporic Latinos. To talk about shared experiences in the ghetto means we must distinguish the intense experiential similarities between Blacks and Caribbean Latinos in New

York from the comparatively more distinct experiences of Chicanos and Blacks in Los Angeles or Chicago and from the completely divergent experiences of African Americans and Cubans in Miami. This may seem all too obvious, yet it is another example of the specificities that are smothered under the seductive weight of the pan-Latino discourse.

The acknowledgment of hip-hop in both the academic and journalistic literature as an urban Black and Latino cultural expression has suffered from the perils of panethnic abstraction. In the haste to rescue Latinos from the hip-hop historical invisibility in which they were submerged for a period and to acknowledge the present role played by Latinos within core hip-hop, essentialized connections are drawn and crucial differences among groups within the Latino panethnic conglomerate are slighted.¹¹ The historical and present connections between Afro-diasporic Latinos and African Americans in New York are, at times, muted or even drowned out by the naturalizing call of panlatinidad.

THE LATE 1990S: LATINAS GET HOT

As I explained in the previous section, the rise of rap's ghetto centrality as a selling point in the latter half of the 1990s has played a part in Latinos' relegitimation as core participants of hip-hop. This legitimization is manifested in various ways: the greater media visibility of Latino hip-hop artists; the rise in the use of Spanish words and phrases in songs by the most popular African American rap artists; and widespread references to and images of Latinos and Latinas in rhymes, videos, and articles. A whole slew of artists dedicated lines or even whole songs to the *mamis*. Latina *mamis* actually became one of the latest faddish hip-hop fetishes. Tropicalized¹² (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997), exoticized, eroticized, and romanticized, Latinos in hip-hop have, as of late, most often been portrayed as virtual Blacks with the ghetto nigga stamp of approval and, particularly in the case of females, a sexualized flair.

New York's Afro-diasporic multi-ethnic hip-hop culture and the integral role of Caribbean Latinos—particularly Puerto Ricans—within it has set the tone for transregional, mass-mediated Latino hip-hop images. But this is a subtlety that largely remains unspoken. Therefore, oftentimes the pan-Latino aggregate is awarded a blackness really meant for Caribbean Latinos.

Let's take the example of the recent Latin mami fetish. Though most often generically referred to as Latinas, when the *mamis* populating rappers' wet dreams are referred to by specific national origin, it is almost invariably Boricua (and increasingly, Dominican) females that are invoked. And even when their Puerto Ricanness is not stated explicitly, subtle and not-so-subtle clues reveal these *mamis* as Puerto Ricans.

Puerto Rican women had had a presence in rap lyrics (almost invariably as objects of desire) before salivating after *mamis* became a commercial gimmick. "I like 'em yellow, brown, Puerto Rican and Haitian," A Tribe Called Quest's Phife had said of his taste in women in 1993's "Electric Relaxation." A member of the Wu-Tang Clan, using the metaphor of ice cream flavors in 1995's "Ice Cream," lusted after Chocolate Deluxes, French Vanillas, and Butta Pecan Ricans (Raekwon 1995).

The difference between then and now is that a theme that used to be occasionally touched upon—namely, the hot Latin mami—has nowadays become a market cliché. Another difference is that as New York becomes more Dominicanized, the local long-standing interchangeability of Spanish/Hispanic/Latino for Puerto Rican (Flores 1996a) has come to be expanded to include Dominicans next to Puerto Ricans.¹³ Puerto Ricans used to be the prototype of the exotic/erotic New York mami; now Dominicans also inform the prototype.

Latinas are certainly not the only females that get hypersexualized through rap images and rhymes. Far from it. As Irving accurately states, the role of Black women in rap has "more often than not, been limited to those voiceless images projected unto the extended wet dream of music videos" (1998:34).¹⁴ Within rap's heterocentric discourse, where African American male subjectivities reign supreme, Black women are the norm, the ethnoracial self—othered and hypersexualized for gender reasons—but in ethnoracial terms they are the familiar and familial. Puerto Rican women, on the other hand, are familiar yet still exotic. At times they may even be considered part of the family—but always one step removed. Black women are the "*sistas*"; Puerto Rican women are the othered, tropicalized, and exoticized *mamis*.¹⁵

Asian women have also had the questionable honor of occasionally populating rap's wet dreams. Similarly to Latinas, Asian women are viewed as erotic/exotic creatures. Unlike Latinas, however, their exoticism is not stamped by the U.S. ghetto experience and spiced with images of south-of-the-border tropicalism. *Mamis* are inner-city exotics, tropicalized ghetto creatures. They are brash, loud, hot, hard, street savvy, and bold—in terms of movies, think Rosie Perez's characters in *Do The Right Thing* and *White Men Can't Jump* and Rosario Dawson's Lala Bonilla in *He Got Game*; in terms of rap music, think Puff Daddy's "Spanish girl" in the interlude right before his 1997 song "Señorita" from the CD *No Way Out* or Lissette and Joanne in the late Big Punisher's 1998 interlude "Taster's Choice."¹⁶ This ghetto tropical spitfire exoticism greatly differs from the common exoticization of Asian women based on an imputed silence and subservience.¹⁷

The commercial hip-hop image of the Latina mami is most often based on a tropicalized virtual Blackness. The mami is typically taken to be an exotic (and lighter) variation on black womanhood. How? Lets see.

An ad¹⁸ for the Cocoa Brovas¹⁹ album *The Rude Awakening* features a cardboard cup full of steaming cocoa. Six chocolate-drenched young women are partially immersed in the liquid. On the right-hand side of the cup appear the erroneously accented words *Chocolaté Calienté*.

The words in Spanish seem to be indicating that these women (or at least some of them) swirling in hot chocolate and sexily awaiting ingestion are Latinas. They are all various shades of caramel—unquestionably black by this country's standards but still light skinned. Their relative lightness and the fact that all but one have straight or slightly wavy hair go with the Butta Pecan Rican Myth, i.e., the popular perception of Puerto Ricans as golden-skinned and "good-haired" [sic].²⁰ But butta pecan is somehow still imagined to be a variation on chocolate. Butta Pecans are, after all, a crucial ingredient in the Cocoa Brovas recipe for chocolaté calienté. The bottom line is that these hot cocoa girls' latinidad does not take away from their blackness. What their latinidad does do is add an element of exoticism—signified through the ad's use of Spanish—to their blackness.

The accentuation of words that, according to Spanish orthographic rules, should not be accented serves to further intensify a sense of exoticism. Accents are deemed exotic characteristics of an exotic language. Whether this erroneous accentuation was a mistake or was done on purpose does not change the fact that the accents in *chocolaté* and *calienté* serve as tropicalizing markers of difference.

Let's move on to another example. "Set Trippin'," a review of ten popular rap videos in *Blaze's* premier issue, includes Big Punisher's "Still Not a Player." The reviews consist of short blurbs under specific headings such as Plot, Ghetto Fabulous, Estimated Budget, and Black Erotica. The following comments under Black Erotica regarding "Still Not a Player" caught my eye: "Dozens of scantily clad, lighter-than-a-paper-bag sistas and mamis end up dancing outside. Sounds like a red-light district" (Carasco 1998:207).

It is significant that the Black Erotica category includes mention of both sistas and mamis. These may be two ethnically distinct female populations, but both are included in the realm of eroticized blackness. The fact that their light-skinnedness makes the set seem like a red-light district is a commentary on gendered color-chaste hierarchies (hooks 1994) that equate lightness with sexual desirability as well as an acknowledgment of the figure of the prostitute as the embodiment of male sexual fantasy. Considering the common coding of Puerto Ricanness as butta pecanness, it is evident that their attributed phenotypic lightness plays a part in the collective eroticization of Puerto Rican females.²¹

The text of "Still Not a Player" itself poses Puerto Rican and African American women as two distinct groups. Its sing-song chorus, which consists of multiple repetitions of "boricua, morena / boricua, morena," differentiates these two groups of women through the use of Puerto Rican ethnoracializing terminology. The video adds a visual dimension to the distinction

as the camera alternates between a group of lighter-skinned women when the word *boricua* is being uttered and a group of comparatively darker-skinned women when the chorus mentions *morena*. The tiny chihuahua that one of the Boricuas is holding serves as yet another mark of difference. Chihuahuas are a dog breed considered in New York ghetto lore to be popular among Puerto Ricans, but they also invoke the tropicalized panlatinidad of Dinky, the infamous chihuahua of the late-1990s Taco Bell commercial campaign. However, though distinct, these two groups come together by virtue of Big Pun's sexual desire:

I love 'em butter pecan
The black, brown molass
I don't discriminate
I regulate every shade of that ass
[spanking sound followed by a woman's moan] . . .
I want a ghetto brunette
With unforgettable sex . . .
Since I found Joe
Every pretty round brown ho
Wanna go down low (Big Punisher 1998)

Pun boasts of not discriminating because he sexually engages "every shade of that ass." But the shades that he regulates are specifically three: butter pecan, black molasses, and brown molasses. Using the language of "gastronomic sexuality" (Aparicio 1998:147) that also informs the aforementioned Cocoa Brovas ad, Pun focuses his desire on African American and Puerto Rican "ghetto brunette[s]." Boricuas and morenas may be distinct but, as Pun constructs them, they are both sweet, thick, pretty, round, and various shades of brown. And, evidently, that is how he likes his hos.

The Cocoa Brovas ad as well as Pun's pronouncements are only two examples among many of rap's dominant masculinist ghetto nigga discourse, in which African American and Caribbean Latino men construct a landscape of desire where sistas and mamis take center stage as "their" women.

THE LATE 1990S: PUERTO RICANS' TROPICALIZED AFRO-DIASPORICITY

Rap music's late-1990s commercialized ghettocentricity and fetishization of mamis have helped legitimize and even trendify Puerto Ricans—and by extension, Latinos as a whole. This renewed embracing of Puerto Ricans as entitled hip-hop participants invested with cultural authenticity is also connected to the wider social context of the United States, where the rising population numbers, political clout, and media visibility of Latinos high-

light their desirability as consumers and/or objects of mass-mediated exoticization.

Hip-hop's late-1990s "Latino Renaissance" (R. Morales 1996) has signaled an era of greater legitimacy and visibility for Puerto Rican (and other Latino) participants and expanded their opportunities for participation and expression. At the same time, the potential for a wider range of creative expression often fails to be fulfilled given the constraints placed on artists through flavor-of-the-month fetishization and tropicalization.

This redrawing of the realm of creative expression is reminiscent of freestyle music in the late 1980s, which pushed the bounds of New York Puerto Rican creativity through the inclusion of second-generation perspectives but reproduced other essentialist myths regarding Latino cultural production. As I explained earlier, one of its central myths was the construction of a Latino aesthetic that was imagined as excised from the Afro-diasporic history and present context of Caribbean Latino cultural expression in New York.

Despite the similarities—in terms of redrawing essentialist ethno-racialized boundaries—among freestyle in the late 1980s, Latin rap in the late 1980s/early 1990s, and Latino hip-hop participation in the late 1990s, a crucial distinction must be made. Although freestyle and Latin rap were defined as Latino cultural realms, core hip-hop is a Black-matrixed cultural sphere shared by African American and Latino youth. Caribbean Latinos may tropicalize themselves and be tropicalized by others, thus being readily distinguishable from African Americans. However, their participation in hip-hop is grounded in and celebrated as part of an Afro-diasporic cultural realm.

CONCLUSION

The 1980s were dubbed the Decade of the Hispanics in the media and saw an acknowledgment of the diversification and growing numbers of the Latino population—a belated recognition, because this phenomenon had actually begun more than a decade earlier (García 1988). Puerto Ricans made up 80 percent of the Latino population of New York in 1960; by the 1990s, this number had dropped to 50 percent (Flores 1996a:173).

With the growing plurality of Latino groups, numbers, experiences, and voices began the perception of the exceptional character of Puerto Ricans with respect to other Latino groups. It also became apparent that the same factors that made Puerto Ricans a distinct case among Latinos were the same ones that they shared with African Americans.

Certain factors pull Puerto Ricans into the Latino narrative (Spanish language; other historical and cultural factors related to Spanish colonization; and later, U.S. imperialism), but others pull them closer to African Americans and toward a virtual Blackness (English language among the



Victor's Cafe 52: enshrining the past. Wall display featuring prerevolutionary Cuban currency. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.



Generic (but class- and race-specific) tropicalism. Dining room mural at Victor's Cafe 52. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.



Spanish-only placards announcing daily specials at La Esquina Habanera (Havana Corner), Union City, N.J. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.



Ethnic eatery as a portable homeland: La Esquina Habanera, Union City, N.J. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.



Patron dancing columbia at the Sunday evening rumba performance. La Esquina Habanera, Union City, N.J. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.



Mixing secular and sacred modes: dancing for Elegua at the Sunday evening rumba. La Esquina Habanera, Union City, N.J. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.



Ethnicity on display: Gran Parada Cubana, New York City, May 1998. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.



Marking the clave at the weekly rumba in New York's Central Park, May 1998. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.

Note: In summer 2000, the Central Park rumba, an ongoing informal performance over the last 35-plus years, was shut down by the NYC police and forced to relocate outside the park.



Gran Parada Cubana, New York City, May 1998. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.



Rumbeando in Central Park, May 1998. Photograph by Lisa Maya Knauer.



Outdoor exhibitions like this one were a common component of El Taller Boricua's activities in the mid 1970s. Shown here are silkscreen prints from Puerto Rican artists used to announce and commemorate cultural events. Photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of El Museo del Barrio.



Another outdoor exhibition of paintings by members of El Taller Boricua. The painting in the foreground by Manuel Otero features Puerto Rican nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos. Photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of El Museo del Barrio.

second and third generations, residential segregation, labor marginality, poverty, and negative symbolic capital and public image).

Young New York Puerto Ricans have often either found themselves excluded or have excluded themselves from the generally accepted bounds of *latinidad*, given the constitutional urban Afro-diasporicity of their cultural identity. Puerto Ricans who participate in hip-hop culture have, for the most part, sought to acknowledge their Afro-diasporic Caribbean *latinidad* without wholly submerging themselves under the reigning definition of *latinidad* or merely passing as virtual Blacks.

Despite the growing appeals to an increasingly abstracted panlatinidad, Puerto Rican hip-hoppers still privilege their New York Afro-diasporic lived experience. As Q-Unique (1995b) says in his song "Rice and Beans":

no, not Latino
drop that "o"
Latin's just a language, yo

NOTES

1. Hip-hop is most commonly described by its participants as an Afro-diasporic urban youth culture with origins in the 1970s South Bronx. Among its primary venues of creative expression are MCing (rapping), DJing, writing (graffiti), and breaking (dancing). See Flores (1988), Norfleet (1997), and Rose (1994).
2. I use the term *ethnoracial* to acknowledge the constitutional racialization of ethnic categories.
3. In my writing, I will be using *black* and *Black* to refer to two distinct concepts: *black* as the racial or sociocultural category that refers to people of the African diaspora and *Black* as the U.S.-based ethnoracial category that refers specifically to the population known as African American. In this manner, I am seeking to distinguish between the perceived blackness but non-Blackness of Puerto Ricans (and others from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean) and the double blackness/Blackness of African Americans.
4. Thanks to Philip Kasinitz for the concept of Puerto Rican virtual Blackness.
5. Peter McLaren places rap ("gangsta rap" [sic]) within an Afro-diasporic context and a history that features economic exploitation. His case for rap's "ghetto-ethnicity" relies on the centrality of the ghetto within the rap discourse and the shared experience of African Americans and Puerto Ricans.
6. Flores (1996a) argues that the history of Puerto Ricans in New York, rather than being posited and dismissed as an exception among Latinos, can serve to illuminate and guide efforts to understand and further the position and prospects of other Latino groups.
7. Bourdieu explains *habitus* as a "system of structured, structuring dispositions" (1993:482). Urciuoli (1996) applies it in the case of African Americans and Puerto Ricans to indicate that their experiences, perceptions, and actions are shaped by common historical circumstances or "conditions of existence," thus

- leading to similar understandings of and approaches to the world around them. This is not to say, however, that experience and action are strictly determined by these two groups' shared conditions of existence.
8. See Hazzard-Donald (1996), Tompkins (1996), and Verán (1996).
 9. See Menéndez (1988) and Aparicio (1998:147).
 10. If Latino rappers use English in their rhymes, it is because rap is an Afro-diasporic oral/musical form of expression that originated in the United States among English-dominant Afro-diasporic youth. The assumption that the use of English by Latino rappers equals Anglocentrism whereas the use of Spanish or bilingualism signals some kind of adherence to *latinidad* points to severe conceptual problems. Equating the use of English with Anglocentrism negates the appropriation and transformation of the colonizers' language by Afro-diasporic people (which includes certain Latino populations). Furthermore, not only are Latinos following rap's Afro-diasporic English-based orality, but their use of English also derives from their most immediate communicative experience as young people raised in the United States. Another problem with these charges of Anglocentrism is that they assume that a language equals a culture. Flores, Attinasi, and Pedraza (Flores 1993) challenge the notion that the use of English or Spanish indicates how much assimilation has occurred. Puerto Ricans, as well as other Latinos, assert their cultural identity through their particular way of speaking English (Urciuoli 1996; Zentella 1997).
 11. For journalistic examples, see Baxter (1999) and Weisberg (1998). For examples in the academic literature, see McLaren (1995) and Smith (1997).
 12. Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman forward the notion of a tropicalized *latinidad*, drawing from Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation, Pratt's contact zones, and Said's orientalism: "To tropicalize, as we define it, means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values" (1997:12).
 13. On the initial Puerto Ricanization of Dominicans in New York, see Grosfoguel and Georas (1996).
 14. See also Morgan (1996) and Rose (1994).
 15. Rap's Puerto Rican (as well as other Latino) male subjects also eroticize *mamis*. The difference is that, in these cases, *mamis* are eroticized not as a tropical (ethnoracial) Other but as a tropical self.
 16. Big Punisher, a Puerto Rican rapper from the Bronx and member of the Terror Squad, was the first Latino solo act to reach platinum sales with his 1998 debut album *Capital Punishment* (Loud Records, 1998).
 17. The Latina spitfire stereotype is by no means a recent phenomenon. It has populated mass-mediated images in the United States since this century's early decades (Rodríguez 1997). Lupe Vélez and the "Carmelita" character she played in various highly successful movies of the 1930s represents an early example. Rita Moreno, tellingly nicknamed "Rita the Cheetah" by the press, had a hard time breaking out of the spitfire mold in the 1950s. These early portrayals of the spitfire, as is the case with today's *mami*, were typically grounded within a gendered lower-class identity.
 18. See *The Source* 101 (February 1998):36.
 19. The Cocoa Brovas are a rap duo of African American MCs.

20. On the aesthetic and representational marginalization of black Puerto Ricans, see Jorge (1986), Gregory (1995–1996), Thomas (1967), and Tate (1995). On skin tone and Puerto Ricans, see Jenkins and Wilson (1998).
21. Samara, a dark-skinned African American twenty-six-year-old "veteran of live sex shows in New York City," says of her experience looking for work in strip clubs: "Some clubs did not want to hire me because I was black. . . . Some like black girls, but black girls who have either big tits or light skin, who tend to look more like Puerto Ricans" (Samara 1987:37).

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