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NEW YORK RICANS FROM THE HIP HOP ZONE: BETWEEN BLACKNESS AND *LATINIDAD*

by

RAQUEL Z. RIVERA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2000

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As a Puerto Rican living in Sunset [Park], hip-hop music and culture has been part of me as much as salsa and colonialism have.

Edward Rodríguez, "Sunset Style"

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Hip hop began nearly two-and-a-half decades ago in New York City. In the twenty-five years since, the art forms that make up its expressive foundations have gone through a multitude of shifts and developments. Hip hop's musical dimension, for example, has evolved from a New York ghetto phenomenon from which its youthful participants derived immense pleasure but little to no cash remuneration, to being a prominent component of contemporary popular culture and one of the most profitable sectors of the transnational music industry. In a recent article, the *Daily News*' David Hinckley describes rap as "the dominant sound of mainstream pop music." Big-name rap artists of the United States are well-known all over the world; rap music is locally cultivated virtually everywhere, from Tokyo to Dakar to Matanzas.

Hip hop is in some senses a translocal, multi-ethnic and multi-racial cultural phenomenon, certain aspects of which receive international exposure through CDs, Hollywood movies, MTV, and the internet. But space and locality have by no means become irrelevant, nor have race and ethnicity. In fact, local rootedness and social context are still extremely important as bases of hip hop creativity and as profitable sources of hip hop "authenticity." The ethno-racialized ghettos of the United States remain prime locally-rooted points of reference within hip hop. New York City neighborhoods, like the South Bronx, Queensbridge, Harlem, and Bedford-Stuyvesant, have been consistently "shouted-out," celebrated, reflected upon and submitted to criticism through rap rhymes, samples used in rap music and graffiti pieces. This dissertation is a localized historical exploration of hip hop's ethno-racial dimension, focusing on the participation of New York Puerto Ricans.

New York Rican Voices from the Hip Hop Zone

Q-Unique is a skilled South Bronx-raised rap artist and b-boy[1] who is a member of the Arsonists[2] and the Rock Steady Crew[3]. A self-described "hip hop activist" committed to nourishing a

---

[1] B-boys and b-girls specialize in the hip hop dance form known as breaking.

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historically-grounded and socially-responsible hip hop creativity, Q. deeply resents being segregated, as a Puerto Rican, from a hip hop cultural core which is often assumed to be African American.

> 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 [Puerto Ricans] [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." (Q-Unique 1995)

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

What does a New York Puerto Rican MC like Q. have in common with a West Coast Chicano rap artist like Kid Frost? Not necessarily more than what he shares with an African American MC from New York City, according to Q. The ethnic "funneling" that he criticizes relies on prescribed experiential and artistic commonalties based on a pan-ethnic label. Facile and questionable pan-ethnic 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, trans-ethnic connections --as those between Puerto Ricans and African Americans in New York.

Q. continues:

> We've discussed this in Rock Steady and when we've become approached with this situation we don't like doing the "Latinos in hip hop" subject. I think that's tacky because we believe it's a ghetto thing. From the start it's separating us from the rest. Looking at us like we're the kids in the bubble. It feels wack. (Q-Unique 1995)

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[2] The Arsonists are a popular New York underground rap group with several independent singles under their belt. Their first album was released by Matador Records in August 1999.

[3] The Rock Steady Crew is a prestigious international hip hop organization particularly recognized for its contributions to breaking.

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But just as he resists being funneled into the "Latino hip hop artist" category, Q. also resists being subsumed under the African American "umbrella." He explains:

> The majority of [African Americans] don't even know who we [Puerto Ricans] are, what we are. They want to consider us Black. I beg to differ. I'm not ready to go under anybody's umbrella. I know we are our own kind. I know we are of many races, but so is every other nation. (Q-Unique 1995)

Q. thus refuses to subsume his Puerto Rican ethno-national identity under the larger pan-ethnic categories of *latinidad* or Blackness. He also refutes the notion that ethno-racial affiliation has or should have a bearing on an individual's participation and enjoyment of hip hop culture. Instead, he invokes hip hop's multi-ethnic and multi-racial South Bronx origins to establish hip hop art forms as grounded in the creativity of young people from U.S. inner-city communities, primarily African American and Puerto Rican, but inclusive of other ethno-racial and national groups as well.

> We [Rock Steady Crew] just wanna keep it as a hip hop thing, as a ghetto thing, 'cause there's whites and there's Japanese and there's other cultures as well. (Q-Unique 1995)

Edward Rodríguez, a Puerto Rican hip hop enthusiast and journalist,[4] shares the class dimension of Q-Unique's argument. He also proclaims hip hop to be, primarily, the creative expression of urban youth in low-income communities. However, there is an important ethno-racial component to Rodríguez's formulation.

> Culture is a peoples' way of life. Hip hop culture thus is the way of life of urban Blacks and Latinos. . . . It is easily possible for anyone to contribute worthily and represent one or all of the aspects of hip hop culture. *However, they cannot have the same claim on the culture that an urban Black or Latino has on it* [emphasis mine]. For example, a white person may contribute enormously to an aspect of hip hop (i.e. graffiti, DJ-ing, MC-ing, etc.), and live in the South Bronx. Is he hip hop? Yes, but only to a certain extent. (Rodríguez 1996b)

Whereas Rodríguez claims that hip hop "really is a black thing and that includes Latinos and all African peoples," Q. has no interest in defining hip hop's ethno-racial scope. Rodríguez bases his argument not only on these groups' joint hip hop involvement, but on a shared Afro-diasporic history

---

[4] Rodríguez has been a regular contributor to the Baruch College student newspaper *The Ticker*. His often controversial column, "Sunset Style," is a "hip hop editorial" named after Rodríguez's working-class and heavily Puerto Rican Brooklyn neighborhood.

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that includes socio-economic exploitation and marginalization, as well as cultural formations. In an article that criticizes what he perceives as the deepening wedges driven between African American and Caribbean Latinos, he remarks:

> Hip hop once united urban Blacks and Latinos through a common culture. It helped them realize that they had much more in common than hip hop. Latinos and Blacks learned they both suffer from oppression, poverty, and share common history and roots. (Rodríguez 1995b)

Furthermore, unlike Q., Rodríguez has no qualms about including the New York Puerto Rican experience as part of the New York "Latino" experience. Neither is he reluctant to formulate the black experience in the United States as inclusive of Puerto Ricans. In his view, Puerto Ricans are both Latinos and black.

Rodríguez is not claiming that Puerto Ricans are "Black" (African American), but "black" (part of the African diaspora in the Americas, which includes African Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean people). This conceptual distinction between African Americanness (Blackness) and Afro-diasporicity (blackness) is commonly used by many hip hop participants as well as some students of the culture (Flores 1988; Kelley 1997; Rose 1994), and it is actually key in understanding the history of Puerto Rican participation in hip hop culture. [5]

Q-Unique and Edward Rodríguez express only two of many divergent opinions regarding the relationship between ethno-racial affiliation and participation in hip hop art forms. The bearing of ethno-racial affiliation on hip hop emic perceptions regarding "belonging," "entitlement" and "authenticity" has been a site of contention within hip hop culture since its very beginnings in the early 1970s.

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[5] In my writing, I will be using "black" and "Black" as two distinct concepts: "black," as the "racial" or socio-cultural category that refers to people of the African Diaspora, and "Black," as the U.S.-based ethno-racial category which 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.

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Between Blackness and *Latinidad*

This dissertation explores the ways in which New York Puerto Ricans have navigated the murky waters of ethno-racial[6] identification within the hip hop realm. Have they highlighted or de-emphasized their Puerto Ricanness? Have they carefully tip toed around the identity minefield or recklessly stomped through? What have been the consequences of the strategies chosen? How have they thought of their identity as Puerto Ricans vis-à-vis the larger pan-ethnic[7] Latino label? Have they constructed Puerto Ricanness as in tandem with or in contradiction to African Americanness?

My main contention here is that 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 blackness and *latinidad*. 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 (Chávez 1991; Flores 1996; Smith 1994). Their exceptionality is based on a history that diverges from what has been construed as the Latino norm and which happens to bear much in common with the experience of African Americans. However, Puerto Ricans are also cast out of narratives of blackness, since often times blackness in the United States is only thought of in terms of African Americans (Fusco 1995). Caught between *latinidad* and blackness, Puerto Ricans may fit in both categories and yet also in neither.

I further argue here that the meanings given to blackness and *latinidad* by the young New Yorkers involved in hip hop have a complex relationship with those predominant among the older Puerto Rican and African American generations, as well as with academic and mass-mediated

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[6] I use the term "ethno-racial" in order to acknowledge the constitutional racialization of ethnic categories as well as to highlight the social constructedness of racial classifications (Davis 1991; Hollinger 1995; Omi and Winant 1994; Rodríguez-Morazzani 1996). Hollinger explains why he believes "ethno-racial bloc" to be a more accurate way to describe the social groupings that are commonly referred to as "races": "This phrasing better reflects our understanding of the contingent and instrumental character of the categories, [and] acknowledges that the groups traditionally called racial exist on a blurred continuum with those traditionally called ethnic[...]" (Hollinger 1995, 39)

[7] For explorations of *latinidad* as pan-ethnic category see Flores (1996), Oboler (1995) and Jones-Correa and Leal (1996).

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representations of these ethno-racial identity fields. Hip hoppers partly deconstruct and reconstruct "official" ethnic and racial categories; but they are simultaneously deeply influenced by the dominant formulations.

The bulk of this dissertation consists of an exploration of various stages in hip hop's twenty-five year history. I aim to discuss how social constructions and experiences of class, ethnicity, gender and race have conditioned the creative participation and representations of Puerto Ricans in hip hop culture. I maintain that certain articulations of class, gender and ethno-racial identities have resulted in the construction of Puerto Ricans as black (or even Black), have made them seem an exception to dominant definitions of Latino pan-ethnicity (which pose *latinidad* as Hispanocentric and non-black), and have facilitated their construction as part of a hip hop Afro-diasporic "ghetto-ethnicity" (McLaren 1995)[8]. On the other hand, understandings of Puerto Rican identity that privilege a *latinidad* constructed in opposition to blackness and Blackness, have resulted in Puerto Ricans in hip hop culture having to defend their Afro-diasporic "ghetto-ethnicity," and their history and creative role in hip hop. The privileging of this kind of *latinidad* leaves Puerto Ricans justifying their participation in a culture (mis)understood to be African American cultural "property."

In the present introduction, Chapter 1, I will address the general phenomenon of hip hop and situate myself within it. I will also identify my methods of inquiry and review the existing literature.

Chapter 2 serves as an introductory counterpoint to Chapter 1, for it contextualizes hip hop culture within the history of Puerto Ricans in New York and their placement in the city's ethno-racial and socio-economic hierarchies. The focus is on how the history of Puerto Rican migration and racialization in New York sets this group apart from other Latino immigrants and brings them closer to African Americans.

Part I, which includes Chapter 3, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, is an exploration of hip hop history as seen through the lens of New York Puerto Rican participation. The history of New York Puerto

[8] Peter McLaren places rap ("gangsta rap") within an Afro-diasporic social history which 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.

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Ricans within the hip hop zone serves as a way to illustrate how their identities are negotiated through navigations between *latinidad* and blackness --identity categories which are themselves constantly being redefined. This history is also a vehicle through which to explore how African American-Puerto Rican inter-ethnic dynamics and identities manifest themselves within a specific realm of cultural expression.

Chapter 3 discusses hip hop's early times in the 1970s South Bronx as a male-dominated Afro-diasporic vernacular culture. This chapter centers on issues of "authenticity" and cultural "entitlement," and the changes in said notions that ensued after the commercial recording of rap music in 1979 and the mass-mediated popularity of "breakdancing" during the first half of the 1980s.

The latter half of the 1980s and the narrowing of hip hop's ethno-racial scope (in terms of participation and "entitlement") to the exclusion of Puerto Ricans is the subject of Chapter 4. This narrowing is discussed through the exploration of the ethno-racial fissures between African Americans and Puerto Ricans that manifest themselves in hip hop, as a zone of urban vernacular cultural production and as a mass-mediated cultural product. This chapter also explores the advent of "Latin hip hop" --which includes "freestyle" as well as "Latin rap"-- as a segregated realm of musical production that developed partly in response to Latino marginalization from the "core" hip hop realm, and which contributed further to the notion that Puerto Ricans and other Latinos were outside hip hop's scope of "entitlement."

Chapter 5 delves into rap music's shift in emphasis during the 1990s from an "entitlement" based on an ethno-racialized blackness which largely excluded Puerto Ricans, to one where blackness is defined primarily in class terms and where Puerto Ricans are considered insiders. This chapter also discusses the contradictory effects of the *latinidad* pan-ethnic discourse on the participation and perceived entitlement of Puerto Rican hip hoppers.

Part II, which includes Chapter 6, Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, centers around three themes that during the late 1990s provide vivid examples of the ways in which Puerto Rican participation in hip hop can be described as a navigation between *latinidad* and blackness.

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Chapter 6 addresses the commercial exploitation of *latinidad* within rap music during the latter half of the 1990s, paying particular attention to the role played by "tropicalizations" (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997) in the construction of Puerto Ricans as entitled participants. Puerto Ricans are perceived to share a ghetto blackness with African Americans, but nevertheless present themselves as a variation on ghetto blackness given their tropicalized and exoticized *latinidad*.

Chapter 7 delves further into the topic of tropicalizations by focusing on the participation and representations of Puerto Rican women in hip hop's musical realm. This chapter explores how most representations of Puerto Rican women in rap music are premised on their exotization as a tropical (i.e., Latinized) variation on black womanhood, thus illustrating the convergence of *latinidad* and blackness in gender-specific terms.

Chapter 8 discusses language use and wordplay in rap rhymes as tools used by New York Puerto Ricans to navigate between *latinidad* and blackness. Within this chapter, the common association between the use of Spanish language and Puerto Rican ethno-racial identity is questioned through the musical production and experiences of Puerto Rican hip hoppers. Instead, this chapter illustrates how the ethno-racial identity of second and third generation Puerto Rican youth is most often expressed through rhymes that privilege English and connect them with wider Afro-diasporic ghetto-based linguistic practices.

Hip Hop Culture and Rap Music

Rap music is largely considered by its participants to be part of hip hop "culture," a broader phenomenon which includes other artistic expressions such as graffiti writing (also named graff, writing, or aerosol art) and the dance form known as b-boying/b-girling, breaking or "breakdancing" (Guevara 1987; Rose 1994; Toop 1991). Rap music may be described as the "aural" dimension of hip hop; graffiti and breaking, respectively, being its "visual" and "kinetic" expressions (Norfleet, 1997). This aural dimension of hip hop involves two primary expressive elements: MCing (rapping or rhyming) and DJing.

Though I focus this investigation on rap music, I have studied it as a component of hip hop culture. For close to a decade and a half, rap has been the most visible, popular and profitable of hip

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hop art forms. Situating rap within hip hop culture, and analyzing the dynamics between rap and other hip hop art forms, allows for the construction of a more rounded and complex analysis which takes close account of rap's socio-historical context.

Rap is today one of the most popular and profitable musical genres. It is the most rapidly-growing segment of the music industry. United States consumers in 1996 spent $2.7 million every day or $30 a second on rap (Johnson 1997). At the same time, rap is a musical expression whose history, success and discourses are tied to poor Afro-diasporic urban communities in the United States (Arlyck 1997; McLaren 1995; Rose 1994). Rap, therefore, must be understood through the recognition of its intense technological and industrial mediation, its international popularity, its historical context and its continued rootedness in poor communities of color across the United States (Flores 1996b).

New York inner-city neighborhoods were the cradle of what we know today as rap. Its first exponents date from the early 1970s. It is a music strongly based upon Afro-North American musical traditions (Hebdige 1987; Toop 1991). But in spite of being firmly situated in an Afro-North American musical tradition, rap has been constitutively influenced by Afro-diasporic immigrants. This genre is a testimony to the cultural interaction between African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Caribbean immigrants and their descendants in New York City (del Barco 1996; Hebdige 1987; Flores 1988; Rose 1994).

Rap music has evolved from a local musical style of New York City to being one of the most popular and profitable music genres in the international music market. Mass mediation has had a profound effect on rap music. It began as an art form nourished and developed primarily through quotidian experience. Initially, it depended upon the participants' physical presence at house parties, outdoor jams and neighborhood rhyme cyphers[9]. As the scope of audiences and artists grew, that quotidian and physical experience came to be complemented --and in many cases replaced-- by mass mediation.

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[9] Cyphers are spontaneous and informal gatherings where participants arrange themselves in a loose circle to rhyme or dance, and where improvisational skills have a primary role. See Tony Bones, Queen Heroine and MFW (1997) for an assessment of the cypher's importance in hip hop. "You cannot front on the importance of a cipher. It goes beyond rhyming, conversation and other means of communication. It's the ultimate

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Hip Hop as Vernacular and Mass Mediated Cultural Expression

The process of mass mediation often occurs with no regard for the historical context, roots, function or "meanings," of the form being mediated (Handlin 1968; Ross 1989). Hip hop has been no exception. Its mass mediation has been accompanied by the distancing of localized, neighborhood-based hip hop experiences and creativity from its commercial expressions (Flores 1992-93; Norfleet 1995). Hip hop's multi-ethnic, Afro-diasporic New York history and its artistic expressions that include music, dance and visual art have at times been omitted in mass-mediated accounts that limit hip hop culture to rap music and the African American experience.

Given the reach and influence of these mass-mediated accounts, popular perspectives are profoundly informed by them; mass-mediated accounts at times prove more influential than localized, informal diffusion channels. Thus, versions of hip hop history that have been excised of Puerto Ricans are sometimes accepted in the very New York neighborhoods that gave rise to hip hop --particularly by those who did not witness hip hop's early development first-hand. Gotti, a New York-raised and English-dominant 18 year old Puerto Rican rapper from El Barrio, explains his preference for Island-based "*underground*"[10] music (rap and reggae mostly in Spanish) in terms of ethnic property: "hip hop [rap] belongs to the *morenos* [African Americans], but *underground* is ours." (Gotti 1998).

Veteran b-boy and Rock Steady Crew president Crazy Legs remarks, regarding the gaps in historical memory in the same New York neighborhoods were hip hop first developed:

> The only thing you could get back in the day was ghetto celebrity status, and that's all most people wanted. *That* was our media. . . . Nowadays though, I know so many white people that know much more about Hip-Hop history that the average 'ghetto' person. (Verán 1996a, 42)

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brainstorming session. Every thing from playing congos to African spiritual dances to after school fights to group therapy to ring around the rosie to the Nation of the Gods and Earths all get down in ciphers. Let the circle be unbroken." See also Norfleet (1997) for a reflection on cyphers as performance.

[10] This Island-based "*underground*" music is different from the New York-based "underground" rap scene that I will often refer to here. The latter, though a realm whose borders are in contention within hip hop emic discourses, can be loosely described as the gatherings, performances, practices and recordings which tend to be organized and produced by independent parties with minimal or no connection to the most dominant and profitable sectors of the rap music industry.

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Localized historical memories are influenced, and at times even usurped, by mass-mediated ones that tend to de-historicize, over-simplify, romanticize and/or sensationalize. However, influence does not just run in one direction. Mass-mediated representations draw from New York vernacular historical memories as well as from its thriving "underground" or "extra-commercial" (Norfleet 1997) scene, particularly in the commercial race to remain connected to hip hop's street-based "authenticity."

For example, during the latter half of the 1990s there has been a growing media recognition of hip hop as a "Black and Latino" form of cultural expression. Self-described "hip hop" or "urban music and culture" magazines of wide circulation like *Vibe*, *The Source* and *Rap Pages* have made a visible effort to expand hip hop "entitlement" to Latinos. Television networks BET (Black Entertainment Television) and MTV (Music Television) have followed the same trend.[11]

This recent phenomenon of greater inclusion of Latinos is an example, among many, of a dialectic cross-fertilization between the commercially successful (or "mainstream") end of the hip hop spectrum and its more vernacular, street-based, grass-roots, localized or underground expressions. In a never ending quest for the "cutting-edge" that will boost their sales --which in the case of hip hop translates into a perceived street "credibility," "legitimacy" or "authenticity"--, record labels, magazines and television stations are constantly drawing from vernacular experience and creativity. After ignoring Latinos for the longest time, mass media outlets have taken their cue regarding inclusiveness from hip hop's more street-based expressions.

It is within this context of cross-fertilization between vernacular cultural expressions and mass-mediated ones, that I want to place my discussion of Puerto Ricans and rap music. An understanding of the development and dissemination of rap must take into account the dynamic tension between, on the one hand, mass mediation and, on the other hand, grassroots, localized, underground, vernacular or street-oriented expressions.

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[11] This growing recognition of Latinos as partners in the hip hop project has not signaled an end to the marginalization of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, but it most certainly points to an opening in the ethnically-exclusive vision of hip hop. This may not, however, be a lasting shift out of African American-exclusivity, but a passing trend.

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The Hip Hop Zone

Hip hop is a fluid cultural "space," a "zone" whose boundaries are an internal and external matter of debate. A profoundly diverse, translocal, multi-ethnic, and multi-racial cultural phenomenon, hip hop expressions can also present themselves as exclusionary, be it for aesthetic, regional, gender, sexual-orientation, national, ethno-racial, class, or myriad other reasons. The dynamic tensions within hip hop and its constant drawing and crossing of borders are better addressed by the somewhat ambiguous concept of a "hip hop zone" than by often-used but more limiting terms like "hip hop community" and "hip hop nation." I take the term from a rhyme by Q-Unique, where he introduces himself as "Q-Unique from the hip hop zone."[12]

Within the larger hip hop zone exist a great many sub-zones, most of which are interconnected and/or overlap. For the purposes of the present discussion, I must distinguish between two of these sub-zones.

There is a Boricua/Latino-centric rap scene in New York, which is closely affiliated with the "underground" rap and reggae music of Puerto Rico. Its most popular exponents were raised on the Island and are based there, like El Mexicano, Daddy Yankee, Ivy Queen, Chezina, Glori and Vico C.[13] (to mention only a few). Nevertheless, New York-based Puerto Rican (and, increasingly, Dominican) artists also abound in this sector of the hip hop zone: Mafa, a Dominican DJ who has released two albums; Enemigo, a Bronx-based Puerto Rican rapper who did a guest appearance on R&B singer Corinne's debut single (produced by rap star and impresario, The Fugees' Wyclef Jean) and is currently negotiating a record deal; Don Gato, who traveled to Puerto Rico to appear as a guest artist in albums by DJ Adams and Coo-Kee; and numerous other commercially-aspiring artists and crews like BWP (Boricuas With Pride), Patota y Al Callao Underground, and Gotti. A great majority of these artists that participate in the Island-style "underground" circuit are Spanish-dominant and have been either raised primarily in the Island or spent substantial periods of their lives there.

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[12] "Oral Sex," unreleased.
[13] Vico is the only one of these artists to be presently living outside Puerto Rico, having recently relocated to Orlando, Florida.

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In terms of musical and verbal aesthetics, these artists are much more closely tied to the "underground" music of Puerto Rico than to the "core" New York hip hop music scene. While establishing the "core" and "fringes" of New York hip hop is a subjective and potentially sticky endeavor, an argument can be made for the existence of a "core" New York hip hop music scene, where African Americans are the most visible group but which has included the substantial participation of West Indians and Caribbean Latinos (particularly Puerto Ricans), and to a lesser extent, of other ethno-racial groups. This "core" is regarded as such within most hip hop emic discourses, given its importance and impact on the larger, translocal hip hop zone[14].

The Puerto Ricans who have participated in this "core" New York hip hop music scene have largely been English-dominant youth of the one-and-a-half, second and third generations. Among the better-known are DJ Charlie Chase of the Cold Crush Brothers, Master OC and Devastating Tito of the Fearless Four, as well as Ruby Dee and Prince Whipper Whip of The Fantastic Five. All three music groups were popular crews of the early 1980s and are widely acknowledged as pioneers of rap music's early commercial era. The Fat Boy's Prince Markie Dee Morales and The Real Roxanne are two New York Puerto Ricans who attained commercial popularity in the mid-1980s. Ivan "Doc" Morales is a key music producer and engineer of the later 1980s, the man behind the popular sounds of Erik B. and Rakim's *Paid In Full*, BDP's *Criminal Minded* and *By Any Means Necessary*, among many other "classic" hip hop albums. Among New York "core" hip hop Puerto Rican artists of the 1990s are MCs like Hurricane Gee, Power Rule, Kurious Jorge, Fat Joe, Big Punisher, Thirstin' Howell III, A-Butta and Building Block, and DJs and producers like Frankie Cutlass, DJ Tony Touch, Doo Wop, G-Bo the Pro, Double R, Lazy K, DJ Enuff, and Bobbito the Barber a.k.a. Cucumber Slice. It is on this "core" New York hip hop sub-zone and the Puerto Ricans that participate within it that I focus this investigation.

The borders between the New York hip hop "core" and Island-style "underground" sub-zones are porous. DJ Tony Touch, for example, is one of the few hip hop artists that comfortably weave in

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[14] New York has been regarded as a hip hop hot spot, not only because of its place in hip hop history, but also because of its continuous creative

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and out of these two sub-zones. His mixed tapes are popular among both audiences. Though Brooklyn-based, he travels frequently to Puerto Rico to spin at "underground" events and clubs. Tony Touch also spins regularly at New York clubs that feature hip hop music, at times for mostly Latino audiences, at times for mostly African American audiences, at times for "mixed audiences".

Boricua Guerrero (1997) is another example of the porosity of these two hip hop sub-zones. This commercially successful album, though directed largely towards a Spanish-speaking audience (Cash 1997), attempted to bridge the gap between these sub-zones by pairing popular rappers from the New York "core" scene with popular "underground" artists from the Island. It included collaborations between Nas and Daddy Yankee, Q-Tip and Chezina, Fat Joe and Mexicano, and Punisher and Jahvia. Its Executive Producers were Stanley "Cash" Stephenson, a New York African American, and Elías de León, a Puerto Rican raised in Puerto Rico and presently residing in New York.

Though *Boricua Guerrero* contributors Fat Joe and Punisher share the bond of Puerto Rican identity with their Island-based "underground" counterparts, their creative production is most comfortably lodged within the "core" hip hop music scene of New York. In this album that --as stated amid gunfire in the "Intro"-- seeks to bring together "two nations, two languages, one race," Fat Joe and Punisher in many ways stand closer to the New York African American artists than to the Island-based "underground" rappers.

For the Puerto Rican hip hoppers that participate in "core" New York hip hop, ethno-racial or national-origins identity is not necessarily foregrounded in their hip hop-related activities. Neighborhood, borough, city, coastal, gender, sexual, and class identity often take precedence as categories of affiliation within the hip hop zone. One of the reasons for this has been that stressing Puerto Rican identity "too much" can leave Puerto Ricans out of the hip hop "common territory" shared with African Americans. This idea will be developed in the chapters that follow.

Some Puerto Rican hip hoppers do highlight their ethno-racial identity, but others do not. Some include mention of it in their lyrics, while others do not. Some hang out, dance, and/or make

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contributions to this cultural zone.

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music mainly with Puerto Ricans or other Latinos; others may be the only Puerto Rican in an otherwise all-African American crew.

Unlike the Island-based "underground" scene where the participants are mostly Puerto Rican and almost exclusively Latino, the physical spaces where Puerto Ricans participate in "core" hip hop tend not to be ethno-racially segregated in the same way. At times, the majority of the participants in these spaces are African American. Other times, Latinos (mostly Puerto Rican) and African Americans make up the majority of the participants, with smaller proportions of "whites" and Asians.

New York hip hop thrives in diverse spaces which include street corner rhyme cyphers, "open-mic" events like those hosted by Bobbito the Barber at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, small record stores like Fat Beats and Bobbito's Footwork in The Village, annual competitions like the DMC DJ battles, rap shows at The Apollo Theater in Harlem or the club Wetlands in Lower Manhattan, Zulu Nation and Rock Steady Crew Anniversaries, internet radio shows like 88-Hip Hop and Queendom which transmit from a loft in SoHo, and traveling multi-media hip hop gatherings like Elevated and The Spot. Appendix 1 consists of excerpts from my field notes which describe in detail some of these places and the action that takes place within them.

Objectives, Methods and a Few Stories from the Field

Between 1992-94, as I was conducting research for my master's thesis, which was entitled "Rapping in Puerto Rican: Cultural Politics and Discourses" and focused on the rap music produced in Puerto Rico and the identity discourses associated with it, I became aware of the pivotal historical role played by New York Puerto Ricans in the development of hip hop culture in the United States. It struck me that New York-raised Puerto Ricans had also been instrumental in the development of hip hop art forms in Puerto Rico. Though the development of hip hop in Puerto Rico was partly informed by mass mediation, New York-raised Puerto Ricans who visited or migrated to the Island provided a direct human link between the vernacular urban youth cultures of Puerto Rico and New York. Though the scope of my masters thesis was limited to cultural practices in the Island, I included a section where I discussed the role of New York Puerto Ricans in hip hop culture, both in New York and in

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Puerto Rico. As I applied to doctoral programs, I knew what my next research focus was going to be: the role of New York Puerto Ricans in New York hip hop culture.

I became interested in exploring the history and expressive dimensions of rap music in Puerto Rico mostly because I wanted to understand the class and racial dynamics and discourses that served as its context. But somewhere along the line, almost without realizing it, I went from being intrigued by the commercial rap music phenomenon to loving and respecting hip hop as an expressive multi-dimensional culture. It started more as a historical-sociological interest, and then I got wrapped up in hip hop's beauty and energy.

By the time I moved to New York in 1994, I was as interested in hip hop's most commercial manifestations as in exploring its extra-commercial realm. So I began reading regularly the commercial hip hop-oriented magazines and newspapers like *The Source*[15], *Vibe*, *Rap Pages* and *Rap Sheet* (literature which had been extremely difficult to find in Puerto Rico); as well as watching video shows and television channels that feature rap music, such as BET's "Rap City," Video Music Box and MTV; and listening to Hot 97, New York's only radio station that features commercial rap and R&B, and the "Stretch Armstrong Show Featuring Bobbito the Barber" on WKCR, which was for many years one of the most important "underground" radio shows.

At the same time, I began frequenting The Nuyorican Poets Cafe, particularly the rap and spoken word open-mic events hosted by Bobbito the Barber,[16] Words and All That!, which still continue to this day. The Cafe, located in Manhattan's Lower East Side (also known as L.E.S., Loisaida, Alphabet City or East Village), on Third Street between Avenues B and C, was a short walk from my first home in New York.

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[15] In 1997, the *Source* was the biggest-selling music periodical in the United States, selling an average of 317,369 copies per issue. In comparison, *Rolling Stone* averaged 169, 625. (George 1998, 72)

[16] Bobbito, a New York Puerto Rican from the Lower East Side, has been an instrumental figure in New York hip hop culture. Not only has he, for years, hosted some of the most important underground radio shows and open mic events in the city, he has also been a regular contributor to various hip hop-oriented magazines, has served as a panelist in many hip hop conferences and is also the owner of a small independent label, *Fondle 'Em Records*.

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Once at the Cafe, it was extremely easy to find out about hip hop-related events around the City: other open-mic events, rap shows, graff shows, b-boy and b-girl dance practices and classes, DJ competitions, clubs, rap showcases, panel discussions and conferences, among other events. Promotional flyers were always passed around in the Cafe, announcements for future events were constantly made from the stage, and casual conversations were very easy to strike (which would lead to event information exchange).

Bobbito's Words and All That! are not the only hip hop-related events at the Cafe. Other regular (or semi-regular) events include Tabletums, a monthly "open turntable" event hosted by Kinetic and Lyrics, another "open mic" hosted by Fareed Abdallah. Many other hip hop-related events also take place at the Cafe.

Since those introductory visits to the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, I have been regularly attending hip hop-related events. Some of these have been one-time affairs, such as the Zulu Nation Female MC showcase held at SOB's (West Village) in 1996, the Arsonists presentation during the Spring of 1996 at record store Fat Beats (then located in the East Village), and "Power of the Booty: an interactive look at representations of women in hip hop culture and media," a panel discussion held at New York University on November 23, 1998. Others are regularly occurring like the yearly Zulu Nation Anniversary, the Rock Steady Crew Anniversary, the DMC DJ Competitions, the monthly events at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and the weekly Lyricists Lounge (until recently held in the West Village at The Cooler). Some are always held in the same venue, others have rotating locations. Some have been short-lived (like The Spot, a hip hop multi-media event which featured an open mic, breaking, video presentations and a graff show). Others seem to disappear for a while, and then start happening again (like Elevated, an event similar to The Spot).

A Writer (Not a Graff Writer)

One of the first questions asked of me during casual conversations struck up at hip hop events has been: "What do you do?" The question, I learned, had nothing to do with profession, but with dedication to a hip hop art form. "Do you rhyme?" "Are you a b-girl?" I soon decided that the most

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accurate answer was "I'm a writer." To which I quickly had to add that I didn't mean a graffiti writer (as my interlocutors would usually assume), but a journalist that wrote about hip hop. But I never said "journalist" first thing, for it could sound the "culture vulture" alarm. (And with good reason, given the media's track record.)

By the time I began my research in New York, I had written articles on rap music in Puerto Rico for *Centro*, the publication of the Hunter College-based Center for Puerto Rican Studies, as well as Island-based academic publication *Post-data*, and the newspaper *Claridad*. As one of the few writers to have explored hip hop's musical dimension in Puerto Rico, I was invited to speak at two events soon after I moved to New York in 1994. One was a discussion at Hunter College entitled "From Bomba to Hip Hop." The other was a hip hop workshop at Columbia University during Muévete: the Boricua Youth Conference. Since then, I have participated in numerous other public forums.

Half-way through my research process, I began to contribute regularly in two key hip hop-related publications: *Stress*[17] magazine in New York and *In the House* magazine in Puerto Rico. I also began writing about rap music for *The San Juan Star*.

My academic and journalistic writings about hip hop *almost* invariably opened doors for me, particularly given my focus on Puerto Rican participants and my interest in hip hop as a whole (not just on the most commercially-successful rap music). *Almost*. A few consultants were hesitant to talk to me *after* they learned I was a writer, fearing I would distort their words and experiences or somehow make money off of them. But for the most part, being recognized as a writer dedicated to hip hop has made it easier for me to engage consultants and gain access to other contacts and resources. Some of my consultants have actually contacted me for interviews.

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[17] *Stress* is a New York-based magazine that aims to remain in touch with the hip hop grassroots movement and not just cover the glitzier aspects of the rap music industry as most other hip hop-related magazines do. Even more importantly for the purposes of the present study, *Stress* was founded by a group of "nigga-spics" (as stated in their editorials) in their twenties who, among other objectives, aimed to create a space from which to address the media invisibility of Latinos in hip hop.

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Consultants[18]

On April 21, 1998, I was stressed and angry about my dissertation writing process. A friend suggested I relax and do something fun. Downstairs Records, a famous store that features both old and new records, was only a few blocks from where I was. So I headed to 6th Avenue around 40th St. What follows is an excerpt from my field notes.

> I walk into the store, which is actually upstairs on a second floor. I interrupt the two employees talking to each other to ask if they have hip hop, break beats, Latin Soul or Latin sections. One of the guys --stocky, light-brown skin, with a fade [short haircut] and goatee, probably in his thirties--, who I gathered was probably African American or Boricua, pointed to where I should be looking. As I got happy finding Sugar Hill and Whipper Whip records, and Winley Records break compilations I kept my ear on the guy that helped me, who was talking about being young and living in the South Bronx during the filming of Fort Apache.
>
> He and his friends were amazed that they were filming in their neighborhood. Back then he saw the movie and thought it was "all good," although he remembers people being pissed at the way the neighborhood and the people were portrayed. When he saw the movie again as a grown man he understood why people were upset.
>
> I also heard him talk about [rock group] Kiss coming to the neighborhood to film a video. The neighborhood kids weren't allowed close to the set so they threw stuff at them from a nearby building rooftop.
>
> I approached him with a pile of records to see if I could hear them before buying them. He said sure and headed to the turntable near the windows at one extreme of the store.
>
> I said I was really interested in breakbeat music so he started playing stuff from the Winley Records compilations. He went through songs like "Apache," "Scorpio," "It's Just Begun," "Corazón" (which was done by an African American band, lyrics in Spanish... sounded so-so but still a trip).
>
> Hoping for a yes, I asked him if he was into this music growing up. "Yeah, this was my thing," he answered, smiling. I prodded: "Did you b-boy?" "Nah, look at me. Look at this belly. Do I look like I can b-boy? I was a DJ."
>
> I laughed and asked if he was down with a crew. He responded: "With Electric Company, which later kind of merged with Rock Steady Crew. I was known as Ill Will."
>
> Oh shit! I was ecstatic.

Some of my most exciting interviews and informative casual conversations have been totally unexpected, as in the case of Ill Will. Such was also the case with Tabla, a man in his early twenties who worked as the security guard in my school building. One night I saw him bopping his head and writing furiously at the building's front desk. He looked up briefly to smile and bid me goodnight. I smiled back and asked: "Are you listening to something or are you writing a rhyme?" He looked a bit

[18] See Norfleet (1997) for a reflection on the power dynamics implicit in the term "informer" and her preference for the term "consultant."

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perplexed and answered: "Writing a rhyme." Then he added, with disbelief: "You into this?" (He didn't have to mention my gender or my looks. I had heard from plenty of people before how I didn't fit the "hip hop head" profile.) Then we talked about hip hop non-stop for close to an hour.

Other consultants, like Hurricane Gee, G-Bo, Power, Rockafella, Charlie Chase, BOM5, and Tony Touch, I sought after and set up interviews way in advance. Some of them I ambushed after shows and panel discussions. For others, I went through my contacts in the magazines *Stress* and *In the House*, or through previous consultants.

My consultants were b-boys, b-girls, DJs, producers, rappers, MCs, "ghost writers" who write rhymes for others, and graff writers, as well as hip hop enthusiasts who participate in a myriad other ways, among them, through their presence, appreciation and support. Some of them are known in the commercial realm, others are known in the underground circuit, others are well-known only on their block. Some used to be known, and have today largely been forgotten. Some are still active, others have long retired from hip hop. Some of them are professional artists, others aspire to become professional artists, others cultivate their craft and participate in hip hop with no career expectations. Some of them equate hip hop culture to the rap commercial realm, others draw sharp distinctions between "rap music" and "hip hop culture." Some shun the commercial realm and recognize only the underground as the zone where hip hop thrives. All of them love hip hop with a passion.

The "White girl" and the Puerto Rican "sista"

I figured out early on in my research process that brown lipstick, big hoop earrings, baggy pants and rolling the "r" in my first name, among other strategies, worked in my favor: interviews were easier to set up, casual conversations were easier to strike, nasty comments and dirty looks were easier to avoid. Though my light and freckled skin, straight hair, and green eyes were interpreted by most as "white girl" markings, I found out I could overpower these through language and dress. I realized very early on that whereas a "white girl" researching hip hop may be a times viewed as a potential "culture vulture" poking her nose in "other" people's business, a Puerto Rican woman (no matter her phenotype, class background or regional origin) is almost invariably celebrated for studying

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the culture of "her" people. Why should I --an Island-born "white" Puerto Rican who did not grow up in the ghetto-- have more of a "claim" on hip hop than an Italian from the Bronx River housing projects? Though I found these knee-jerk inclusions/exclusions problematic, I nonetheless flaunted my ethno-racial markings in order to facilitate my research process.

But sometimes my constantly striving to prove myself one of "us" took a toll on my patience. I remember a small rap and poetry open-mic event in 1994 of no more than thirty people crammed into a small performance space in the Lower East Side. There, the only light-skinned faces belonged to me and another Puerto Rican, probably also in her early twenties. Her poetry struck me, not for being aesthetically pleasing but because it was based on the pain of ethno-racial exclusion: too Puerto Rican to be truly "white," but too "white" in phenotype to be smoothly accepted as a "sista" in the eyes of "her" people --which in this context meant not only darker-skinned Puerto Ricans, but also African Americans and other Latinos. Her verses navigated the politics of inclusion/exclusion by crafting a "super-Puerto Rican down with my African American brothers and sisters" persona through her poetry.

Stony silence and suspicious looks had greeted me at the door and followed me down the hallway. Perhaps my look that night wasn't "Puerto Rican" enough. I knew fully well all I had to do was open my mouth and my "accent" would transform me from "white girl" to Puerto Rican "sista." But I was in no mood to prove myself that night. So I stared back, unsmiling.

I sat painfully through raps and poems, grating my teeth at each celebration of "our" superiority over "our" white oppressors. Then came the rhyme about the racist "white boy" and the "white bitch" through whom he came into this world. Oh, how I found that funny, in a bitter kind of way! I was also shaken. I was the "white bitch" right then.

Early the next morning, I wrote a note to the aforementioned rhymer as part of my field notes:

> You've left me with a burning question. What was it again that some random whiteboy's mamma do to you? You know the one: the white bitch, the automatic candidate for disrespect. *Pues, ¿sabes? Pa bitch yo. Pa bitch la madre que te parió.* White is so relative and bitch is too. So tell me, who is a bitch and who is a sister to you?

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But that night was an exception. I usually prominently displayed the markings taken by others to be indicative of my Puerto Ricanness and answered with a nod and a vague smile the innumerable times I was told "Sorry, sista. I didn't realize you were Puerto Rican. You don't look Puerto Rican."

State of Research

Puerto Ricans and Hip Hop Culture

Specialized accounts of hip hop such as those by Toop (1991) and Rose (1994) acknowledge the pivotal role of Latinos --and particularly of Puerto Ricans-- in the culture. These historically-oriented accounts recognize hip hop as heir to an Afro-diasporic tradition that includes decades of joint musical production by African-American and Latino musicians in New York City.

Toop, for example, emphasizes the impact that the Latin Soul movement of the mid 1960s had upon hip hop. During the introductory chapter, he interchangeably refers to the creators of hip hop as "blacks," "African Americans and Hispanics" and "blacks and Puerto Ricans." However, in his subsequent account of the early stages of hip hop, Toop does not make a point of differentiating African Americans from Puerto Ricans. He does introduce ethno-racial distinctions into his analysis, when he explains the Caribbean (West Indian) influences of hip hop and calls to attention that Kool DJ Herc was raised in Jamaica and Grandmaster Flash is of Barbadian parentage. Nevertheless, the fact that other key early figures who he mentions are of Latino Caribbean background --most specifically, Puerto Rican-- goes unmentioned. Among these artists are Rock Steady Crew's Crazy Legs, DJ Charlie Chase of the Cold Crush Brothers, Devastating Tito and Master OC of the Fearless Four, and graff artists Lee and Futura 2000.

Toop's treatment of Black and Latino ethno-racial affiliations within the hip hop zone implicitly follows the logic that Tricia Rose explicitly espouses. In a footnote to the chapter dedicated to discussing the emergence of hip hop culture, Rose explains:

> My arguments regarding Afrodiasporic cultural formations in hip hop are relevant to African-American culture as well as Afrodiasporic cultures in the English and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, each of which has prominent and significant African-derived cultural elements. Although rap music, particularly early rap, is dominated by

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> English-speaking blacks, graffiti and breakdancing were heavily shaped and practiced by Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities that have substantial Afrodiasporic elements. (The emergence of Chicano rappers took place in the late 1980s in Los Angeles.) Consequently, my references to Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities should in no way be considered inconsistent with my larger Afrodiasporic claims, particularly those that dominate future chapters devoted specifically to rap music. (Rose 1994, 189)

Rose's explanation reveals the ambivalence and confusion surrounding the cultural heritage and socio-political solidarities of people of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. She holds that Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans and others Caribbean Latinos are part of the African Diaspora; the claim is far from being common-knowledge, however, and is likely to be received with skepticism or outright rejection, thus forcing Rose to explain the foundations of her position.

Rose's main purpose is to analyze rap as part of African American cultural history and contemporary life. Although she acknowledges the critical role of Puerto Ricans and other "young people of color" in cultivating this cultural expression, her main concern is based upon the African American community. The specificities of the Puerto Rican experience within the hip hop zone are thus subsumed under the African American experience. This is also the case in Toop's analysis.

Writings that focus exclusively on hip hop's aural dimension, tend to either explore rap music as an exclusively African American expressive phenomenon (De Genova 1995; Henderson 1996; Kelley 1996) or, similarly to Rose and Toop, mention Puerto Rican and/or Latino participation in passing, but still end up focusing their analysis on African Americans (McLaren, 1995; Norfleet, 1997; Potter, 1995; Smith, 1997).

Boricua and other Latino hip hoppers who have been fighting and negotiating respect and recognition are quite exasperated at such accounts. Q-Unique is very blunt in his judgment, starting with the title of Rose's book.

> What the fuck is that?: *Black Noise*. If anything she should have named it 'Ghetto Noise.' (Q-Unique 1995)

As Q. explained, he is not one to deny that Puerto Ricans are part of the African Diaspora. What he objects to is the presumption that the "Black" experience, defined primarily in terms of African Americanness, can properly address the specificities of Puerto Rican life in the United States. Behind

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inclusion lies the specter of subsumption and dismissal. Q. wants to see the history and culture of Puerto Ricans addressed directly. He says, "I don't wanna be under anybody's umbrella."

Flores (1988, 1992-93, 1996b) and I (Rivera 1996) have been the only two students of hip hop culture to have explored New York Puerto Rican participation, taking into account both hip hop's Afro-diasporic urban context and the specificities of Puerto Rican experiences. Flores' inquiries have been aimed at understanding why and how Puerto Ricans have been marginalized within an urban culture in which they have been co-creators. Through this dissertation, I expand on Flores' body of work by paying close attention to the way in which New York-based hip hop emic discourses, as well as mass-mediated discourses, have shifted over time with regards to Puerto Rican cultural "entitlement" and "authenticity," and how those discursive shifts have affected the participation, representations and artistic production of Puerto Ricans.

New York Puerto Ricans and Urban Youth Culture

Hip hop is a central realm of cultural production and identity-building among Puerto Rican youth of the second and third (and beyond) generations. It is also a cultural zone of intense interaction and cooperation between young Puerto Ricans and African Americans.

Literature which focuses on the creative practices of New York Puerto Rican youth is lamentably sparse. Exceptions include Flores (1999) and Salazar's (1992) writings on the popular 1960s musical genre known as *bugalú*, Flores' essays on hip hop, and Hager's (1984) comprehensive account of early hip hop culture.

As poet Louis Reyes Rivera notes, the cultural production and identity of New York Puerto Rican youth is tightly linked to that of African Americans:

> . . . interestingly enough, of all the "Latino-Americans" living in the United States, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans --second generation-- more easily identify with the Afro-United States scene than with the Anglo-United States scene. And that's not only because of the similarity in music but also because of the similarity in spirit and in social conditions. It's not just a cultural thing, it's an ethnic recognition. [sic] and it's a social response to similar conditions. (Hernández 1997, 129)

This, however, is another topic that remains largely unexplored in the existing literature on culture and the arts --save for the exceptions previously mentioned.

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Allusions to the existence of an urban youth culture shared by African Americans and Puerto Ricans have been made in the sociological literature that grapples with issues of "assimilation," structural incorporation, and socio-economic mobility (Gans 1992; Kelly and Schauffler 1996; Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 1996). However, said literature is limited to describing the existence of a shared "adversarial stance" (Portes and Zhou 1993) or "adversarial stances against mainstream behaviors" (Kelly and Schauffler 1996) among these groups. These "adversarial stances," allegedly, manifest themselves through a disdain of authority and formalized education, as well as participation in illegal money-making activities.[19]

Not only is the branding of urban youth culture (coded as Black and Puerto Rican) as "adversarial" or "oppositional" questionable, but to explain the absence of upward social mobility among these groups as an effect of said oppositional culture is even more questionable (Kornblum 1984). Working-class white youth exhibit many of the same attitudes being attributed to African Americans and Puerto Ricans, but their culture is not described as "oppositional" nor are they being described as "unassimilable." (Mollenkopf, Kasinitz and Waters, forthcoming) Furthermore, most appraisals of urban youth culture are severely limited since they only focus on bleakness, violence and poverty; joy, desire, rhythm, color, movement, ingenuity and creativity are totally absent from these narratives. A notable recent exception which focuses on hip hop is Berman (1999).

Zentella (1997) and Urciuoli's (1996) linguistic studies among New York Puerto Ricans include explorations into the linguistic practices of youth. Though not broaching the topic of artistic practices, their studies can serve as a point of departure for the exploration of language use and identity in youth cultural production.

This dissertation is intended, on the one hand, as an inquiry into the creative practices of New York Puerto Rican youth. It is also a contribution to the understanding of how African American-Puerto Rican relations and identities have affected the realm of cultural production. I offer hip hop culture as

[19] Bourgois (1995), though taking a different conceptual approach, also speaks of these youth perceptions and behaviors, and dubs them part of an "inner-city culture" and a "street culture of resistance" that has emerged in response to exclusion from mainstream society.

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an example of how youth cultural production sometimes challenges and sometimes reinforces traditional categories of ethno-racial affiliation. The result is that the boundaries between Puerto Ricanness (and, more generally, *latinidad*) and African Americanness cannot always be properly established.

Conclusion

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. This dissertation is a contribution to the history of Puerto Rican hip hop artists and other participants in New York as well as a necessary (and largely neglected) angle from which the construction of Puerto Rican identities must be explored.

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CHAPTER 2

ENTER THE NEW YORK RICANS

The position of New York Puerto Ricans in 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 socio-economic hierarchies, and their relationship with African Americans and other Latinos.

Puerto Ricans were for four decades (approximately 1940-1980), the prototype and stereotype of a larger group variously referred to, in the United States' Northeast, as "Spanish," "Hispanics," "Latin Americans," "Latinos," or, derogatorily, "spics." Puerto Ricans, a group defined by their national origin, were for that time (and still, even today, at times) regarded as regional symbols or representatives of all immigrants from a variety of Latin American nations (Flores 1996).

The reason for this has a lot to do with numbers. Though Dominicans, Cubans, Mexicans and other Latin American immigrants have a history in New York City that dates as far back as Puerto Ricans', this latter group has been --and remains to this day-- the largest Latino group in New York. In the public eye, *Nueva York* has had a Puerto Rican face for a good part of this century.

The situation is far different in the 1990s. The 1980s, dubbed the "Decade of the Hispanics" in the media, saw an acknowledgment of the diversification and growing numbers of the Latino population --a belated recognition, since this phenomenon had actually begun more than a decade earlier (Falcón, Delgado and Borrero 1989; García 1988). Large numbers of Hispanic Caribbean immigrants and other Latin Americans began arriving in the United States after the repeal of the national origins quota in 1965, many of them settling in New York City.

Puerto Ricans made up 80% of the Latino population of New York in 1960; by the 1990s, this number had dropped down to 50%. But though their proportion with respect to Latinos as a whole has diminished, Puerto Ricans are still the largest Latino group in New York City.[20] Dominicans are today the second largest Latino group. Their numbers have risen from 1.7% of the City's Latino population in

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[20] Puerto Ricans are not only the largest Latino group, but also one of the largest ethnic groups in New York City.

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1960 to 18.7% in 1990. Colombians, Ecuadorians, Mexicans and Cubans also have a substantial presence, each group accounting for more than 50,000 city residents (New York City Department of City Planning 1994).

With the growing plurality of Latino groups, numbers, experiences and voices, the "exceptional" character of Puerto Ricans with respect to other Latino groups has become a hot topic among media and social analysts, as well as within popular discourses. Commentators have noticed how many of the same factors that make Puerto Ricans a distinct case among Latinos are those they share with African Americans (Chávez 1991; Massey and Denton 1991; Smith 1994). Not that there is anything new in the association of African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Even during the mid-century decades that Puerto Ricans were taken as the "Hispanic" prototype, they were also closely associated with African Americans in the public eye. And with good reason, for, as will be discussed in the sections that follow, the historical experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York City have more in common with those of African Americans, than with those of any other ethno-racial group.

Migration and Settlement

After being a Spanish colony for four centuries, Spain granted Puerto Rico its autonomy in 1897. Only a year after, Spain was forced to cede Puerto Rico (along with Cuba and the Philippines) to the United States after losing the Spanish-American War. Thus, since 1898, the Island has been a colony of the United States and subjected to its political and economic power. The history of Puerto Rican migration to the United States is directly related to the rise of the United States as an imperial and capitalist power at the end of the nineteenth century (Dietz 1991; History Task Force 1979).

With an economy structured to benefit U.S. corporations and a sector of the Puerto Rican elite, the largest proportion of the Island's population was either over-worked and under-paid or deemed redundant. The migration of workers was promoted as a safety-valve for the pauperization and social discontent generated by exploitation and insufficient employment --but attributed by the authorities to "overpopulation." Such was the case in the early decades of the twentieth century when U.S. sugar companies dictated the course of the Puerto Rican economy, as well as later on during the 1940s with

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the launching of "Operation Bootstrap," when the shift from a largely agricultural to an industrialized economy yet again displaced large numbers of workers.

Sizable Puerto Rican settlements in New York developed during the first two decades of the twentieth century. These early settlements included the Lower East Side and Chelsea in Manhattan, and the area close to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, particularly Red Hook. They tended to be close to the primary sources of employment for them during the period, among these, cigar factories, the New York docks, the merchant marine, the Nabisco Company in Chelsea and a rope manufacturer in the Brooklyn Navy Yard area called the American Manufacturing Company (Fitzpatrick 1987; Muñiz 1998).

In 1950, more than half (56%) of the 246,000 Puerto Ricans in New York City lived in three Manhattan neighborhoods: Lower East Side, East Harlem and Washington Heights. East Harlem was, in the early 1950s, the neighborhood with the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans. Other settlements of the time included Williamsburg, Bushwick, Sunset Park and Carroll Gardens in Brooklyn (accounting for close to 14% of the City's Puerto Rican population) and the South Bronx (25%).

By 1960, the Puerto Rican population had increased dramatically to 613,000, and their residential distribution had shifted. Numbers in Manhattan decreased, as they increased in the Bronx and Brooklyn. During the 1960s, many migrated out of the Lower East Side and East Harlem into the South Bronx and Northern Brooklyn. New areas of settlement during this decade included the East and North Bronx, and Coney Island, Flatbush and East New York in Brooklyn. Since the 1960s, most New York Puerto Ricans have lived in Brooklyn and the Bronx, the latter having the highest concentration (Muñiz 1998; New York City Department of City Planning 1982; New York City Department of City Planning 1994).

Most of these residential areas have been either shared with African Americans or located in close proximity to African American neighborhoods. Predominantly African American areas like Harlem (Manhattan) and Bedford-Stuyvesant (Brooklyn) flow into largely Puerto Rican neighborhoods like East Harlem and Bushwick. African Americans and Puerto Ricans have lived side-by-side in areas such as the South Bronx.

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The 1960 Census illustrates the low degree of residential segregation between African Americans and Puerto Ricans. The index of segregation between these two groups was 62.2 (Kantrowitz 1973, 23). The index of segregation between Puerto Ricans and whites during the same decade was 73; the same index for African Americans and whites was considerably higher at 80 (Conway and Bigby 1985, 81).

By 1960, the two-decade period of most intense Puerto Rican migration to New York City (1940-1960) gave way to a "reverse migration" spurred mostly by an economic recession. During 1961 and 1963, for example, more Puerto Ricans returned to the Island than migrated to New York. Two-thirds of Puerto Rican workers were involved, at the beginning of this decade, in semi-skilled manufacturing work and were hard hit by the massive loss of manufacturing jobs that New York experienced during the 1960s and 1970s. Puerto Rican poverty levels rose dramatically during this period, placing them among the poorest of city residents. African Americans were, alongside Puerto Ricans, among the city residents most violently impacted by the changing economic conditions of the times.

New York was no longer the primary destination of Puerto Rican migrants during the 1970s. Whereas in 1950, eight of every ten Puerto Ricans in the United States had settled in New York City; By 1980, less than half of Puerto Ricans in the United States lived there. A decade later, in 1990, New York accounted for only a third of Puerto Ricans in the 50 states. Nevertheless, Puerto Ricans continue to be a sizable presence in the city. In 1990, they numbered 897,000 accounting for 12% of the total New York City population (New York City Department of City Planning 1994).

Puerto Ricans in New York were, during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, at the very bottom of the income scale, among other socio-economic indicators like poverty levels, home ownership rates, unemployment and labor force participation. In the 1990s, they remain a largely marginalized population living outside the economic mainstream (Hanson-Sánchez 1996; Torres 1995).

"An Alliance of Survival"

I remember the first time I went to the South with my friend Billy. I sat in the front of the bus and when the bus got to the Mason Dixon line, our driver got off and a new driver got on. Immediately, he said

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"all the colored to the back" and all the coloreds got up and went back and I just sat there. And he said "I want all of you colored people to go to the back" and I said "look I am puertorriqueño" and he looked at me and said "I don't care what kind of nigger you are" and he put his hand into his side pocket.

Piri Thomas in Stavans, *Race and Mercy*

I'm smoking weed with my cousins in a car on 5th Ave and 120something. A cop car blasts over the loudspeaker. "You niggas get out the car!" We kept smoking. Once again: "You niggas get out the car, now!" Suddenly somebody knocks loud on the window. I roll down the glass and a cop shouts: "I told you niggas to get out the car!" I say: "But we're Puerto Rican." He spits back: "I don't care what kind of nigga you are. Get the fuck out the car!"

Comedian Herbie Quiñones as told by Pete Díaz

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, police brutality, negative portrayals in academic literature and media, housing and employment discrimination, residential displacement and racial violence have been not only similar but also linked. Puerto Ricans have come to be considered a native minority that shares the bottom of the socio-economic structure with African Americans (Ogbu 1978; Massey and Bitterman 1985; Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1993; 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; Torres 1995; Urciuoli 1996).

The colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States is a prominent factor which sets Puerto Ricans apart from other Latinos and draws them closer to African Americans. For one thing, Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917. Given their colonial experience, Puerto Ricans are inserted into the racial, cultural, and class dynamics of the U.S. in a way more akin to African Americans and Chicanos than to immigrants from Latin America. (Flores 1996; Grosfoguel and Georas 1996).

Puerto Ricans, as new immigrants to New York City, were initially a confusing case since being even more visibly multi-racial 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

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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.

According to Grosfoguel and Georas (1996), low symbolic capital is one of the many attributes African Americans and Puerto Ricans share. They hold that the incorporation of Puerto Ricans into the New York ethno-racial hierarchy has operated in conjunction with what Bourdieu (1977) has termed "symbolic capital." A group's symbolic capital (i.e., prestige, honor, public image) is positively correlated to the group's position in the racial/ethnic hierarchy. Positive symbolic capital typically gives way to economic opportunities and access to economic capital. Low or negative symbolic capital usually leads to a negative public image, low economic opportunities, and discrimination in the labor and housing markets. Grosfoguel and Georas argue that the initial incorporation of both Puerto Ricans and African Americans into the very bottom of New York ethnic/racial and socio-economic structures in conjunction with their extremely low symbolic capital have played a significant role in the perpetuation of their socio-economic marginality.

Points of contention and separation arise between African Americans and Puerto Ricans, but there is a fundamental shared exclusion from the white, middle-class world. In the words of Andrés Torres, African Americans and Puerto Ricans in New York have been linked through an "alliance of survival." Their residential and work-related proximity, high poverty levels, and similar historical experiences and cultural legacies have foregrounded the commonalties of their struggles. Puerto Ricans and African Americans in New York also share a history of political alliances (Early 1998; Rodríguez-Morazzani 1991-92; Torres 1995; Abramson 1971).

The two groups worked together throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Among the joint endeavors were the efforts to increase community control over public schools and anti-poverty programs, as well as the welfare rights movement (Torres 1995). Many black Puerto Ricans were part of the Black Power Movement, not as merely sympathetic allies but also as core members (Rodríguez-Morazzani 1991-92, 109).

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The Black Power Movement also served as an ideological and organizational example for Puerto Rican activists of the time. The Young Lords Party, for example, was modeled after the Black Panthers (Abramson 1971). Denise Oliver remembers that it was through the Black Panther newspaper that the group of activists who eventually became the Young Lords in New York first learned of the existence of young Puerto Rican activists from Chicago who called themselves the Young Lords Organization. (Morales [1998]) Oliver, who was Minister of Economic Development in the Young Lords Party from 1970-71, is an African American and one of many who participated in Puerto Rican organizations. Since those times, electoral alliances, as well as labor struggles and efforts against gentrification, police brutality, cutbacks in education and other social programs, have seen joint African American and Puerto Rican participation.

The name of City College's Student Center sums it up by illustrating how past decades of shared struggles inform the political outlook of student activists of today. The Assata Shakur/Guillermo Morales Student Center honors jointly two exiled New York revolutionaries, one African American and the other Puerto Rican.

Puerto Ricans and African Americans: A Shared Stigma

Two early chroniclers of the Puerto Rican migration, Chenault (1938) and Handlin (1959), concurred in pointing out that Puerto Ricans insisted on distinguishing themselves from the African American population in order to avoid carrying the same racial and socio-economic stigma. In an ironic turn of events, nowadays Dominicans, West Indians, Mexicans and other newer immigrants strive to distinguish themselves from both African Americans and Puerto Ricans (Kasinitz 1992; Smith 1994; Waters 1996). Given the rising numbers of other Latino groups, Puerto Ricans have been increasingly described as the exception within the Latino group, "the 'problem' even among their own kind" (Flores 1996a, 179).

Linda Chávez's chapter "The Puerto Rican Exception" in her book *Out of the Barrio* (1991) offers a clear example of this singling out of Puerto Ricans from other Latinos. In that chapter, she explains that "Hispanics" are "choosing" to become part of the "mainstream" of U.S. society --except

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for Puerto Ricans. The problem posed by Puerto Ricans is not simply that a "Hispanic" group is suffering the repercussions of being left behind. She fears that the upward mobility of "Hispanics" as a whole may actually be hindered by the large sectors of the Puerto Rican population trapped in the "urban underclass" (Chávez 1991, 152) alongside African Americans.

Based on culturalist and conservative assumptions, she explains how affirmative action and welfare benefits have made Puerto Ricans and African Americans feel entitled to special treatment; these "privileges" have been a disincentive to socio-economic mobility. Citizenship has ended up being a liability for Puerto Ricans, since it has entitled them to "privileges based on disadvantage" provided by the Welfare State. Lacking incentives for assimilation, Puerto Ricans have "chosen" to remain outside the mainstream.

Though Chávez denies that racism has played a role in Puerto Rican low socio-economic status, she remarks that race has influenced the construction of Puerto Rican identity in the United States. She holds that most Hispanics are of mixed native and Spanish ancestry, but that miscegenation in the Hispanic Caribbean has primarily involved African and Spanish people. Then she goes on to explain that Puerto Ricans' relative high degree of African ancestry (when compared to other Hispanics) has led "white Americans" to think of Puerto Ricans as black, thus subjecting them to similar discriminatory treatment as African Americans. In the course of explaining how race (blackness) has shaped Puerto Rican identity, Chávez contradicts her initial statement that discrimination does not account for Puerto Rican social and economic marginality.

Chávez refers to Massey and Denton's (1991) study of residential segregation in making her argument about race and Puerto Ricans. She holds their findings suggest that

> Puerto Ricans may eventually come to identify themselves more in racial and less in ethnic terms, with darker Puerto Ricans absorbed into the American black community much as other Caribbean blacks, such as Jamaicans, have been over time. (Chávez 1991, 155)

Her argument about Puerto Rican difference, with respect to the rest of Hispanics, is based on the former's disadvantaged structural position (a marginalization which, she argues, is of their own making and stems largely from the entitlements derived from U.S. citizenship) and their African

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heritage --two characteristics which they share with African Americans. In short, what separates them from Hispanics, draws them closer to African Americans.

Massey and Denton (1991) note that African Americans experience residential segregation to a greater degree than do Hispanics and Asians. African Americans face high segregation levels that are not attenuated by upward mobility or suburbanization. For Hispanics, on the other hand, rising socio-economic status, acculturation and suburbanization do account for declining segregation. Puerto Ricans in New York, however, are the exception among Hispanics. Their experience places them a lot closer to African Americans than to other Hispanics.

Massey and Denton point to Puerto Rican's African ancestry and low socio-economic status as explanations for their exceptional position among Hispanics. They conclude that with respect to residential segregation "it is not race that matters, but black race" since

> Blacks are apparently viewed by white Americans as qualitatively different and, by implication, less desirable as neighbors, than members of other racial or ethnic groups.(Massey and Denton 1991, 378)

According to Massey and Denton, low socio-economic status initially ghettoizes Puerto Ricans together with African Americans and anti-black prejudice cements their segregation and blocks their mobility.[21]

African Americans and Puerto Ricans, though seen as distinct, are frequently spoken of in the same breath in media representations and policy discussions. Both are perceived, written about and represented as the problematic native minorities of New York and other metropolitan centers like Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston (Kornblum 1991; Lemann 1991; Pérez 1990). They have even become the standard against which the relative success of newer immigrants is most often measured (Kasinitz 1992; Smith 1994; Waters 1996).

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[21] Grosfoguel and Georas (1996) argue that the marginalization of New York Puerto Ricans has set the stage for the incorporation of Dominicans as yet another stigmatized and racialized "minority" group into New York socio-economic hierarchies.

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Of "Allies" and "Traitors"

Robert Smith (1994) has documented what members of a Mexican street organization, "gang" or "*pandilla*" in New York perceive as the distinction between Puerto Ricans and the rest of Hispanics. The purpose of the Organización para la Defensa de la Raza (ODR) was, avowedly, "to defend the Hispanic race" from Puerto Rican and African American youth. These two latter groups were presumed by the "*pandilleros*" to be violent, prone to vices and culturally inferior. A similar differentiation between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans was made by a Mexican youth group president who expressed the following to Smith:

> Look at the blacks and Puerto Ricans, he told me, they have all kinds of problems: drugs, crime, teen pregnancy, disobedience to their parents, girls walking alone at night... Look at this group, he said, pointing to the assembled Mexicans --Do you think the Puerto Ricans and blacks have this kind of community? This kind of culture? No, he answered, they do not, and this is the problem. (Smith 1994, 26)

Once again, Puerto Ricans are differentiated from other Latinos through their associations and similarities to African Americans. Interestingly enough, ODR distinguishes between Island-born Puerto Ricans and New York Puerto Ricans. The first are thought of as immigrants, the second as problematic locals in cahoots with African Americans.

This distinction proves to be significant given that, by the 1990s, most of the New York Puerto Rican population is of the second and third generations. Whereas in 1950 almost all of the Puerto Ricans living in New York City had been born in Puerto Rico, by 1990 the opposite was true. Therefore, presently, the majority of Puerto Ricans in New York have been born in the fifty states, making Puerto Ricans the only Latino group in New York for which this is true (New York City Department of City Planning, 1994).

These differentiations between (relatively) recent Latino immigrants and seasoned locals are also made by Puerto Ricans themselves, particularly youths, who side with African Americans in teasing and "getting over on" (taking advantage of) "herbs" –most typically defined as new immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America, who are stereotyped as ignorant and easy to take advantage of.

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Red graffiti alongside the FDR Drive, on the easternmost end of El Barrio, denounces the ganging up on Mexicans by Blacks, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. The dripping and crudely written phrases "BLACK ABUSIVE," "PR y RD SANGRE," (Puerto Ricans and Dominicans blood) and "PR SON TRAICIONEROS" (Puerto Ricans are treacherous) tell a silent but still vivid tale of youth ethno-racial alliances and rivalries in New York.

Using the Lower East Side neighborhood she studied as an example, Urciuoli illustrates how in many New York neighborhoods there are no stable boundaries separating African American and Puerto Rican social life, particularly when it comes to young people:

> In this context, Puerto Ricans and African Americans do not make up entirely separate groups. They differ in how they define themselves and are defined by many of the things they do and in language. But in part through their shared history of class exclusion, they share a great deal of what they do, how they talk, and how they define themselves. They constantly interact. They make friends and sometimes enemies. They date and marry each other. They mix in adolescent cliques. Puerto Rican boys pick up slang, pronunciation, and grammatical phrasing from African American boys, who pick up Spanish phrases from Puerto Rican friends. (Urciuoli 1996, 65)

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"[22] 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 1985; Rose 1994), is the quintessential contemporary expression of this structural and cultural congruence --like doo wop and Latin Soul were during the 1950s and 1960s.

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[22] Bourdieu (1993, 482) explains habitus as a "system of structured, structuring dispositions." Urciuoli applies it in the case of African American and Puerto Ricans, to indicate that the experiences, perceptions and actions of Puerto Ricans and African Americans 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.

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Congruence, however, does not translate into an absence of rifts, tensions and exclusions. The marginalization experienced by Puerto Ricans in the hip hop realm has been neither fortuitous nor circumstantial, but is related to the historical relations between the two groups, and the particular position that each occupies in the city's racial and socio-economic hierarchies. In Torres' view, African Americans and Puerto Ricans find themselves acting "often in tandem, occasionally at odds" (1995, 23). Despite their long history of cooperation and alliances, African Americans and Puerto Ricans also have a parallel history of conflicts (Miles 1992; Morales 1986; Torres 1995).

Ethno-Racial Rifts Among Puerto Ricans and African Americans

Cultural identity, production, and entitlement have most often been invested with the notion that Puerto Ricans are *like* blacks, but *not* black. In Flores' 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" (1992-93, 28). Part of this cultural baggage is a very Eurocentric notion of *latinidad* (Flores 1996; Fox 1996; Pabón 1995; Thomas 1967). Puerto Rican *latinidad* is most often constructed in such a way as to preclude its coexistence with Puerto Rican Africanness.

Puerto Ricans in the United States most frequently pose ethno-cultural identification as being of greater importance than racial identification (V. Rodríguez 1997; C. Rodríguez 1991, 52), even though ethno-cultural notions of Puerto Ricanness are racially constituted (Rodríguez-Morazzani 1996). A self-described multi-racial, culturally distinct group, Puerto Ricans have resisted compliance with the reigning system of racial classification in the United States, according to which, typically, any known African ancestry makes a person black.

Historically, the United States developed what has been termed a hypo-descent (where people of mixed ancestry are identified with the subordinate group) or one-drop rule (one drop of "black blood" makes a person black) (Fredrickson 1981; Omi and Winant 1994). The system of racial classification that evolved in Latin America was different for it depended more upon somatic characteristics than on heredity (Degler 1971; Davis 1991; Hoetink 1985; Seda Bonilla 1968). Put in other terms, Latin American racial categories depend more upon "color" (and other physical characteristics) and class

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than on "race" per se (Betances 1974). In Latin America, skin tone, facial characteristics and hair type, along with class markings like dress, body language and speech patterns, all have bearing on race (Rodríguez 1991, 52). Members of the same family may actually be categorized differently. Another great difference between the two systems of racial classification is the white-black dichotomy in the U.S., which contrasts with the recognition of a wide variety of intermediate racial possibilities in Latin America (Degler 1986; Davis 1991).

The dominant Puerto Rican discourse of miscegenation or *mestizaje* poses national identity and racial make-up as a blend of African, Taíno and European (primarily Spanish) elements. Miscegenation is built into the language of community and nationality (Blanco 1985; González 1989; Grosfoguel and Negrón-Muntaner 1997; Pedreira 1992). But to choose one race over the other --according to the way in which race is thought of in the United States-- has been perceived as denying a part of one's self. Piri Thomas gave voice to this sentiment by writing,

> It wasn't right to be ashamed of what one was. It was like hating Momma for the color she was and Poppa for the color he wasn't (Thomas 1967, 121).

But there is yet another reason why Puerto Ricans have refused to accept the one-drop rule and identify as blacks. Although a multi-racial people, Puerto Ricans are still the bearers of strong anti-black prejudice (Zenón Cruz 1975; Díaz Quiñones 1985; Jorge 1986; González 1989; Sánchez 1998). Therefore, not only have most Puerto Ricans (regardless of their color) not considered themselves black, but they have held their "blacker" African American neighbors in contempt. Anti-black sentiment was brought with them from Puerto Rico and bred within Puerto Rican communities in the continent; these attitudes were compounded with the adoption of U.S. prejudices against African Americans (Blanco 1985, 102; López 1980, 324).

For many African Americans, the Puerto Rican insistence on identifying primarily by ethno-cultural affiliation or national origins and not along "racial" lines, combined with Puerto Rican racism, have not made Puerto Ricans dependable partners in race-based struggles. Suspicion and prejudices have thus run both ways.

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Cultural Production and New York's Black Diaspora

Hip hop, as a realm of joint Black and Puerto Rican cultural expression, must be contextualized not only within the previously discussed common structural history of African Americans and Puerto Ricans, but also within a long standing history of joint cultural production (Boggs 1992; Flores 1988, 1999; Roberts 1979; Toop 1991).

"Latin" music benefited from an interest by African American audiences on the wane of the Harlem Renaissance (Glasser 1991, 39). In the 1930s and 1940s, Puerto Ricans participated along with African American and Cuban musicians in the production of Afro-Cuban Jazz and Latin Jazz. There was also a collaboration of African Americans and Puerto Ricans in rhythm-and-blues music of the late 1950s. One example is the greatly successful Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. This group had two African American members, two Puerto Ricans and one Dominican (Lipsitz 1994, 82; Rodríguez-Morazzani 1996, 110).

The Latin *bugalú* of the 1960s, which mixed mambo with early black rock-and-roll, has been described by John Storm Roberts as "a genuine reflection of the impact of 1960s black music on young Latins" (Roberts 1979, 167). Ricardo Ray and Willie Colón, both New York born Puerto Ricans, were among its exponents. Hits like Joe Cuba's "Bang Bang" (which sold over a million copies) and Héctor Rivera's "At The Party" were very popular both among African American as well as Latino teenagers (Flores 1999; Lipsitz 1994; Salazar, 1992).

Latin Soul, the broader musical tree of which *bugalú* represented a branch, had been developed by Puerto Ricans and African Americans. Joe Bataan, a musician of Filipino and African American ancestry and ex-leader of El Barrio gangs the Young Copasetics and The Dragons, and Jimmy Castor, an African American, were both central figures in Latin Soul. Jimmy Castor's music later became a pivotal component of the hip hop soundtrack. "It's Just Begun", a b-boy and b-girl classic of the early 1970s, mixed timbales breaks with Sly Stone bridges --a further profession of Afro-diasporic hybridity involving African Americans and Caribbean Latinos (Toop 1991, 22).

The Last Poets, a group of poets/musicians whose vocal styles are direct precursors of hip hop's lyrical styles (Mansbach 1996; Toop 1991), were outspoken critics of the marginalization of

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African descendants in the Americas --Puerto Ricans included. Felipe Luciano, a New York Puerto Rican who was also a Young Lords Party leader, was one of the Last Poets four original members.

Hip hop culture is yet another testimony to African American-Puerto Rican cultural production and socio-political action. Just as previous generations had done before them, Puerto Rican and African American youngsters in the 1970s transformed their potentially forced joint segregation into a chosen partnership.

Hip hop, in many senses, has transcended the inter-ethnic rifts between Puerto Ricans and African Americans. Puerto Ricans have participated in it along with African Americans right from the start. Nevertheless, particularly in terms of hip hop's musical component, record-spinning (DJing) and rhyming (MCing), Puerto Ricans' cultural "entitlement" to these art forms has been a realm of contention.

Part of the problem has to do with the fact that understandings of blackness and Afro-diasporic cultural identity are frequently fractured along national or ethno-cultural lines, so that the connections between those that populate what Gilroy (1993) has termed "The Black Atlantic" are camouflaged. Accounts of change, interaction and complexity are often sacrificed when historical memory and analysis are circumscribed to national or ethno-cultural borders (Aponte 1995; Fusco 1995; Gilroy 1993). Much of the history of political thought, activism and cultural expression regarded as either discretely African American or Puerto Rican, has actually been "generated by the broader experience of appropriation and transformation within the African diaspora" (Rodríguez-Morazzani 1996, 153. However, academic, media and popular understandings all frequently fail to take into account the complexities of the Black Atlantic, relying instead on narrow visions of history and identity.

The creative expression of Puerto Ricans through hip hop art forms cannot be easily incorporated into the dominant discourses of Puerto Rican nationhood (Alegría 1971; Fernández Méndez 1970; Seda Bonilla 1994). Pabón points out that the dominant *"discurso de la puertorriqueñidad"* (Puerto Ricanness discourse) is one which

> reduces our nationality to an ethnic essence (Hispanicity) and/or a linguistic essence (Spanish). This is a discourse that proposes a homogenous and Hispanophilic nationality. In other words, it upholds a national imaginary that erases others,

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eliminates difference and excludes the vast majority of Puerto Ricans.[23] (Pabón 1995, 22)

Given this narrow and dominant view of what "*puertorriqueñidad*"is, rap music goes beyond the confines of what has most often been defined as "Puerto Rican national culture" for various reasons.

Rap is a genre that originated outside Puerto Rico[24] and which has been heavily based upon Afro-diasporic traditions which are often perceived as incompatible with Puerto Rican musical tradition. It is a music strongly rooted in African American music and oral tradition, being informed by blues, jazz, funk, soul, signifyin', the dozens, scat and jive talk (Toop 1991). Jamaican sound systems, dub poetry and reggae have also been primary sources for rap music (Hebdige 1987). This genre thus draws from Afro-diasporic cultural traditions that are perceived to break with the perception of an "essential" Puerto Rican Hispanicity.

Rap can be better understood through theorizations of culture that break with the dominant Hispanocentric and territorial mold. Gilroy's (1993) exploration of a "Black Atlantic" culture, though largely ignoring the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, still provides a conceptual blueprint with which to extricate the discussion of rap from the Hispanocentric constructions that most often define the terms of the debate. Thus, instead of being posed as a "foreign" cultural product, developed by the U.S. black Other, rap can be contextualized within and related to other cultural formations in the African Diaspora that includes the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Not only Gilroy's thesis, but other theories of cultural expression as fluid transterritorial phenomena (Canclini 1992; Flores 1993; Hall 1990; Manuel 1995) have also informed my approach to this investigation.

One day in March of 1997, in the midst of conducting the research for this project, I stepped off the #7 train on 5th Avenue, pondering a hip hop connoisseur's assertion that, for Caribbean Latinos,

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[23] The translation is mine.

[24] Rap's musical and oral sources challenge the dominant narrow territorial conception of nationhood. Fernández Méndez (1970, 8) offers an example of this territorial approach in the form of his lapidary statement that Puerto Rican culture "is nothing else but a concrete historical reality: that which takes place in a territory called Puerto Rico." Rap's Afro-diasporic and Caribbean linkages pose a threat to the dominant national identity discourse since this approach to identity is invested in drawing borders between nations (Aponte 1995).

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when "you're hip hop, you accept your blackness" (Rodríguez 1995a). He had offered as an example the hip hop duo Beatnuts (Ju-Ju is Dominican, Psycho Les is Colombian) having used, as the opening to one of their songs, a sample of an old Latin Jazz record which declares: "This is not Spanish, this is Afro-Spanish." As my mind spun and wandered, I witnessed a brief verbal exchange between two men, one African American and the other a Caribbean Latino, which gave me even more food for thought.

> I was walking down the subway station's long tiled hallway, when I heard and then saw a late-30s, slim man with dark brown skin, dark sunglasses and black beret cocked Panther-style (or was it beatnik style?). He was doing some nice stuff on a drum. To my right, a brown skinned (slightly lighter than the first) chubby guy, probably in his late 30s too, wearing a baseball cap, T-shirt and jeans, had his headphones on. He took his headphones off as he approached the drummer. Without slowing down his pace, he said in a tone implying a recommendation: "Salsa." He said it with an "English" accent, even though it was evident that his first language was Spanish. The drummer responded, still playing: "Naah, Afro." The Latino man insisted, saying it slower and with more emphasis: "¡Salsa!" The drummer --who was African American-- shot back, once again: "¡Afro!" They went back and forth with the same script a few more times.
>
> Though I stood quiet, I felt like asking them: "What's the big difference? Isn't salsa 'Afro'?" What a great example of how ethnic differences between African Americans and Latinos are at times viewed as so intense that not even the distinctly Afro-diasporic music of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is viewed as "Afro"!

Hip hop, as a site of internal movement and contentions, at times challenges and other times supports these limiting understandings of history and culture that slight the richness and complexity of the African Diaspora. Though hip hop artistic expressions (save for graffiti), in practice, have been fundamentally Afro-diasporic cultural forms, they have still been affected by narrow understandings of blackness.

New York Ricans: Drifting Away?

. . . hip hop is typically labeled "Black music," thereby failing to acknowledge the Latino influence in the creation of hip-hop culture.

Miguel Burke, "Puerto Rico...Ho!!!"

Even Black people that don't like hip hop realize it's part of their culture; these motherfuckers don't.

Q-Unique

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Manuel (1995), in the book *Caribbean Currents* (1995), includes a section on "Latin rap." Considering the notions of purity that frequently guide discussions of national culture and the distaste with which rap is often regarded by Latin Americanist intellectuals, I was pleased to see the inclusion of this musical genre. Furthermore, Manuel recognizes that nowadays rap has "replaced salsa as the real voice of the barrio." However, in seeking to acknowledge the importance of rap for young Latinos, he forwards the notion that Puerto Ricans "adopted" hip hop --a cultural expression of the Black Other. Manuel explains:

> Among English-speaking Newyoricans in the 1980s who were growing up with ghetto blacks and *inundated* with hip-hop culture, there developed a widespread tendency to *adopt* contemporary Afro-American dress, mannerisms, and music (emphasis mine). (Manuel 1995, 92)

The rich history of African American-Puerto Rican cultural cross-fertilization is absent from this account. New York Puerto Rican hip hoppers are portrayed as having been "inundated" by this "Afro-American" culture, when in fact they were the willful, skillful and enthusiastic co-originators of this culture.

Manuel is far from the only one suggesting that Latino hip hop artists and audiences are somehow participating in a cultural expression of the ethno-racial Other. George Lipsitz describes both New York Puerto Rican *bugalú* and hip hop artists as "devotees of African-American culture" who by displaying a "strategic anti-essentialism" "bring to the surface important aspects of who they are by playing at something they are not" (1994, 71). In this manner, Lipsitz draws parallels between these Puerto Rican artists, the Mardi Gras black participants who dress up as "Indians" and Chicano punk rockers. Though the concept of "strategic anti-essentialisms" is potentially illuminating, the leveling of the practices of all three groups as "disguises" through which they play "at something they are not" disregards some crucial distinctions. Is there not a substantial difference between Chicano punk rockers who participate in a realm of cultural expression which started among young people in Britain and the New York Puerto Rican hip hoppers whose contributions and participation have made hip hop culture what it is? How can hip hop possibly be described as a "disguise" for the New York Puerto

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Ricans for whom hip hop is a vernacular cultural realm, as much a part of their experience as "salsa and colonialism" (Rodríguez, 1996a)?

Percussionist Johnny Almendra shares with Manuel and Lipsitz the premise of hip hop being the product of the non-Puerto Rican Other which Puerto Ricans have "adopted." But unlike the latter, Almendra attaches a negative connotation to the phenomenon.

> I tell you, we're losing a lot of the kids to Hip Hop, because a lot of them don't speak Spanish... These kids are being influenced by other musics, so was I, but I chose to listen to *my* music. And I listened to Elvis Presley, too, but something was calling me (Salazar 1995, 21).

Sergio George, a well-known musician and producer, head of Sir George Entertainment, shares Manuel and Almendra's assumption that hip hop is a foreign or outside influence on Latino youths. George grew up in East Harlem. He recalls that before he got into Latin music (Willie Colón, Héctor Lavoe, Fania All Stars), he was "strictly into black music." The following is an excerpt of an interview conducted by Jorge Cano-Moreno.

> J. C. M. : As a black Latino what are your feelings on Latino roles in Black Music or rather should we be limited to just Latin music?
> Sergio George: That's a difficult question. Personally, it is tough but I have decided to stick to my *own people* and use the influences I like from black music.[...] I feel I have to stick with *my people* and by that I just don't mean Puerto Ricans that includes Dominicans, Cubans, Colombians; it has to include all Latinos. We all share the same kind of struggles and hopes. (Cano-Moreno 1995)

George does not suggest that Latinos have no business doing "Black" music. On the contrary, he mentions R&B and even hip hop as some of his largest musical influences. What George does accept is the dichotomy between Latin and Black music. This dichotomy reaches beyond musical categories to the realm of lived relations, manifesting itself in definitions of community and political solidarities. He has opted to deal with these rifts between the African American and the Latino community by "stick[ing] to my own people".

Manuel, Lipsitz, Almendra and George all share the assumption that hip hop is "Black music" --though they diverge in terms of the judgment attached to it. And although Latinos may enjoy and be influenced by this "Black music," it is the music of the ethno-racial Other.

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Conclusion

Puerto Ricans are deemed Latinos --a category based on the assumed shared history, culture and language of the territories colonized by Spain. But the history of Puerto Rican migration and racialization in New York sets this group apart from the rest of Latino immigrants and brings them closer to African Americans. African Americans and Puerto Ricans are the quintessential resident minorities of the New York context. Certain historical factors pull Puerto Ricans into the Latino narrative (Spanish language, Catholicism, and other cultural factors deriving from a history of Spanish colonization), but others draw them closer to African Americans and toward blackness (language use among most members of the second and subsequent generations, citizenship, residential segregation, labor marginality, poverty, negative symbolic capital and public image).

The following chapters describe how these forces that pull Puerto Ricans in opposite directions have manifested themselves in a particular cultural phenomenon, namely the musical aspect of hip hop culture. Using hip hop as an example, I explore how Puerto Rican identity is articulated and negotiated through a navigation between *latinidad* and blackness. I also address how Puerto Ricanness has been constructed in conjunction with and with respect to African Americanness.

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PART I

A HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

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CHAPTER 3

1970s AND EARLY 1980s:

"IT'S JUST BEGUN" [25]

The South Boogie Down

What *is* hip hop? Most simply, it is an inner-city subculture that has created its own graphic art, dance, fashion, and musical styles. However, to really understand what this subculture is about, one has to travel back twenty years to a time when the Bronx was undergoing a period of rapid social change.
Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*

So you think that hip hop had its start out in Queensbridge?
If you pop that junk up in the Bronx you might not live
'Cause you're in South Bronx, the South, South Bronx
Boogie Down Productions, "South Bronx"

By the 1970s, the South Bronx was internationally known as the epitome of urban blight in the United States. The world watched in a mix of horror and voyeuristic fascination as a large proportion of the South Bronx's physical structures burned and crumbled.[26] This area was said to be "the most famous slum in America" (Lemann 1991), "the dark side of hell" (Rodríguez Juliá 1988, 29), the "international symbol of urban decay and devastation," "home of the poorest of the poor," "a disaster area," "like the bombed-out cities of Europe after World War II" (Rodríguez 1991, 109). In typical blame-the-victim fashion, responsibility was placed squarely on the shoulders of South Bronx residents (Berman, 1999). It was during this period of Bronx history that hip hop, as we know it, was born.

The South Bronx is widely recognized in oral, written, filmed and audio recorded accounts of hip hop's history as the place where the art forms that make up the expressive foundation of hip hop

[25] "It's Just Begun" is the title of a 1972 song by Jimmy Castor and the Funky Bunch which is considered one of hip hop's early break-beat "classics." For more on "break-beats" see the section entitled: "Break-beats and the Meanings of Blackness."
[26] See Wallace and Wallace (1998) for an incisive indictment of New York City's public policy during the 1970s with regards to housing and the poor which evolved from "benign neglect" to "active planned shrinkage." This policy shift involved cutbacks in fire services in the poorest city neighborhoods --among them the South Bronx, Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant-- which set the context for the ensuing "fire epidemics."

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-- DJing; MCing or rhyming; breaking (b-boying/b-girling); and graffiti writing-- first came together under very specific terms during the first half of the 1970s.[27] African Americans, Puerto Ricans and West Indians were the groups most heavily involved in the development of these expressive forms within the hip hop scene[28] (Flores 1988; Rose 1994; Thompson 1996; Toop 1991).

Puerto Ricans made up the largest ethno-racial group 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 largely 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 1995; Verán 1991).

As is the case of any other culture, hip hop was intimately related to the socio-economic and political realities of the time. The social conditions and economic prospects for young people of color living in poor communities during the 1960s and 1970s were appalling. African-Americans and Puerto Ricans living in New York, in particular, shared similar conditions and, quite often, the same workplaces and dilapidated neighborhoods, and were served by the same decaying schools and hospitals. As Bronx DJ, producer and MC, KMX-Assault explained of Blacks and Puerto Ricans in

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27 The creative impulses behind hip hop, however, were not exclusive to the South Bronx. Young people in other city neighborhoods participated in expressive phenomenons related to what eventually became known as hip hop culture, at times unaware that these expressions were not confined to the borders of their immediate community. Lee Quiñones, a famous Puerto Rican graffiti artist who grew up in Manhattan's Lower East Side, says that around 1974 he was still unaware that the park jams featuring MCs and DJs were not exclusive to his neighborhood. Furthermore, he had not yet realized that the media-propelled stereotypes of the South Bronx as a wasteland were not quite true: "I had no idea they were doing that shit in The Bronx and Spanish Harlem. I thought The Bronx was a place where trains were laid up and people were going nuts, you know?" (Lascaibar 1997).

28 Early forms of contemporary graffiti were being practiced in New York years before it converged with what later become known as the other hip hop art forms; some graffiti artists --particularly "white" artists-- did not and do not see their art as connected to hip hop (BOM5 1996; Bravo 1997), leading some to question hip hop's claim to graffiti and the accuracy of describing graffiti as "one of the four elements of hip hop." Vee Bravo, senior editor of *Stress* magazine, objects to what he terms the "romanticized Big Bang theory" of hip

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New York during the 1960s and 1970s: "You lived next door; you shared the same cockroaches" (Vázquez, Flores and Figueroa 1992-93, 41).

Government "urban renewal" projects of the 1960s and early 1970s, like the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, entailed the dislocation of communities of color in the South Bronx[29] (Berman 1988). Although there was a substantial Jewish population in these neighborhoods, Black and Puerto Rican residents were disproportionately affected by the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway (Rose 1994, 31). To top things off, this was an expressway whose purpose was to make commuting easier for suburban residents, not to improve the quality of life in inner-city ghettoes.

The South Bronx during these two decades saw an unprecedented flight of jobs and residents and a great decrease in housing options. In the decade beginning in 1970, the South Bronx lost 27,763 housing units --the equivalent of 10.5% of total housing available. Certain health areas of the South-Central Bronx actually lost 80% of both housing units and population (Wallace and Wallace 1998). The demographic composition of the area also changed radically. During that same decade, 87% of the white population moved. In 1970, 20.2% of the population was white, 33.9% Black and 35.1% Hispanic; by 1980, 91% of the population was Black and Hispanic. Puerto Ricans were the largest group in the South Bronx throughout the decade (Rodríguez 1991, 109).

The plight of the South Bronx was connected to economic changes at both the city and the global levels. New York as a whole experienced a serious economic downturn in the 1960s and 1970s. This downturn was tightly linked to the shifting position of New York --as well as other U.S. cities-- with respect to the global economy (Torres 1995; Wilson 1987). Historically a manufacturing center, the New York economy was turning more towards the financial and service sectors. The ensuing loss of manufacturing jobs had the most intense effects among racialized minorities, particularly Blacks and

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hop where the "Holy Trinity" of hip hop music, dancing and visual art suddenly came to life in the South Bronx (Bravo 1997).

[29] The disproportionate negative impact of "urban renewal" projects on poor African Americans and Puerto Ricans was not only felt in the South Bronx, but in many other areas of the city. Critics of the city government's approach to "urban renewal" dubbed it "urban removal" and --more explicitly indicative of the racial underpinnings of the policies-- as "Negro removal" (Binder and Reimers 1995; Muñiz 1998).

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Puerto Ricans, whose livelihood depended heavily upon the industry. Puerto Ricans were even more dramatically affected since, unlike African Americans, their loss of industrial jobs was not offset by opportunities in service and clerical occupations, nor in the public sector (Torres 1995, 87).

As living conditions in the city deteriorated, there was a growing amount of middle-class flight towards the suburbs. As the primarily white middle-class left, the city's tax base suffered a severe setback. To compound the situation, these new suburbanites became commuters, keeping their jobs in the city and thus not opening up these positions for city residents. Between the postwar years and the 1970s, New York City's white population decreased by 25%. Blacks and Puerto Ricans made up 33% of the city population by 1970 (Torres 1995, 44-45).

These changes for the worse in economic and social conditions in New York City had the greatest impact on people of color. Blacks and Latinos disproportionately occupied the bottom fifth of the income scale in the period 1978-1986. The proportion of households living at or below the poverty level during the same period was 40% for Puerto Ricans (30% for Hispanics) and 25% for African Americans (Rose 1994, 28).

Tricia Rose explains that "early Puerto Rican, Afro-Caribbean and black American hip hop artists transformed obsolete vocational skills from marginal occupations into the raw materials for creativity and resistance." Puerto Rican graffiti writer Futura 2000, for example, attended a trade school that specialized in the printing industry. He wound up working at Mac Donald's after graduation, however, since a lot of the work he had been trained to do could be performed by computers (Rose 1994, 34). One of the "pioneer" hip hop DJs, Grandmaster Flash, applied the skills learned through training as an electrician to his musical craft, giving rise to developments such as homemade mixers that better served the needs of hip hop DJs (Hager 1984) and the "beat box," a precursor of the drum machine later used in rap records (George 1999).

Hip hop culture was born out of material deprivation, in the midst of dwindling income, educational access and job opportunities (Berman 1999; Hager 1984; Rose 1994). Berman actually argues that hip hop perhaps did not arise *despite* these conditions but *because* of them:

> Even in its greatest misery and anguish --and in some sense, I think, *because of* its misery and anguish--the Bronx became more culturally creative than it had ever been

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> in its life. As a Bronx character in Grace Paley's short story "Somewhere Else" put it, 'The block is burning down on one side of the street, and the kids are trying to build something on the other.' In the midst of dying, it was busy being reborn. (Berman 1999, 79)

DJs, MCs, b-boys, b-girls and graffiti writers unleashed their "oppressed creativity,"[30] extracting joy, beauty, music and poetry out of urban decay. They constructed a booming soundscape out of old records and beat-up turntables; they converted drab subway cars into vibrant masterpieces that loudly testified to their skill and ingenuity; they made nimble bodies and quick tongues into tools for cultural construction.

George (1999) contrasts the mass mediated portrayals of the Bronx as a cultural wasteland in popular films such as *The Warriors* and *Fort Apache: The Bronx* with the actual vibrant creative scene that was the South Bronx in the 70s. Contrary to these films, *Wild Style* (1982), a low-budget production that was the first to document hip hop, actually concentrates on celebrating the beauty and energy of South Bronx youth culture. The film takes a critical stance regarding socio-economic conditions, neither demonizing nor romanticizing the area and its residents. It was filmed on location in the South Bronx and featured key hip hop artists of the time who portrayed roles very close to their own lives.

Fab Five Freddy, an African American graffiti artist from Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, who portrayed "Phade" (a graffiti writer turned shady hip hop promoter) and who was also the film's associate producer and musical director, says regarding film portrayals of the South Bronx:

> . . . in the movie Fort Apache every Black or Puerto Rican person was either a pimp, a hustler or a criminal. We wanted to show there's a lot more happening in the Bronx. (Flores 1984)

A particularly striking sequence from *Wild Style* has one of the film's main characters, a Puerto Rican graffiti artist named Ray (played by Puerto Rican aerosol artist Lee Quiñones), riding alone in a train car whose walls are covered with graffiti tags. Ray had earlier expressed to Phade that he needed to take a train ride in order to seek ideas and inspiration for his next graffiti piece. As Ray

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[30] Pee Wee Dance of the Rock Steady Crew expressed in DJ Tony Touch's Tape #45: "Understand hip hop culture is a Black and Latino manifestation of an oppressed creativity[...]."

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pensively stares out a window, the camera captures the empty lots, rubble, garbage and abandoned buildings that stand alongside the train's path. A rhyme by the Cold Crush Brothers' Grandmaster Caz is heard in the background:

> Look past the garbage, over the trains
> Under the ruins, through the remains
> Around the crime and pollution
> And tell me where I fit in
> South Bronx, New York, that's where I dwell
> To a lot of people it's a living hell
> Full of frustration and poverty
> But wait, that's not how it looks to me
> It's the challenge and opportunity
> To rise above the state of debris
> You gotta start with nothing and then you build

The South Bronx landscape may have been in great part harsh, barren and burnt; but for Ray and his peers, it was also a source of inspiration and creative energy. *Wild Style* compellingly documents how through graffiti, music and dance, young people in the South Bronx transformed that landscape, "making things look all beautiful, man."[31]

A South Bronx Story: Ray Meets Bam

Around 1975, a ten-year-old Puerto Rican with a big afro and who answered to either Ray or Norman was riding around the Bronx on his "banana seat" bicycle. He saw a "chubby black kid," a little older than himself, tagging (writing graffiti) up on a bridge. Ray stopped to talk to him and they had an animated conversation about tagging.

The year before that, Ray had become a member of the kids' division of the Puerto Rican gang Savage Skulls. But he wasn't wearing his "colors" that day and his being with the Savage Skulls didn't come up in the conversation. The other boy was a member of one of the Savage Skulls' rival

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[31] From a line uttered by "Phade" (Fab 5 Freddy): "It's about time we get some publicity for this goddam rap shit, you know. People rapping, man, us out there doing art on the subway, making things look all beautiful, man."

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gangs, the Black Spades[32], who were predominantly African American. But he wasn't wearing his "colors" that day either.

The next time they saw each other, however, their ethnic-based gang allegiances came up. Ray was passing by the Bronx River Houses as the other kid was hanging out in front with a bunch of other guys Ray knew to be Black Spades. Ray waved. The other kid waved back. Then Ray gave them the finger as he started pedaling away at full speed. They hurled rocks and bottles, but he escaped unscathed.

Ray later found out that the chubby black kid's name was Afrika Bambaataa and that he was throwing a jam at the Bronx River Houses. Ray wanted to go, but he was a little afraid, given the finger incident. But he went anyway, with his mostly Puerto Rican crew, SMD (Sound Master Disco), for which he was a DJ. To Ray's surprise, gang and ethno-racial rivalries were left to the side that night and they had a great time. In fact, he remembers these early hip hop parties as signaling the beginning of an era where gangs receded in importance, as hip hop-based crews became more significant organizing vehicles for young people.[33]

Little did Ray imagine then that Afrika Bambaataa would become known years later as the Godfather of Hip Hop, or that those early jams at the Bronx River Houses in the South Bronx were the beginning of one of the most vibrant and popular forms of musical expression of the late twentieth century.

Nowadays, Ray is a veteran graffiti writer and member of the Rock Steady Crew who is known as BOM5. (BOM5 1998)

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[32] Afrika Islam, a New Yorker who relocated to Los Angeles and is known for producing rapper Ice T and credited with extending the Zulu Nation to Los Angeles, describes the Black Spades as "basically based after, like either [a] semi-black liberation army, somewhere between the Black Panthers and a motorcycle gang without motorcycles." (Cross 1994, 160)
[33] See Hager (1984).

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Break-beats and the Meanings of Blackness

Jimmy Castor's 1972 song, entitled "It's Just Begun," starts with a raspy male voice: "*What we gonna do right here is go back, way back, back into time...*" Then there's a brief horn intro. Immediately after, the percussion, bass, and guitar kick in, full force.

"It's Just Begun" is a perfect point of departure in exploring Puerto Rican musical participation in hip hop. Its Sly Stone-style guitar and heavy timbales percussion stand as products of decades of African American and Puerto Rican cultural collaboration and a testimony of Afro-diasporic hybridity. Castor, a well-known African American musician, had been an important figure in the Latin Soul genre heavily cultivated, mostly by Puerto Ricans and African Americans, in the 1960s (Flores 1999; Roberts 1979; Toop 1991). His music was also pivotal in the early years of hip hop.

"It's Just Begun" is one of the early "break-beat" classics and was popularized at a time when hip hop was already in motion but had not yet been baptized as such. It was because of songs like this one --along with others like James Brown's "Give It Up or Turn It Loose," "Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved," "Sex Machine" (and plenty more of his songs), Bob Smith's "Apache," Rufus Thomas' "Do the Funky Penguin"-- and the fact that they became known as break-beat music, that the dance style that developed to its rhythms was called b-boying or b-girling. Initially, just called "burning" or "going off," an influential DJ from the Bronx known as Kool Herc is credited with giving the dance element of hip hop its name (Hager 1984, 33). As stated in Q-Unique's mix-tape *Beats for the Breakers*:

> B-boying started from a man called Kool Herc. He is the godfather of hip hop and he used to throw jams in the Boogie Down Bronx. And he used to have two members of his crew called the Nigger Twins. They are the pioneers of the b-boy world. And before Kool Herc would throw on the beat, he would get on the mic and say: "B-boys are you ready? B-girls are you ready?" He would throw on the break-beats and the b-girls and the b-boys would go off. So the "b" stands for the break of the record, and the boy or the girl who is out there doing it stands for the boys and girls. (Q-Unique 199?)

Break-beat music provided an antidote to the perceived rhythmic blandness of disco, where the percussive break was either just one more element in the song, or it was masked, or even altogether eliminated (Toop 1991, 60 ; Rose 1994, 47). On the contrary, break-beat music foregrounded the rhythm. Instead of weaving one disco song into the next, as most disc jockeys at the time did, the Bronx DJs credited with the early development of hip hop sounds --namely Kool DJ Herc,

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Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa-- relied more on hard funk records and emphasized the breaks of the songs, meaning the point in a song when the rhythmic patterns created by the instruments are isolated from the melodic and harmonic components.

Using two turntables and two copies of the same record, these DJs extended the breaks of songs and actually made them the tune's main feature. The breaks used ranged from the funk drumming of James Brown records, to the timbales of Jimmy Castor's songs, to the drum intros of rock groups like The Rolling Stones.

Kool DJ Herc, a Jamaican who came to New York in 1967 as a twelve year old, is credited with popularizing the use of powerful Jamaican sound-systems and toasting. Toasting is one of the precursors of MCing (rapping) and consists of speaking and rhyming in witty and syncopated ways over records. Afrika Bambaataa became well-known for his parties where he would throw together all kinds of funky crowd-pleasers from Jimmy Castor to James Brown, as well as unexpected sounds that included Japanese electronic music, the Rolling Stones, Beethoven and Malcolm X speeches. Grandmaster Flash (a second-generation Barbadian) is credited with developing several DJing techniques, among them the "backspin," where a record is quickly spun backward on the groove so that a certain phrase may be repeated.

Kool DJ Herc, the man known as the "Godfather of Hip Hop" or the "Father of Hip Hop," began DJing in 1973 (Hager 1984, 32) and found out early in his DJ career that playing "Latin-tinged funk" moved the crowd much better than the reggae beats he started out with (Toop 1991, 60). This is not to say that "Latin" music was openly embraced by early hip hop audiences --one thing was a Latin tinge, another was straight-up Latin music.

Bambaataa recalls that many in his mostly African American and Puerto Rican audience claimed to like neither "Latin" music nor rock. He used to get a kick out of making dancers groove to this music that they claimed to dislike. He would throw on only the break part and "you'd see the blacks and the Spanish just *throwing* down, dancing crazy" (Toop 1991, 66). Confronted with the fact that they just danced their hearts out to music they were supposedly not into, party goers used to react either with surprise or plain disbelief.

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DJ Charlie Chase of the Cold Crush Brothers was one of the first famed Puerto Rican hip hop DJs. He began spinning records later than Kool Herc and Bambaataa, during the late 70s. Like Bambaataa, he also talks of sneaking in Latin music at jams. He used to slip in elements like funky baselines from Bobby Valentín and other Latino bands, concealing them just enough so that people could inadvertently enjoy them and not walk off the dance floor (Flores 1992).

These DJs' experiences illustrate how, even though the early hip hop participants were multi-ethnic (mostly African American, West Indian and Puerto Rican), their point of musical convergence was funk-based. Toop points out that though reggae and salsa have been important influences in the development of hip hop, they have been "plundered but rarely met on [their] own terms" (Toop 1991, 104). The early hip hop sounds were known for the incorporation of diverse musical influences; among these were reggae and "Latin" music. These, however, were deemed additions to what was perceived as the core: funk, a musical form which was not only part of an African American cultural tradition but, more importantly, popularly understood to be so.

DJs like Bambaataa may have been particularly innovative and may have incorporated a variety of unexpected sources into the music they were spinning. However, there was still an ethno-racially identified musical "base" from which additions and innovations could take place. Afro-diasporic youths were not simply converging on a certain musical style; more importantly, funk was an ethno-racially identified musical style. Funk's blackness was very narrowly defined and was restricted to African Americans. Hip hop, an heir to the funk tradition, also became identified with this narrow (non-Diasporic) view of blackness. Though Caribbeans and African Americans were equally invested as hip hop participants, hip hop was often perceived to be lodged within a Black (non-Caribbean) matrix.

"Morenos"[34] and "Porto Rocks" [35]

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[34] "Moreno" is a Spanish word to describes someone with "dark" skin. While in Puerto Rico "moreno" is used to describe anyone (whether Puerto Rican or not) with dark skin, the term is most often used by Puerto Ricans in New York to refer to African Americans.

[35] "Puerto Rock" has been a mocking term used to described Puerto Rican hip hoppers. This moniker has been reappropriated by Puerto Ricans as a means to

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Hip hop began as an ethno-racially inclusive sphere of cultural production. Poet and recording artist Sekou Sundiata's recollections of growing up in East Harlem in the 1960s could very well be describing the social and cultural interaction of African Americans and Puerto Ricans during the 1970s --not only in East Harlem, but in other city neighborhoods like the South Bronx, Williamsburg and the Lower East Side.

> Yeah, there were turf battles, bloodshed even. But the strongest move was unity. We dated each other, ate in each other's kitchens, wore the same gear, had the same local heroes, spoke the same hip language of the barrio in the neighborhood, understood in diverse flavors the philosophy of the cool & what it had to do with survival. (Sundiata 1998)

During hip hop's formative years, "the strongest move was unity," but ethno-racial 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 was contingent upon locality. The South Bronx and East Harlem evidenced relatively subtle ethno-racial rifts and more trans-ethnic cultural interaction; these rifts seemed to be greater and trans-ethnic interaction less pronounced in other neighborhoods, particularly those with greater ethnic residential segregation (B-Boy Omega 1998; DJ Ill Will 1998; Fabel 1998).

The seemingly innocuous move from the heavily multi-ethnic South Bronx to predominantly Black neighborhoods in Brooklyn proved to be significant for DJ Ill Will of Electric Company. The South Bronx native recalls no distinctions or tensions between African Americans and Puerto Ricans when it came to hip hop in the South Bronx.

> We were all one race of people. We were all from the same area. Blacks and Puerto Ricans were together. Back then race was never really a problem between Blacks and Spanish. (Ill Will 1998)

It was in Brooklyn that he was first made to feel like Puerto Ricans were a separate group within the hip hop realm. His DJ ability was first questioned (based on his Puerto Ricanness and the

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reassert their inclusion in and "entitlement" to the hip hop realm. I know of at least two MCs who have taken the term as their artistic name: Puerto Rock of Latin Empire and Puerto Rokk (an MC associated with G-Bo the Pro). Fat Joe also proudly bills himself a Puerto Rock in one of his rhymes.

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assumption that Puerto Ricans were not good hip hop DJs) when he started spinning at parties in Brooklyn. The South Bronx, on the contrary, seems to have been one of the most active spots of Afro-diasporic trans-ethnic cultural activity, and Puerto Ricans thus had less explaining to do regarding their "belonging" or "entitlement" to hip hop.

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, they 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, though, as Juan Flores has pointed out, at times the bond was reduced to a junior partnership.

Rubie Dee, one of two Puerto Rican members of the popular hip hop group The Fantastic Five, tellingly says in a rhyme in the movie *Wild Style*:

> Rubie Dee is my name and I'm a Puerto Rican
> You might think I'm Black by the way I'm speaking

A Puerto Rican raised in New York City, Rubie Dee speaks and rhymes like most other New York Puerto Ricans of the second and third generations: in a "Puerto Rican English" (Zentella 1997) similar to or virtually indistinguishable from the African American English of their peers. Nevertheless, Rubie's speech patterns, particularly within the context of what was often perceived as an African American lyrical/musical style, perhaps seemed to warrant an explanation.

DJs like Ill Will of Electric Company and Charlie Chase of the Cold Crush Brothers recall the times they were showered with multiple variants of the same infamous double edged compliment: "You're so good! I never would have thought you were Puerto Rican" (Chase 1996; Ill Will 1998). "Puerto Rocks" at times found their presence and artistic skills questioned by Blacks intent on protecting what they perceived as their physical and cultural territory (Flores 1992).

Boricua participation was not the same in all four art forms. While prominent --perhaps central-- in breaking and graffiti, their participation as MCs and DJs in what eventually became known as rap

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music was comparatively less so (Chase 1992; Ill Will 1998; Rose 1994; Goldstein 1998; Flores 1984). Wondering why this was so leads to one of those chicken-or-the-egg queries. Was Puerto Rican "entitlement" more limited in MCing and DJing *because of* their low degree of participation and visibility? Or was their low degree of participation and visibility *due to* their perceived lack of "entitlement" to hip hop's musical element?

Rhyming and DJing were from the beginning more ethno-racially identified with African Americans and closed to perceived outsiders, by virtue of their relying on dexterity in the English language and thus being most easily traceable to a U.S. Black oral tradition (Flores 1988, 39), 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, where, though the participation of Caribbeans was pivotal[36] (Flores 1988; George 1999; Hebdige 1987; Rose 1994; Toop, 1991), it was often narrowly identified with an ethno-racial Blackness (Flores 1996b; Rivera 1996). A distinction must be made, however, between the experiences within the hip hop realm of West Indian Caribbeans (primarily Jamaican and Barbadian) and Latino Caribbeans (primarily Puerto Ricans).

West Indians are commonly thought to stand comparatively closer to Blackness than Latino Caribbeans.[37] 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). Furthermore, whereas West Indians can "assimilate" into Blackness, Puerto Ricans generally "assimilate" into New York Puerto Ricanness, also known as Nuyoricanness. Given their relative proximity to an ethno-racial Blackness, West Indian entitlement to hip hop, as a

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[36] George argues that "Hispanic" youth played a key role in shaping hip hop's musical development through their participation as b-boys and b-girls. "It was their taste, their affirmation of certain tracks as good for breaking, and their demand to hear them at parties that influenced the DJ's and MCs who pioneered hip hop's early sound." (George 1998, 16)

[37] Foner argues the existence of a difference between the experience of black Puerto Ricans who tend to identify in terms of their national-origins group and not racially versus recent West Indian immigrants who develop a consciousness of themselves as black and of their placement as black people within the racial hierarchies of U.S. society (1987, 248).

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Black-identified musical expression, has not been as much of an issue as it has been for Puerto Ricans --both from emic as well as "outsider" perspectives.

We can draw a useful example from the comparison of DJ Kool Herc's and DJ Charlie Chase's respective experiences. In 1967, Herc arrived to the Bronx from Jamaica as a 12 year old. Initially, he experienced a lot of trouble adjusting to his new surroundings. But soon he started spending time with two young African Americans who befriended him. "I started hanging out with them and picking up the slang. Pretty soon, I was Americanized." (Hager 1984, 31) Chase, however, though born in New York, was always a comparatively easier target for outsider status. His ethnic "markings" couldn't be shed through "Americanizing," particularly because his light skin color and wavy-but-not-nappy hair texture made those markings all the more visible.

In a conversation with Charlie Chase, I asked him about the possible reasons why there were not that many Puerto Rican hip hop DJs (comparatively speaking, with respect to African Americans). He offered three explanations. First, he said, many Puerto Ricans are bicultural, so they would have had to "give up a side of themselves" to get into hip hop. Second, it is easier to be a house or a freestyle DJ, because there isn't all the scratching and other techniques --you just have to blend one song into the next. Third, a lot of the records used were funk-based, which was a predominantly African American musical expression (Chase 1996).

I was intrigued by his first assertion that Puerto Ricans would have had to leave their "Latin" side aside in order to become hip hop DJs. I asked him to elaborate. Chase answered that since a lot of the rapping and DJing was derived from the Jamaican toasting tradition, it is seen as a Black thing. Chase's statements illustrate how West Indian Caribbean cultures are seen as standing comparatively closer to U.S. Blackness than Puerto Rican culture. Thus, the Jamaican toasting tradition is smoothly adopted and thought of as part of African-American/Black culture. Puerto Rican cultural traditions, on the contrary, are perceived as not as easily intersecting with African American culture.

Hip hop is a hybrid culture where Caribbean contributions have been fundamental (Cooper 1988; Flores 1988; Hebdige 1987; Thompson 1996); however, its Caribbean aspects were often either unrecognized or perceived as mere sprinkles of Caribbean flavor within a Black matrix. This narrow

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Black-identification was not always the up-in-your-face kind. Most often it was actually not overt nor obvious, nor was it constant. It was usually the subtext, the fine print, what you come up with if you read between the lines.

At times hip hop's Black-identification entailed questioning Puerto Rican participation. For example, DJ Charlie Chase nearly caught a "beat down" at a jam. "What the fuck are you doing here, Puerto Rican?" was the question posed to him for crossing into what was perceived as "Black" territory (Flores 1992). Both Charlie Chase and Ill Will recall audiences reacting surprised by their being Puerto Rican and also skilled DJs, for good DJs were assumed to only be Black (Flores 1992; Ill Will 1998). Theirs are not isolated cases. Puerto Rican hip hoppers of the 1970s usually have at least one or two stories of ethno-racial tension. However, Black-identification largely meant that the territory of cultural convergence between Caribbeans and African Americans was identified solely with the latter.

This issue of Black-identification transcends hip hop; New York's urban Afro-diasporic youth culture has historically been Black-identified. Caribbean youth are presumed to "assimilate" into African American youth culture without taking into account two important factors: First, much of what is called African American youth culture is profoundly hybridized and some of its strongest influences are related to Caribbean cultures (Cooper 1988; Flores 1988; Hebdige 1987). This hybridization is related to a process that Blaut (1983) calls "the partial growing-together of the cultures of ghettoized communities." Second, "assimilation" presupposes an original culture and an assimilated one, allowing no room for the concept of reconfiguration. This is part of what Lipsitz (1997) criticizes as "the inadequacy of binary models of assimilation." These models rely on the presumption that there are two distinct cultures that are equally accessible to immigrants --it is just a matter of choice.

In the case of Puerto Ricans, Flores argues that

> . . . as Nuyorican modes of expression come to intermingle with others and thus distinguish themselves from those of the Island legacy, it is not accurate to speak of assimilation. Rather than being subsumed and repressed, Puerto Rican culture contributes, on its own terms and as an extension of its own traditions, to a new amalgam of human expression. (Flores 1993, 192)

Second and third generation Puerto Ricans in New York have a distinct cultural identity that cannot be accurately described as "assimilated" --not into African American culture and even more less

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so into "mainstream" U.S. culture. Their identity is distinct from that of their African American peers, that of first generation Puerto Ricans, and that of their Island Puerto Rican peers.

Cross-fertilization and hybridization, as cultural phenomena, are often lost in narratives of "assimilation." These narratives frequently employ stifling notions of tradition and origins based upon ethno-racial and/or national categories. The strength of these categories and divisions often overpower socio-cultural history as well as lived reality in accounts of cultural creation.

Pointing to the long history of joint cultural production between African Americans and Puerto Ricans --which includes Latin jazz, doo-wop, Latin soul and hip hop-- Flores remarks:

> You see there that it's not just Latinos doing a black thing, but its really them jamming together and coming up with something that's not the same as either of the two they started with. Something new comes out of the picture. (del Barco 1996, 68)

However, that history is often swept under the rug. It seems that in terms of cultural production it is easier to go back to a "default" setting where origins can be made to align with ethno-racial and/or national categories. Hybrid cultural formations, like hip hop, threaten those categories. What ends up happening is that either African Americans claim hip hop all for themselves ("It's a Black thing, you wouldn't understand") or the older Puerto Rican generations pronounce it a product of the black Other. Puzzled African Americans want to know of Puerto Ricans who participate in hip hop: "Why are you fronting like you're Black?" Puzzled Boricuas (or Latinos) ask from the margins of the hip hop zone of those inside: "Why are you denying your Puerto Ricanness (or *latinidad*)?"

Most "Porto Rocks" have been challenged at some point or another by their African American peers as to why they are "trying to be down" (Flores 1991). Their parents and older relatives have also gotten on their case for being into that "jungle," "nigger" or "*moreno*" music (del Barco 1996; Q-Unique 1995; Acevedo 1995). The presumption is that hip hop is not "theirs." Cultural entitlement to hip hop has been often ethno-racially defined and limited to African Americans. A related phenomenon has been the presumption that Puerto Rican cultural entitlement to hip hop is contingent upon the "latinization" of their creative expression.

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Though musical taste and style are not strictly ethno-racially predetermined, ethno-racial groups often do gravitate around music to which they have a "claim."[38] Many of the ethno-racial tensions and dynamics in hip hop have to do with this association between style and ethno-racial cultures --a point which I will argue throughout this dissertation.

The Early Rap Game

During the Spring of 1979, a funk group called Fatback released what can be considered the first commercial rap record entitled "King Tim III (Personality Jock)." Toop describes it as a "success of sorts" managing to get regular play in record stores and on New York's disco station WKTU (1991, 81). 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 a group which called itself the Sugarhill Gang, was undoubtedly the record which signaled the commercial rise of rap, reaching position #36 on the U.S. charts and becoming the biggest-selling 12 inch record ever (Toop 1991, 81). MCing and DJing thus began their steep rise in mass-mediated popularity with the release of "Rappers' Delight".

The success of this group of unknowns who were hand-picked by Sugar Hill Records' owner Sylvia Robinson, opened the door for artists like Grandmaster Flash, the Cold Crush Brothers and Afrika Bambaataa who were already popular in the New York park, house party and small club circuit. The Sugar Hill Gang's success also generated a fair amount of resentment among these hip hop artists who had worked hard to build an underground reputation. Says Grandmaster Flash:

> They [Sugar Hill Gang] got a record on the radio and that shit was haunting me because I felt we should have been the first to do it. We were the first *group* to really do this --someone took our shot. Every night I would hear this fucking record on the radio, 92KTU, 98, BLS, rock stations. I was hearing this shit in my dreams.(Toop 1991, 76)

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[38] The concept of "having a claim" on a certain cultural expression is one which comes up constantly in the cultural arena. Arguably a step more inclusive than the concept of "cultural property," it usually draws on history, traditions, origins and participation to separate insiders from outsiders. See Edward Rodríguez's comments regarding the "claim" to hip hop, early in Chapter I.

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To add insult to injury, part of the Sugarhill Gang's hit song lyrics had been written by Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers. Hank, one of the Sugarhill Gang's rappers, was once Caz's bodyguard. When the opportunity to record with Sugarhill Records came up, Hank asked Caz if he could use his rhymes. Caz said yes, figuring that if the lyrics were a hit, Cold Crush may be the group to "get on next." But that was not the case, and Caz never did get a dime for his contribution to "Rapper's Delight." (Grandmaster Caz 1998) In the words of Waterbed Kev from the Fantastic Romantic Five:

> Sugarhill dogged a lot of people, but they also gave hip hop the opportunity to go worldwide. (1998)

Though most of the artists popular during rap's first five years as a mass-mediated consumer product (1979-1984) were African Americans (some of them West Indian like Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash), Puerto Ricans were far from absent in this scene. DJ Charlie Chase of the Cold Crush Brothers, The Fearless Four's[39] Devastating Tito and DJ Master OC, The Fantastic Five's Prince Whipper Whip and Rubie Dee, Prince Markie Dee Morales of the Fat Boys[40] and The Real Roxanne were popular figures in commercial rap's early times.

Other Puerto Rican recording artists of the time included Rammelzee, Futura 2000 and one of the members of Mean Machine. Graffiti artist Rammelzee and K-Rob had a hit record called "Beat Bop" (1983) (Cross 1993, 69) initially released by Basquiat --the Haitian-Puerto Rican visual artist of downtown fame-- on Tartown Records, with later wider distribution by Profile Records (Toop 1991, 122). Another graffiti artist, Futura 2000, was featured in a record produced by The Clash for the record label Celluloid (Potter 1995, 158). The Mean Machine put out "Disco Dream," the first rap record with bilingual rhymes (del Barco 1996, 67; Verán, 1991).

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[39] The Fearless Four released "Problems of the World", "It's Magic" and the major hit "Rockin' It"(1982) on Enjoy Records. This was also the first rap group, after Kurtis Blow, signed to a major label (Elektra) (del Barco 1996, 66). Nelson and Gonzales dub the Fearless Four, along with the Furious Five and Soul Sonic Force, as the groups at the "cutting edge of this new Black Noize" (1991, 206) in 1983 and 1984.

[40] Among the Fat Boys' hits were "In Jail," "All You Can Eat" and "Can You Feel It." They co-starred, along with Run DMC in the movie *Krush Groove* (1985) and later starred in *Disorderlies.*

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Despite strong Puerto Rican participation, as rap traveled beyond its New York home Puerto Rican artists were most often not recognized as such. Their ethno-racial backgrounds were "all but invisible" (Flores 1996). Rap was the new "Black Noize" (Havelock and Gonzalez 1991) coming out of New York and it was not always clear how Puerto Ricanness related to Blackness.

Given rap's historical 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 early 1970s beginnings. But rap's mass-mediated commodification in the late 1970s led to an even more intense ethno-racialization of rap. 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 Afrodiasporic New York context where Blacks and Puerto Ricans are neighbors, friends, and allies is an exception and hard to conceive of in most other U.S. locations. Hip hop's initial Afrodiasporic ghetto base was hard to translate into highly segregated contexts with no corresponding histories of trans-ethnic Afro-diasporic cultural production. Audiences unfamiliar with New York inner-city life for the most part did not (could not) distinguish between African Americans and Puerto Ricans.

B-boys in the Media Limelight

Chitlins and plátanos were in style and demand back then.

Phase 2, "The Realness"

Ethno-racial politics were different when it came to breaking and graffiti. These art forms came into the media limelight a few years after the first rap album was released. But most importantly for our purposes, they entered the realm of mass media and remained more class-identified (or ghetto-identified) than Black-identified.

Breaking was the subject of a newspaper article for the first time in 1981 (Hazzard-Donald 1996). Sally Banes wrote in New York's *Village Voice* of a "local dance form that's fast, black, Spanish, down and bad."

> The heroes of these legends are the Break Kids, the B Boys, the *Puerto Rican and black teenagers* [emphasis mine] who invent and endlessly elaborate this exquisite,

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heady blend of dancing, acrobatics, and martial spectacle. Like other forms of ghetto street culture--graffiti, verbal dueling, rapping-- breaking is a public arena for the flamboyant triumph of virility, wit and skill. (Banes 1981: 31)

Two years after that first article, breaking had become a mainstream fad. Initially developed and practiced exclusively in New York ghetto basements, sidewalks, park jams and uptown clubs, breaking eventually became popular in hip downtown New York clubs.

Phase 2, an African American veteran spray can artist, reminisced in a 1996 article about the early hip hop party venues "uptown."

> Ooh, how I be remembering back in the days. The Plaza, Tunnel, Puzzle, The Shaft, Hudson Center, Chuck Center, Soulsville/Hevelo, Sparkle, Twilight Zone, Hunter College, Nel Gwyns, Black Door, Mitchel Gym, Audubon Ballroom, Ecstasy Garage, The Renny, Harlem World, T-Connection, The Dixie, Celebrity Club. Too many clubs and parties to remember. Those were di-zays. . . . M.C and D.J battles. Echo and 23 Park. Boston Road, The Love Brothers, was it 63 Park? Mike and Dave jams in Harlem. This was before Hip Hop became "legit" and them *other folks* [emphasis mine] took over. Prior to this, colored folks which included honest people, crooks and thieves made up about 99% of the promoters and patrons. But that was back then. (Phase 2 1996)

Phase 2 points to 1982 as the year when hip hop started having a presence in downtown clubs. The Roxy, Club Negril, Peppermint Lounge and Danceteria were among the clubs that b-boys and b-girls began frequenting. He proceeds to bitterly recount:

> It was during these times that Hip Hoppers became a display to an audience that was checking out 'how we be living for the first time.' 'Ooh Pointdexter, observe that adolescent defying the gravitational pull of the earth's core while rotating counter clockwise on the base of his cranium.' It was something for them folks who weren't living it, to physically experience and orgasmically feast their eyes upon. (Phase 2 1996)

DJ Ill Will coincides with Phase 2 in observing that the acceptance and furor over hip hop in downtown clubs had much to do with the romantization and voyeuristic fascination with the ghetto, ethno-racial Other. In Phase 2's words, "Chitlins' [African Americans] and plátanos [Puerto Ricans] were in style and demand back then."

Ill Will recalls his experiences at The Roxy and Danceteria:

> It felt like a circus or like they were looking at animals in the zoo. These people were so amazed at the simple shit we did all day long around our way. It made me aware and it made me proud that I could entertain them. But all this talent didn't mean shit. . . . They only paid attention to me and talked to me because of what I could do on the turntables. If they didn't know who I was they wouldn't pay me no mind. I didn't like that. . . . I don't like white people. They tried to jerk us back in the day. And even

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here [at Downstairs Records, where Will works and our conversation is taking place], you heard that guy asking me for a record before? They talk to me like I'm stupid. (DJ Ill Will 1998)

It did not take long before so-called "breakdance"[41] fever spread nationally and internationally. Syndicated dance shows like *Dance Fever* and *Solid Gold* incorporated "breakdancers" in their programming (Rosenwald 1984, 74). Burger King, Panasonic, Coca Cola and Pepsi, among many others, made commercials which featured breaking (Kelley 1997, 68). Movies like *Wildstyle* (1982), *Style Wars* (1984), *Beat Street* (1984), *Breaking* (1984), *Breaking II: Electric Boogaloo* (1984) and *Flashdance* (1984) were key in its national and international popularization.

As mentioned by Phase 2 and Ill Will, a large part of the national and international public's fascination with breaking had to do with its "ghetto" or "street" roots. The class origins of the dance form were constantly foregrounded. Meanwhile, the ethnicity/race of its creators and performers -- though a basic ingredient of breaking's ghetto mystique-- remained either unspoken or played down. Most coverage of the art form did not follow Sally Banes' straight-up description of its class and ethno-racial origins. "Ghetto" and "street" actually became coded references to race and ethnicity.

Tompkins, in a 1996 *Rap Pages* issue dedicated to hip hop's dance element, wrote a scathing article blasting Hollywood's feeding frenzy over breaking. Entitled "Hollywood Shuffle," the piece examines this early aspect of "Hip-Hop exploitation history" and criticizes its contrived, watered down approach to hip hop creativity. Concentrating his comments on the movies *Beat Street* and *Breakin'*,[42] he notes regarding the second one:

the dichotomy between White (Holly-would-they-not) and Hip Hop is evident in the mealy-mouthed glossed references to Latinos and Blacks as 'street kids.' In Special K's best condescending, Saturday-morning-with-Mom-with-the-Sunny-D Voice: 'Those street kids have more heart and soul...' (Thompkins 1996)

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[41] "Breakdancing" became the catch-all term to describe what had originally been referred to as "burning," "going off," "b-boying" and "b-girling," or, by the specific name of each style.

[42] Video Channel VH1 introduced its August 2, 1998 showing of *Breakin'* by pronouncing it "the movie that started it all." Considering that this movie was made in 1984, more than a full decade after breaking's public (though ghettoized) recognition as a dance form, the "all" that this movie is being purported to have started only refers to breaking's phase as mainstream fad. This is only one example among countless of the way in which the mainstream media severs history and social context from cultural expression.

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The end of her line is: "than any dancer I know." Special K is the central figure, the white dancer-with-formal-training-and-with-a-heart-of-gold; it is through her that "street dance" is legitimized. Legitimization, in this case, equals recognition outside ghetto borders, especially by the professional dance world. Kelly embodies goodness and truth. She chastises the elitist "phony stuffed shirts" that dismiss street dance; she also sees through fellow dancer Ozone's (Orlando) street macho cool pose that disguises his fears and insecurities. She is drawn to the passion and dedication of breakers and serves as their translator to the outside world.

The formula is an old one: white "missionary" (nun, doctor, teacher, cop, social worker, dancer...) with great insights and good intentions tries (not always successfully) to save the non-white ghetto inhabitants[43]. Kelly the missionary thus defends the "innocence," "natural" creativity and passion of the "black" and "brown" youthful ghetto dwellers.

The same "mealy-mouthed" approach to the race and ethnicity of breakers is taken in *Dance Magazine*'s April 1984 "break dance" special. Not once do the four articles devoted to the art form mention race or ethnicity, instead disguising these through references to "street" and "ghetto." Particularly striking is the article on the Furious Rockers. This article whose title claims to explore "break dance roots in a breakneck neighborhood" and whose subject is a Puerto Rican crew from a Puerto Rican neighborhood (Williamsburg, Brooklyn), manages to avoid even the slightest mention of ethnicity or race.

In the same *Dance Magazine* issue, breaking is enthusiastically described as "exciting," "disturbing," "vibrant, macho street dances" (Rosenwald 1984); "the most dynamic, gritty, visually exciting dance around today" (Grubb 1984, 78); a dance form where people "can use their kinesthetic sense and not worry about the 'right' movements" and which "grows out of people's natural movement" (Pierpont 1984, 82); a ghetto form that can be practiced in the safety of the studio and where

[43] Pérez (1990) has dubbed the products of this approach to movie-making "missionary films." He points to the 1960s reigning "liberal perspective" as the key moment in the production of such films among which are *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), *Change of Habit* (1969) and *The Possession of Joel Delaney*.

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Connecticut "housewives" can get a vicarious sense of pleasure by "flinging their arms and saying, 'We bad'" (Pierpont, 1984). The reference to Connecticut housewives is a loaded and coded reference to female white middle-class status, meant to stand in contrast to breaking's celebrated male ghetto blackness. Connecticut housewives are billed as the epitome of softness, breakers are deemed to be the exact opposite. And that's where breaking's excitement as commercial product lay.

Breaking has not been a male-exclusive domain, though females have had to struggle hard against marginalizations premised upon rigid dichotomous notions of masculinity and femininity (Diana 1998; Guevara 1987; Jackie 1996; Rockafella 1996; Rose 1994). Females have been assumed to lack the necessary physical strength and dedication, to be unwilling to get dirty on the floor, not to want to risk messing up their hairdo or breaking a fingernail. Breaking's male-dominance has been an extension of the patriarchal social norms with which its participants comply. This male-dominance was intensified with its commercialization. The mass marketing of hip hop has had much to do with the exotization of black ghetto "virility" as a temporary distraction from "white" suburban monotony (Flores 1984; Guevara 1987).

The ways in which breaking tended to be described ("natural," "instinctive," "vibrant," "gritty," "dynamic," "exciting") bring to mind cliché exotizations of the ghetto --particularly the "black" ghetto-- as primeval, exciting, dangerous, mysterious and cool. Breaking's magic resided in its purported primitive simplicity.

Dance Magazine's Margaret Pierpont (1984) explains that "ordinary people" don't have to worry about the "right" positions, they just have to follow their "kinesthetic sense," since breaking "grows out of people's natural movement." How Pierpont concludes that breaking is somehow closer to human "natural movement" and "kinesthetic sense" than other dance forms is unexplained. It sounds like, in her haste to romanticize the form, she is undermining the artistic complexity, technical difficulty and specificity of breaking. Gómez-Peña's thoughts regarding Latino artistic production in general can be applied to the role exoticism played in the commercialization of breaking:

Countless prior and later films like *The Young Savages* (1961), *Fort Apache* (1981), and *Dangerous Minds* (199?) exhibit the same "missionary" approach.

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> . . . our art is described as 'colorful,' 'passionate,' 'mysterious,' 'exuberant,' 'baroque,' etc., all euphemistic terms for irrationalism and primitivism. (Gómez-Peña 1993, 51)

Breaking's ghetto blackness was not ethno-racially circumscribed to African Americans in the manner that rap was. Puerto Ricans were deemed entitled participants and commercially packaged as the exotic dark Other. Whereas Puerto Ricans in rap were either assumed to be African Americans or, if their ethnicity was known, had their artistic skill and cultural entitlement questioned, ethnicity was not as much of an issue for Puerto Ricans in breaking. They didn't have to justify themselves as Puerto Ricans doing a "Black thing" or subsume their Puerto Ricanness under Blackness, because the realm was not perceived as ethno-racially exclusive.

Part of the reason for breaking's ethno-racial inclusiveness with respect to Puerto Ricans was the fact that, from its earliest expressions, breaking was not perceived as a primarily African American domain. Though generally understood as undoubtedly Afro-diasporic, breaking was not seen as narrowly articulating specifically African American traditions, identity and concerns. Breaking was visibly nourished by "both long-standing and more recent Afro-Latino expressions" which include rumba, mambo, the Latin hustle and rocking[44] (Diana 1998; Flores 1988; RC 1998). Furthermore, Puerto Ricans had been and were still key in the development of the b-boy/b-girl dance style (Flores 1988; Hazzard-Donald 1996; Rose 1994); most of the better-known breaking crews (Rock Steady Crew, the Furious Rockers, Dynamic Rockers, New York City Breakers) were primarily Puerto Rican (Cox 1984; del Barco 1996). All of these factors made it even less tenable for Boricuas to be left out of the equation.

Perhaps another reason why breaking was not narrowly ethno-racially identified as African American may have been related to breaking's short lived existence as a mainstream media darling. Had breaking remained as sustainably profitable as rap turned out to be, ethno-racial divisions may

[44] Rocking was a competitive youth dance form developed in the late-1960s which attained great popularity, primarily among Puerto Ricans, in the 1970s. The North-Central Brooklyn neighborhood known as Bushwick seems to have been at the epicenter of rocking's creative developments. Other neighborhoods known as rocking hot spots included East New York, Bay Ridge and Williamsburg. Rocking eventually became known as Brooklyn rock or

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have been created in order to maximize profits through the marketing and romanticizing the familiar ghetto African American "Baadman" (Rose 1994) image.

By 1985, "most kids had STOPPED BREAKING and my Hip-Hop heart was broken," says Cristina Verán in *Rap Pages*' 1996 dance edition. Verán, a Bronx MC of Peruvian descent known as Dulce Love and a member of the Devastating Ladies, had to halt plans to conduct a "breakumentary," for the scene had gone from vibrant to deserted in the span of one year. She explains the decline of hip hop as the effect of over-exposure and the media's watering-down of the form:

> 'Breakdancing: The Fad' ultimately turned into a roller-coaster ride careening out of control -from fast food and candy commercials to 'you too can breakdance' videos geared to suburban mall junkies. Sacred traditions became trendified, and, like the dope fiend's ultimate junk high, they crashed just as quickly and just as hard. (Verán 1996d)

After breaking and graffiti had their time in the commercial limelight during the early to mid-eighties, these art forms faded into the mass-mediated hip hop background. They often came to be perceived as "played out," pariahs within the hip hop culture that they had been intrinsic to. From time to time they have resurfaced as complementary to rap music in shows, videos and magazines. Breaking has actually made somewhat of a "comeback" in the media in recent years.[45] But for the most part, after the breaking and graffiti craze of the first half of the eighties, these art forms have been relegated to history.[46]

With the passage of time, hip hop culture became increasingly identified with the more commercialized branches of rap music. So given that hip hop culture started being perceived as practically synonymous with rap music, and that rap is the aspect of hip hop in which Puerto Ricans

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uprocking outside of the borough where it was first developed. See Dooks (1997), García (1996) and Valentín (1996).

[45] See Ogunnaike (1998) and Owen (1998).

[46] Despite the fact that in terms of media visibility and commercial popularity, graffiti and breaking have been eclipsed by rap, these art forms still thrive as part of an urban vernacular culture. It is crucial to remember that hip hop cannot be reduced to its most commercially successful aspects. As has been the case with countless other commercialized artistic expressions (Flores 1985; Handlin 1968; Ross 1989), hip hop culture has been and is developed, transmitted and reworked through a dialectic interaction between mass mediation and more geographically-based, underground, street or neighborhood-oriented cultural phenomena (Flores 1992-93).

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have had comparatively less media visibility, perceived skill and cultural entitlement, it is not surprising that hip hop's history was re-imagined leaving Puerto Ricans out of the picture. Dehistoricized and decontextualized, hip hop became "a Black thing you wouldn't understand" --as stated in the popular late-1980s phrase which was not only on many a lip, but also printed on T-shirts and stickers. Hip hop's ties to the Afro-diasporic urban vernacular culture that originated it had been distorted, and sometimes altogether severed.

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CHAPTER 4

THE LATE 1980s AND EARLY 1990s:

WHOSE HIP HOP?

After breaking and graffiti crashed-landed in terms of mass-mediated popularity around 1985 following their brief but intense media-propelled flight, 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 African American concerns by popular rap artists through rhymes, statements and samples was one of the factors that further contributed to the ethno-racialization of hip hop as exclusively African American (Henderson 1996; Rodríguez 1996a). In other words, the voicing of Black-identified perspectives and concerns led to the increasingly narrow identification of hip hop with this specific group.

Run DMC's "Proud to Be Black" in the album *Raising Hell* (1987)[47] is an example of rap's explicit Black-identification during this late 1980s period, from a group that was not particularly known for their Black Nationalism or Afrocentricity. Other groups which were actually well-known for their ethno-racial politics were BDP, Public Enemy, X-Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, and Brand Nubian.

Rap music has manifested, throughout its history, different approaches to and articulations of Blackness. Explicit references to Blackness in the earlier 1980s, though elaborated and displayed, were not omnipresent. The late 1980s and even up to the early 1990s, however, saw an explosion of Afrocentric sentiment (Allen 1996).

The ideological and aesthetic reverberations of this period are still being felt, for they set the stage for creations and transformations to follow. The "Afrocentric," "Black nationalist" or "pro-Black"

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[47] Run DMC's *Raising Hell* was the first rap album to go triple platinum with 3 million copies sold. This group had previously released the first rap album to go gold (500,000 sold) and the first rap song to be featured on MTV (Dyson 1993, 5).

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school of rap had a lasting impact on the hip hop collective imagination --its faddish qualities notwithstanding.[48] These formulations of an exclusively African American agenda cloaked hip hop in an ethno-racial garb that seemed several sizes too big (or too small, depending on how one looks at it) for Puerto Ricans.

The expression from within hip hop of Black pride and nationalism, and the denouncing of conditions in urban ghettoes, had a great impact on young Puerto Ricans. Q-Unique (1995) recounts the influence on his life of hip hop's pro-Black era and the sustained organizing efforts of the hip hop-based community organization the Zulu Nation:

> Groups like Public Enemy, KRS-ONE, X-Clan and Poor Righteous Teachers, they made me aware of the fact that I needed to know who I was as a Puerto Rican. Zulu Nation just put the icing right on the cake 'cause when I became a member in 1990 they gave me the details and the lessons that just added more to what it meant to be Puerto Rican here in America. They showed you the little details, the little tricks of what was going on out there and lessons and ways of keeping up with what's going on out there. At the same time teaching me more about myself and religion and all types of things. That's what I learned from the Zulu Nation, a lot of things, even how to eat right. They taught us about the bad things in certain foods or whatever have you... pork, that contained pork. Even down to like toothbrushes and hair combs that contained pork. I'm just using pork as an example. All that to me was necessary, big time, 'cause before all of that I was this little wild spic running in the streets not knowing what the fuck was going on.

I prodded Q.: "So you're attributing to the Zulu Nation you getting your head straight?" To which he answered: "Them plus a lot of hip hop music."

Louis, a Puerto Rican teenage rap fan during rap's Afrocentric phase, recalls that when he first heard Public Enemy it was like a revelation. He says he went straight to the library to look up who was this Huey Newton they were talking about. That was when it really hit him that this rap group was talking about important Black historical figures and events. His first reaction to the information he was

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[48] Afrocentricity was, in some senses, a commercial phase that rap went through. The movie *CB-4*, starring comedian Chris Rock, portrays it as one of numerous fads in the history of rap. The movie includes a scene in which one of the protagonists --dressed in heavily layered, stereotypically "Afrocentric" attire-- raps something to the effect of: "because I'm black, I'm black, I'm blickety, blickety, black, black, I'm black..." His intense, self-righteous, blacker-than-thou pose is played off as ridiculous given the inane lyrics and the fact that the audience has seen him adopt a whole slew of rapping personae in an attempt to boost record sales. His Black nationalist image thus represents just one more gimmick.

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being exposed to 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 diversity and hybridity of the "Black Atlantic." Louis realized that he and "his people" were not quite part of the history Public Enemy was talking and rhyming about. 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?"

The question posed to Louis was not actually referring to the hip hop "his people" were not making, but that which they were making: in his friends' (and his own) eyes, "corny shit" by Latin Empire, Kid Frost and Mellow Man Ace. The reasons why these Latino artists were considered corny by many New York hip hoppers may have been due to a perception of their lyrics and beats as dull and overly-derivative just as much as it may have been due to their stepping out of the bounds of hip hop's accepted Black matrix. In fact, it may be too difficult to separate the perception of arrested musical pleasure and lack of talent, from the straying from the Black-identified formula. It seems that often there was a negative aesthetic judgment automatically attached to bringing into rap music "too much" of an artists' Puerto Rican/Latino background. The assumption seems to have been that by "overly" stressing their Latino background, artists were either negating their blackness or, at least, breaking with the common cultural ground that unites them with African Americans.

Q. and Louis' experiences illustrate the ambivalent position that Puerto Ricans (and other New York Caribbean Latinos) held during this time period, given hip hop culture's growing sole identification with rap --thus leaving breaking and graffiti on the sidelines. To compound the situation, rap was also being increasingly perceived as an exclusively African American musical expression. Boricuas could be included or excluded, depending on the situation. Q-Unique's experiences of inclusion are probably very related to his South Bronx upbringing and his involvement with the Zulus --a historically ethno-racially inclusive hip hop organization. However, even Q. has his own stories of exclusions to tell.

As mentioned, it was both creative developments and marketing decisions that worked together in the ethno-racialization of hip hop as African American. So the issue was not as simple as

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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 international popularity, and thus its expansion outside of territory where Puerto Ricans are a familiar presence –whether as neighbors, lovers, family, playmates or artists. As hip hop's scope of influence/consumption/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 the vital role that Puerto Ricans played in the New York hip hop scene became increasingly obscured, even in its New York breeding grounds (which remained a fertile and influential site of hip hop creativity).

Hip hop's Black-identification must also be contextualized in the vilification/romantization 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 (particularly male) experience and image (Allinson 1994; Bonastia forthcoming; Rodríguez 1996a; Rose 1994; Samuels 1991). Allinson points to the relationship between rap's appeal and "a long-established romantization of the Black urban male as a temple of authentic cool, at home with risk, with sex, with struggle." (1994, 449)

Be it in the realm of public policy, media representations, sociological and historical analysis, or popular culture, Puerto Ricans, though considered blacks for some purposes, are considered outside the scope of blackness for others. Within the U.S. context, they have always had their ghetto dark Other credentials up to date; their relationship to blackness, however, has not always been clear. So, if hip hop's mass-mediated popularity is closely connected to a romantization/exotization 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)

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Puerto Ricanness in rap was (and still is, but less so, as I will argue later) deemed a potential commercial liability. Numerous Puerto Rican MCs (among them Fat Joe, Q-Unique and Fam Ties[49]) recount being explicitly told by A&Rs and other industry people that they were talented but their ethno-racial background worked against them. Fat Joe, for example, recalls the countless times he was told that "rap ain't Puerto Rican" when he was first looking for a record deal (Bernard 1998).

This preoccupation that Puerto Ricans were, for commercial purposes, not black enough seems to have extended beyond rap, to the dance element of hip hop (where, ironically, Puerto Ricans had previously held center stage). B-girl Rocafella recalls being turned down for dancing in rap music videos because "we're looking for Nubian sisters." For her, it was apparent that part of the problem was that these video producers "were only considering this much [her thumb and index fingers separated a quarter of an inch] of what black is."

"So what was driving this narrow vision of blackness?", I asked her. "Was it media-driven or was the media responding to 'grassroots' notions?" She answered:

> That's one of those chicken-or-the-egg situations. I'd like to think it's the people up on top imposing their vision on everyone else. But it's not just that. In the neighborhood people be saying "Oh, you ain't down!" What? I carry the cross, but I ain't down? (Rockafella 1996)

Rockafella says she understands why it happens, though. "African Americans don't get props for what they've done. Look what happened with other music they created, like rock." Akanni, an African American breaker who has been part of the crews 3D, Crazy Breakers and Floor Lords and who, like Rockafella, formed part of the hip hop dance company Ghettoriginal, expands on that idea.

> As Black people, we've had so much taken away from us that we get really defensive. We stop remembering Latinos, even Asian people, are also 'people of color'-just as creative as we are. We have such a pride now that we think we invent every damn thing. We may have invented it, but not every little facet. The Latin people were right up there with us, from the beginning. They didn't take something away from us. They were *with* us. (Verán 1996c, 42)

Puerto Rican marginalization in rap can also be connected with purist and narrow definitions regarding what is Black expressiveness and what is Latino expressiveness. Rap was viewed,

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[49] Fam Ties is a professionally-aspiring rap duo from East Harlem made up of two Puerto Rican teenagers.

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particularly by those who were not hip hop participants, as a new expression along a Black-music continuum (which excluded Caribbean Latinos like Puerto Ricans), and deemed as a breaking away from Latino music.

Rap presented similar problems for the perceived boundaries of "Latino" musical expression, as those which Latin Soul, and particularly *bugalú*, of the late 60s had previously presented (Flores 1999; 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), *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 stead-fastness of ethno-racial categories in the United States, particularly during a time which Hollinger (1995) describes as an "age of ethnos-centered discourse."[50] These categories translate into what is perceived as a limited potential for trans-ethnic cultural production, solidarity and political organizing. Cultural hybrids like hip hop threaten those categories and the comforting and simplifying myths built around them.

Cultural production is often circumscribed by limitations imposed through the equation of ethno-racial affiliation with a certain range of cultural expression. To step outside of that range is viewed as betrayal. Thus, Puerto Rican hip hoppers have found themselves chastised for engaging in creative practices that are not "their own". But sometimes cultural production --and hip hop is also an example of this-- breaks with the strict ethno-racial mold and expands the boundaries of expression. However, these challenges frequently pass unnoticed because "common sensical" modes of analysis

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[50] Hollinger notes a discursive shift during the latter half of the twentieth century in the United States from a universalist "species consciousness" to a particularistic "ethnic-consciousness." He describes the early 1970s as the period at which the contrast between the two could be appreciated most vividly (Hollinger 1995, 57).

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force their subject of inquiry to conform to stultifying ethno-racial categories and their surrounding myths. Unfortunately, the outcome is that

> . . . each group gets its own ghetto, its own impenetrable turf. A dangerous distancing of the Others from one another. (Sundiata 1998)

"Doc" Rodríguez

Ivan "Doc" Rodríguez has been working as engineer, producer and mixer in hip hop recordings since 1987. His contributions to hip hop include classics, such as Erik B and Rakim's *Paid In Full*, BDP's *Criminal Minded* (1986) and *By Any Means Necessary*, Ultra's first album, Biz Markie's *I Need a Haircut*, all EPMD albums, 3 MC Lyte albums, and Das EFX's first two (Valentín, 1997). However, Doc's contributions to hip hop have largely gone unacknowledged. Firstly, because engineering and mixing are not high-profile crafts within rap. Secondly, because he has often not been given full credit for the work he has done --at times not even been given the money he was owed (Verán 1997).

In an article subtitled "A Decade of Getting Jerked in the Game as Told by Engineer Extraordinaire Ivan 'Doc' Rodriguez," Rodríguez brings up his ethnicity as yet another factor contributing to his invisibility.

> My purpose for people knowing who I am is to earn more respect for my Latino people because I'm in a pro-Black industry and I work a pro-white job. (Verán 1997)

In an interview for *Stress* magazine, Rodríguez remarks:

> The main issue that I want to touch on is that I stepped unto this game as a broke Puerto Rican, born in Santurce, PR and raised in Hell's Kitchen, NY. I grew with a soul, I cried, I screamed and I hurt. I pushed forward and got out of that community- but returned to it. I was able to get rid of the evil that tried to control me while I was in there. I never saw the inside of a jail. . . . When I walked into this industry, I walked in with a clean heart and a clean mind and I'm still clean, ten years later. (Valentín 1997)

Remarkably, Rodríguez is not drowning in bitterness. Instead, his painful experiences in the industry inform his critical vision of hip hop; but these experiences do not override his treasuring hip hop as a beautiful expression of urban Afro-diasporic culture which Blacks and Latinos share.

> Hip Hop instead of making us grow as a people has hindered our people, because we fight each other over little pennies that people throw at us. Our culture is a very jealous, insecure culture. . . . If *you're Black or Latino, you are somehow a part of me* [emphasis mine], and instead you are being threatened by me or me being threatened by you, we should be able to grasp hands instead. (Valentín, 1997)

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Though perhaps "jerked" quite a few times, Rodríguez remains full of hope: "I've been hurt and I've been offended, but that's not gonna change me." (Valentín 1997) Like Rodríguez, there are many more Puerto Rican hip hop cultural workers whose invaluable contributions have gone unnoticed, particularly during the late 1980s period of greatest Puerto Rican marginalization in hip hop.

What is this "Latin" in "Latin Hip Hop"?

Freestyle

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 may cause a bit of confusion, since 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 a key to 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." Others describe it in starkly unflattering terms as the "synth-heavy bubble-salsa of Lisa Lisa and her big-haired descendants" (Morales 1991), and "bubble-gum ballads over drum-machine beats" (del Barco 1996, 84). On the contrary, enthusiasts like G-Bo the Pro react excitedly at the mention of this music genre and celebrate it not only as a source of pleasure but as a point of ethno-racialized pride: "Freestyle was hot! It was Puerto Rican." (G-Bo 1998) Groups like Cover Girls, Exposé, TKA and Latin Raskals, and artists like George LaMond, Sapphire and Brenda K. Starr, were among the best-known freestyle artists. The overwhelming majority of these were indeed 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 (rather than rapped) sticky-sweet (at times bitter-sweet) lyrics centered on the vagaries of love, whereas hip hop MCs broached topics more concerned with ghetto

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life, racial strife and personal/artistic prowess. Freestyle's sound was electro-pop, while hip hop was usually backed by harsh funk with booming basslines.

That is not to say that there has been no overlap between the freestyle and the hip hop scenes. In New York, certain clubs provided spaces where the boundaries between hip hop and freestyle were blurred. A primarily hip hop club might make freestyle songs their interludes, and vice versa. Clubs like Latin Quarters, then located in the Times Square area, featured freestyle some nights and hip hop on others (G-Bo 1998; Díaz 1998). Freestyle artists like the Latin Rascals produced music for the Fat Boys. Some freestyle singers like members of TKA and Brenda K. Starr had first tried their hand at popularity as MCs. Years after freestyle's commercial success plummeted, one of TKA's members, K-7, launched a solo rap career which yielded modest if fleeting hits of the 1990s like "Come Baby Come" and "Zunga Zeng."

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. But he offers no possible explanations and leaves one wondering: Why did that separation happen?

One of the factors at play in the late 1980s schism along ethno-racial 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 on a reductive notion of blackness (exclusively African American), and suffering from severe cultural-historical amnesia-- prefigured 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 1995). Andy Panda, a key song writer, producer and media personality of what he terms "the freestyle movement," recounted, as follows, the beginning of freestyle for a largely teenage audience at 1995's Muévete Boricua Youth Conference held at Hunter College.

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> In 1985 I came out of college and I wanted to pursue a career in the music business. I was DJing my way through college. I spent a lot of time at the clubs that your older brothers and sisters may have hung out at: clubs like the Roxy, the Fun House, Latin Quarter, clubs like First Class up in the Bronx. . . . But one thing that I noticed, much to my dismay, was that all these records that were being played in clubs and predominantly Latino clubs, were not represented by any Latino artists. You know, and I said "Damn! I know we got talent. How come we have no Latino artists out there?" And I would scan the credits of the records that I played and, you know, you'd see a remix here and there, but there weren't a great many Latino songwriters. There weren't a great many Latino record producers. . . . So me and a bunch of other people, we shared that same mentality, and we began writing music and producing records in whatever limited facility we had and getting the people who we knew, from our neighborhoods, who we thought had talent, to sing on those records. As a result there was a movement, if you will, that was created.

Discussions of the emergence, popularity and cultural significance of freestyle must take into account this desire of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos to see "our own" in the limelight, to have a music that was "ours." George LaMond, a popular freestyle singer during the 1980s[51] 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 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 are clearly a response to Latino invisibility in mass media (Morales 1996; Rodríguez 1997), in general, and the prevailing notion at the time that hip hop was African American cultural property , in particular. They must also be understood as an expression of the will of New York-raised Puerto Rican (and other Latino) youth to expand the bounds of collective expression outside of Spanish-language "Latin" music.

What was perceived as culturally "ours" by these youths exceeded the bounds of "Latin" orthodoxy that considered Spanish language and Latin America "originated" sounds as a necessary component of music worthy of the label "Latin." Latinos and "American" [sic] music seemed for most disparate partners, both in terms of cultural "legitimacy" and commercial viability. In that sense, the participation of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in doo wop (during the 1950s), Latin Soul (during the

[51] LaMond, like many other artists who began their careers as freestyle singers such as Marc Anthony, La India, Brenda K. Starr and Lissette Meléndez, has in the 1990s re-directed his musical pursuits towards salsa.

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1960s), hip hop (during the 1970s and 1980s) and freestyle (during the 1980s) all shared an element of challenge to the dominant notions of *latinidad*.

The backlash against these challenges to *latinidad* took many forms: Willie Rosario's insistence on identifying *bugalú* as "American" music (Roberts 1979); Puerto Rican parents complaining of their children's fascination with hip hop "nigger" music (Acevedo 1995; del Barco 1996; Q-Unique 1995); A&Rs refusing to sign Latino MCs because "Puerto Ricans don't sell"; George García being persuaded by his label to launch his freestyle career as George LaMond, for his last name was considered a commercial drawback (Parris 1996, 31).

Though grassroots perceptions are often more responsive to innovations and changing conditions than market-oriented ones, both coincided in their difficulty in grappling with the younger generation's creative will to embrace their New York-based, English-infused, Afro-diasporic lived cultural experiences. Freestyle was in this sense an artistic liberation from culturally stifling parameters of conformity with the reigning notions of *latinidad*.

At the same time, though it advanced the power of second and third generation identity and artistic production, freestyle also reproduced other reductive notions of identity, experience and solidarity. It reinforced the myth of pan-Latino commonality and the drawing of *puertorriqueñidad/ latinidad* as identity categories in great part defined through non-blackness.

Orsi (1992) 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" (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'" (318). Similarly, Puerto Ricanness and *latinidad* have been informed by a desire to distinguish these groups from the "darker" African Americans.

These anxieties regarding ethno-racial identity affect understandings of artistic production in peculiar ways. Not only can a certain mode of expression, like freestyle, be said to be Latino because New York Puerto Ricans are the most distinguished, popular, or numerous participants. A certain

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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 ethno-racial ethos come to define what may or may not be Latino. Andy 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)

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 constantly thrown around in the media, street corner cyphers, and domestic conversations. These essentializing myths serve to cement difference, as further "strategies of alterity."

The list of areas where difference is believed to be patently clear thus grows. Ethos, aesthetics, themes, ideas, language, musical references and sources, can all be pointed to as examples of group difference. What is African American can thus be considered easily distinguishable 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.

> The unifying concept of hip hop is that it is for all people of color of African descent who created a culture to reflect their richness and flavor despite living in extreme poverty. However, many Latinos had trouble embracing this concept as their own ignorance and racist attitudes would not let them realize their own kinship with African Americans. Latinos wanted to see *their own* [emphasis mine] performing on stage and in the spotlight and thus Freestyle or, as it was called at the time, club music. (7)

Freestyle began as an artistic outlet and challenge 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 and also popular cultural identity. Many Puerto Ricans distanced themselves from hip hop in order to pursue something that was truly "their own" in the form of freestyle. But then, freestyle ended up taking a commercial popularity decline that affected not only

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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.

The terminology is again instructive. While some celebrated the nominal interchangeability of "freestyle" with "Latin hip hop" as a rightful emphasis of the former's ties and debts to the latter, others condemned it (Morales 1991; del Barco 1996; Rodríguez 1988; Rodríguez 1996). Edward Rodríguez, for example, argues that holding freestyle as synonymous with Latin hip hop "lead[s] to the idea that Latin hip hop was different from real hip hop" (1995) and "separated Latinos from real hip hop" (1996a).

Of course, this notion of "real" hip hop brings up a whole new set of problems regarding who defines and the criteria for defining, yet it does point to certain prevailing emic notions where the boundaries between center and periphery, though porous and contested, are most often perceived as commonsensical among participants. In this case, the core was Black-matrixed hip hop and the periphery included "other-ethnic" hip hop such as "Latin hip hop."

"Latin rap"

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, topics were ghetto-centric. It was basically rap music done by Latinos, often code-switching between English and Spanish, with topics and references particular to inner-city Latino communities.

Contrary to freestyle, whose artists were overwhelmingly New York Puerto Ricans, Latin rap came largely out of the West Coast and had few Puerto Rican exponents. Kid 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

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Mellow Man Ace (a Cuban, also from Los Angeles), Latin Alliance (headed by Frost) and the infamous[52] Gerardo (an Ecuadorian, a.k.a. 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. But they never achieved the popularity of later Latin rap artists.

Though most commonly treated as such, "Latin rap" is not a self-explanatory nor unproblematic label. Is it simply rap done by Latinos, regardless of style or content? Is it rap done by Latinos which 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 term "Latin rap" has been used to categorize artists like Kid Frost, Mellow Man Ace, Gerardo, Latin Alliance, and Latin Empire --all U.S.-based Latino artists whose music, rhymes and themes include elements common-sensically identifiable as Latino. It has also been used to describe Latin America-based artists like 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 L.A.-based trio was made up of Sen Dogg (a Cuban -- 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 be that since two of its three members were Latinos, Cypress Hill had a certain mold of *latinidad* to conform to. They, however, never claimed to be doing Latin rap. In fact,

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[52] For emic critiques of Gerardo see my essay in *Centro* (Rivera 1996).

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they scoffed at the thought and explicitly resented being boxed into the category others presumed they belonged in. Asked if their approach to music-making was a "Latin thing," Sen Dogg answered:

> A lot of groups out there are like pro one culture and shit, like Kid Frost -he caters just to the Latin, 'cause that's his thing. If you ask me -I'll tell you that [Frost] is a sucka and he can't represent my thing, that's where we step in. We feel you can all be down with your own, but not when it comes to the music; you all got to be together. (Cross 1993, 238)

Sen Dog and B-Real were deemed part of the hip hop core --as opposed to the fringes which Latin rap artists occupied. They were also extremely successful in terms of record sales, being the first Latino hip hop artists to achieve platinum status. These discussions of how "Latino" or "Anglocentric" their artistic production is or is not, slight other aspects of their music which are more directly relevant to the social milieu in which rap is produced and consumed.

Morales defines "Latin hip hop" as "the polyphonic outburst of recent rap-oriented records" like *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/Americano hip hop aesthetic" which 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 need not be dismissed as "de-Latinized, stoned-out Beastie Boys." Though their rhymes are mostly English, Morales notes, they still kick some bilingualism and their "relative Anglocentrism" doesn't necessarily "mean they're not reaching *vatos* in the hood."

Instead of questioning the stifling assumptions regarding ethno-racial identity and artistic expression that underpin this charge of Anglocentrism, 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. The

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experience of New York Puerto Ricans then begs the question: why assume the naturalness or necessity of a "Latino" aesthetic and cultural product over and against Afro-diasporic ones? If a "Latino" aesthetic is supposed to be informed by cultural expressions and lived experiences that are identified with Latinos living in the United States, then why exclude from that *latinidad* the vernacular cultural production of New York Puerto Ricans who have been living, loving, playing and making music together with African Americans for most of the century?

The Hispanocentric bent of the dominant definitions of *latinidad* has often led to Puerto Ricans placing themselves or being placed by others outside the bounds of *latinidad*. A cornerstone aspect of the Latin rap aesthetic was the use of bilingualism or 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 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." (Rodríguez, 1995) Then there's also the issue of New York-raised Puerto Ricans (and other Latinos) expressing themselves more comfortably in English than in Spanish. As 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" (del Barco 1996, 82). Prince PowerRule (Oscar Alfonso) has the following 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 this Latin rap as a Latino-specific realm within rap music had a dual effect. On the one hand, it expanded the bounds of participation and expression of Latinos in hip hop, but on the other hand, it also ended up making the existing ridges between Puerto Ricans and African Americans even deeper. The non-black *latinidad* that Latin rap was based on, shrouded the Afro-diasporic dimension of Puerto Rican identities.

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CHAPTER 5

THE 1990s:

GHETTOCENTRICITY, BLACKNESS AND PAN-*LATINIDAD*

Yo, yo, yo. What up? This is Pee Wee Dance of the legendary Rock Steady Crew and here's what I want you to do. Yo, over this funky track you're hearing right now, check the lyrics. Understand hip hop culture is a Black and Latino manifestation of an oppressed creativity. But understand also that rap is a white manifestation of a desire to package and sell that expression. So while you're thinking about what I just said, let this rhythm get to your head. Peace.

Pee Wee Dance, *Tony Touch #45*

The people of Puerto Rico are African descendants, in the same way that the so-called slaves that they brought to [the United States of] America. That's why we understand we are the same people and we are happy to see our brothers representin' themselves [in hip hop].

Dead Prez

Journalist and poet Kevin Powell poured out a heartfelt lament in the pages of *Vibe* magazine in which he grapples with the contradictions inherent in what he identifies as one of the 1990s hottest trends in U.S. popular culture in general and commercial rap music in particular: the mass marketing and glamorizing of the violence and pain of black "ghetto" life. It distresses him that poor people's real-life tragedies are being packaged and sold through music, television and film. But what haunts him the most is what he perceives as a dangerous trend among young black people: the upholding of a stereotypical "ghetto" mentality as a badge of honor and the equating of that mentality with blackness.

> You ghet-to! Real niggas come from the ghetto. I ain't never leavin' the ghetto. These are some of the things we've said aloud, to one another, and to ourselves throughout the course of the past year. Suddenly, it's the move to be from the ghetto (even if you aren't), to speak the ghettocentric language (even when it sounds like you frontin'), and to proclaim the ghetto as the true source of black identity -some of us call it "representin'." (Powell 1995)

Written from the point of view of a hip hop participant, Powell's article is an indictment of the pervasiveness within rap of a discursive and performative blackness defined through a stereotypical "ghettocentricity" (Kelley 1996; McLaren 1995; Samuels 1994). He concludes by stating that if blunt smoking, gun packing, 40-ounce drinking, and calling one another "niggas" and "bitches," are what the ghetto and, by extension, blackness are about, then "we're participating in our own self-destruction, in true ghetto style."

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Powell's article speaks to a change in rap's commercial trends. The Afrocentric emphasis in rap of the late 1980s started shifting towards a more ghettocentric approach in the early 1990s (Boyd 1997; Smith 1997). Blackness did not cease being a crucial identity marker within rap's discourse, but just became more narrowly identified as a ghetto blackness.

> Rap's agenda since PE's [Public Enemy's] heyday has shifted largely from a generic concern for chronicling the "black" experience to one specifically about the black underclass in the ghetto. . . . In rap's dominant market paradigm, blackness has become contingent, while the ghetto has become necessary. (Smith 1997, 346)

Focusing on West Coast "gangsta rap" during the earlier half of the 1990s, Robin Kelley ponders the confluence of class and race within the genre through artists' usage of the term "nigga":

> More common, however, is the use of "Nigga" to describe a condition rather than skin color or culture. Above all, "Nigga" speaks to a collective identity shaped by class consciousness, the character of inner-city space, police repression, poverty, and the constant threat of intraracial violence fed by a dying economy. Part of NWA's "Niggaz4Life" on *Efil4Zaggin*, for instance, uses "nigga" almost as a synonym for "oppressed." In other words, "Nigga" is not merely *another* word for black. Products of the postindustrial ghetto, the characters in gangsta rap constantly remind listeners that they are still second-class citizens -"Niggaz"- whose collective lived experiences suggest that nothing has changed *for them* as opposed to the black middle class. In fact, "Nigga" is frequently employed to distinguish urban black working-class males from the black bourgeoisie and African Americans in positions of institutional authority. (Kelley 1996, 137)

Though Kelley focuses on the commercially-dominant West Coast sound of the earlier 1990s, and Smith on the East Coast-based rap of the mid-to-late 1990s, both describe the same class-based narrowing of the concept of blackness as expressed through rap.

Rap's discursive and performative focus shifted from a blackness primarily defined through (a narrow, non-diasporic take on) African American history and ancestry to one based more upon contemporary socio-economic conditions and lived culture (as opposed to "traditional," "inherited" or "ancestral" culture). As this shift was taking place, a slight relaxing of blackness' ethno-racial scope also occurred. The blackness formerly restricted by the bounds of an ethno-racialized African Americanness began expanding to accommodate *certain* Latino groups as a population of ethno-racial Others whose experience of class and ethno-racial marginalization is virtually indistinguishable from the ghettocentric black experience. Such Latinos could even be perceived as closer to this class-based blackness than "bourgie" blacks.

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While during the late 1980s and early 1990s hip hop was frequently described by African American 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 which emphasizes the ghetto experience.[53]

The MTV animated series "Station Zero" which started being broadcast in 1999 is only one of many recent manifestations of this move toward the re-inclusion of Latinos as core participants in hip hop culture. This TV show features both African American and Latino teenage characters who engage in different facets of hip hop creativity. Sosa (1999) describes the character "Chino" as "definitely not afraid of his Latino heritage, he freely uses Spanish without translating for the Spanish impaired." What a change from a decade ago! What would have probably been considered back then a Latino segregationist tactic and a gesture of linguistic exclusion toward African Americans, is today being celebrated as a sign of hip hop authenticity. New York Latinos are being acknowledged as tightly linked to hip hop's history and subsequent development. Chino is not only a "Hip Hop conscious character" who struggles for artistic freedom and integrity in the face of commercial exploitation; he is also a South Bronx Latino from the very Soundview housing projects that have been central in hip hop history.

It is true that, in the 1990s, young people of all ethno-racial affiliations participate in hip hop. Furthermore, blackness as signified through class-specific "nigganess" has been celebrated by many

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[53] This class-identified blackness that relaxes ethno-racial boundaries is the opposite of what happened during rap's Afrocentric phase during the late 1980s. Initially a ghetto-based realm of cultural expression of considerable ethnic-inclusiveness during the 1970s and early 1980s, particularly among Afro-diasporic people, rap's class-identification shifted in favor of a narrow ethno-racial identification as a "Black thing" during the latter 1980s. During the 1990s, the tide has turned once again to favor a ghetto-based blackness inclusive of Latinos.

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hip hop enthusiasts, regardless of ethno-racial background. As KRS-ONE expressed in a popular 1995 rhyme,

> what go around, come around, I figure
> now we got white kids calling themselves 'nigga'[54]

But KRS does not let his listeners forget that "white kid's" appropriation of black language and their participation in hip hop culture takes place within a context of white supremacy, where still "the crosses burn."

> the tables turn
> as the crosses burn
> remember you must learn

Rap is a central part of mainstream U.S. pop culture, has multi-racial 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/nigganess-- is contentious ethno-racial territory and its borders zealously policed by its participants. The ethno-racial scope of "authenticity" has been expanded somewhat, but only to incorporate (though not always smoothly) the "Latino" experience. This ethno-racial scope is tightly woven in with contemporary socio-economic structures. The quote by Pee Wee Dance at the beginning of this chapter provides a vivid example, for it points to ethno-racialized economic contentions between the Blacks and Latinos at the axis of hip hop creativity and the "white" power structure that has taken one element of hip hop (rap), pulled it from its socio-historical context, and profited from it more than the main creators themselves.

Emic notions of authenticity have been broadened in order to accommodate a group that is perceived to be quite close to Blackness to begin with. Latino blackness or near-Blackness is thought of as a product of social, political and economic circumstances, which have led to shared lived and historical experiences in the "ghetto" with African Americans. David Pérez, a Bronx Puerto Rican who has directed videos for Tribe Called Quest, Cypress Hill, House of Pain, Brand Nubian, Diamond D, Beastie Boys, KRS-ONE and others, explains how his growing up as a working-class Puerto Rican in New York grants him authenticity in the hip hop realm:

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[54] See "MCs Act Like They Don't Know" in *KRS ONE* (1995).

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> I look sort of white so I have to establish myself. Gotta let *them* know where you're coming from, what you saw when you were growing up. Then all of a sudden, they look at you, and you're light-skinned. You could be Italian, Jewish, Greek. Then after you establish yourself, you become *authentic*. (emphasis mine) (del Barco 1996, 76)

But Latino authenticity is not only conceived within hip hop in terms of socio-economic structures; it is also constructed as related to Afro-diasporic ethno-racial identities, cultural history and cultural formations. The Off-Broadway production, *Jam On the Groove*,[55] provides a pertinent example. The cast of this hip hop theater production consisted mostly of African Americans and Puerto Ricans, and included some of the better known Puerto Rican b-boys and b-girls of New York City --Crazy Legs, Ken Swift and Honey Rockwell of the Rock Steady Crew, Fabel and Wiggles of Rhythm Technicians, Rocafella and Kwikstep of Full Circle. One of its pieces, entitled "Concrete Jungle," celebrates hip hop's dance element as an expression of joy and an outlet for creativity in a context of urban blight and police brutality.

A b-boy and b-girl battle is the venue where technique and inventiveness are displayed, as well as a site where tensions and rivalries between African Americans and Puerto Ricans are manifested. The battle is interrupted for a moment as the off-stage voice of a police officer demands that they disperse, calling them "a bunch of savages" and "nothing but shit." The dancers ignore the cop and the battle continues. The voice bursts out with another string of insults and threats, but the dancers still refuse to disperse. Gunfire rings out, as the dancers try to escape. All but one are gunned down. The sole survivor proceeds to bring everyone back to life with the beat of a drum. "Concrete Jungle" is partly an indictment of the racialization and marginalization of Latinos and African Americans as the "savages" that inhabit the New York inner-city "jungle." It also celebrates the common Afro-diasporic cultural ground of African Americans and Latinos --the drum is upheld as a symbol of tradition as well as a tool for joint present-day struggle.

But the Afro-diasporic identities shared by African Americans and Latinos entails only a sector of Latinos, namely Afro-diasporic Latinos. To talk about shared experiences in the ghetto means we

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[55] *Jam On the Groove* ran during 1995 at PS 122 in the East Village and the Minnetta Lane Theater in the West Village. The company also did an international tour. See Bousaada (1995) and Pareles (1995).

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must distinguish the intense experiential similarities between Blacks and Puerto Ricans 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 Blacks and Cubans in Miami (Portes and Stepick 1993). 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 (Flores 1996; Oboler 1995).

The sense of a Black and Latino "us" in hip hop is intimately related to the experiences of African Americans and Caribbean Latinos (particularly Puerto Ricans) in New York City. In the words of El Barrio-raised Puerto Rican DJ and producer Frankie Cutlass:

> Puerto Ricans, we grew up with Blacks. I go to the housing projects that's all you see... a lot of Puerto Ricans and Blacks, bro, so we got soul too. I mean we eat what you eat. You eat what we eat too. A lot of times Latinos... their wife is Black and their kids is Black and Puerto Rican. And I could bring a lot of the homies from the ghetto... you think they're Black... they're Puerto Rican. We're there, we can hang with you. (Burke 1997a, 132)

In response to his interlocutor's question about the similarities in the experiences of Blacks and Latinos in the United States, Cutlass extricates his experiences from those of the Latino aggregate since he does not feel he can "speak for another culture." He feels he can only talk from his Puerto Rican vantage point.

Cuban Link, a rapper and member of the Bronx-based Terror Squad (whose most popular members are Puerto Rican rappers Big Punisher and Fat Joe), answered a journalist's inquiry regarding "Latino involvement" in hip hop by discarding presumptions of pan-*latinidad* and narrowing down the concept to refer only to Caribbean Latinos:

> It's the Caribbean Connection, baby. Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, all. We're coming together and it's something you've got to see to believe. (Lynch 1998, 34)

The explicit avowal by popular hip hop personalities and hip hop-centric media (magazines like *The Source*, *XXL*, *Blaze*, *Stress*, *Ego Trip* and rap video shows like BET's *Rap* City) of the historical presence and importance of New York Caribbean Latinos within hip hop has been crucial in the process of widespread Latino legitimation as bona fide, core members of the hip hop "community" --and not just

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arrimaos or interlopers attempting to "be Black" or do a "Black thing."[56] And since *latinidad* is often viewed as the primary and "natural" locus of identity for all Latinos, the fact that New York Caribbean Latinos have had a historical presence in hip hop, has been automatically extended to encompass Latinos as a whole.

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 pan-ethnic abstraction. In the haste to rescue "Latinos" from historical invisibility and to acknowledge the present role played by Latinos within hip hop, essentialized connections (often enough based on stereotypes and exotization) are drawn, and crucial differences among groups within the Latino pan-ethnic conglomerate are slighted.[57] 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 pan-*latinidad*.

The role played by New York Puerto Ricans in hip hop culture has been different from that of other Caribbean Latino groups in New York; the differences are even greater when Puerto Ricans are compared to Chicanos and other Latinos on the West Coast. But these specificities are obscured by the growing force of the *gran familia latina* discourse within hip hop.

A 1998 feature article in *Industry Insider Magazine* illustrates the case in point. Weisberg, its author, laments that "Latinos in hip hop have always seemed like second class citizens in an art form they helped create" (11) and sets to find out why.

Throughout the article, Weisberg enthusiastically writes about the "sense of family" manifested among the "Latino brethren" and "Latino hermanos" that are meeting at an *Industry Insider*-sponsored summit of Latino hip hop artists which took place at the beginning of 1998 in New York City. (The article consists mostly of interviews with the artists who attended the summit.) Brought together under

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[56] This re-assessment of Latino participation did not spring up out of nowhere. Even before it became common to speak of hip hop as "Black and Latino," certain sectors held a vision of hip hop history that ran counter to the then-dominant construction of hip hop as exclusively African American.
[57] For example, in the August 1999 *Source* magazine cover, an article on the duo Beatnuts was subtitled "Dos Vatos Locos," thus assuming that West Coast Chicano self-referential terminology can be automatically made to apply to these New Yorkers of Dominican and Colombian background.

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the assumption of a family bond --the summit was billed by Weisberg a "family reunion" (53)-- many of the artists themselves also celebrate in their statements the ascribed "bond" of *latinidad*.

According to Jack, from the West Coast group Psycho Realm: "Since we're all Latinos, it's like were [sic] all family." (57) Big Punisher also alludes to a *latinidad*-based notion of family: "It's Latino first. That's more important than East/West. That's familia. That's La Raza." (57) Fat Joe elaborates further:

> Since we're Latino, I feel that we're all spiritual in a way. It doesn't matter if you're Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Columbian [sic], or whatever. We've got something that's real different from many other cultures. No matter what's going down, we always stick together. It's about time we did this. Hopefully, we'll keep gettin' together like this and show everybody love. It doesn't matter if you're from the West Coast or the East Coast. We're Latino. You know what I mean? We cut across all that shit. (55)

Joe, Jack, Punisher, and most of the other artists interviewed by Weisberg weave a family-based narrative of unity among Latinos that relies more on future projections than on lived experiences --particularly as it applies to Latinos involved in hip hop culture. "No matter what's going down, we always stick together" (Joe) and "Latinos look out for one another" (Pun) are statements that express what (purportedly) *should be*, rather than what actually *is*. The virtual lack of collaboration[58] (particularly cross-coastal) among these artists and their vowing to work in unison *from now on* exposes this celebrated Latino unity as either still forthcoming or wishful thinking. Besides, considering the explicit acknowledgment in the article of "misunderstandings" and "differences" formerly existing among some of the participating artists, the summit can be seen as more of a patch-up/make-up session ("to squash beef," as Frost says), than yet another manifestation of love and support among the Latino "familia."

Though cloaked in the benevolent, comforting and naturalizing mantle of family, the Latino unity that these artists are advocating is more a commercial necessity and market strategy than a spiritual, familial or historical imperative. Marginalized within what Fat Joe terms a "Black business,"

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[58] Further illustrating this trumpeting of a Latino unity that has yet to materialize, Weisberg wonders "why haven't Latino artists worked on more projects together?" His assumption is that Latino artists *should* want to work together, and since there have been very few projects of such kind, it must be due to obstacles that *should* be overcome.

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the only option for Latinos, as expressed by the majority of the artists present at the summit, is to work together and "help their own." In Son Doobie's words:

> . . . whether it's black media owned by white folks or black media owned by black folks, I know everybody wants to help *their own* [emphasis mine]. Basically, what we've done now is helped ourselves to the table because nobody was going to give it to us. . . . It's time for Latinos to shine because we've been down since day one. (Weisberg 1998, 54)

The notion that Latinos have been key in hip hop since "day one" is stressed time and time again throughout the article by the artists, as well as by Weisberg. Though the Latinos that participated in hip hop's earliest history were specifically Caribbean Latinos and overwhelmingly New York Puerto Ricans, the Latino aggregate as a whole reaps the claim to hip hop historical presence and authenticity. There is a sense of a trans-coastal, trans-national Latino "us" that enables this collectivization of the experience of a sector within the Latino population. The article, by not even nodding in the direction of regional and ethnic (as opposed to pan-ethnic) specificities, makes it seem as though the obstacles and issues faced by Latino artists in different regions and of different ethnicities have been the same.

Weisberg, in his mission to celebrate Latino rap artists and hip hop culture in general, constructs a mythical pan-ethnic bond between Latino artists and portrays hip hop as a democratic, utopian space where the media is the big bad wolf.

> If music is truly universal, then hip hop is its purest expression. . . . It doesn't matter if your [sic] Black, White, Catholic, or Gay. Hip hop has always been the cultural melting pot of free expression and open dialogue. The watering down and deterioration of hip hop's infrastructure lies in the fact that its education is left in the hands of the media. (1998, 51)

Weisberg takes the easy way out and bows out of internal criticism. He fails to explore the tensions among Latino groups as well as those existing between African Americans and Latinos --tensions that are as much a part of hip hop history as trans-ethnic solidarities and multi-ethnic cultural creation. This forced sense of harmony even leads him to the ludicrous claim that homosexuality is a non-issue in hip hop, and to ignoring the dynamics of gender power within it.

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Baxter (1999), in an article for *The Source*[59] entitled "Spanish Fly: Latinos Take Over," suggests that the explanation for why, in commercial terms, "Latin culture suddenly bec[a]me so hot" in the late 1990s has to do with "demographics" as well as "the recent political awakening of the Latino community." He proceeds to mention several movements and initiatives in order to illustrate "Latino" political mobilization: the Chicano Moratorium of 1970, the United Farm Workers during the 1960s and 1970s, and the more recent mobilizations against California's Proposition 187.

Since Baxter restricts his comments to a few West Coast-based, Chicano-dominated examples, readers unfamiliar with the topic thus get a myopic introduction to the history of Latino political mobilization. They may think that "Latino" political mobilization has been restricted to the West Coast, or perhaps that the movements he mentions are representative of the interests and efforts of Latinos across the nation. New York's long history of African American and Puerto Rican joint political struggles is not even peripherally mentioned --a political history which complements an equally long history of joint cultural production, of which hip hop is a part.

This type of identity-building within hip hop substitutes an abstract discourse of Latino pan-ethnic solidarity in place of a more regionally-based, lived-experience approach where, in the case of New York Caribbean Latinos, urban Afro-diasporic identities dominated. This is not to say that there is no longer within hip hop culture a sense of an "us" between African Americans and Caribbean Latinos in New York; or that Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean Latinos do not also resist the presumption that they share a primary/"blood"-based/ancestral bond with other Latinos and only a secondary or circumstantial one with African Americans. For Puerto Ricans within hip hop, *latinidad* and Afro-diasporic blackness are at times parallel, at times intersecting identity discourses; sometimes they coexist while, at other times, they may compete.

The clashing of Latino and Afro-diasporic identities is not unavoidable, for they are not mutually-exclusive identities. The problem is that they are often posed as such, forcing a non-sensical choosing-of-sides. Ethno-racial rifts between Caribbean Latinos and Blacks within hip hop have been

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[59] *The Source* bills itself as "The Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture & Politics."

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informed to a great extent by a larger social context in which *latinidad* and blackness are often held to be non-intersecting. Hip hop, nevertheless, has been one of the social realms where Caribbean Latino Afro-diasporicity has been grappled with and celebrated the most.

As the mass-mediated visibility and momentum of a largely Hispanocentric, essentialized pan-*latinidad* grows, so do the perceived differences between Caribbean Latinos and Blacks. Caribbean Latinos are assumed to have experiences, histories, identities and solidarities that "naturally" place them within the pan-Latino aggregate. Paradoxically, at the same time, there is a growing general sense that Latinos and Blacks share parallel experiences of class and racial marginalization in the United States. Both tendencies manifest themselves within hip hop.

Whether taken up by elected officials, government bureaucrats, academics, journalists or activists, contemporary discussions of poverty, political and economic empowerment, social marginalization, crime, the prison-industrial complex and police brutality --to mention only a few issues-- center around these two groups. So even in the midst of this essentialization of the pan-Latino bond, the notion of shared conditions and the need for a strategic alliance between African Americans and Latinos is not lost. It is most often not deemed a "natural" or "primary" bond --like those among Latino groups--, but one dictated by necessity. As Fat Joe stated in Weisberg's article:

> We can't change the world, but we want people to notice the importance of Latinos in hip hop. I want people to notice the power that we have in this industry. I want people to look at the bigger picture and realize that this isn't just about Latinos either. We need Blacks and Latinos to get together to show the strength of this hip hop game, we need to be the majority not the minority. Everybody needs to understand we're on the same fucking page. (1998, 55)

The combination of this discourse of Latino pan-ethnicity within hip hop with the sense that Blacks and Latinos are "on the same fucking page" has had the seemingly contradictory effect of extending hip hop authenticity --signified by a ghettocentric "nigga-ness"-- to include all Latinos, but at the same time deepening the rifts between Caribbean Latinos and African Americans. Pan-*latinidad* has, oddly, "niggafied" certain Latino groups (like Chicanos) through their essentialized association with New York Caribbean Latinos. Pan-*latinidad* has also meant, in the particular case of Puerto Ricans, that a group which was instrumental in hip hop's development, and which had been historically

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"niggafied" through their association with African Americans, can now be held as non-black under the assumptions of pan-*latinidad*.

These paradoxes are related to diverging assumptions about who Latinos are and what *latinidad* means. The union of Black and Latino under a hip hop "us" is thrown around more often than it is actually grappled with. Different assumptions can be at play when invoking that "us". Taking after the Chicano model, one of these assumptions is that Latinos are "browns" that near Blackness, by virtue of sharing a parallel ghetto experience with Blacks (not necessarily sharing the same ghettos), and by virtue of their multi-racial (heavily indigenous) makeup (Boyd 1997; Jiménez 1997; Perkins 1996, 263). Another one is more specifically concerned with Caribbean Latinos in New York who share a ghetto experience with Blacks (most often the same ghettos) and an Afro-diasporic culture --thus their being even closer to Blackness (Flores 1998; Rodríguez 1996; Rose, 1994).

The late 1990s common reference to hip hop as a "Black and Latino" form of cultural expression cannot be understood without dwelling on the ethno-racial categories used to expand inclusiveness beyond African Americans. Puerto Ricans, as well as other "Hispanic" Caribbeans, though Afro-diasporic peoples, are largely not considered and do not consider themselves "Black." Black, in its common usage in the United States as an ethno-racial category, is a synonym for African American. Exceptions are made, though, in the case of English-speaking Caribbeans and, if the boundaries are stretched even more, even Francophone Caribbeans can be considered Black. But Spanish-speaking Caribbeans are a totally different story, for they are associated with the "Latino" or "Hispanic" categories, rather than with Blackness or Afro-diasporicity. Thus, in order to acknowledge the historical and present role of Puerto Ricans and other Latino Caribbean people, hip hop is explained as "Black and Latino." It would not suffice to just explain hip hop as "Afro-diasporic" or "African American and Caribbean."

Hip Hop as "Black and Latino"

Some academic commentators have restricted their discussions of blackness, marginality and ghettocentricity within rap to African Americans (De Genova 1995; Henderson 1996; Kelley 1996);

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others have included Latinos (Smith 1997; McLaren 1995) as co-participants in rap's discursive and performative constructions. Most frequently, the latter are content to describe rap as a Black *and* Latino phenomenon but mention nothing about the specificities (or lack thereof) of the "Latino" experience in hip hop. Is there no mention of Latino specificities because these two groups engage (and are engaged by) blackness in the same fashion? Or is it that Latinos are mentioned as co-participants (due to their historical and/or contemporary importance) but the subsequent discussion of blackness only applies to African Americans?

Smith describes rap in his article's introductory paragraph as

> an expressive outlet for a marginalised and demonised urban social bloc that speaks with *heavily black and Latino* [emphasis mine], predominantly masculine accents within a staunchly white and patriarchal social order. (1997, 345)

A few pages later he makes reference to hip hop's "African-American and Afro-Caribbean artisans" (348). Further on he states that though "rap is clearly a contemporary manifestation of an ancient African oral tradition," its "thematic content did not blossom from New York City roots immersed in any singular ethnic soil, but emerged as a mutant outgrowth stemming from a rampant miscegenation of cultures" (354).

One of the article's primary focuses is exploring "hip-hop performativity" as it relates to a discursive, material and historical blackness, frequently making reference to the African American experience: "communal African-American sensibility" (346), "African American artistic expression" (348), "African-American legacy" (352), "African-American experience" (352), "African-American cultural identity" (352), "African-American subjectivity" (353), "communal African-American safehavens" (367), "'African American-ness'" (368). Though Smith introduces rap as an expressive form that is predominantly "black and Latino", he focuses on rap's relationship to a blackness that is discussed solely in terms of the "African-American experience." So where does that leave Latinos with respect to said blackness? How do they relate to and/or fit into it? Is this a blackness that includes Latinos? And if that is the case, why does Smith only focus on African Americans?

It is hard to answer these questions without venturing into speculation. The reader never gets a feel for why Smith accrues such importance to Latinos by describing them as co-formulators, along

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with African Americans, of rap as an "expressive artistic outlet," but then never mentions them again. Is it because they are included within the bounds of the blackness being discussed or because they exist/create outside the scope of said blackness? Who are these Latinos anyway? The only other instance in the article where Smith mentions another group, aside from African Americans and Latinos, as a key participant within rap is when he refers to hip hop's "Afro-Caribbean artisans." Should we then assume the "Latinos" Smith writes about are Afro-Caribbean Latinos?

Unlike Smith, other authors have made explicit their understanding of rap's internal ethno-racial dynamics when it comes to the relationship between blackness and *latinidad*. Rose, for example, contextualizes hip hop within "Afro-diasporic cultural formations" (1994, 189), where "Spanish-speaking Caribbean" youth are explicitly included within the African diaspora. Rodríguez (1995) also avoids discussing an abstract *latinidad*, whose relationship to blackness is unclear or unspoken, by honing in specifically on Afro-diasporic Latinos

In Smith's case, it is not at all clear if the blackness he talks about includes Latinos (and if it does, how). McLaren (1995), on the other hand, seems to imply that "blackness" and "Latinoness" are distinct but parallel ethno-racial experiences that inform rap music. But he never explains why.

> Gangsta rap is concerned with the articulation of experiences of oppression that find their essential character among disenfranchised urban black and Latino populations. . . .The ontological status of the gangsta rapper resides in the function of the commodity of blackness, but a certain quality of blackness that is identified through the expressive codes of the rapper is the 'inner turmoil' of the oppressed black subject of history. Here, blackness (or *Latino-ness*) [emphasis mine] marks out a heritage of pain and suffering and points to the willingness and ability of oppressed groups to fight against injustice "by any means necessary." (1995, 33-34)

Whatever the reasons authors may have for not addressing how Latinos participate and create within rap's ghettocentric blackness, this omission leaves a lamentable gap in the literature. Is "Latino" merely the ethnic label for a group that exists within this ghettocentric blackness? Are Latinos outside the scope of said blackness? In the following sections, I seek to explain how "sometimes" is the answer to both questions.

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PART II

TOPICS IN THE LATE 1990s

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CHAPTER 6

LATIN@S GET HOT AND GHETTO-TROPICAL

As I explained in the previous chapter, the rise of rap's ghettocentricity as a commercial trend has played a part in the re-legitimation of Latinos as core participants of hip hop. This legitimation is manifested in various ways: the greater media visibility of Latino hip hop artists; the increased use of Spanish words and phrases in songs by the most popular rap artists; and frequent references to and images of Latinos in rhymes, videos and articles.

Rigo Morales explains in *Urban The Latino Magazine*'s "hip hop issue" how the romantization of "street life" and the perceived participation of Latinos within it have led to rap lyrics populated by Latino characters and references:

> The fact that Latinos play a small part in today's 'game of hustle' has had a big influence on rappers who strive to prove just how 'real' or 'official' they are to the street. Being that Latinos are a major part of urban society, MCs tend put [sic] us within their rhymes in an attempt to paint a more vivid picture of life in urban society. Add to that the obsession with powerful figures such as Manuel Noriega, Pablo Escobar and the fictitional, god-like Tony Montana, and we have what seems to be an unexposed trend within today's rap music. (1998, 33)

Though rap's trendy ghettocentrism has been dominated by a celebration of a narrow and stereotyped strip of ghetto life[60], there exists another approach to ghettocentricity. This latter approach is more concerned with historicizing ghetto experiences and creativities than with glamorizing the "thug life."[61]

KRS-ONE is a popular MC that advances the notion of a historicized ghettocentricity:

> If rap could be put into a scientific formula the equation would be: Rap=HipHop=Urban=Ghetto=***Reality***. (KRS-ONE 1995)

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[60] At a February 1999 hip hop conference at New York University, *Blaze* Features Editor, Darrell Dawsey, expressed dissatisfaction with the glamorizing of a stereotypical ghetto experience within rap music, and called for more rounded and multi-dimensional accounts of ghetto life. "I came from a so-called bad neighborhood [in Detroit], but the ice cream truck still came down my block. Nobody's mom wanted them b-boying and tagging in her living room. My mom hugged me." He lamented that these experiences typically get left out of rap's popular ghetto thug narratives.

[61] These approaches to ghettocentricity, however, are not necessarily mutually exclusive; the difference, most frequently, is a matter of emphasis.

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The "mathematical" over-simplicity and self-avowed "scientificity" of KRS' statement borders on muddling the subject he seeks to explain. Yet his somewhat cryptic pronouncement articulates the confluence of class, geographical location, youth culture, ethnicity and race within hip hop culture --particularly since a few pages later he also characterizes hip hop as "black."

The Rock Steady Crew (particularly through its president, Crazy Legs) and the Zulu Nation (most notably through its founder, Afrika Bambaataa) have been key New York-based organizations which have long been promoting the notion of hip hop's epicenter being U.S. "street" or "ghetto" culture.

B-Unique[62], an African American MC from Williamsburg in his early twenties, explains the rise in the use of Spanish words and phrases by African American MCs as partly informed by a history of joint ghetto experiences between Blacks and Puerto Ricans.

> The main reason for that [the use of Spanish in rhymes] is the areas that they [African American MCs] live in. Ghettoes are mixed with Puerto Ricans and Blacks. Like me... I've grown up around Puerto Ricans and Blacks so we're always together. It's almost like we're the same race. We're always rocking the same styles, the chains and the Timberlands. So when we're writing it's like giving props to my neighborhood and its also like for all the Puerto Ricans around my neighborhood we gonna throw in a couple of words for them. (B-Unique 1998)

But, says B-Unique, commercial considerations have also influenced the recent trend regarding Spanish language use in rap rhymes:

> I think at the Puerto Rican Parade is that a lot of rappers realize... Hot 97 is like "oh the Puerto Rican parade'... they realize that like 50% of their fans are Puerto Rican. Guys like KRS and Puffy know that. (B-Unique 1998)

Rap's ghettocentricity has thus affected the perception of Latinos within it in various ways. The later 1990s ghettocentricity trend, populated by stereotypical "niggas" and "bitches," "hoes" and "thugs," extends an integral role to Latinos as denizens of a bleak and hyper-violent urban scenario. The more historical ghettocentric approach likewise includes Latinos as central hip hop participants, though for reasons more related to lived experience than to stereotypical ghetto fantasies. But, as B-Unique points out, acknowledging Latinos is not merely a disinterested creative move to paint a more

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[62] As part of the duo Brooklyn Bandits, B-Unique rhymed on "Venganza" (DJ Adams 1998) and "Bandido Style" (Coo-Kee 1998). His music partner is Don Gato,

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complete or vivid picture of ghetto reality. Recognizing Latinos is a way of giving them "props," as much as a way to court them as consumers.

Aside from ghettocentricity, another market trend within which the legitimation of Latinos has taken place is the re-discovery and romantization of "old school" hip hop. The latter half of the 1990s has seen a renewed interest in early hip hop as a site of authenticity. Examples are numerous, so I will mention only a few. After years of virtual absence from the media, breaking was featured in numerous rap videos (The Def Squad's "Rappers Delight," The Fugees' "Staying Alive," Madonna's "Rain"), as well as commercials and ads (Avirex, Gap, Lugz, Sprite, Blockbuster). Sprite promoted its product by appealing to a sense of hip hop nostalgia. One of its commercials is built around the infamous rivalries between rappers KRS-ONE and MC Shan. A Sprite ad is based on references from the "classic" hip hop movie *Wild Style*. The movie itself, after being virtually impossible to find for years, was re-released on video by Rhino Records along with its soundtrack (Higa 1998). *The Source* magazine introduced in early 1997 a regular section entitled "Hip Hop 101: Respect the Architects of Your History." A remake of the song that launched rap into the commercial limelight in 1979, "Rappers Delight," was released by Eric Sermon, Keith Murray and Redman in 1998 and enjoyed great commercial success. Its video featured dancing by b-boys and b-girls from the Rock Steady Crew.

The recognition of the key role that Puerto Ricans have played in hip hop's development has endowed them with the mystique of old school authenticity --an authenticity that has been extended to all Latinos through notions of pan-*latinidad*. Mix that old school mystique with the ghetto-based legitimacy previously described and, suddenly, Latinos seem to have gained full recognition. By 1998, not only had they been accepted and legitimized within hip hop, but Latino images and artists had become somewhat of a fad.

Latinos are the move. Latinos have been making moves. Latinos are hot. Statements like these were uttered innumerable times by the time 1999 rolled around --particularly in the "year in

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a Puerto Rican MC who has grown up partly in Williamsburg and partly in Guaynabo.

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review"-type specials which radio stations, TV shows and magazines typically do at the end of each year.

Hot 97 (WQHT) is New York's only radio station that features rap and contemporary R&B. Its "Morning Show" hosts, Ed and Maia, spent a good part of their December 28, 1998 show naming everything that was hot and everything that was not in 1998. What was hot? Among other things, metrocards (as opposed to tokens), the record label Def Jam (as opposed to Bad Boy), and Latinos (as opposed to "white people"). Ed and Maia did not bother explaining what was self-evident to most of their listeners. Anybody who had been paying the slightest attention to rap music in 1998 knew what they meant by pronouncing Latinos "hot."

Big Pun, a Puerto Rican from the South Bronx, became the first Latino solo artist to go platinum, thanks to his album *Capital Punishment*. Noreaga, a Lefrak City (Queens) native who proudly pronounces himself both African American and Puerto Rican[63], hit the gold mark with his album *N.O.R.E.* During 1998, these two were actually the rap artists with the most guest appearances on rap and R&B recordings (*The Source* 1999). Hot 97 radio host Angie Martínez, constantly referred to as The Butta Pecan Rican, enjoyed a heightened visibility and popularity through MTV appearances and guest rapping on several popular tracks, among them "Ladies' Night" with Da Brat and Lil' Kim, and "Heartbeat" with KRS-ONE, as well as in songs with MC Lyte and Beenie Man. Fat Joe's *Don Cartagena* and *Cypress Hill IV* went gold.

But Latinos being "hot" does not just point to the commercial success and media visibility of these Latino artists. Many non-Latino rappers peppered their rhymes with words in Spanish, such as Jay-Z, Cam'ron, Dru Hill, Puff Daddy, Foxy Brown, Mase, Lil' Kim, Sportythieves, The Lox, Ras Kass, Outkast, Black Star. Latinos were mentioned and celebrated in numerous popular rhymes and images. Platinum single "Uptown Baby" by African American artists Lord Tariq and Peter Gunz pays homage to hip hop's Mecca, the South Bronx:

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[63] "I can't consider myself just Latino or just African American. . . . When I was growing up, people around my neighborhood used to call me a nigger-rican. It meant something to me. It's a representation of who I am. . . . I'm half Latino and half African-American. I gotta claim both." (Baxter 1999, 138)

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Well if it wasn't for the Bronx
This rap shit wouldn't be going on
So tell me where you from
Uptown baby! Uptown baby!

Not only does the song open with a horn sample from a song by Puerto Rican salsa singer Jerry Rivera, but its video includes Big Pun, a Puerto Rican rapper from the South Bronx, as an icon of hip hop authenticity. Another South Bronx Puerto Rican hip hop celebrity, b-boy Crazy Legs, was featured in an AVIREX ad and touted as the epitome of hip hop authenticity as evidenced in the ad's caption "Authenticity: 'It's not old skool, it's not new skool, it's about the true skool!'" The video of another platinum seller, Jay-Z's "Hard Knock Life," casually closes with a "typical" image from Caribbean New York ghetto streets: an old man pushing a *carrito de helado* (ice cream cart) boasting "*coco y piña*" (coconut and pineapple) painted on the side. Puff Daddy recorded a version of "PE 2000" which features Puerto Rican rap artist Hurricane Gee and includes footage from the Puerto Rican Day Parade.

Jennifer López became Hollywood's highest paid ever Latina actress and an icon of sexy "Latin" womanhood. She gained fame through her roles in the movies *Mi Familia*, *Jack*, *Money Train*, *Blood and Wine*, *Selena*, *Anaconda*, *U-Turn* and *Out of Sight*. López's charms had an impact in the hip hop realm. She was featured as the "salsa"-dancing Tunisian princess[64] in the video for Puff Daddy's platinum single "Been Around the World." Articles on her (some focusing solely on her notorious butt) appeared in magazines *Vibe*, *XXL* and *Ego Trip*. But López was hardly the sole Latina being drooled over. A whole slew of rap artists dedicated lines or even whole songs to the "*mamis*." Latin *mamis* actually became one of the latest faddish hip hop fetishes. (See Chapter 7 below).

Latinos in hip hop have, in the late 1990s, most often been portrayed as exotic virtual Blacks with the ghetto nigga stamp of approval and, particularly in the case of females, a sexualized flair. The lines uttered by a member of The Lox on Puff Daddy's 1997 hit "It's All About the Benjamins," are a great example of the double-pronged fascination with Latinos manifested in popular rap lyrics and

[64] What? More on this video in Chapter 7.

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imagery of the late 1990s: on the one hand, their participation in ghetto hustles –particularly the drug business– and, on the other the exoticized sexualization of the *mamis*.

> I'm steady tryin' to cop those
> Colossal-sized Picassos
> And have *papi* flip coke
> Outside those *gatos*
> . . . with cash flowing like *Sosa*
> And a Latin chick transporting in her *chocha*

The image of this "Latin chick"'s vagina as a vehicle for drug traffic is particularly significant, for it represents the perfect marriage of commercial rap's current fixation on sexualized *mamis* and the drug business: the "chocha", as the ultimate and disembodied object of male desire is also the vehicle for money-making illicit activity. The passing reference to Sosa, the drug-dealing boss in the movie "Scarface," is also significant as an example of rap's fixation with fictional, as well as real-life, Latino outlaws.[65]

Rap music has undoubtedly been informed by stereotypical mass-mediated Latino images, as its romantization of fictional gangsters and drug dealers illustrates. But this glamorization of and identification with Latino outlaws functions at a somewhat detached and abstract level; it parallels rap's romance with the Italian Mafioso figure.[66] Yet there is another level of identification with the Latino outlaw, one which is rooted in lived experiences and Afro-diasporic identities, and reinforced through mass media images, specifically as manifest in the New York context.

New York's Afro-diasporic multi-ethnic hip hop culture and the integral role of Caribbean Latinos within it has set the tone for trans-regional, mass-mediated Latino hip hop images. But this is a subtlety that remains largely unspoken. The pan-Latino aggregate is thus often awarded a blackness really meant for Caribbean Latinos.

This confusion is exemplified clearly in the recent "Latin *mami*" fetish. Though most often referred to generically as "Latinas," when the *mamis* populating rappers' wet dreams are referred to by

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[65] For more on "Scarface" as a seminal (pun intended) source of reference for contemporary youth culture see Morales (1997b).
[66] Listen to De La Soul's "Itzoweezee" for a fierce indictment of rap's glamorization of Latino drug dealers and Italian Mafiosos: "Cubans don't care

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their specific national-origins group, 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 Dawg had said of his taste in women in 1993's "Electric Relaxation." Members 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).

The difference between then and now is that a theme that used to be occasionally touched upon --namely, the hot *mami*-- has in the late 1990s 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 1996) has come to be expanded to include Dominicans next to Puerto Ricans.[67] Puerto Ricans used to be the prototype of the exotic/erotic New York *mami*; now Dominicans also inform that prototype.

The recent commercial rise of the sexualized *mami* image is not the sole province of the rap industry. The latter half of the 1990s has seen an explosion of sexualized images of Latinas and Latinos. Ricky Martin, Antonio Banderas, Jennifer López and Salma Hajek have become mainstream sex-symbols of the end of the millennium. Serignese notes:

> While the image of the thieving little Mexican bandit has morphed into a much hipper, cross-cultural urban gangster, the Latin Lover stereotype has simply gained momentum, categorizing both males and females into the insatiable sex machines that sell millions of dollars worth of liquor, clothing and makeup. (1998)

This renewed hunger for Latin lovers of both genders has developed, not in isolation, but in the midst of a general media interest in things Latino. As the March 26, 1998 *New York Times* proclaimed from the first page of its Arts Section: "Latino Culture Whirls Onto Center Stage."

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what ya'll niggas do/Colombians never ran with your crew/. . ./ The only Italians you know is ice-y."

[67] On the initial "Puerto Ricanization" of Dominicans in New York, see Grosfoguel and Georas (1996).

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"Spanish" Girls, *Mamis* and *Señoritas*

Puff Daddy released "Señorita" in his platinum-selling *No Way Out* (1997). To the sounds of bells ringing lightly and birds tweeting (which, I guess, are supposed to evoque the sweetness of romance), he rhymes:

> Her name was *Carmen*
> And she lived down in *Spanish Harlem*
> . . . I was cool with her pops
> Louie, the mechanic
> Went to school with her brother . . .

A woman's voice sexily whispering "Mi amor, soy tuya para siempre. Te amo." is woven in with the chorus:

> *Mami* ven aquí
> I wanna be your *papichulo* can't you see
> Baby I need you *conmigo*
> Your style is my *steelo*
> *Te necesito yo a ti.*

A sample of Puerto Rican salsa artist La India singing a few lines from "O ella o yo" follows the hook.

Puffy wants to be Carmen's "*papichulo.*" Carmen is from Spanish Harlem. "*Mira*" is a potential way of addressing her.[68] These are clues that may escape those not familiar with New York Puerto Ricans. However, though her Puerto Ricanness is never expressly mentioned, there remains no doubt regarding Carmen's ethnicity.

"Señorita" is preceded by a raunchy, sexually explicit (and thus decidedly radio-unfriendly) interlude where Puffy and a "Spanish girl" (according to the song credits) have and talk about sex. He declares that when she yells in Spanish, "that shit be turning me on, word up." So he wants her to teach him Spanish so "I can yell back at yo ass." Given her accent, speech patterns and language use, this "Spanish girl" is decidedly Puerto Rican. She purrs "*te quiero comer*" (I want to eat you) and "*te quiero lamber*" (I want to lick you) with the unmistakable Puerto Rican substitution of "l" for "r." But, as in the song, her being Puerto Rican is not mentioned.

[68] "Makes no sense to say '*mira*'/ 'Cause she ain't turning around/ She's my *señorita*."

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Like Puffy, the members of R&B group Dru Hill go weak at the knees when a Puerto Rican woman calls them "*papi*." Their 1998 hit "How Deep Is Your Love?" features rapper Redman and was played constantly on Hot 97 over the winter of 98-99. Contrary to "Señorita," however, her ethnicity is directly stated.

> Hey *mami*
> Ju [imitating Puerto Rican accent] know that I like it
> When ju call me *papi*
> But it seem as if . . .
> You've been seeing another *chico*

Puff Daddy's "Señorita," Wyclef Jean's "Guantanamera," Mase's "Tell Me What You Want," Puff Daddy and The Lox's "It's All About the Benjamins," Jay-Z's "Lobster & Shrimp," Big Pun's "Still Not a Player," Will Smith's "Miami," and Cam'ron's "Horse and Carriage" and "You Don't Know," were among the rap hits of the late 1990s that made references to Latinas --all of them in terms of desire. Some of these songs make express mention of the *mami's* or *mamis'* ethnicity, others do not specify. But as we saw with Puffy's "Señorita," even when no direct mention of ethnicity is made, the *mamis* that populate these tracks are almost invariably New York Puerto Ricans and, at times, Dominicans.

The commercial hip hop image of the Latin *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. I will elaborate this point in the following chapter.

Latinas are certainly not the only females that get hyper-sexualized through rap images and rhymes. Far from it. As Irving (1998) 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

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videos."[69] Asian women have also had the questionable honor of occasionally populating rap 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 spliced with images of "south of the border" tropicalism. *Mamis* are inner-city exotics, tropicalized ghetto creatures.

Mamis are brash, loud, hot, hard, street-savvy and bold –think Rosie Perez's characters in the movies *Do The Right Thing* (1989) and *White Men Can't Jump*, and Rosario Dawson's Lala Bonilla in *He Got Game* (1998). This ghetto tropical spitfire exoticism differs markedly from the common exotization of Asian women based on an imputed silence and subservience.[70]

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 (Cortés 1985; Pérez 1981; 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 (Rodríguez 1997). These early portrayals of the spitfire, as is the case with today's *mami*, were typically grounded within a gendered lower-class identity.

The next section explores the concept of tropicalizations and how it aids in understanding the racialized erotization of *mamis* as tropicalized (virtually) black women and, more generally, the contemporary position of Puerto Ricans in rap music.

A Tropicalized Latinidad

African American women have a history of being othered, hyper-sexualized and exoticized by the white-supremacist U.S. dominant culture (Mullings 1994; Shohat 1997). Within rap's heterocentric discourse where African American male subjectivities reign supreme, however, Black women are the norm, the ethno-racial self –othered and hyper-sexualized for gender reasons[71], but in ethno-racial

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[69] See also Morgan (1996) and Rose (1994).
[70] See Jacob (1998). "I can see it in them, the hunger for a quiet woman, an erotic encounter, a spicy dish." (6)
[71] On woman as the Other see Beauvoir (1980).

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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*."[72]

The construction within rap of *mamis* as familiar territory is very much premised upon New York Afro-diasporic lived experiences and dynamics. New York is an intensely Puerto Rican city where *mamis* abound; Black-Puerto Rican desire is extremely common and fails to raise eyebrows in the way that Black-White or Black-Asian desire does.

Often boxed into the *mami* category myself, a bit of autobiographical information will help illustrate my point. The following chronicles my earliest personalized introduction to New York racial/sexual politics, which occurred around seven years ago.

In the beginning, it was a torrid love affair --informal and unorthodox, but still torrid. I met his Mom in a casual way, without the least bit of ceremony or fanfare. He had gone out for groceries at the nearby *bodega*. As I sat at the kitchen table, Mom walked in and courteously but a bit too coolly greeted me. Then the dreadlocked matriarch busied herself with some papers in the living room.

The next time we met, however, it was a different story. As soon as I walked in the door Mom flashed a beautiful smile. "Hi! How you doing? You know, the other day I didn't realize you were his friend from Puerto Rico." Her demeanor was totally different. She came through in all her warm, witty and sharp splendor.

I later asked him what the change in attitude was all about. He responded: "She thought you were a white girl when she first met you --probably looking for adventure and some Black dick. But later she realized you were Puerto Rican."

Oh shit!, I thought. So, I "look" white, but I "am" Puerto Rican? So, because I am Puerto Rican, she thinks my intentions have a greater chance of being honorable? I am "Other," but not *as* "Other"?

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[72] 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

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He later explained to me: "I'm sure Ma would prefer I was dating a Black woman. But Puerto Rican is at least close enough."

And so, about seven years ago, I was introduced to a dimension of New York racial/sexual politics right on the first day of a long string of visits to a New Yorker boyfriend. Subsequently (five years ago, to be exact) I moved to New York and to this day I am still fascinated by the peculiar place I occupy in this city's racial/sexual politics.

Through this experience and countless others, I began realizing how my Puerto Ricanness "darkened" me and placed me closer to blackness, regardless of what was often initially perceived to be a phenotypic whiteness. My Caribbean-raised *blanca curtida* and freckled skin, straight brown hair and green eyes have led many to guess I am Italian or Jewish. My non-ghetto-stereotypical dress, demeanor and language add to my perceived whiteness. But just as many, usually *after* they know I am Puerto Rican, have told me that my wide nose, fleshy lips, big ass and hips are a dead giveaway of my non-whiteness.

This is anything but an unusual story. Innumerable Puerto Rican women have heard it and Magdalena Gómez shaped into the poem "To the Latin Lover I Left at the Candy Store" (1991).

> how come,
> I wanna know,
> you like me better
> when I tell you
> my name is Gómez?
> I was one more white girl
> till my accent started to show
> and then you said
> you should have known
> I was a sister
> when you saw the size of my hips

Accent, demeanor, clothes, education and last name are some of the many "ethnic" markers that identify Puerto Ricans and affect perceptions of their "race." These markers may "lighten" or "darken" the person in question. Gómez was a "white girl" until her accent "started to show," thus transforming her, in the eyes of her suitor, from "white girl" to "sister." Her big hips initially had had no racial connotations. She was just a white girl with big hips. But after her Puerto Ricanness became

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tropical (ethno-racial) Other, but as a tropical self.

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apparent, her hips were perceived as a hint of blackness (however diluted) and a physical manifestation of her ethno-racial affiliation, thus darkening her.

The construction within rap of *mamis* as familiar territory for young African American males is thus related to Black-Puerto Rican relations in New York City, particularly as these relations express themselves in the realms of ethno-racial identity and sexual desire. However, this lived familiarity has given way to a familiarity based more on mass-mediated images.

New York has historically been one of the epicenters of hip hop culture; it is an important source of style, trends, and information. Puerto Rican women, as visible participants and objects of desire within New York hip hop culture, thus became a familiar referent for hip hoppers across the nation. With the increasing mainstream media exposure of Latinos/Latinas, and by their having become a rap media staple in the 1990s, *mamis* are now imagined as familiar through a combination of the lived, imagined, and media-reinforced ties that bind *niggas* (Black and Latino), *mamis* and *sistas* together.

Puerto Rican *niggas* and *mamis* may be considered full-fledged members of an inner-city Afro-diasporic "us." Their tropicality, however, sets them apart.

Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997) advance the notion of a "tropicalized" *latinidad*, drawing from Fernando Ortiz's (1940) concept of "transculturation," Pratt's (1991) "contact zones," and Said's (1979) "orientalism." "Tropicalizations,"[73] according to Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, can be formulated from a dominant perspective ("hegemonic tropicalizations") or from subaltern subjectivities ("self-tropicalizations"). They have a geocultural (rather than a geophysical) scope --so that tropicality extends not only to the Caribbean, but also the rest of Latin America and the United States.

> 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. . . . the sort of *tropicalization* we are considering here would be a mythic idea of *latinidad* based on Anglo (or dominant) projections of fear. (8) . . . A different, more radical sort of *tropicalization* emerges from the cultural productions, political struggles, and

[73] Their use of the plural in the term "tropicalizations" is crucial, for it highlights the multiplicity of subject positions from which tropicalizations can be effected.

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oppositional strategies deployed by some U.S. Latinos/as . . . who are standing the dominant culture's stereotypes and images on their heads from the margins, resemanticizing them, in García Canclini's words (*Transforming Modernity*), from hegemonic tools into discursive weapons of resistance. (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997, 12)

Though Latino-generated tropicalizations may subvert hegemonic tropicalizations, self-tropicalizations are not by definition contestatory. Aparicio describes self-tropicalizations as

> . . . the "processes of subjectification" by which [Latinos] engage in discourse, recirculating particular "tropical" signifiers with newly invested meanings, at times liberatory, at others potentially oppressive in their ambiguity. (1997, 195)

Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997) focus either on "hegemonic tropicalizations" formulated from an Anglo or white-supremacist perspective and on "self-tropicalizations" by Latinos/Latinas themselves. The difference between these two types of tropicalizing gestures resides in the locus of enunciation (who is tropicalizing) and not necessarily in the content of the enunciation. Hegemonic tropicalizations are posed as oppressive by definition, whereas self-tropicalizations can be either oppressive or liberatory.

Self-tropicalizations have become more common within rap, particularly since the mid-1990s, when "Latinos" were legitimized as core hip hop participants.[74] Funkdoobiest's "Papi Chulo" (1997) provides a pertinent illustration through its invocation of the Latin lover stereotype, clichéd tropicalizing references to fruit (mango) and music (tango)[75], and its use of timbales. The group's Puerto Rican MC, Son Doobie, declares:

> Don't worry
> Kingpin Don Son Juan same
> *Papi chulo*, the only one . . .
> Shake your booty
> For my crew Funkdoobie
> . . .
> What's it to me?

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[74] Before the mid-nineties, the less Latino rap enthusiasts distinguished themselves from African Americans, the less their entitlement to this cultural form was questioned.

"Latin rap" artist Gerardo had in the early 90s soared high in commercial success with his tropicalized "Rico Suave" macho lover image. But his mainstream success was not accompanied by acceptance within hip hop's Black-matrixed core.

[75] See Aparicio (1997, 206) on mangos and tangos as "tropicalizing cultural signifiers."

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With your germ tango . . .
Mango juicy, you know who I be
Latin womanizer

Though self-tropicalizations in rap abound, hegemonic tropicalizations are negligible if defined by a locus of enunciation that privileges "Anglo (or dominant)" (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997) subjectivities. The European/white subject position as the voice of hegemonic tropicalization is virtually absent from rap's discursive and performative terrain.

As a Black-matrixed discursive and performative realm dominated by African American subjectivities, rap provides a venue to explore another instance of tropicalization which can neither be described as hegemonic nor self-ascribed. I will refer to these types of tropicalizations, which in this case are formulated by African Americans, as Other-subaltern tropicalizations.

African Americans' tropicalization of Caribbean Latinos in rap is often indistinguishable in content from "the mythic idea of *latinidad*" in hegemonic tropicalizations; rap's self-tropicalizations, incidentally, do not differ much in content from hegemonic tropicalizations either. Sensuality, heat, romance, passion, voluptuousness, vibrant color, frenetic rhythm, sinuous movement, and spice, are some of the mythical characteristics that define a tropicalize *latinidad*. These ascribed traits are almost invariably present in tropicalizations, whether they are hegemonic, self-generated or formulated from an Other-subaltern perspective. However, whereas hegemonic perspectives typically reduce the tropicalizing difference to matters of subservience and fear, which do not negate desire for that subservient and dangerous tropical other; rap's subaltern-generated tropicalizations (whether formulated from the perspective of African Americans or Caribbean Latinos) do not inscribe "the tropical" with assumptions of inferiority or danger –unless "the tropical" is gendered as feminine.

Tropicalizations within rap privilege and celebrate black subjectivities; rap's black subjects may tropicalize, be tropicalized or self-tropicalize. Tropicalizations serve to distinguish between two subaltern Afro-diasporic groups. African Americans and Puerto Ricans are the black protagonists of rap's ghettocentric narratives; but only Puerto Ricans (and by extension, other Latinos) are ghetto-tropical.

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Tropicality, as Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997) develop the concept, is imbued with notions of primitiveness, hyper-sexuality, danger, and mystery, among others. Not coincidentally, these attributes share much with the imputed characteristics that make African Americans (as well as other racialized minorities) the Other within white-supremacist U.S. culture (Mullings 1994; Shohat 1997). Mullings holds that the sexualized "othering" of "people of color" in the United States serves as "metaphor and representation of European supremacy" as well as an instrument to perpetuate labor exploitation:

> For all people of color, an aspect of their exploitation centers around being defined as "the other." Representations of gender figure strongly in this process. Men are generally depicted as irresponsible and dangerous -a threat to European women. Women are portrayed as "wild women of other worlds". . . Thus, while men are constructed as sexually aggressive, women are depicted as sexually available. (1994, 280)

Contemporary discourses of non-white alterity are embedded within a history of "Western" patriarchal structures and colonial enterprises (Crespo 1996; Gilman 1985; McClintock, 1995; Ostolaza Bey 1989; Santiago-Valles 1994/1995; Shohat 1997). Gendered metaphors have played a central role in colonial discourses. The "non-Occident" has largely been portrayed as feminine. According to Shohat:

> Europe's "civilizing mission" in the Third World is projected as interweaving opposed yet linked narratives of Western penetration of inviting virginal landscapes *and* of resisting libidinal nature. . . . Within this Promethean master-narrative, subliminally gendered tropes such as "conquering the desolation" and "fecundating the wilderness" acquire heroic resonances of Western fertilization of barren lands. The metaphoric portrayal of the (non-European) land as a "virgin" coyly awaiting the touch of the colonizer implied that whole continents --Africa, America, Asia and Australia-- could only benefit from the emanation of colonial praxis. . . . The engendering of "civilization," then, is clearly phallocentric, not unlike the mythical woman's birth from Adam's rib. (1997, 20)

This issue of gendered metaphors as a trope of masculinist (post)colonial domination is also taken up by Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, who describe the "feminization of Latin America" as yet "another discursive strategy in the overarching patterns of *hegemonic tropicalizations* by dominant sectors and by the so-called First World." (1997, 16)

Not only have the colonized territories been feminized, but the colonial "subaltern," as a category, has been constructed through the use of gendered metaphors. Shohat, who chronicles

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through cinematic representations the gendered constructions of the colonial subaltern, describes the "rape and rescue fantasy" as a central trope of colonial discourse of the twentieth century. In this fantasy, the Western hero (i.e., the "civilizer") rescues Western and non-Western women from the evil African, Asian, Arab, Native American or Latino men --much like the European "discoverers" rescued the colonized territories from wilderness and claimed them for "civilization."

> The figure of the Arab assassin/rapist, like that of the African cannibal, helps produce the narrative and ideological role of the Western liberator as integral to the colonial rescue fantasy. This projection, whose imaginistic avatars include the polygamous Arab, the libidinous black buck, and the macho Latino, provides an indirect apologia for domination. (Shohat 1997, 39)

(Post)colonial domination is not only justified through the demonization of the male subaltern, but also through the representation of subaltern women as exotic hyper-sexual beings, sexually available and always horny. The subaltern female is portrayed as in perpetual desire for the male Western subject.

Tropicalizations, as the "mythic idea[s] of *latinidad* based on Anglo (or dominant) projections of fear" which serve as "hegemonic tools" that Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman describe, form part of the dominant (post)colonial masculinist discourse as Shohat poses it. The construction of Latin America as feminine and Latinas as tropical, exotic and hyper-sexual (Chávez-Silverman 1997; Rodríguez 1997; Shohat 1997) are virtual constants within hegemonic tropicalizations. These constructions are also often invoked in self-tropicalizations and Other-subaltern tropicalizations.

Aparicio (1998) discusses the tropicalizing patriarchal discourses which manifest themselves in the literature and music of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, which revere and celebrate the iconic Caribbean "*mulata*." "She" is pleasure, rhythm, movement, heat, spice, chaos and irrationality personified. Within these tropicalizing patriarchal discourses, Caribbean music and the Caribbean itself as a geocultural region are associated with the *mulata* imagery and thus feminized. Aparicio offers the example of Antonio Benítez Rojo who, in his book *The Repeating Island*

> allegorizes [the geocultural entity of the Caribbean] as polyrhythm, chaos, and carnival, ideologemes that the author concludes are "feminine": "There is something strongly feminine in this extraordinary fiesta: its flux, its diffuse sensuality, its generative force, its capacity to nourish and conserve." (Aparicio 1998, 268)

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Self-tropicalizations by Latin American women also frequently employ the tropes of (post)colonial masculinist discourses (Aparicio 1997). In an article that celebrates "Latin style" as "sensual," "passionate," "excessive," and "dramatic," by contrasting it to "the milder Anglo flair," Marilú Menéndez (1988) places tropicalized Latina bodies (starting with her own) at the center of the discussion. Menéndez confesses that despite her dedication to looking "chic" through following the trends of high fashion, "I always managed to blow it at the end, to look off, to look...excessive." Why? She says the answer has less to do with "a lapse of taste" than with "ethnic determination."

> To think that all the sophisticated nuances of European fashion, all the controlled urbanity of New York style, all the black in my wardrobe, the tightly pulled chignon, could not cover up, could not restrain, *the tropical*. Something *too lush, too sweet, too exuberant, too dangerously close to ripeness*. The idea sort of pleased me. It made me smile. It made me walk with a *sexier* sway. (emphasis mine) (Menéndez 1988)

Menéndez revels in her tropicalized/eroticized/ethnicized difference. Her tropical *nature* can barely be contained by the seams of her *civilized* high fashion wardrobe. As the title of her article "How to Spot a Jaguar in the Jungle" proclaims, Latinas and Latinos are the "jaguars" in the quintessential urban "jungle" --New York. Though in passing she criticizes Anglo stereotypes that confuse Latina sexual strength and defiance for coquettishness, what her article does most emphatically is perpetuate a stereotypical and essentialized, exotic/erotic view of Latina(o) subjectivity.

According to Menéndez, the history of "Latin style" in New York can be traced back to "the severity of Castile," an "Africanized" and "sensual" Islamic Andalusia, and "the sultry Caribbean with its steamy mélange of races inextricably mixed in the exuberance of the tropics." Once in the tropics, though dominated politically and economically, blacks "took revenge on the masters by overwhelming white culture in every other aspect." Her narrative implies that while Castilian "severity" is responsible for Latin style's obsession with coordination, careful arrangement and calculation, Africanness accounts for its passionate and sensual dimension. Menéndez's self-tropicalizing account of *latinidad* celebrates its (muted) African component, while reproducing the stereotype of blackness as hyper-sexual. Her arguments are fundamentally informed by (post)colonial discourses that pronounce the dark Other as erotic and exotic. Excess as the mark of tropical difference presumes "Anglos" as the norm against which *latinidad* is to be defined.

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Menéndez celebrates tropical excess as a pan-ethnic marker "that crosses class lines that are otherwise rigidly kept," and that spans gender and sexual orientation (at least among men; she makes no mention of lesbians). Thus, she essentializes *latinidad* and minimizes the importance of class, race and region in her grandiose pan-ethnic narrative. Aesthetic and sexual excess have been and still are criticisms (and/or a reasons for exoticized desire) leveled by the upper classes and white (or lighter-skinned) Latinos/Latin Americans against the lower classes, blacks and indigenous peoples. However, fissures and contentions such as these are conveniently swept aside, since, for Menéndez, "we" are joyfully united under "our" banner of excess.

This impulse to essentialize *latinidad* as a realm of sensuousness and pleasure is a common theme within self-tropicalizations. Aparicio notes how Enrique Fernández, in an essay entitled "Salsa X 2,"

> reduces the complex history of U.S. Latinas/os and of Latin America to the sensorial realm of sound and taste, thus displacing the cultural agency and historical variability of our social complex. (146) . . . Fernández, then, strategically essentializes Latino culture as a utopian, eroticized alternative to Anglo America's puritanism-based repression of the sensual and the disciplining of the bodies. (1998, 147)

Both Menéndez's as well as Fernández's essays illustrate the "myth of unity" that Gómez-Peña (Fusco 1995) describes as being forwarded in narratives of a U.S.-based "facile pan-Latin Americanism." This "myth of unity" is actually very similar to what Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman describe as self-tropicalization. Arising from "the need to create a political alliance among different groups to combat dominant Anglo culture," this approach to pan-*latinidad*

> at times, becomes an ultra-romantic vision of what Latinness is, and sometimes lapses into insipid generalizations. According to this vision, food, language, sense of humor, art, and music are all crucial factors of this essential identity. (Fusco 1995, 160)

This self-tropicalizing "myth of unity" constructed by the subaltern employs many of the same constructs as the essentializing and homogenizing "south of the border" visions that abound in dominant U.S. culture. Is it then any wonder that many of these same tropicalizing tropes are used by African American and Latino rappers as signifying of *latinidad*?

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Rap is a discursive and performative realm where youthful Afro-diasporic subjectivities take center stage, African American ones being the most visible, but also including those of West Indians and Caribbean Latinos. It is a realm where the U.S. black Other grapples with his/her imputed Otherness, as defined through (post)colonial discourses. This Otherness is at times contested and at other times accepted. Rap is also a realm where the black Other grapples with the Otherness of non-white Others (Asians, Arabs, Africans from Africa). Within rap, blackness is construed as the norm; at times, hegemonic otherings are adopted and applied to Other groups outside the realm of blackness.

Puerto Ricans, as Caribbean Latinos, have an ambiguous and shifting relationship to rap's normative blackness. Black, almost black, tepidly black, light black, not quite black... their tropicalized *latinidad* distinguishes Puerto Ricans from "regular black folk" (to paraphrase Shange). They are both "us" and "Others."

Most discussions of *latinidad* (Aparicio 1998; Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997; Fox 1996; Menéndez 1988; Morales 1991; Santiago, 1994) focus on its relationship to the dominant U.S. white/Anglo/European culture. These accounts slight another crucial point of reference against which *latinidad* is defined, namely African American culture. This point of reference is particularly relevant in the lived experience of Caribbean Latino groups in New York City.

For Puerto Ricans in New York City, *latinidad* has as much to do with not being white, as it has to do with not being African American. Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) is an epochal[76] example of how a young Puerto Rican's identity and circumstances are shaped by a difference that distinguishes him from whites as well as from Blacks, but where the differences between Blacks and Puerto Ricans are minimized by virtue of a shared history and lived circumstances. But the relationship between Puerto Rican and African American ethno-racial identities

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[76] As Rodríguez-Morazzani (1996) has noted, ethno-racial identities, perceptions and interactions vary from one generation to the next. Therefore, Thomas' experiences as a black Puerto Rican growing up in the 50s differ from those of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg and Jesús Colón during the earlier part of the century, and from those of Yoruba Guzmán and other Young Lords in the late 60s. The Civil Rights movement and the Black Power struggles, among many other factors, contributed to cementing the notion, particularly among

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is not always an issue of difference. Puerto Rican identity in New York, though at times defined in contrast to African Americanness, it is at other times defined in tandem with it. The latter is most often evidenced by the Puerto Rican second and third generations (Hernández 1997; Urciuoli 1997). Hip hop culture is thus a venue through which Puerto Rican *latinidad* in the U.S. can be explored, not by privileging the Anglo/Latino or dominant/subaltern dynamic, but by focusing on the interactions of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Caribbean populations.

The following chapter explores further the way in which a gendered and tropicalized *latinidad*, embodied by the *mami* figure, intersects with blackness in mass-mediated rap discourses.

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the younger generations of the time, that Black and Puerto Rican identities and circumstances shared many things in common.

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CHAPTER 7

BUTTA PECAN MAMIS:

GENDERED AND RACIALIZED TROPICALIZATIONS

Tropicalized *Mamis*: "Chocolaté Calienté"

An ad[77] for the Cocoa Brovas[78] album *The Rude Awakening* features a cardboard cup (the kind with the blue and white Greek motifs, common in New York delis and *bodegas*) 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, goes with the Butta Pecan Rican Myth[79] --in other words, the popular perception of Puerto Ricans as golden-skinned (hence the association with butter pecan ice cream) and "good-haired" [sic].[80] But "butta pecan" is somehow still imagined to be a variation on "chocolate." In fact, add an accent to the "e" in "chocolate" and you get a "chocolaté" that is a virtual equivalent to "butta pecan." 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.

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[77] See *The Source*, February 1998, 36.

[78] The Cocoa Brovas are a rap duo of African American MCs.

[79] Radio personality/rap artist Angie Martínez and actress/singer Jennifer López are the Butta Pecan Ricans of greatest exposure --and loudly celebrated as such.

[80] See Appendix 1, Field Notes #2 for some thoughts on the stereotyping behind the Butta Pecan Myth. On the aesthetic and representational marginalization of black Puerto Ricans see Cardona (1998), Jorge (1986), Gregory (1995-96), Romano (1992), Sánchez (1998), Santos (1995), Thomas (1967), Tate (1995). On perceived phenotypic distinctions between African Americans and Puerto Ricans see Jenkins and Wilson (1998), Samara (1987) and Thomas (1967).

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The accentuation of final é's 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.

Such markers are indeed cogent, and highly charged. "Set Trippin," a review of 10 popular rap videos in *Blaze*'s premier issue, includes Big Punisher's hit song "Still Not a Player." The reviews consist of short blurbs under specific headings such as "Plot," "Ghetto Fabulous," "Estimated Budget," and "Black Erotica." It caught my eye that under "Black Erotica," it said, regarding "Still Not a Player":

> Dozens of scantily clad, lighter-than-a-paper-bag sistas and mamis end up dancing outside. Sounds like a red-light district. (Carasco 1998)

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 skin tone makes the set seem like "a red-light district" is a commentary on gendered color-caste hierarchies (hooks 1994) that equate "lightness" with sexual desirability, as well as an acknowledgment 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 erotization of Puerto Rican females. [81]

The text of the song 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 ethno-racializing 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

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[81] Samara, a dark-skinned African American 26 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*" [italics are mine]. (Samara 1987, 37)

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"boricuas" is holding serves as yet another mark of difference. Chihuahuas are not only a dog breed considered in New York "ghetto" lore to be popular among Puerto Ricans, but which also invokes the tropicalized pan-*latinidad* of Dinky, the infamous chihuahua of the late 1990s Taco Bell commercial campaign. However, though distinct, these two groups come together by virtue of Pun's sexual desire.

> I love 'em butta 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

Pun boasts of not discriminating since he sexually engages "every shade of that ass." But the "shades" which he "regulates" are specifically three: butta pecan, black, 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."

Jay Z., in "Who You With?," defines the ethno-racial span of his sexual desire in a closely related manner when he says: "I sex everything from Blacks down to *miras*." "Mira" is used as a reference to Puerto Ricans. It comes from Puerto Ricans' frequent use of "mira" ("look") at the beginning of sentences or as a way to get someone's attention.

Though not focusing in on Puerto Rican women specifically, but on Latinas in general, Funkdoobiest's Son Doobie expresses similar preferences in "XXX Funk":

> 'Cause black girls know my name
> [women's voices:] Hey!
> I say brown girls know my name
> [women' voices:] You know it!

Whereas Punisher's makes use of the dichotomy *boricua/morena*, Son relies on a brown/black distinction. Both MCs, however, aim to distinguish Latinas from African Americans and, at the same time, (chromatically) identify both groups as objects of desire. Son goes one step further than Punisher

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because he not only celebrates the "black" and "brown" women he likes, but explicitly poses "white" women as their opposite. In a spoken aside during which the drums fade so that only the bassline accompanies his words, Son declares contemptuously:

> I hate these big silicone titties
> I hate them skinny, pale bitches

As if for further emphasis --and perhaps to let the last verse sink in-- the music briefly stops altogether. Son then says "let the beat kick" and the drums and bass come back in full force.

The Cocoa Brovas ad, Big Pun's "Still Not a Player" video, as well as Son Doobie's and Jay Z's pronouncements are all part of rap's dominant masculinist ghetto *nigga* discourse, where African American and Caribbean Latino men construct a landscape of desire where *sistas* and *mamis* take center stage as "our" women.

A discussion of how Puerto Rican *mamis* have been eroticized within the hip hop zone as tropical virtual Blacks and part of a ghetto black "us" would be incomplete without mention of what may, at first glance, seem an odd topic: actress Jennifer López's ass. Focusing on this much-celebrated aspect of her anatomy may seem like a digression, but it most certainly is not. As Negrón-Muntaner has noted, "for any Caribbean interlocutor, references to this part of the human anatomy are often a way to speak of Africa in(side) America" (1997, 185). López's status as a mainstream sex symbol of the later half of the 1990s and the totemization of her buttocks have been shaped as well as informed by popular perceptions of Latina womanhood and their racial underpinnings, including those within the hip hop zone.

Tropicalized *Mamis*: Jennifer's Butt[82]

> Unlike hair and skin, the butt is stubborn, immutable --it can't be hot-combed or straightened or bleached into submission. It does not assimilate; it never took a slave name. . . . And the butt's blatantly sexual nature makes it seem that much more belligerent in its refusal to go away, to lie down and play dead.
>
> Erin Aubry, "The Butt: Its Profanity, Its Politics, Its Power"

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[82] "Jennifer's Butt" is the title of an article on Jennifer López by Negrón-Muntaner (1997) which appeared in the journal *Aztlán*.

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Welcome to the Realm of the Big Butt Cult. African American rappers Sir Mix-a-Lot and LL Cool J have celebrated strategically-placed fatty tissue in "Baby Got Back" and "Big Ole Butt." Panamanian reggae artist El General has exalted voluminous backsides in "Tu Pum Pum." Island Puerto Rican rapper Vico C has given props to big butts in "Bomba para afincar" (1991) and so has Bronx Puerto Rican Fat Joe in "Shorty Gotta Fat Ass" (1993).

So central are female *nalgas* (butts) and *caderas* (hips) in the discourse of Afro-diasporic male desire, that Aparicio (1998) dedicated a chapter entitled "Patriarchal Synecdoques: Of Women's Butts and Feminist Rebuttals" to exploring Latino Caribbean music's (lower) body politics. Negrón-Muntaner (1997) also identifies "the butt" as a compelling dimension of Afro-diasporic cultural discourses and practices that deal with sexuality, pleasure, power and the body. Focusing on the case of Puerto Ricans, she states:

> The prominence of the Puerto Rican butt rests not only on popular musical genres but on several noted literary epistemological texts, including Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's *Una noche con Iris Chacón* and Luis Rafael Sánchez's well-known novel *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho* . . . . In each case, sexuality is the discursive flow where the butt acquires its meaning and raison d'être. (Negrón-Muntaner 1997, 191)

Iris Chacón, a Puerto Rican dancer and singer whose most celebrated asset was most often clad in a g-string, went beyond stardom to acquire mythical status through her immensely popular prime-time Spanish-language TV show of the 1970s and 1980s: *El Show de Iris Chacón*. I distinctly remember myself as a young girl watching La Chacón jiggling her ample ass cheeks on my grandmother's black and white TV set. Negrón-Muntaner (1997) identifies Bronx Puerto Rican actress Jennifer López as a symbolic heiress of Iris Chacón, describing her historical role as that of "the next big bottom in the Puerto Rican cultural imaginary and our great avenger of Anglo analphobia."

López's butt, though initially eyed with worry and deemed in need of camouflage by Hollywood costume designers[83], has ended up being embraced by the mainstream media. Wiltz (1998) declared in the *Daily News* that López's posterior has "become something of a national obsession." *Entertainment Weekly* (1998) pronounced it "an erotic totem up there with Uma Thurman's lips and Pamela Anderson

[83] See Negrón-Muntaner (1997, 187).

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Lee's bust." It has also been written about in *Time* magazine, *Playboy* and *Elle*, among numerous other print media.

A few perceptive observers (Aubry 1999; Negrón-Muntaner 1997; Perry 1997; Wiltz 1998) have noticed and problematized how this actress' mainstream acceptance is related to her "embodying ideal 'Latin' beauty . . . --that is, neither too dark, nor too light" (Negrón-Muntaner 1997). However, these racial underpinnings of her acceptance have only rarely been discussed.

Jennifer López and her ass also loom large in the hip hop collective conscious as the embodiment of Latina desirability. In a *Vibe* article by dream hampton (1999), she was pronounced "the biggest explosion outta the Bronx since the birth of hip hop." Yeah, yeah... pretty eyes, flawless (light) skin, flowing dark (straight) hair, sharp "ghetto" wit... But López would not be the icon she has become were it not for her voluminous ass cheeks. As Goldie wrote in hip hop magazine *XXL*'s "Eye Candy" column:

> *ButtaPecanRican*. What makes Lopez lovely is not her sexy looks, her unbelievably flawless face or her nut-wrenching aura. It's her ass. It's not a special ass, because most Black women are born with ass like this, but JL makes it work. The half-circle. The sphere. It's everything Black and Puerto Rican men love and white men can't understand. (1998, 80)

According to Goldie, López's is a "Black" ass --mystifying to white men and revered by Black and Puerto Rican males. Puerto Ricans thus stand together with African Americans as admirers and/or bearers of voluminous "Black" asses. Implicit is that Puerto Rican men know how to appreciate this feature of "Blackness" because Puerto Ricans are part of "Blackness." Likewise, hampton (1999) describes Lopez's butt as a feature of her blackness: "Women like her --namely black women-- haven't exactly had issues of shame when it comes to that particular body part. In most sectors of our community, the bigger the better." (102)

Verán (1998) celebrates in *Ego Trip* --another hip hop-oriented publication-- "this pear-shaped Puerto Riqueña" for "single-handedly spearheading a big booty backlash against the supermodel types who espouse Schindler's List chic." Now, not only can "los brothas on both sides of the border" feast their eyes on a gluteus after their own heart, but "women of color" can rejoice in a feminine icon that does not conform to "the blonder beauty barometer of Los Blancos." Verán, like Goldie, posits an "us"

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that includes Puerto Ricans (and, perhaps, other Latinos) and Blacks, and according to which Jennifer López, the Hottentot Venus and Iris Chacón are upheld as "our" images.

> From the 19th Century's South African spectacle --unique-physiqued Venus Hottentot's humongous hindquarters-- to the Risqué Rican TV variety vixen Iris Chacón and her bombastic Boricua booty, *we've got* emphasis mine a lengthy legacy of well-endowed icons of *our* own to look up to. (emphasis mine) (Verán 1998)

López's butt has been celebrated within the hip hop realm as a vindication of "our" Afro-diasporic standards of beauty. In contrast, her ass has been celebrated in the mainstream media as a mark of the dark Other's racial/sexual difference. Dark Other's with big asses may come a dime a dozen, but López's "racially nebulous features" (Wiltz 1998) or relatively "more Caucasian features" (Perry 1997) make her a palatable embodiment of racialized/sexualized difference. She has been, for the mainstream, the tropicalized, dark "enough" (but not "too" dark) and big-assed exception to the Eurocentric rule.

While the mainstream celebrates the Other's ass, hip hop circles celebrate "our" ass. Where both realms do coincide is in ignoring how approximation to whiteness is privileged even when the object of appreciation is the non-white Other. *XXL* columnist Goldie (1998) allows that most black women have a butt like López's. The reason why her bottom is famous and other big black bottoms are not is, according to him, that "JL makes it work." Perhaps López does have a certain something that makes her ass seem extra-special. But doesn't it seem too much in accordance with Eurocentric aesthetic hierarchies that a very light-skinned, straight-haired --white, by Latin American standards-- woman is the icon celebrated for her "black" ass?

Eurocentric aesthetic standards have historically informed Afro-diasporic standards of beauty. This is visible in what hooks has termed "color-caste hierarchies" which, as she explains, are related not only to skin color but also to hair texture and other phenotypic features. These hierarchies are also very gender-specific.

> The exploitative and oppressive nature of color-caste systems in white supremacist society has always had a gendered component. A mixture of racist and sexist thinking informs the way color-caste hierarchies detrimentally affect the lives of black females differently from black males. Light skin and long, straight hair continue to be traits that define female as beautiful and desirable in the racist white imagination and in the colonized black mind set. . . . To this day, the images of black female bitchiness, evil temper and treachery continue to be marked by darker skin. . . . Dark

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skin is stereotypically coded in the racist, sexist or colonized imagination as masculine. Hence, a male's power is enhanced by dark looks while a female's dark looks diminish her femininity. (hooks 1994, 179)

Among Afro-diasporic populations themselves, lighter-skinned black women have been thought of as prettier, sexier and more feminine than darker women. Good hair/bad hair (*pelo bueno/pelo malo*) distinctions have been routinely made and are also gender-coded (Brownmiller 1984, 72; Caldwell 1995; Jones 1994; Jorge 1986; Santos 1995). It is significant, for example, that the *mulata* has been the figure posed in the musical and literary traditions of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean "as the embodiment of rhythm, movement, and erotic pleasure" (Aparicio 1998, 143). The lighter beauty of the *mulata* has been privileged over darker female beauty.

U.S. political exile Assata Shakur recalls a telling conversation with a jailmate nicknamed Coke. She had expected Assata to be tall, burly, dark and ugly, thus bearing the alleged outward markings of strength, fearlessness and badness.

> "When I saw your picture I thought you was much bigger. And much blacker, too."
>
> "Really?" I laughed. It was a statement I heard over and over. Everybody told me they thought I was bigger, blacker and uglier. When I asked people what they thought I looked like, they would describe someone about six feet tall, two hundred pounds, and very dark and wild-looking.
>
> "Bad as them papers said you was, I just knew you had to look bad. And here you are, just a little ole thing." (Shakur 1987, 87)

Color-caste hierarchies have also been very much a part of hip hop cultural formations. On the one hand, rap videos present a wider range of Afro-diasporic female beauty than many other contemporary entertainment mediums. According to rap and R&B video actress Anansa Sims:

> To me, you'll find the most beautiful Black women in videos because it's where we're allowed to show our natural shapes-the big butts, breasts, and the thick thighs. (Valdés 1997)

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Though Sims' pronouncement has a ring of truth to it, with regards to body shape,[84] the issue of color and other phenotypic characteristics is a whole other story. Rap videos and magazine spreads usually feature light-brown young females with long hair (be it naturally non-nappy, straightened or weaved) who are upheld as the epitome of female black beauty but run counter to the blackest, nappiest philosophy championed elsewhere. It seems that while naps and dark skin in men are a proud symbol of blackness, the same physical traits in women are perceived as questionable because they are deemed unattractive, unkempt, unfeminine, menacing, butch.

The *Source*'s Second Annual Swimsuit Issue, published in June 1997, presents an illustration of color-caste hierarchies at work. The problematic character of this pictorial representation was noted by a *Source* reader by the name of Shannon who wrote in a letter to the editors:

> Why oh why would you choose six slim, sexy, nearly white models? Are you dissing Black hip-hop culture? Can't you see that your representation of the "hip-hop woman" is very misguided? A much more balanced and healthy view of hip-hop women is in order." (Shannon 1997)

Jennifer López's quintessential butta pecanness places her high in hip hop color-caste hierarchies. Her lightness combined with her being Puerto Rican, however, may have been a hindrance during rap's Afrocentric stage --before Latinos(as) were reclaimed as bone-fide members of a ghettocentric hip hop "us." But as rap has shifted in emphasis from Afrocentricity to ghettocentricity, Puerto Ricanness and blackness have come to be seen as overlapping more often. The phenotypic range of black female beauty has been expanded somewhat in order to accommodate "light" or "white" Caribbean Latinas. This expansion tends to be celebrated within hip hop as an acknowledgment of the ethno-racial diversity and complexity of the black experience in the Americas.

But what about the problematic of color-caste hierarchies? They are still in effect, of course, perhaps being now even more vicious and still most often going unacknowledged. Within this celebration of a multi-hued blackness, proximity to whiteness can be given even more privilege, but cloaked under the guise of Afro-diasporic inclusiveness.

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[84] Slightly fuller female figures may be the norm in rap and R&B videos, but they are still ruled by a cult of thinness.

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Sadly, this all sounds eerily reminiscent of the Puerto Rican (and more generally, Latin American) tactic of deflecting accusations of racism by raising the banner of miscegenation (Díaz Quiñones 1985; Giusti Cordero 1996; Grosfoguel and Negrón-Muntaner 1997). *Us? Racists? Gringos are racists, but not us. We can't be racists, because we are all racially mixed here.*

> According to this ideology, all Puerto Ricans regardless of "race" are the mixture of the same ethnic ingredients -Spanish, African, Indian- and therefore equal. This superficially more benign form of racist ideology is often as, *if not more* [emphasis mine], effective than more overt racist discourses in preventing racism from being socially and politically challenged in public discourse. (Grosfoguel and Negrón-Muntaner 1997, 14)

If Degler (1971) was right in affirming that racial identity and categories in the United States have, since the 1960s, begun converging more with those of Latin America, then hip hop may be a pertinent example. And if that is the case, we are up against some thorny challenges indeed. *Us? Privileging whiteness? Never! We are all black here and just celebrating all dimensions of blackness.*

And thus, Jennifer López, a tropicalized *mami* who practically dangles from the lightest end in the spectrum of blackness, gets celebrated as the totemic bearer of the big black butt.

Enchilada Rhymes and the (Feminized) "Mark of the Plural"

In a room dimly lit by candles, a Tunisian princess --played by Jennifer López-- displays fiery Eddie Torres-type salsa moves as the hip hop beat in Puff Daddy and Mase's video "Been Around the World" switches to sounds more appropriately "Latin". Ras Kass, a West Coast-based African American MC, passionately describes in his song "Lapdance" (1998) a Guyanese stripper as a "tropical" "Latin American mami" with a "fat derriere" who "wrapped her legs around my neck/ and worked it with a Latin thing."

Both images are constructed on the basis of a patriarchal desire that eroticizes and exoticizes. The heat and mystery that the images convey is all that matters. Tunisian princesses are deemed exotic, so they are spliced with exotic lustful *mamis*. The exoticized tropicalized enchantment of Spanish-speaking *mamis* is extended to other women, thus stretching the *mami* category into oblivion. Who cares if Guyanese are not Spanish-speaking Latin Americans? After all, accuracy and specificity never did much for exoticism. (López 1997; Shohat 1997)

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Rap images, in this sense, are influenced by a larger culture that tends to exoticize and splice together aspects of interchangeable "exotic" cultures, stamping them with what Albert Memmi terms the "mark of the plural" (Shohat 1997, 47). What is important is not these cultures' specificities, but the feeling of desire, mystery, adventure, danger, revulsion and/or pleasure that they evoke for the exoticizing subject. Shohat offers as examples the silent era films that

> included eroticized dances, featuring a rather improbable mélange of Spanish and Indian dances, plus a touch of belly dancing [and the] superimposition in Orientalist paintings of the visual traces of civilizations as diverse as Arab, Persian, Chinese and Indian into a single feature of the exotic Orient. (1997, 47)

Chávez-Silverman (1997) discusses a similar exoticizing convolution of multiple unrelated cultural signifiers. She describes Kate Braverman's second novel, *Palm Latitudes* (1988), as a "hegemonic tropicalizing" of a "domestic Third World," particularly of "third woman" subjectivities. One of the novel's characters, Francisca, nicknamed "La Puta de la Luna," has the following to say regarding graffiti on a wall:

> the walls of a liquor store have been spray-painted with the emblems of local madmen and incarcerated heroes. This script is primitive...the expression asserts itself, even in a degraded form. The impulse cannot be erased. She stares at the graffiti, noting that the signatures are perfectly arched like the arc of a matador's cape (Chávez-Silverman 1997, 52).

Chávez-Silverman remarks on the "ethnocentric, ludicrously mixed-metaphor, pan-Hispanic discourse (madmen, primitives, and matadores!) attributed to a Central American prostitute" which "begs any explication." (104) By advancing the notion of "palm latitudes," Braverman constructs exotic "verdant regions which level out Madrid, Caracas, or Los Angeles, cholo writing, the arc of a matador's cape, [and] the blue robe of La Virgen de Guadalupe." (107) She uses graffiti as a tropicalizing trope for ethno-racialized spaces of urban marginality and decay.[85]

[85] The characterization of tagging as "primitive" and emblematic of "local madmen and incarcerated heroes," is particularly striking. Why is it "primitive"? Because it's "ugly"? (Highway billboards and electoral propaganda plastered on walls are ugly too and nobody thinks of calling them primitive.) Because it is done by "uneducated people"? (So why other things people without formal education create can be exquisite "popular art" or "exotic" crafts?) Because of its connections with criminality/marginality? (First, white-collar crime is not viewed as primitive. Second, the assumption that tagging is related to insanity and criminality elevates the

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A few examples from 1940s Hollywood films illustrate the way in which, from the hegemonic U.S. perspective, inter-Latin American differences are masked behind the sign of *latinidad*.

> . . . all Latins and Latin Americans were from South of the Border and *that* border was the only one that mattered as far as Hollywood was concerned. Thus Carmen Miranda is incongruously "Brazilian" in a studio-produced Argentina (*Down Argentine Way*, Irving Cummings, 1940) and Cuba (*Weekend in Havana*, Walter Lang, 1941); Desi Arnaz an Argentine conga-playing student in a New Mexico College in *Too Many Girls* (George Abbott, 1940); Ricardo Montalbán a Mexican classical composer that dances Spanish flamenco in *Fiesta* (Jack Cummings, 1947); and Gene Kelly an Anglo sailor on leave who happens upon a stage version of Olvera Street in the Los Angeles of *Anchors Weight* (Stanley Donen, 1945) and dances a "Mexican Hat Dance" to the Argentine tango "La cumparsita." (López 1997)

The tropicalized *mamis* of rap's imaginary, as well as Braverman's "palm latitudes" and the aforementioned filmic examples of "the mark of the plural," are informed by centuries-old colonialist imaginaries. The "rescue" fantasy that Shohat describes as a central trope of colonial and postcolonial discourses[86], where the Western male subject is both civilizer and savior, is present, for example, in Puffy's "Been Around the World" video. In this case, the U.S. Black male subject is the inheritor of Western (white) imperial discourses where the colonial subaltern and the colonized territory are constructed through gendered metaphors. The female Other (the "Latin"-dancing Tunisian princess) is the coveted object of desire, while the male Other (in the form of the stereotypical "Arab assassin") is the evil native from whom the Western hero must rescue the female Other. The female Other bears "the mark of the plural" and is imagined as an exotic blend of Arab royalty and tropicalized *mami* heat.

The recent ubiquitousness of the eroticized *mami* in rap videos and rhymes has been accompanied by a canned, stale and tropicalized injection of Spanish words and phrases into mostly-English rhymes. Mase and Total's "Tell Me What You Want" provides what is perhaps the best (and corniest) example:

> Hey mama, won't you come here to papa . . .
> Come over here, I think I see your baby fatha
> . . . come to my casa
> If you're in a rush you call me mañana
> Whatever you need girlfriend

---

violence/marginality/criminality that exists in poor communities to an absolute level. Tagging is far from being the domain of madmen and criminals. How about the many young "regular" kids that tag for the hell of it?)

[86] See Chapter 7.

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I got the whole enchilada
Just the way you like it
Mase gonna do you propa

One of the most pleasurable aspects of the art of MCing is its mastery, manipulations and innovations based on urban street vernacular(s) --particularly the so-called "non-standard" or "broken" kind.[87] Behold the simplicity and evocativeness of Guru passing the *bodega* and saying "*suave*," Hurricane Gee dissing the "*pollos* in snakeskin stilettos," Jay-Z. claiming the girls in Miami ask him "*papi chu*, who be stoppin' you?", Jeru referring to cocaine as "*perico*," Tony Touch rhyming "*títeres*" with "freakin' it," and Cam'ron's line about "Jimmy Jones frontin' in the *chancletas*." Now, compare their references and wordplay to Mase insipidly rhyming "mama" with "papa," "fatha" with "*casa*," and "*mañana*" with "*enchilada*." The clincher is his use of the quintessential "American" cliché "the whole enchilada," particularly given its stereotypical evocation of Mexican food as if it had anything to do with the *mami* he courts.

A similar example can be found in Dru Hill's "How Deep Is Your Love?" When the narrating subject tells the song's Puerto Rican *mami* that he suspects she is involved "with another *chico*," he is as far away from using New York Caribbean Spanish vernacular as Mase is in his enchilada rhyme. This is not an argument for Dru Hill and Mase's language "inauthenticity." But it is important to distinguish rhymes that make use of urban street vernacular(s) from those that pretend to, but do not.

This stereotypical, tropicalized and trite use of Spanish is addressed in Danny Hoch's theater piece *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop*. His character Emcee Enuff offers the audience a rhyme from his new album:

Mister Big Poppa, flashin' a hun'ed dolla
Poppin' Cristal at the club, doin' the *cha-cha*
Actin' drunk, talkin' to *mama*, sayin' *la la*
Where is the joy? That shit is *caca, da-da*
(Hoch 1998, 73)

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[87] Jee (1998) proudly remarks regarding language use in hip hop culture: "The slang spitters/ standard English quitters/ Ebonics slingers/ Break Language, talk shit, and flip word thinkers. Speaking non-standard English is nothing new to those who are 'non-standard' americans. 'Non-standard' niggas twist words listed in dictionaries, we flip words from movies, we re-create, we innovate."

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Hoch parodies here not only the simplistic and contrived use of Spanish or Spanish-sounding words, but also commercial rap's fascination with the high life and all its trappings, which includes money, champagne (Cristal), and a surplus of *mamis*.

The Atlanta-based African American rap duo Outkast likewise pokes fun at rap's gimmicky use of Spanish words and *mami* fetishism. In a song entitled "Mamacita," references to rice and beans are intertwined with a description of a woman lusting after her girlfriend as a "pit mixed with a chiwawa" --rice, beans and chihuahuas being tropicalizing ethno-racial signifiers. The next verse has guest artist Witchdoctor rhyming

> Prepare for this sex drilling
> She said same thing is Spanish
> Got me feeling manish . . .
> Quiet night like this bachelor like me is single
> Talking to you Miss Bilingual
> Lets mingle in the crowd watch a show
> Pop some Moet trying to get you so wet
> Never been to Spain
> Never been a lame, horny . . .

The irony in this song is subtle. One can almost miss its tongue-in-cheek reproduction of rap's clichéd references to the *mamis*. But clues like Witchdoctor saying that the *mami*'s speaking Spanish "got me feeling manish," reveal that Outkast is making fun of rappers who brandish *mamis* as exotic trophies of their manliness. Furthermore, the song's hook has a man's voice chanting "Mamacita" followed by a woman chanting back "Papadonna," which brings together two of rap's most overused references, namely, Latina *mamis* and Italian *Mafiosos*. This song ends with a few words in Spanish clumsily strung together: " *Permicito, señorita, mamacita, mira mira*/ What's your name? María/ Same as *mi tía de Colombia*."

Despite these internal rumbles of discontent regarding the *mami*-related clichés, rap's obsessing over Latinas may not have yet reached saturation levels as a commercial trend. Thus, we may yet be in for quite a few more *mami*-focused "enchilada rhymes."

"The mark of the plural" poses diverse "exotic" cultural signifiers as equivalent; thus, enchiladas, mangoes, rice and beans, tango, salsa, and flamenco, can all be tropicalizing tropes for pan-*latinidad*. Furthermore, according to the logic of the "the mark of the plural," women of diverse

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cultural backgrounds are interchangeable. *Puerto Rican, Dominican, Chicana, Argentinian, Guyanese... What's the difference? Who cares? They are all hot Latin mamis. Aren't they?*

The "mark of the plural," as a trope of Eurocentric colonialist thought, though affecting the male Other differently from the female Other, still encompasses both genders. But there is another "mark of the plural" that is made to apply to women specifically --all women, not just those defined as subaltern in the colonialist discourse. Aparicio writes of a "pluralizing of Woman (Woman as multiplicity)" that

> not only maps the geography of a Latin male gaze and desire, but most centrally, it delineates a Don Juan subjectivity whose desire and libidinal economy are never static nor totally satisfied." (1998, 142)

Though concentrating her discussion on representations of women in Latin American music, Aparicio acknowledges the trans-cultural character of this phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, rap is also ruled by a masculinist "I want them all" mentality, where women --whether *sistas* or *mamis*-- are not real subjects, complex and distinct, but interchangeable sources of masculine pleasure or pain.[88] Funkdoobiest expresses this sentiment in particularly raw terms in "Pussy Ain't Shit" (1995):

> Pussy ain't shit but lips and clits . . .
> I just fuck the pussy
> Then I just throw it out
> It ain't shit
> The bitches be acting like it's gold . . .
> Now I look back and -shit- it's all the same to me

Noreaga conveys a similar attitude in "N.O.R.E." (1998):

> I only fuck a bitch twice
> If she get on her knees

Tropicalized *Mamis* Speak

How come I am not looked upon as
more than a chocha[89] with legs,
A sperm bank looking for reg's?

Seven, "Yeah, I'm Your Mommie"

[88] See Gus Puleo (1996) for examples of this phenomenon within salsa.
[89] "Chocha" is the equivalent of "cunt" in Puerto Rican slang.

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I want females to know that you have to go for yours. And if you're of color, oh my God, you better have some hiking boots because you are climbing a serious mountain, and only a few will get to the top and say, 'Damn, can I get a lemonade?'

Rocafella

African American female rap artists, though radically fewer in number than their male counterparts, and though severely constrained by patriarchal notions of appropriate/desirable/profitable female images and creativity, have managed to make inroads in this male-dominated realm. Lauryn Hill, Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott, Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, Mia X, Eve, Charli Baltimore, Da Brat, MC Lyte, Heather B, Bahamadia, Queen Pen and Queen Latifah, are some of the better-known African American female rap artists. Without their diverse creative voices, Black female subjectivity within rap would be limited to male representations of female subjectivity and overwhelmingly one-dimensional.

The case of Latinas, however, is another story. There are no Latina rap artists in the core hip hop music realm with the media visibility of any of the Black female artists previously mentioned. The closest is Angie Martínez, the New York Puerto Rican radio personality who recently began to explore rap through brief guest appearances on other artists' recordings, and is due to release her debut album in January 2000.

Hurricane Gee, a seasoned and well-respected artist who has collaborated with Redman, Eric Sermon, Keith Murray, Busta Rhymes, Xzibit, Cocoa Brovas, Puff Daddy and Funkdoobiest, among others, and who released her first solo album in 1997, is the only other Latina (Puerto Rican) female MC to have garnered some media recognition. It is significant that though *mamis* have been high on many a rapper's sexual agenda, Gee has not reaped commercial rewards from rap's *mami* fetish. All this obsessing over *mamis* and the only Latina MC, with solid underground credentials if not commercial success, hardly gets any play?

Martínez's media visibility, contrary to Gee's, seems to have benefited some from hip hop's new found appreciation for the *mamis*. Though a considerably weaker MC than Gee, it is Martínez who has gotten the most commercially visible rhyming gigs. Could it have to do with the fact that, while Martínez looks are quintessential "butta pecan," Gee is straight-up black? Could it have to do with the

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fact that, whereas Martínez non-confrontationally asserts herself in her rhymes, Gee pulls cards, calls people's bluffs, and is perceived as harsh, confrontational and complicated?

Gee's complex and strong subjectivity indisputably clashes with the hot-and-compliant mythical *mami* subjectivities being celebrated. When I asked a young Puerto Rican MC/producer what he thought of Hurricane Gee as an artist, his lack of enthusiasm for her work centered on her not being "lady-like." As he said, "women rappers have to be ladies to get treated as ladies." Such notions regarding appropriate female images are not *mami*-specific. Both African American and Latina MCs are affected by these types of gender-based limitations and expectations.

According to Jeff Fenster, Vice President of A&R at the record label Jive, "males just don't want to hear hard things from women." That, combined with comparatively less label support for women, is the reason Fenster gives as to why African American female rap artists Boss, Yo-Yo and Queen Latifah did not fare well, in terms of sales. (Smyth 1995, 126) Un Rivera, rap producer, video director and President of the labels Undeas Records and Untertainment, gives credence to Fenster's pronouncements in his account of shaping Lil' Kim's image:

> What I did with Lil' Kim's image was look at my wife and I thought, if I had another girl, how would I want to see her dressed? I used to buy Kim her clothes . . . Me and Big used to go back and forth with ideas trying to figure what is it that niggas wanted to see. Niggas want to see how Shorty get down. They don't want to hear about Kim shootin' people , and they don't wan to hear about Kim sellin' drugs. *Maybe*, they want to hear about Kim fuckin'. So, we started makin' records like that. We would give Kim these ideas, and Kim would come back with some real sexual shit." (Marriott 1997)

Hurricane Gee is neither focused on exploiting her sexual appeal like Kim, nor is she a quintessential butta pecan *mami* like Martínez. She is a powerful Puerto Rican black woman MC who projects herself multi-dimensionally as loving, faithful, dedicated, horny, aggressive, demanding, vulnerable, and spiteful, depending on the situation. The wounded lover who struggles to maintain her self-respect in "Somebody Else" gives way to the hardrock MC from "Underground Lockdown."

> Chacho, es que no entienden que yo no estoy jugando
> Andan buscando tremendos golpes
> No hay quien me toque
> Porque mi gente me defiende
> So hold that bullshit down
> 'Cause I ain't fucking around
> I came to get down straight ghetto

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Knocking pollos off snakeskin stilletos
Material non-lyrical
Yeah, yeah

Gee goes from thankful and dutiful daughter in "Mamá" to lustful and eager to please lover in "Boricua Mami."

This boricua mama got what you love, papa
I chupa you like the cabra
Get up, get up, swing, I'm just having fun
Stroking that big black gun
'Till we be hot like the sun . . .
Papi, you ain't gots to pay me no fee
('Cause I'll love you for free)
I don't need your money
Just give me all your honey
And let me smoke you like a spliff
'Till you big enough to slip
In between my dairy queen
'Till you all up in my spleen
For hours and hours
Then we jumpin' in the shower
And getting busy underwater

She is also the mother who bitterly pokes fun at her lying and irresponsible baby's father as she kicks him out of her life.

Honey, get a grip
And pump to this
'Cause now, you dismissed
And I'ma find me a cutie who eat fish
And who gonna caress my earthliness
With love and happiness . . .
You ain't got to get up
You just ain't at my level
See your tomorrow is . . .
Up in luxury cars with stars
And my tomorrow is in my own garden
Running wild, breathing fresh oxygen
With my beautiful baby girl
Making dope music for the whole world

Whereas Hurricane Gee is, as her album title proclaims, *All Woman*, complex and ever-evolving, the mythical *mamis* of rap songs are simple and cartoonish. When their voices are heard, they are, almost invariably, sensuous creatures whose only interests are material goods and sexual pleasure.

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We hear Puffy's "Spanish girl" in the interlude right before the song "Señorita" slurping as she performs oral sex, moaning, and teaching him a couple of phrases for hot pillow talk.[90] All the while, as if to create a properly tropical ambiance, "Como mi ritmo no hay dos" is playing in the background. During "Señorita" itself, two female voices are heard. One, presumably the song's subject, whispers: "Mi amor, soy tuya para siempre. Te amo." The second comes from a sample of a song by salsa singer La India: "Sabes que aquello fue un engaño..." (You know that it was all a lie...)

The "mamacita" of Cam'ron's "Horse and Carriage" video --whose hook is taken from a Ricky Ricardo song!-- speaks once and says: "Oh, you're going to buy me diamonds!" Puffy raps about a *mami* who, presumably, shares his luxury-obsessed mentality:

> Honey I'll keep you hot and wet
> Flooded with ice
> You can spend all day
> And chill all night
> . . . Every few weeks is a bigger size ring . . .
> Thousand dollar shoes
> Dance in ballrooms
> You know the dress
> That got the party impressed
> You'll only wear it once
> 'Cause the world is mine

In a notorious interlude, entitled "Taster's Choice," in Big Punisher's debut album, two Puerto Rican *mamis* get it on with Pun. Amidst slurping sounds, moans and a creaking bed, we hear:

> Lissette: Oh my god that feels so good.
> Joanne: *Mamame la chocha*, Pun.
> Lissette: *Ay que grande. Ay, castígame.*
> Joanne: *Ay, ay*... I gotta have it. I gotta.
> Lissette: Ride me.
> Joanne: *Ay*, Pun stick me. *Ay* Lissette, *dame*, let me get on top, Lissette.
> Lissette: No Joanne, no. No, Joanne, no.
> Joanne: Lissette, stop being selfish.
> Lissette: You had him last night, Joanne. No.
> Joanne: Get off him. Get off!
> Lissette: No.
> [slap]

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[90] The phrases she tells him in Spanish do not correspond to the English translation she gives him. For example she tells him "te quiero mojaíta" (I want you wet) means "I wanna hold you in my arms." She claims that "te quiero comer" (I want to eat you) means that "I love you very much." Is she making fun of him? If she is, only the portion of the audience that knows Spanish will be in on the joke.

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Listed & Joanne: Bitch! What the fuck you doing you fucking bitch? You greedy bitch. What the fuck you doing?
Pun: [muttering to himself] You stupid bitches. [to them] Stop! Stop! What are you doing? Stop. Relax.
Lissette: She had you last night, Pun.
Joanne: Gimme Pun. Pun.
Pun: Ma, ma, What do you want? What do you want?
Joanne: I wanna ride your dick.
Lissette: I want your dick.
Joanne: No.
Pun: Shh. C'mere. Shh. C'mere, you spank here. Help push in Lissette. I need help pushing. That's what she wants.
Joanne: Go ahead, Listed.
Pun: Bend over, Lissette. Bend over. [bed creaking more] *Toma*. Take it from the back.
Lissette: Ah, ah...
Joanne: *Ay*, Lissette, Lissette.
Pun: Ah, ah...
Lissette: *Castígame, castígame*. Punish me.
Pun: [loud sigh] [male orgasm signals THE END]

The Puerto Rican mami of Dru Hill's "How Deep Is Your Love?" coos: "*Ay, como te extraño. Ven aquí mi papi morenito. Dámelo duro. Dámelo, papi chulo.*"[91] DJ Enuff, a Puerto Rican DJ who is part of Hot 97's "Morning Show," occasionally slips in between songs a sample of a woman moaning: "*Ay, papi.*"

Black Star, an African American duo from New York, offers a lonely and welcome exception to this legion of sexually explicit caricatures of Latinas. In a beautifully crafted song entitled "Respiration" (1998) that plays with the notion of the city as a breathing organism, a woman's voice opens the track: "*Escúchala, la ciudad respirando.*" (Listen to the city breathing.) Her words are
immediately followed by the guitar chords that establish from the beginning the reflexive, bordering on
immediately followed by the guitar chords that establish from the beginning the reflexive, bordering on melancholic, mood of the song. The chorus offers a good example of how Mos Def, Talib Kweli and guest artist Common, skillfully weave together images and feelings, based on their home cities --New York for Black Star, Chicago for Common.

So much on my mind I just can't recline
Blasting holes in the night 'till she bled sunshine
Breathe in
(And inhale vapors from bright stars that shine)
Breathe out

[91] "Oh, how I miss you. Come here, my black *papi*. Give it to me hard. Give it to me, *papi chulo*."

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(Weed smoke retrace the skyline)
Yo, how the bass ride out like an ancient mating call?
I can't take it ya'll
I can feel the city breathing!
Chest heaving, against the flesh of the evening

Right after the chorus, the same soulful female voice comes in once again: "*Escúchala respirando como yo. Ojos sinceros escondiendo pena y temor*[...]" (Listen to her breathing like me. Sincere eyes hiding sorrow and fear.)

The city is both feminized and Latinized through its association with the words and experience of this female subject. Parallels are also made between the city and the male gender as Common uses the metaphor of "breathing" to relate general socio-economic circumstances in Chicago to his "man's" experience.

Some of this land I must own
Out of this city they want us gone
Tearing down the 'jects, creating plush homes
My circumstance is between Cabrini and love jones
Surrounded by hate yet I love home
Ask my guy how he thought traveling the world sound
Rather hard to imagine he hadn't been past downtown
It's deep, I heard the city breathe in its sleep
A reality I touch but for me it's hard to keep
It's deep, I heard my man breathe in his sleep
A reality I touch but for me it's hard to keep

In contrast to most Latina voices heard in contemporary rap recordings, Black Star and Common incorporate a Latina voice into their music in order to weave a poetic narrative whose last concern is the usual Don Juan economics of sex. Lamentably, this trio of artists is an exception to the rule.

Foxy Brown's debut platinum-selling album, *Ill Nana* (1996), incorporated a Puerto Rican woman's voice as a marginal commentator in the opening track "Intro...Chicken Coop." The "Intro" is partly a commercial for upcoming Latino artists The Cru and Cormega. The latter was then the most recent member of The Firm, a crew made up of popular rap artists Foxy Brown, Nas and AZ.

Announcer [a movie preview-type male voice]: In the summer of '96, we saw Nas Escobar captivate an entire industry. Little did we know, when he stepped through the door, The Firm he represented would be right behind him.
Woman [in an aggressive and exasperated tone]: *¿Y qué carajo es el Firm? ¿Y quién es este maricón Cormega? ¡Mamao!* (And what the hell is The Firm? And who is this faggot Cormega? Cocksucker!)

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Though this woman's interjection is a marginal aside to add "flavor" and humor to the "Intro," it is also one of the few examples of Latina female voices in recent rap recordings that do something different than moan in ecstasy.

The problem with the prevalent representations of Latinas does not reside in the sexually explicit images. Explicit sex should not be confused with sexism. An image does not get more sexist as it gets more "hardcore." Big Punisher's "Taster's Choice" interlude would be just as sexist if its protagonists were kissing, instead of fucking. The problem with these representations is that the *mamis* are only thought of in terms of sexual desire. *Mamis* are not sisters, friends or mothers. Their only conceivable role is that of lovers. To compound the matter, the terms of these sexual representations are tragically misogynist and operate under a patriarchal logic. The *mamis* are frivolous, gold-digging and infinitely substitutable beings.

Big Pun's "Taster's Choice" again provides a telling example. Lissette and Joanne are portrayed as petty and egotistical, quick to jump at each other's throats competing for Punisher's dick. They are, of course, desperate for the ultimate phallocentric prize. Pun, on the contrary, is way above their silliness. He demeans them by muttering under his breath "stupid bitches" and proceeds to mediate their spat. Of course, their being "stupid bitches" does not make them, for him, any less desirable. Dealing with female frivolity is just the heterosexual man's burden. Poor guys, that is what they have to put up with if they want to get laid.

Furthermore, lesbian pleasure is celebrated in "Taster's Choice", but only because it is for male consumption. Lesbian desire is only redeemed by male participation. Had Pun not been there, or had these women not conformed to stereotypically "feminine" standards of beauty, then Lissette and Joanne's desire for each other would be repulsive and a threat. "[..]Without man [they] would be indefinite, indefinable, nonsexed, unable to recognize [themselves]: outside the symbolic." (Cixous 1990, 349)

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Lesbianism is only acceptable given a phallocentric logic, according to which, without a penis, there is no "real" sex. By the same phallocentric token, gay male desire is perceived as way too real, and thus under no circumstances is it deemed hot, cute, or even remotely acceptable.[92]

"Lesbian chic" surfaces not only in rap, but in popular culture in general, being a common male erotic fantasy. When asked about the commercial viability of an openly lesbian rapper, Lenny Santiago, an A&R at Roc-A-Fella Records responded:

> It's such a turn-on for guys, I think it would be marketable. It's every man's fantasy to sleep with two women. If she were *ghetto-sexy* [emphasis mine] and had skills, I could see that. (Mshaka 1999)

A clueless male reader ask Lana Sands, *XXL*'s sex columnist: "How do I get with a lesbian?" She responds:

> I think you might be looking for a girl who is bisexual or maybe bi-curious as opposed to a full blown lesbian, 'cause you might not find what you're looking for by *Chasing Amy*." (Sands 1998)

The assumption that a lesbian woman would necessarily want to engage males sexually reveals an extremely heterocentric perspective, a lack of imagination, and just plain ignorance. Lesbian fetishism is evidently not about actual female-to-female desire, but about a cute show for male consumption.

In a conversation I had with two Puerto Rican teenage rap artists who expressed great admiration for Big Punisher, the "Taster's Choice" interlude came up. I asked what they thought about it. One of them dutifully informed me that "it was degrading to women." The following exchange ensued:

> Raquel: Why do you say it's degrading to women?
> Jay[93]: Because it makes them seem like two freaks.

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[92] In one of the few published articles that explores male homosexuality in hip hop, which appeared in *The Source*, Byers states: " . . . hip hop, which is quite unfairly [and perhaps problematically] seen as the last frontier of real *nigga-ness*, might suffer as an icon of Black masculinity if one of its more hard-core artists revealed himself to be gay." (1997, 108)

This article elicited praises from some readers in the February 1998 issue of *The Source* : ". . . I must give big ups to R.K. Byers for escaping from his dragon's lair and entering the world of hip-hop where the folks who jump to da music happen to be gay." It also got a scathing rejection from another: "Yo, straight up, I can't believe I was reading about a bunch of gay clowns *trying* to be down. Hip-hop and homos don't go together. . . . *real brothers* ain't havin' it." (emphasis mine) (18)

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Raquel: But isn't he a freak too, then?
Jay: Yeah, he's a freak too. See, it's that double standard. If guys do it, it's aiight, but if girls do it they're hoes or freaks.
Tony: They probably got some hoodrats to do that! [laughter]

The assumption that the women that played Lissette and Joanne's roles were "hoodrats" struck me, particularly since Tony's statement followed Jay's acknowledgment that branding this kind of raw female sexual behavior as "freakish" is a sexist double standard. So not only does raw sexual behavior in real life make a woman a freak, but it also makes freakish ("hoodrats") the actresses or models that enact such behavior. Reality and fantasy collide at a fascinating angle when playing a role in a staged sexual encounter, for commercial consumption has bearing on assumptions (coded as negative) about the real lives of this encounter's female participants.

The sexualized actresses and models of rap songs and videos, though indispensable in rap's landscape of male pleasure, are routinely debased. *Blaze* magazine's rap video reviewer, Rubin Carasco (1998), quips that the estimated budget for Punisher's "Still Not a Player" consisted of "a three-piece meal at KFC for each girl," giving voice to the notion that these women are selling their sexuality cheap. If women selling sex for high prices is viewed as morally reprehensible (McClintock 1993; Pheterson 1993), selling sex cheap is viewed as even worse. And that is why the actresses that played Joanne and Lissette are assumed to be "hoodrats."

Seeking to challenge the dismissal of these actresses and models as "video hoes," Valdés writes

> Videos are an integral part of hip-hop culture. They can either make or break a song's impact. But what exactly makes a video good? Film quality, concept, clothes, choreography, *and most often, how dope the women look* [emphasis is mine]. Ironically, no one knows much about these females; yet, *everyone* has something to say about them. Now don't go there and dismiss these ladies as "video hoes." Do you call actresses who star in dozens of movies, "movie hoes"? Don't hate these women because they're beautiful. (1997, 73)

Valdés makes a good point by highlighting the hypocrisy of singling out video actresses for negative judgments, while movie actresses are not judged as harshly. But to validate these women as

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[93] "Jay" and "Tony" are pseudonyms.

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respectable professionals, Valdés draws a clear separation between the "freaky" roles they portray and their real lives:

> But if these women do get a little freaky in these videos, please remember it's all just an act. . . . Their morals and goals go far beyond their video images.

And what if it wasn't an act? What if these women were sexually aggressive and/or promiscuous in real life? Would that invalidate their also being respectable professionals? Unfortunately, the answer is yes. Female "freaks" are assumed to be ditzy, sleazy and unprofessional. The same judgment is not applied to males, due of course to the patriarchal double standard.

Valdés also relies on denying the central role of sex as a commodity in these actresses' careers, in order to validate them: "Some may accuse these women of selling sex, but they're simply portraying roles." There is no contradiction in selling sex through role-playing as a professional occupation, yet Valdés poses it as such. The so-called "video hoes" that Valdés aims to vindicate as "video queens" have to navigate between economic necessity (earning a living, building a career) and notions of female dignity (according to which selling sex is dishonorable).

Women within the rap music industry are overwhelmingly relegated to secondary roles. They are most highly visible as the models and actresses in magazines and videos. Indispensable as members of the collective at the core of male pleasure –i.e., women, females, honeys, hotties, bitches, hoes, freaks, chickenheads, pigeons, chicks...–, they are branded by the "mark of the plural" which makes them expendable and easily substitutable as individuals. Women are coveted and necessary, but also debased and disrespected, often regarded, as Seven (1996) says in a poem, as nothing more "than a *chocha* with legs."

The ubiquitous tropicalized representations of Caribbean Latinas in recent rap music present a striking and ethno-racially specific example of how women bear the "mark of the plural." These representations also illustrate, in a gender-specific fashion, the way in which Puerto Ricanness is constructed through navigations between a tropicalized *latinidad* and a ghettocentric blackness. Puerto Rican *mamis* are portrayed most commonly as a tropical and racially "lighter" variation on ghetto blackness.

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Puerto Rican Tropicalized Afro-diasporicity

Rap music's late 1990s commercialized ghettocentricity, old- school nostalgia and fetishization of Butta Pecan *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 highlight their desirability as consumers and/or objects of mass-mediated exotization.

Hip hop's late 1990s "Latino Renaissance" (Morales 1996) has on the one hand 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 in the late 1980s, which pushed the bounds of New York Puerto Rican creativity through the inclusion of second-generation and third-generation perspectives, but reproduced other essentialist myths regarding Latino cultural production. As I explained, one of its central myths was the construction of a Latino aesthetic that was imagined as disengaged from the Afro-diasporic history and present context of Caribbean Latino cultural expression in New York.

Despite the similarities --in terms of re-drawing essentialist ethno-racialized boundaries-- between 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. While freestyle and "Latin rap" were defined as Latino expressions, "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 still grounded in and celebrated as part of an Afro-diasporic cultural realm.

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CHAPTER 8

NAVIGATING BLACKNESS AND *LATINIDAD* THROUGH LANGUAGE

Niuyorricans do not realize that their language is English and the language of Puerto Ricans is Spanish.

Eduardo Seda Bonilla, "El problema de la identidad de los niuyorricans"

Mira, si no hablo bien el español es porque no nací en España; si no hablo bien el inglés es porque no soy hijo de puta.

Pedro Pietri, *Puerto Rican Voices in English*

The creative output of New York Puerto Ricans involved in hip hop's musical element varies widely. General aesthetics, themes, lyrical styles, choice of poetic language, verbal delivery techniques, musical sources, as well as styles and modes of musical production (live instrumentation, samples, DJing), vary tremendously from artist to artist --as they also vary among African American artists. I mention this wide range of creative output because Puerto Ricans, and Latinos in general, have often been expected to reduce that range in order to fit into acceptable and/or recognizable parameters of *latinidad*. This assumption, often held by people outside of hip hop's bounds, is that these artists must "Latinize" hip hop in order to make it truly "theirs." Otherwise they are perceived to be imitating or adopting African American cultural expressions (Cano-Moreno 1995; Levinson 1998; Manuel 1995; Salazar 1995). And if Latino artists make no effort to "Latinize" their artistic expression, it is because they have lost "their" culture. Bronx writer Abraham Rodríguez, author of *Boy Without a Flag* and *Spidertown*, responds to these types of assumptions:

> It is pretty dumb for anyone to suggest that young Puerto Ricans have lost their sense of "culture" when all they are doing is expressing the dynamics of their experience in Rap as well as Rock, Jazz and Pop music. No tragedy there, just expansion. (Rodríguez 1999)

Within the "core" hip hop expressive realm, there exists a strong resistance against such pressure for Latino artists to "Latinize" their creative output. If anything, the flip side of that pressure has reared its head at times. Certain artists, like Latin Empire, Kid Frost and Mellow Man Ace, who have worked with explicitly Puerto Rican/Latino themes, language and/or sources in their music, have been shunned --by African Americans and Latinos alike-- for stepping out of the Black-matrixed hip hop norm. Though brief or peripheral Puerto Rican/Latino references and influences have been generally

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deemed acceptable, it seems as if there has been an emic cut-off point on acceptability (shifting and highly subjective, but nonetheless real). In MC Power's words, "If you want to say something about being Latino, make a short statement and that's enough." Once artists step beyond the cut-off point, they can be perceived to be "impos[ing] Puerto Rican culture on hip hop" (Q-Unique 1995), "try[ing] too hard to bring in their ethnic background" (Power 1995), or trying to use their Puerto Ricanness or *Latinoness* as a commercial hook (Weisberg 1998).

Main One, realizing how stressing his "heritage" could land him on the wrong side of hip hop legitimacy, sought to perform a balancing act in his upcoming music projects:

> My next album is gonna be straight-up raw... I'm still going to put my heritage in it, but I ain't no *Rico Suave* [emphasis mine]. I'm real." (Rob Rivera 1996)

As one of the first New York Puerto Rican rap artists to make their Puerto Ricanness one of the central components of their musical production, the duo Latin Empire has been frequently invoked for criticism. Explaining their lukewarm acceptance in hip hop "core" circles, Q-Unique comments:

> They impose Puerto Rican culture on hip hop. Hip hop doesn't need to be infused with anything in order to be complete. That's why they don't get much acceptance. (1995a)

Alano Báez, lead singer of Ricanstruction (a hardcore band with influences ranging from reggae to perico ripiao to hip hop), recalls:

> When Latin Empire came out they were seen as more of a novelty act and never really accepted as hip hop. The reaction to them was "Oh, Latinos doing hip hop" --as if Latinos hadn't long before been doing hip hop. Part of the problem was also that they weren't that good. (1998)

In an interview held at Rappers Discotheque in Puerto Rico, Panamasta (an MC from the Lower East Side of Manhattan) and D-Stroy (an MC from Bushwick, Brooklyn, and member of the Arsonists Crew), faulted some New York Puerto Rican artists for stressing their ethno-racial affiliation too much and thus being responsible for their own lack of success. A Puerto Rican MC "gotta represent as a rapper first and then as a Puerto Rican." Panamasta and D-Stroy believe that he or she has to prove themselves in hip hop's Black-matrixed expression, in order to later be able to stress their ethno-racial background. Furthermore, these MCs explained this avowed need to "represent as a rapper first" to be applicable, not only to Puerto Ricans or even Latinos in general, but to MCs of other non-Black ethnicities as well.

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> Panamasta: Check it out, in New York, Puerto Ricans right now are having a hard time 'cause they ain't getting too much light. First you gotta represent as a rapper. Then when you get up there and shit . . . [The music industry decision-makers won't say] he's a *Puerto Rican rapper, lets give him a break, he speaks Spanish*. No. He's gotta represent as a rapper first and then as a Puerto Rican. He's a Puerto Rican in deep anyway. But they need to represent as an artist, as an MC. That's why people like Fat Joe and Funkdoobiest and Kurious they haven't been coming out "yo, I'm Puerto Rican, I'm Puerto Rican" but you can feel their vibe. But they gotta represent as MCs.
>
> D-Stroy: For example, with House of Pain. They Irish, but you can't say, "yo, he's good for a White MC." It ain't really that 'cause you gotta be nice as an MC. When you start dividing, it hurts. You gotta start like that but when you get there and people respect you as an MC then you can go and do it. Although, no matter how it goes I'm still Puerto Rican.

DJ Muggs, Cypress Hill's Italian-American DJ, makes a similar distinction between "representing as an MC" and "representing as a Latino MC."

> I'm gonna come right out and tell you that the problem with Latino rappers is they come out representing that they're a Latino rapper instead of coming out just as an mc. They pigeon-hole themselves, ya see? Black people down south don't give a fuck if you're Latino. White people who love hip hop don't give a fuck if you're Latino. You have to come out and let the music speak for itself so that people will check you with an open mind. You just gotta come out and do your shit. Don't rely on being *Latino* as your gimmick. . . Latinos are a minority and if those are the only people buying your shit... You have no one to blame for not succeeding. (Weisberg 1998, 54)

Ju-Ju from the Beatnuts says that although he includes some Spanish in his rhymes: "I ain't trying to stress that shit. I want to be respected as a talented hip hop artist, not as a talented *Latino* hip hop artist." (del Barco 1996, 81)

From these commentators' statements it seems as if hip hop's definitional Black-matrix is violated when certain expressions of *latinidad* are placed too close to the axis of artistic creation. Said Black-matrix is central not only in terms of emic perceptions of hip hop as a collective mode of expression, but also in terms of commercial viability. *Latinidad* is unstable and potentially hazardous in commercial terms because Blackness is hip hop's reigning commercial gimmick.

Language has been one of the central signifiers of *latinidad* with the potential to evoke perceptions of disruption and deviation from the Black-matrix. It seems that one thing is the use of Spanish or Spanglish, which may be thought of as perfectly alright, and another is their "overuse." Journalist Rigo Morales gives voice to a widespread perception within hip hop circles by offering the

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examples of Mellow Man Ace, Messengers of Funk and Little Indian as artists who "have gone on to become statistics in the rap game, mostly due to their overuse of 'Spanglish.'" (Morales 1998, 33)

The boundaries between "use" and "overuse" have always been subtle and elusive, varying by region, circles, as well as individuals. Nevertheless, there has been a noticeable expansion in the acceptability of Spanish, "Spanglish"[94] and code-switching in rhymes during the latter half of the 1990s. The members of Cypress Hill, who in the early 1990s abrasively criticized Kid Frost for focusing too much on a Latino-oriented aesthetic, are today preparing to release their first Spanish EP. Funkdoobiest, whose 1995 album *Brothas Doobie* included only sparse sprinklings of Spanish and a few fleeting mentions of its members' ethno-racial affiliations, came back in 1997's *The Troubleshooters* with lyrics heavily infused with Spanish and ethno-racial references. An MC I interviewed a few years ago, who disdained Latino rappers who put "too much" emphasis on their ethnicities, is today rhyming in Spanish and has garnered more media visibility than ever for doing so. Times have changed, and as *latinidad* has acquired greater legitimacy as a component of hip hop's core, the scope of acceptable "Latinized" deviations from hip hop's Black-matrix has expanded accordingly.

The role of commercially successful African American artists in the increased acceptability of *latinidad*-infused hip hop cannot be underestimated. Making reference to hit rap songs such as Wyclef Jean's "Guantanamera" and Puff Daddy's "Señorita," Fat Joe explains:

> These artists have sold ten to fifteen million records worldwide and all that, and they're showing love for Latinos, so now you'll have their fans more open to Latinos. (Morales 1998, 33)

In no small part due to the legitimation of Latino themes by African American artists, what in the earlier half of the 1990s may have been perceived as Latino sectarianism is today a sign of hip hop ghetto authenticity. For example, lets take a 1998 interview that Angie Martínez did with Cypress Hill's Sen Dogg and B-Real for MTVs August 1, 1998 show "Smoking Grooves." Sen Dogg was wearing a black baseball jersey with bold white letters across the chest that read "LATIN THUG." In the course

[94] What is commonly labeled "Spanglish" is actually more properly referred to as "code-switching" (Acosta-Belén 1972).

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of the conversation, the MCs revealed that they were working on an EP in Spanish. After their brief exchange, Sen introduced in Spanish the Tupac video that followed their interview, as English subtitles appeared at the bottom of the screen. Remember, these are the same artists that years back criticized Kid Frost for over-emphasizing his *latinidad* and thus only catering to Latinos. The big difference is that what constituted catering to a Latino audience in previous years, today has widespread appeal.

The increased acceptance and marketability of Spanish-infused rhymes has led some Puerto Rican artists to incorporate more Spanish into their rhymes, but not all. Fat Joe's sparse use of Spanish within rhymes has remained constant over the course of his three albums. Underground MCs Kurious Jorge, Power Rule, The Arsonists, Building Block of Word A' Mouth, Thirstin" Howell, and A-Butta also write mainly in English.

Though the use of Spanish in rhymes enjoys greater acceptance in the late 1990s, it has not become a necessary identity marker either. For the New York Puerto Rican second and third generations ethno-racial identity and difference has more to do with the way English is spoken than with the use of Spanish in rhymes.

"Boriquas On The Set"

Frankie Cutlass' "Boriquas On The Set," featuring Doo Wop, Fat Joe, Ray Boogie and True God, is a self-affirming ode to New York Puerto Ricans. Nuyoricanness is praised and defined through a class, generation and gender-specific experience. Class-identity, ethno-racial affiliation and ethno-racial solidarities are constructed with respect to each other, as evidenced by Fat Joe and Ray Boogie offsetting their respective identities against "downtown white boys" and "Caucasian[s]," as well as Ray Boogie praising the "street" and the "ghetto" while he draws connections between himself and African American, Puerto Rican and Mexican ghetto dwellers.

> See True and Boogie kicking street facts
> Headcracks [props] for the Blacks and the Arawaks
> My Aztec roughnecks get love too
> And if you ain't from the ghetto, then muthafuck you

Ray Boogie employs "Arawaks" as a stand-in for Puerto Ricans, an often used strategy

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--which extends way beyond hip hop-- of defining the Puerto Rican experience in terms of Native American ancestry, particularly in order to distinguish Puerto Ricanness from the U.S. Black experience.[95] Puerto Ricans and Chicanos, the two Latino groups invoked by Boogie, are thus linked by an appeal to a shared indigenous American connection, adding yet another bond to the "ghetto" connection they share with each other as well as with African Americans.

"Boricuas On the Set" is a manifestation of Puerto Rican second and third generation cultural practices. These MCs are English-dominant, New York Puerto Rican style --an approach to language which is much indebted to the New York African American vernacular of their peers, as well as to the Puerto Rican Spanish of their parents (Flores 1993; Pedraza 1987; Urciuoli 1996; Zentella 1997). In this particular song, language is an identity badge, but it has more to do with the way English is used and less with the faint sprinklings of Spanish through these rhymes. Spanish usage is limited to Doo Wop's mention of "eat[ing] *cuchifrito* every time I get booted," Fat Joe's taunting an opponent to "*mámame el bicho*," and a sample from African American rapper Method Man in which he declares "you ain't got no ends in *mi casa*."

This celebratory classic honoring hip hop's Boricua presence employs minimal Spanish and no musical sources commonly identified as Latino --its mid-range bassline and high-pitched synthesizer melody almost makes it sound like an elaboration on a video game's musical background. The Boricua experience is celebrated through English-dominant rhyme skills, and the flaunting of heterosexual male prowess, as well as ghetto street knowledge --coded as the "nigga" experience.

> My nigga Joe, good looking, check it
> My title never got tooken
> From San Juan to Brooklyn
> I am the undefeated, undisputed
> eat *cuchifrito* every time I get booted
> Sex Corona, with Mona, bitch from Iona
> Didn't bone her, because she was a blood donor . . .
> (Doo Wop)
> Yeah! Guess who comes out the camp
> The undisputed heavyweight Bronx champ

---

[95] Other examples include: Krazy Taíno's choice of artistic name; DJ Tony Touch frequently referring to himself as the Taíno Turntable Terrorist; Mr. Wiggles declaring in DJ Tony Touch's mix-tape #49 that he is "coming like an Arawak to spear shit up."

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Niggas know the time, niggas know the deal
Niggas know that nigga Fat Joe is mad real . . .
It's the illest nigga from the Boogie Down
Represent every day with the 4 pound
Rap aggressor, MC stresser
Whenever horny I'm fucking bitches on my dresser . . .
(Fat Joe)

Nigga-ness, as evidenced in Fat Joe's rhyme, defines the self as well as those around him whose respect he commands. Aside from the appeals to a Boricua Arawak past, the Boricua New York inner-city experience is coded as a "nigga" present. Edward Rodríguez explains regarding the use of the word "nigga":

> The word "nigga," particularly, is a clear instance where ghetto Black and Latino youth address themselves particularly. . . . The usage of words like 'nigga' and even 'minority' show our rebellious mentality in realizing the collective perception our social and economic class gives us, and the lack of power we have despite our large populations. (1996b)

Niggas in 'The Age of the Ebonic Plague'

Language plays no small role in the construction of a niggafied Puerto Rican experience. "Niggas know who niggas are" (Bravo 1998b), partly through language use, particularly within the hip hop realm. "Ebonics slingin'" (to paraphrase Jee) is a primary communicative "nigga" practice, MCing being one of its principal poetic methods.

"You may think I'm Black by the way I'm speaking," said old-school legend Rubie Dee in an early 1980s rhyme. "My verbal Ebonics get you more higher than chronic," said Hurricane Gee nearly to two decades later in the late 90s. Around the same time, the Cru released a track titled "The Ebonic Plague," featuring Ras Kass, the hook to which declared:

It's all about me for you and you for me
And player if you do for two, we do for three
If you think its 'bout the cash, the cars and jewelry
We living in the Age of the Ebonic Plague

"The Ebonic Plague" proposes language as a realm where community consciousness is built as well as manifested. No ethno-racial distinctions are made between the African American and Puerto Rican artists that contributed to this song; they are all part of the "we" building and living the Age of the Ebonic Plague. Linguistic manifestations of New York Caribbean *latinidad* are incorporated into the

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"Ebonic" community realm: The trilling "r" of the word "three" in the looping statement "mike check the one, the mike check three" --which is in linguistic debt to New York Puerto Rican English; the effortless integration of "México," pronounced in Spanish, into an otherwise all-English rhyme; the opening of the last verse with a reference to The Arsonists' (the crew from Bushwick, Brooklyn, with all Caribbean Latino members) "The Session."

> Punks pop shit we Joe Pesce 'em, no question
> Cru Session, no time for second guessing

The way in which this track is imprinted by New York Caribbean *latinidad* may be lost to the casual observer that is not familiar with urban Afro-diasporic youth culture. The linguistic and other markings that signify *latinidad* for the second and third Caribbean Latino generations and for their African American peers are very specific to the Black-matrixed youth culture they share.

"Niggas Know Who Niggas Are"

There ain't no such a thing as Puerto Ricans. We're just a different kind of nigga. That's all.

A man in his early 20s addressing a woman of similar age

The Latino community needs to get up in this piece. 'Cause you know y'all just got dropped off at a different port than nigga niggas.

Kofi Taha, Black August Collective

And for those of y'all who are puzzled by my definition of a nigga, keep this in mind, niggas know who niggas are, and that's all we need to know.

Vee Bravo, "Moves & News"

The paced and somber piano chords of "Return of the Crooklyn Dodgers," laced with gloomy horn riffs, provide a contrast with the high-pitched bells pealing throughout, the upbeat boom-bap of the drums, and the rhymers' forceful and lyrically-packed deliveries. African American MCs Chubb Rock, OC and Jeru the Damaja teamed up for this song which was included in the soundtrack for the movie *Clockers*, directed by Spike Lee. An elegy as well as a celebration of Brooklyn and Brooklynites, "Return of the Crooklyn Dodgers" is also an indictment of the racialization of crime. Chubb Rock is the first to step to the microphone:

> Now fly kids, who got the cocaine?
> Don't tell me it's the little kids on Soul Train
> The metaphor, sent from my brain to my jaw

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> It comes from other places, not intended faces
> Journalistic dials are yellow and then, of course, falter
> You watch channel zero with that bitch Barbara Walters
> She'll have you believe Black invented crack
> when President Lyndon had the form all the way back
> in '63, with Kennedy . . .
> Whitey can sell on the corners of Bushwick
> Whitey can sell on the corners of Flatbush
> Whiteys can sell on the corners of Bed Stuy
> Pass the torch and that nigga die
> So just die nigga, die nigga!
> You're too black, you can't handle
> You're too strong, get high

Not content to speak in the abstract, these MCs situate themselves within specific "Crooklyn" neighborhoods: Bushwick, Flatbush, Bed Stuy, Fort Greene and East New York. Bushwick, the first of the neighborhoods mentioned, is a heavily Puerto Rican neighborhood[96] in North-Central Brooklyn and one of the borough's most depressed areas. Its inclusion as one of the neighborhoods where "whitey" profits as "niggas" die, is an illustration of how New York Puerto Ricans are branded by "nigganess." It also serves as an example of the way in which Puerto Ricans are recognized and "shouted out" by African Americans within rap in ways that are not readily apparent to listeners unfamiliar with New York City and its youth culture. Indeed, "niggas know who niggas are."

The "Master's Language"

Edward Rodríguez describes MCs in his column for Baruch College's *The Ticker* as "ghetto poets" who "have mastered their masters language better than the masters themselves." His comments have certain parallels to Aparicio's characterization of the literature written entirely or almost entirely in English by Latinos as

> writing the self using the tools of the Master and, in the process, infusing those signifiers with the cultural meanings, values and ideologies of the subaltern sector. (1997, 202)

[96] In 1990, Bushwick's residents were reported to be 70% Latino, and 17% African American. The largest Latino group was Puerto Rican (who made up 62% of the neighborhood's Latino population), followed by Dominicans (16%). (Hanson-Sánchez, 1996)

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But Aparicio, contrary to Rodríguez, focuses on these literary practices through a Latin Americanist/tropicalist perspective that neglects the urban Afro-diasporic context which is crucial in the reappropriation of the "tools of the master" for many Latino writers, particularly those from New York. For hip hop lyricists as well as for other writers, the subversion of the "master's" language in the New York context owes as much to "linguistic tropicalization" (Aparicio 1997) as it does to linguistic Afro-diasporization.

In terms of Afro-diasporic sources and approaches to creative expression, the practice of writing rap rhymes and MCing by Puerto Ricans has much in common with the school of Nuyorican poetry, which includes poets such as Sandra María Esteves, Tato Laviera and Pedro Pietri. In the words of another one of the Nuyorican poets, Louis Reyes Rivera,

> . . . what is referred to as Nuyorican poetry is as much rooted in African-U.S. urban poetry as it is an attempt to redefine or reclaim the Puerto Rican culture. (Hernández 1997, 129)

This rootedness of Nuyorican artistic expression within an urban Afro-diasporic context, however, frequently goes unacknowledged. Anglo/Latino and master/subaltern dichotomies are most frequently privileged in discussions of U.S.-based Puerto Rican creative expression, thus neglecting the tensions and connections between African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Aparicio's arguments regarding "linguistic tropicalization" are a case in point. Santiago (1994), presents another example, through his erroneous description of *bugalú* as a mix of Afro-Antillean and Anglo-Saxon musical traditions, when it is Afro-Antillean and African American musical sources that are being blended in this genre. A similar assumption is made in the criticisms of Puerto Rican and other Latino rappers' heavy use of English in their rhymes as being indicative of "Anglocentrism."

If Latino rappers use English in their rhymes it is because rap is an Afro-diasporic oral/musical form of expression which originated in the United States among English-dominant Afro-diasporic youth (a population which includes Caribbean Latinos). 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-

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diasporic people. Furthermore, not only are Latinos following rap's Afrodiasporic English-based orality, but their use of English also derives from their most immediate communicative experience as young people raised in the U.S..

Another problem with these charges of Anglocentrism is that they assume that *a* language equals *a* culture. Flores, Attinasi and Pedraza (1993) and Urciuoli (1996) challenge the notion that the use of English or Spanish indicates how much "assimilation" there is. Puerto Ricans, as well as other Latinos, frequently assert their cultural identity through their particular way of speaking English.

Language choices by New York Puerto Rican MCs run the spectrum of linguistic codes that include multiple variants of English and Spanish. Zentella (1997, 41) has identified some of these variants (which, she says, tend to overlap) as: Popular Puerto Rican Spanish, Standard Puerto Rican Spanish, English-dominant Spanish, Puerto Rican English, African American Vernacular English, Hispanized English and Standard New York City English. Significantly, within the hip hop zone, the absence of Spanish is not taken to be necessarily related to ethno-cultural identity. Thirstin' Howell III's all-English rhymes in *Lyricist Lounge* (1998) have no bearing on his Puerto Ricanness; Hurricane Gee is not considered any more in touch with her Puerto Ricanness than he because she skillfully switches back and forth between English and Spanish in her solo album, *All Woman* (1997).

Hip hop is a cultural realm where the Afro-diasporicity of second and third generation Caribbean Latinos is affirmed and celebrated, partly through the linguistic practices they share with African Americans. These linguistic practices are largely English-based, and at times include the use of certain Spanish terms and phrases as common territory (Zentella 1997). However, the Caribbean *latinidad* of New York Puerto Ricans involved in hip hop culture is not ultimately defined through the use of Spanish.

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CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

My name is Fat Joe
I got shit locked down
Running with the Latins
And the Blacks from Uptown

Fat Joe, "Another Wild Nigga from the Bronx"

Hip hop's New York Puerto Rican participants have negotiated their spaces and identities within this expressive realm through varied creative approaches, most of which evidence an effort to balance two ethno-racialized identity categories --blackness and *latinidad*-- that are frequently posited as mutually-exclusive. Their strategies of negotiation have shifted during the course of hip hop's three decade history, in response to the times and the predominant emic discourses regarding cultural "entitlement" and "authenticity."

Hip hop's dominant emic discourses of the 1970s were based on the conceptualization of hip hop as an Afro-diasporic ghetto-based cultural zone inclusive of Puerto Ricans. During the 1980s and 1990s, hip hop's scope of "entitlement" was significantly reduced, so that most often it only accommodated the African American experience. In the latter part of the 1990s, hip hop emic discourses evidenced a renewed class-based ethno-racial inclusiveness directed toward Latinos. Though highlighting Latino difference through tropicalizations, these discourses have also emphasized the existence of shared class-based ethno-racialized identities that are not circumscribed by the boundaries of either *latinidad* or African Americanness.

New York Puerto Ricans tended to step lightly through the identity minefield, though with a sense of ghetto-based Afro-diasporic entitlement, during hip hop's earliest times. Later, as their participation and entitlement were strongly put into question in the 1980s and early 1990s, two divergent negotiation approaches developed: some Puerto Ricans began emphasizing their *latinidad* as expressed through "Latin hip hop," thus excising themselves from the Black-matrixed hip hop core; others took the opposite approach, muting displays of ethno-racialized difference from African Americans, and insisted on their claim to creation and participation within hip hop's Afro-diasporic and

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Black-matrixed realm. During the late 1990s, the re-legitimation of Puerto Rican participation in hip hop has afforded them the opportunity to explore --without alienating themselves from the hip hop Black-matrixed "core"-- forms of creative expression that during the previous decade would have been perceived as critical violations of hip hop's Black-matrix and scope of authenticity.

New York Puerto Rican hip hoppers participate and create within an urban Afro-diasporic discursive and performative realm. This realm has been profoundly and constitutively informed by Puerto Ricans (as well as other Caribbean populations), and Puerto Rican creativity, identities and socio-cultural history. However, hip hop has also been a Black-matrixed cultural zone where African American experiences, identities and voices dominate.

Does this mean that Puerto Rican participation in hip hop takes place within a context of "assimilation" into African Americanness? Not quite, as manifested by the participants themselves. Hip hop cultural production, though Black-matrixed, is not overlapping with African American ethno-racial identity. Puerto Rican legitimation as entitled participants has not been contingent on their subsumption under African Americanness. On the contrary, Puerto Ricans have been legitimated through the invocation of an urban, class-based, and Afro-diasporic shared identity that serves as the base from which to name hip hop "Black and Puerto Rican," "Black and Latino," an expression of ghetto-based "people of color" and/or "niggas."

Hip hop's Afro-diasporic praxis destabilizes the dominant understandings of identity and cultural expression that envision African Americanness and Puerto Ricanness as non-intersecting. But this does not negate that these notions have played themselves out within the hip hop zone, thus creating tensions and affecting relations among participants as well as their creative expression.

At the present juncture, at the end of the 1990s, we are witnessing how pan-Latino social solidarity and identification are being constructed, and how those constructions are manifested in cultural expression. We stand at a crucial moment in terms of Puerto Rican hip hoppers, because despite the growing trends and pressures toward pan-ethnic identification, there is still strong resistance to being lumped under the Latino banner. Puerto Rican hip hoppers are part of a Black-matrixed cultural zone, where even though a crack has been opened for Latino entitlement, the ground

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for trans-ethnic understanding and solidarity is the hybrid Black-matrixed, Black-identified, urban Afro-diasporic youth culture of which hip hop is part. Emphasizing your Puerto Ricanness (Latinoness) in certain ways may leave you out of the Black-matrix.

Second and third-generation New York Puerto Ricans have most often either found themselves excluded or have excluded themselves from the generally-accepted bounds of *latinidad*, given the constitutive 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 Hispanocentric definition of *latinidad* as non-black, or under a blackness that only takes African Americans into account.

Hip hop, as a zone of creative expression, is a three decade testimony of a common urban, class-based and ethno-racialized identity shared by African American and Caribbean youth in New York City. Despite the growing appeals to an increasingly abstracted pan-*latinidad*, Puerto Rican hip hoppers still privilege their New York Afro-diasporic lived experience. As Q-Unique says in his song "Rice and Beans,"

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

And, thus, as this same lyricist said in an improvised rhyme at the Stretch and Bobbito radio show: "I bring it to the end like no ink in my pen."

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APPENDIX 1

FIELDNOTES

Fieldnotes #1: Fat Beats

Spring 1996. East Village. 9th Street between 2nd and 1st Avenue.[97]

Fat Beats, though small, is a key New York hip hop record store, particularly for DJs and vynil record collectors. It specializes in underground hip hop. This store is also an important gathering place, particularly during its regularly-held artist presentations, and a centralized source of information regarding hip hop events.

I went there on a day that the crew the Arsonists was scheduled to perform. The Arsonists is made up of seven MCs, most of them from Bushwick, Brooklyn. Jise, Ching, Krash, Swell and Q-Unique are Puerto Rican. Freestyle is Panamanian. And Kinetic is Dominican. Here is what went on.

It was five minutes to six p.m. as the Arsonists' Q-Unique and I reached the front of Fat Beats. There were about five guys out front, Krash (another Arsonist) among them. He was the only one there I knew. I smiled. We said our respective "what ups?" Q. and I went down the steep narrow steps that lead to the store.

The store itself was a small space, about the size of my livingroom, with low ceilings fully covered with posters, stickers and press photos. All along the walls were records, top to bottom: AZ, Jimmy Castor, Biz Markie with his pointy tongue sticking out, KRS, compilations of break beats...

Two low glass counters set perpendicular to each other demarcated the cashier's territory. The glass counters held tapes, both commercial and underground. There were two small boxes full of tapes of the popular underground hip hop radio show on WKCR, the Stretch Armstrong Show Featuring Bobbito the Barber. CDs were up on the far wall (within the cashier's scope, reach and protection.) A pale, skinny, blondish guy was behind the counters.

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[97] Fat Beats has since moved to the West Village, to 6th Avenue, right above 8th Street.

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Jab (a "white" guy probably in his late 20s or early 30s), who is one of the owners, was in a small office in the back of the store, talking on the phone.

There were only about six or seven people in the store when we got there, including the photographer that was to take Q's picture for the story about The Vortex [a panel discussion on hip hop] that is due to come out in *Rap Pages*.

Krash had come in by this point so we talked for a while. I asked him if the Arsonists' single was coming out both in vinyl and on tape. He said Bobbito's small independent label, Fondle'em Records, was in charge of doing the records and Q. was taking care of the tapes. He was right in the process of erasing old tapes and copying the Arsonists' stuff on them with the equipment he has set up in D-Stroy's (another Arsonist) house. Krash explained it was all a very low-capital operation. As soon as they sold some of those tapes, then they would buy and record some more.

More people were starting to arrive. Ching (Arsonist) was among them. He hugged Krash and looked at me over the top of his silver cucaracha shades. "Didn't I meet you at The Vortex?", he said. "Yes, you did."

Most people coming in looked in the 18 to 25 year old range. Most looked Black or Latino, but some were Asian (there was that chunky Asian kid with the high-pitched voice who is a DJ) and a few more were white. Hardly any girls. Maybe like five. A very beautiful pair walked around picking records. One had smooth milky complexion, short blond hair and a shiny baby-blue stretch top. The other had curly brown hair all over the place, cinnamon skin, a very cute smile and a gap between her front teeth. They looked around twenty.

Krash, Q. and Ching were starting to get antsy. They kept muttering "where the fuck?" were the other Arsonists. Well, Ching knew Kinetic (or was it Freestyle?) had gone to Papaya's to "eat them outta hot dogs." Jise wasn't coming because he was at work.

Jab came over to ask what beats they wanted and when they wanted to start. It was already about 6:30. They wanted to wait a bit more. In the mean time, the skinny kid behind the glass counter started playing the Arsonists' popular underground single "The Session."

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Some guy came in with the previous night's Arsonists' performance at the Stretch and Bobbito show. They put it on. It sounded great! I need to get a copy of it. There was a hilarious part where they imitate [rap group] Onyx's "Slam! Ta-ta-ra. Ta-ta-ra. Let the boys be boys!" but substituting the original words for "Slam! Tostones. Tostones. Wack MCs be toys!"

About ten more minutes went by. The store was packed with about thirty people by then. Fuck it, they said. They decided to start. Q. was excellent. I need to ask him what it was that he said about the government not looking after Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Krash was feisty, punchy, energetic and gritty. I can't appreciate too good his metaphors about "stitching bitch-ass nigga's cunts"... but I very much got into his rhythmic flow. Ching is smooth and monotone in the best of ways, because suddenly his monotone speeds up and with a quick shift, spins back and bites you. He speeds up until you think he's lost, but no, he waits for the perfect moment to lodge his seemingly out of control delivery back into the beat.

In came Kinetic and ¿Hazzik? with matching dread buds. They were greeted with much joy and aplomb and the brew got thicker. Kinetic got on the mic, a pleasure to hear, his voice strong and smooth. As the flow got deeper and the energy built, the Arsonists bopped their bodies in approval, in excitement. The energy kept mounting and then they hit that groove, bodies swaying in syncopated unison. Freestyle came into the store, showing off chest hair and a gold chain thanks to his v-neck shirt. Corny playa image aside, he also ripped it.

It started getting more and more hectic as Q. called the guys from the Jugganots to the mic. Labelmates unite! Another kid was there, I forgot his name. [El P.] He's with Company Flow. A plump, cherry-blond, with a cute little twisted goatee. He dropped something about "Fuck Time Warner and all its affiliates" and then something about fancy clothes should go to the Pope, making me think about the complicated relationship of the "underground" hip hop scene to big $. Later on Q. joked that Fat Beats was changing its name to Tower Records. Pale & skinny behind the turntables corrected him, "no, to Coconuts." Ah, low blow. That is where Q. grudgingly spends a good part of his day working, but, as we all know, money must be made.

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Krash kept asking: "Where the true school heads at?" Kinetic said something about the Arsonists "representin' Latinos."

Fieldnotes #2: Demerara's

Summer 1995. A nightclub on 215 W 28th Street, between 7th & 8th Avenue.

I found out about that night's event through Synergy[98]. First, about Synergy... He's a twenty-year old Puerto Rican who lives in the Lower East Side. I met him in May of this year at the Marihuana Rally in Washington Square Park.

Synergy told me that he had been asked to m.c. the event (no rapping involved, just plain master of ceremonies), which was supposed to be a "showcase," meaning a presentation of "upcoming" artists. Synergy told me that I could get in for free if I hooked it up with his friend Caleb. I called Caleb at 8:30 p.m. the night of the show, like Synergy told me to do. Caleb was very pleasant on the phone. An interesting thing about my short telephone conversation with him was that he said something like: "Oh, by the way, I'm Puerto Rican [or did he say Latino?]. I mean, just so you don't be expecting a *moreno*." Now that was a very interesting (and extremely rich and complex) remark. I took it to mean that he looked like the "typical" (stereotypical) young Puerto Rican (light-skinned but cannot be mistaken for a non-Latino white... this stereotype also has implications in terms of style/appearance, which in turn also has class implications.). I also took it to mean that the crowd would basically be composed of "*morenos*" so a lighter Puerto Rican would be easily distinguishable.

I think I knew what Caleb meant. And so I did. In fact, when I saw him outside the club I immediately knew it was him. His statement was intelligible, but extremely culturally-coded. Puerto Ricans can look just like U.S. Blacks. Take Synergy as an example. He could have not made Caleb's statement, because he is a "blacker" Puerto Rican (dark caramel skin, nappy hair grown into an afro) that cannot be readily distinguished from a U.S. Black (shit! U.S. Black is also a complex category that covers a wide variety of shades).

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[98] Throughout most of this dissertation I use participants' birth or artistic names. In this case I do not.

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Guys who look like Caleb are taken as the Puerto Rican norm and guys who look like Synergy are taken to be the exception (and often, are taken to be non-existent).

Anyway, back to Demerara's and Caleb. I arrived right at ten and I peeked inside to check if I could see someone who might be him. Nothing. So I sat outside on a windowsill to wait. The entrance fee was $10, so I was definitely going to wait until Caleb arrived and got me in for free. Besides, although the show was supposed to start at 9 p.m., there was hardly anyone inside.

There was not much movement outside the club while I was out there. Only about four people went into the club during the 45 minutes that I waited for Caleb. Even though I know hip-hop related events always start late, I'm invariably amazed at how ridiculously late stuff starts. (The event was scheduled for 9 p.m., people didn't really start showing up in numbers until about 11 p.m., the show finally started around midnight).

Of course I detected Caleb right away. Aside from the fact that he was carrying a camera, he was, indeed, the "quintessential" Latino. Olive skin, dark eyes, dark curly hair and a mustache. He was wearing jeans (regular fit, not big) and a button-down flannel shirt tucked in. He introduced me to his wife Mireya. She was very beautiful and was also quite evidently Latina (it was the combination of physical characteristics, style of dress and demeanor). She was light-skinned, had big dark eyes and long curly brown hair. She had fleshy lips painted a dark burgundy color. She was wearing a tight brown top and tight blue jeans that showed off her shapely full figure.

Caleb seemed glad to meet me. Mireya was very polite but looked a little bit wary.

We had our bags inspected and went through a metal detector into the club.

The room was spacious. There was a bar on the right hand side as one came in the door. There was a square of open space (about 15 x 15 ft.) and further on about fifteen tables that sat around 5 people each. Beyond the tables, on the far end, was the stage. The tables were already full.

We stood to one side, in the square of open space. Mireya asked me if I had been to this place before. I answered no. She then asked: "Do you like to come to these places?" The question caught me off guard. I assumed Caleb told her that I was a student and a writer of hip-hop. And even if she didn't know that, why would I go to a hip-hop club if I didn't like it?

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M: Do you actually like these places?

R: Yeah. I love hip-hop. I still don't know much about the scene in New York, so it's all new and exciting to me.

M: Well I hate these places.

R: I don't understand, so why did you come?

M: Because Caleb is always in places like these. You know, with the t.v. show and all. We're always fighting about it. I hate the music and the environment. That's why I never come with him. But he's always doing this, so I tell him he's not spending time with me. He says that this is what he does and that I should come with him. This is the first time I go out with him to a place like this.

R: How come you hate it so much?

M: It's all so violent. I hate going places where I don't feel safe, where at any point you have to duck bullets.

R: But that doesn't happen everywhere. This is not a club where that is likely to happen.

M: But even still. The music is all about the gats and the blunts. That's all they talk about. All the cursing. I've told him I don't want that music in the house. Specially not around our baby. He says that he doesn't like Latin music or house (which is what I like) but he still doesn't complain when I put it on. He says he goes with me to the clubs I like to go to. So I should put up with his music. But I tell him its not the same thing. My music is not violent.

R: But even if you don't like it, Mireya, this is something that he loves. This is the music and the culture that he identifies with. And its got a reason to be. There is a lot of real violence out there, it's no surprise that the music deals with that part of reality. I understand what you're saying, there is a certain glorifying of violence in hip-hop that sometimes I get tired of. But I understand why it happens. Its what we're living.

M: I don't want it around me and I don't want it around Ashley. The other day I caught her saying "shit". I don't talk like that. Neither does my mother. So where did she learn to say that word? I threw some of those tapes out and he was really upset. But he knows I don't want it in the house. He should be spending more time with me and the baby.

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R: But Caleb invites you to come with him. He tries to make you a part of this side of him.

D: But I don't want to. Besides, who's going to take care of Ashley? I can't be coming to these places all the time. It's a good thing my mother helps us out and she's taking care of Ashley tonight.

As we were talking more and more people started coming in. All of them were guys. There were women at the tables, but overall, there was a ratio of about 1 woman to 4 men in the club. A lot of the guys coming in were checking us out insistently. Mireya comments that that is something else that she doesn't like. She feels men in hip-hop clubs are a lot less respectful towards women than men in clubs where they play Latino music. She mentions that the fact that its all young people at hip-hop places gives opportunity for more chaotic behavior.

At that hour, most people at the club seemed to be non-Latino African-Americans. I couldn't spot any more "quintessential" Latinos or Latinas aside from Caleb and Mireya. Of course, there had to be some other Afro-Latinos among the crowd aside from the two I knew: Synergy and Panamasta. Two "white" girls and an Asian girl came in; their look was sexy and scruffy. They definitely stood out in the crowd.

At about 11:30 a group of around 20 bald-headed (or nearly so) light-skinned Latino guys with black shirts that said "Main-One" came in. They looked like they were in their early twenties. I started talking to one of them. His name was Rase and he was the road manager to Main-One a.k.a. The Ghetto Child who is a Puerto Rican rapper. Rase gave me a discount pass to go to Kasbar, a club in midtown (east side), where Main-One was going to perform on Friday. Rase said they play hip-hop, reggae, salsa and merengue at Kasbar.

The show began around midnight. There were seven acts in the show. The only well known artist among them was the last one, Lin Que, formerly Isis of the X-Clan. The rappers weren't excellent, they weren't horrible either. Well, actually, the only really horrible ones were from the group Stressed Out from Long Island. I suspected it was a Latino group; Rase confirmed it. He said they were mostly Mexican and Central American. Their flow was wack and they didn't have a strong stage presence either.

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Main-One came on and he was o.k. I liked better the way Shampoo (his partner) rapped. Mireya and I were surrounded by Main-One's friends who were jumping and screaming and rapping along with the guys onstage. It was impossible not to be energized and enjoy the songs even more with this crowd of twenty going wild all around us. I couldn't understand what the lyrics were about, though.

I guess whoever organized the show saved the best acts for last. Main-One was next-to-last. The last one to go on was Lin Que. She was excellent.

Synergy did an excellent job at emceeing. He'd introduce the rappers and talk shit in between the acts. I guess he also had to promote Paco (was it Paco?) Jeans cause every once in a while he'd mention that they were one of the sponsors of the event. He opened a bag containing the jeans and showed them to the audience. Someone from the audience who was wearing Paco jeans and jacket came onstage. Those clothes are ugly!

No "white" rappers. Just African-Americans and the two Latino crews: Stressed Out and Main-One and his crew.

The show finally ended around 2:30 a.m. Synergy asked if I was going to stay to see the exotic dancers downstairs. I wanted to, but I had to get up early the following day, so I shared a cab back to the LowerEastSide with Caleb and Mireya.

Fieldnotes #3: The Spot

September 20, 1996. At the Taller Latinoamericano, Broadway and 103. [CHECK] Among the organizers were BOM (Puerto Rican graffiti artist in his mid-thirties), Roz (white [Irish?] graffit artist in his mid-thirties), Lethal (Puerto Rican?). [CHECK]

I had forgetten that events like The Spot attract people with little interest in confrontation and profiling. I approached the young woman at the door with my defenses way high but she put me at ease with a few pleasant words and a smile. Beautiful.

There were about seventy mostly young people milling about. Mostly African Americans and Latinos.

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An underground video was playing in the main room. No "arroz con gandules" was being served, like the last time I had come to El Taller for an Elevated event. Elevated is, like The Spot, a multi-media hip hop gathering which travels within the City among different venues. Baba (one of Elevated's main organizers) went back to Australia --that's where he's from.

B-boys were dancing in the next room. Graffiti pieces on cardboard, pictures of graffiti pieces on walls and graffitified t-shirts were being displayed in a corner of that room.

There was no stage. People were sitting on chairs and on the floor, others remained standing. The performers had an open space on one side of the room and the spectators gathered around them.

Akim The Funky Budha, the thin black guy wih the satiny (Tibetan-looking?) pointy shoes and the hat with "wings" who I had seen previously at Elevated events, spoke to the audience of the importance of meditating and the connection between meditating and rhyming. He also spoke of the beauty of hip hop's "underground" and criticized the music industry that defines our tastes. A young guy played that Australian aboriginal wind instrument whose name I forgot that looks like a log and makes a real bassy sound. As the other guy played that instrument, Akim asked us to repeat "tate" after he said "medi." He improvised really clever rhymes and every once in a while he would say "medi" for us to repeat "tate." At one point he put the microphone down to do difficult handstands. As he held his position, he moved his body incredibly slowly, shifting the position of his legs and torso. Akim's performance, from his dress style to his rhymes to his body movements, was about taking hip hop expressivity and developing it in very unique ways.

The Spot seems to be a gathering that consciously seeks to unify (re-unify) the "4 elements of hip hop" plus other expressions (like video). It also wants to provide space for hip hop expressivity that is not like the one ruling the music industry.

One of the videos that was presented was excelent called "Larry, the Cop-Killing Dinosaur." It was a spoof of thug posturing in rap by using a big costumed character that looked like the little kid's t.v. show character Barney, only skinnier. With a U.S. flag as a bandana on his head, Larry is surrounded by young women in shorts and mini-skirts. He has gold chains and guns. A little girl points a gun at the camera, while a little boy with a Jason (from Friday the 13th) mask brandishes a sword.

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One of the best presentations was by a group of women who (some? all?) belong to the Zulu Nation. One of the women was tall, heavy, with light honey skin and short blondish hair. Another was very dark skinned, permed hair, grave voice (could be confused for a man's). She rhymed extra-excellent! Another, with glasses, also rapped good, but was a little shy. The second one (was it Pri?) brought the house down with cheers when she launched into a verse about female emcees that only rap about "loot," "I'm so cute," and about "designer suits." Amén!

The b-boys were also really good. BOM was on the mic, old-school style, making comments, doing simple rhymes and letting the audience know the names of the dancers. Spike (a Puerto Rican photographer and b-boy) was much better than I expected since he had told me he was a beginner. Excellent beginner. Most of the b-boys loked around Spike's age (early twenties, late teens). Then there were about 4 old-schoolers, one of whose t-shirts read Ill Style Breakers. Roz also did a couple of moves. It was evident that he used to dance once upon a time, but that now he's out of shape. He did a couple of moves to make fun of himself, like a simple somersault. Everybody was rolling with laughter. He also laid himself face-down on the floor, sending a wave of movement through his body, like a snake. There was an impressed vocal reaction from the crowd.

Pete's assesment: The b-boys had really good footwork but mediocre windmills. He should know better than me. He used to be a hardcore "breakdancer" once upon a time. He was amazed that so many young kids were doing the dances that he used to do when he was their age. (He's in his late 20s now). He hadn't realized the tradition was alive in this way.

Fieldnotes #4: The Apollo

December 28, 1996. Rap concert at The Apollo Theater on 125th Street. Performers: Lil' Kim, Mobb Deep, Redman and Jay Z.

Pete and I walk down 125th Street past Black "hoodies" and Black "hoodies" (or at least wannabees). We wonder where the Boricuas are at. We get to The Apollo's block and there's a cop (white, ¡surprise!) on the corner, a bunch more in sight further down. Pete says with a chuckle: "See, we'll be aight. There's even white people up here --only thing is they all got guns."

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We passed a Mitsubishi Bravada full of Puerto Ricans (safe assumption, given the flag hanging from the rearview mirror) blasting *salsa romántica*, 40s in hand, looking hardrock retarded, surveying the crowd.

That was all around 11 p.m.. One of the bouncers told us it would start in one and a half hours. So we went to Zula's to eat. The line was horrible. It went around the corner.

We came back not long after midnight. The line was the same length (though they had already started letting people in.) We were right behind an Asian-looking guy with long dreads who spoke Spanish and was with two other guys Latino-Native American-looking.

I've never seen so many fur coats. Girls would pass by all Foxxy Brown [female rapper] style with fur coats. The horror.

Oh! And what is up with all the Lexus, expensive Hondas, BMWs, Land Rovers, Blazers, Pathfinders...??Shiny, expensive rims. Pete comments, they can't all be selling drugs. So we speculate that if you live in the projects and hold down a job, maybe you can afford to sink all your money into a car.

We're waiting, we're waiting... Suddenly we hear a young woman shout about ten people ahead of us: "Puerto Rican shit what? What?" Two girls were shouting in the front. The Puerto Rican said something about the other one wanting her man. I strain my neck and see a cute, short girl, short curly hair dyed blond, with a bottle in her hand, looking all pissed towards the other girl who I couldn't see. Nothing finally happened, but she held that bottle for a good half and hour.

About an hour and a half later, we finally reach the entrance. Males and females get separated. The woman that checked me was nice, no attitude. She patted my headwrap, told me to stomp my feet and took a look inside my mouth checking for razors.

The theater was packed. Grand majority Black, presumably Latino sprinklings (5%?), Asian sprinklings (5%?), White sprinklings (5%?).

The show finally started at 2 a.m. plus.

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The master of ceremonies was some guy from the radio station Hot 97 who got the crowd to chant some Hot 97 is amazing stuff. Ugh. He asked what fellows would do if they had three minutes with rapper Lil' Kim. The guys in the audience went wild shouting X-rated stuff.

The red courtain goes up. There's a low willowy, vaporous curtain. Lil' Kim is crouching in the middle, legs open, leopard clad pussy facing the audience.

Lil' Kim, Little Caesar and about 10-15 more people crowd the stage. For the first half of her time, the people on stage except Kim, Caesar and another guy, stayed swaying on the sidelines. All were men except three fur-clad girls: one full-length white, one butt-length orange and one butt-length blue.

Lil' Kim with big white-rimmed sunglasses. Bra, panties and baby-doll robe (all leopard-skin) with synthetic fuzz trimming.

During her song "Queen Bitch," 2 female dancers came out. One with a black unitard, half of which was transparent. The other one was truly sexy and was an incredible dancer. She was wearing a black bra, black chaps and black g-string. Pete and I agree she was the only good part about Lil' Kim's show. But Pete noted: you can use pussy to sell the show as a segment, but pussy can't hold up the whole show. They tried, though. And the audience was visibly bored and quiet by the end.

Kim was alright-mediocre. She sounds better in recordings. The whole dramatic tension of her show was centered around her showing her g-stringed ass. Somebody onstage said at one point that what the audience wanted was to see her ass. About twice, her sidekick MC's pulled up her robe. We caught a quick flash of ass. She uncovered it, and held her robe up a bit, for us to see. Cute ass, but big deal.

All the girls on stage were black and had straight or straightened medium-length hair.

Simulated fucking by the dancers with a beautiful brown-skinned male dancer with an unbottoned red shirt revealing his ultra-muscular chest and big jeans riding low on his hips. He danced a few times grinding into Kim's butt.

People were hyped at the beginning, but then lost interest. Pete's theory in effect. Conclusion? Girl in the bra and chaps should get a raise.

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Master of ceremonies comes on, says Mobb Deep will come in next. We waited like 10 minutes.

The duo Mobb Deep came onstage with about 30 people. No women. DJ Scratch. He was the best part of the show up until now. He displayed amazing DJ techniques. People got into it.

Their stage prop was this gold, purple, blue, red, shiny fabric set up like a big altar in back of DJ Scratch. Havoc (one-half of the Mobb Deep duo) was in crutches. People reacted best to "Shook Ones" (is that the name of the one that goes "there ain't no thing as halfway crooks..."?) and "The Infamous." Some song mentioned Blacks and Puerto Ricans ¿?????

Pete comments: funny, "niggas" can only be hard; "ladies" can only be sexual. Humm.

Hot 97 master of ceremonies came on again asking the audience if they listened to Hot 97. When he introduced Redman, he told the crowd, as the great punchline: "He just doesn't give a fuck!"

A big planet hanging was his prop. I guess part of the intergalactic theme of Funk Doctor Spok.

The crowd got the most hype with Redman. Too Short, Keith Murray, Eric Sermon went up on the mic. Treach (from Naughty by Nature) came out first acting like an arthritic or an epileptic or something. What was the hand gesture he kept doing? He was on something, I guess.

There were one or two girls among the 50 plus crowd up on stage. They were dressed in jeans and big shirts.

Then came Jay Z. His DJ came on first. Judging by his looks, Pete ventures that he's Latino. I say he might be wrong. Excellent DJ. Did a good 10 minute routine. After Redman, the crowd reacted best to this DJ and DJ Scratch.

Jay Z came out with ugly black long sleeved shirt with fat gray horizontal stripe in shirt. Jeans. Funny-looking eyeglasses. It was like cockroach-glasses with gold frame. Pete says he looked like Irckle.

Sung "Ain't No Nigga" without Foxxy and another of his popular songs without the woman who sings the chorus. The show ended abruptly with somebody anouncing that the Apollo people were pushing them out.

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5:20 a.m. We exited through the back, saw a white stretch limo, and Redman leaving in a dark Lexus.

Crossing the avenue toward the Adam Clayton Powell building, we saw who we assumed to be somebody's parents asleep in a medium-sized nice car. Around the corner on 125th Street were about 3 bottles of Moet left behind on a deserted bench.

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