A Companion to Latina/o Studies

Edited by
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## Contents

*Notes on Contributors*

*Editors' Foreword*  
*Acknowledgments*  

### Part I  Latinidades

1. Marks of the Chicana Corpus: An Intervention in the Universality Debate  
   *Helena Maria Viramontes*  
   3

2. The New Latin Nation: Immigration and the Hispanic Population of the United States  
   *Alejandro Portes*  
   15

3. “Dime con quién hablas, y te diré quién eres”: Linguistic (In)security and Latina/o Unity  
   *Ana Celia Zentella*  
   25

4. (Re)constructing Latinidad: The Challenge of Latina/o Studies  
   *Frances R. Aparicio*  
   39

5. The Name Game: Locating Latinas/os, Latins, and Latin Americans in the US Popular Music Landscape  
   *Deborah Pacini Hernández*  
   49

6. Cuando Dios y Usted Quiere: Latina/o Studies Between Religious Powers and Social Thought  
   *David Carrasco*  
   60

7. Latina/o Cultural Expressions: A View of US Society Through the Eyes of the Subaltern  
   *Edna Acosta-Belén*  
   77
## Contents

### Part II  Actos: Critical Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>José Limón, the Devil and the Dance</td>
<td>José E. Limón</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Everyday Civil War: Migrant Labor, Capital, and Latina/o Studies</td>
<td>Nicholas De Genova</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Powers of Women’s Words: Oral Tradition and Performance Art</td>
<td>Yolanda Broyles-González</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Language and Other Lethal Weapons: Cultural Politics and the Rites</td>
<td>Antonia I. Castañeda</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of Children as Translators of Culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Looking for Papi: Longing and Desire Among Chicano Gay Men</td>
<td>Tomás Almaguer</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>On Becoming</td>
<td>Nelly Rosario</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part III  Vidas: Herstories/Histories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Of Heretics and Interlopers</td>
<td>Arturo Madrid</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Coloring Class: Racial Constructions in Twentieth-Century Chicana/o</td>
<td>Vicki L. Ruiz</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historiography</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>“El Louie” by José Montoya: An Appreciation</td>
<td>Raúl Villa</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Preservation Matters: Research, Community, and the Archive</td>
<td>Chon A. Noriega</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Star in My Compass</td>
<td>Virginia Sánchez Korrol</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>“Y Que Pasara Con Jovenes Como Miguel Fernández?” Education,</td>
<td>Pedro A. Noguera</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immigration, and the Future of Latinas/os in the United States</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part IV  En la lucha: Sites of Struggle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Latinas/os and the Elusive Quest for Equal Education</td>
<td>Sonia Nieto</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

21 The Moral Monster: Hispanics Recasting Honor and Respectability Behind Bars
    Patricia Fernández-Kelly
    229

22 A Rebellious Philosophy Born in East LA
    Gerald P. López
    240

23 Latinas/os at the Threshold of the Information Age: Telecommunications Challenges and Opportunities
    Jorge Reina Schement
    251

24 Conceptualizing the Latina Experience in Care Work
    Mary Romero
    264

    Carlos Ulises Decena
    276

26 Post-Movimiento: The Contemporary (Re)Generation of Chicana(o) Art
    Tomás Ybarra-Frausto
    289

27 “God Bless the Law, He Is White”: Legal, Local, and International Politics of Latina/o and Black Desegregation Cases in Post-World War II California and Texas
    Neil Foley
    297

Part V Mestizaje: Revisiting Race

28 Latinas/os and the Mestizo Racial Heritage of Mexican Americans
    Martha Menchaca
    313

29 Looking at that Middle Ground: Racial Mixing as Panacea?
    Miriam Jiménez Román
    325

30 Color Matters: Latina/o Racial Identities and Life Chances
    Ginetta E. B. Candelario
    337

31 Between Blackness and Latinidad in the Hip Hop Zone
    Raquel Z. Rivera
    351

32 Afro-Latinas/os and the Racial Wall
    Sívio Torres-Saillant
    363

33 The (W)rite to Remember: Indígena as Scribe 2004–5 (an excerpt)
    Cherrie Moraga
    376
## Contents

### Part VI  Identidades: Producing Subjectivities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>“How I Learned To Love Salseros When My Hair Was A Mess”</td>
<td>Edwin Torres</td>
<td>393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Edwin Torres: A Comment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Reflections on Thirty Years of Critical Practice in Chicana/o</td>
<td>Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Social Aesthetics and the Transnational Imaginary</td>
<td>Ramón Saldívar</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>The Taíno Identity Movement Among Caribbean Latinas/os</td>
<td>Gabriel Haslip-Viera</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in the United States</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Looking Good</td>
<td>Frances Negrón-Muntaner</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>“Chico, what does it feel like to be a problem?” The Transmission</td>
<td>José Esteban Muñoz</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of Brownness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>“Fantasy Heritage”: Tracking Latina Bloodlines</td>
<td>Rosa Linda Fregoso</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part VII  En El Mundo: Transnational Connections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Latinas/os and Latin America: Topics, Destinies, Disciplines</td>
<td>Román de la Campa</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Latinas/os and the (Re)racializing of US Society and Politics</td>
<td>Suzanne Oboler</td>
<td>469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Refugees or Economic Immigrants? Immigration from Latin America</td>
<td>Maria Cristina García</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and the Politics of US Refugee Policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Inter-American Ethnography: Tracking Salvadoran Transnationality</td>
<td>Elana Zilberg</td>
<td>492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>at the Borders of Latina/o and Latin American Studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>From the Borderlands to the Transnational? Critiquing Empire</td>
<td>Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo</td>
<td>502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in the Twenty-First Century</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Between Blackness and Latinidad in the Hip Hop Zone

Raquel Z. Rivera

Latina/os and African Americans in the United States most commonly define themselves and are defined by others as two separate groups. Their cultures, histories, and identities are often imagined not to intersect, or at best, to overlap only slightly. The ties that bind Latina/o subgroups (Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Argentinians, Dominicans...) to each other are usually thought to be stronger and somehow more “natural” than those that might bind Latina/os to African Americans.

These two groups are typically viewed as distinct “ethnic” groups, each one having certain cultural characteristics that distinguishes it from the other. They are also misleadingly thought of as distinct “racial” groups where the members of each collective supposedly share genetic ancestry and physical characteristics in common and can be distinguished from the members of the other group.1

Particularly in the realm of popular culture, it is not uncommon to hear Latina/os be described (or describe themselves) as a race, though technically, Latina/os are an ethnic (or pan-ethnic)2 group and can be of any race. To employ the popularly used terms that fuse together race and ethnicity, while African Americans are described as “Black” (emphasis on ethnicity) or “black” (emphasis on race), Latina/os are described as “multiracial,” “brown,” and even “butta pecan.” These racializing terms serve their part in concealing certain realities, among these, that great numbers of Latina/os are black according to this country’s racial standards (“blacker” than many African Americans, for that matter),1 and that most African Americans are multiracial,3 often just as brown or lighter-skinned than many Latina/os.

It is important to keep in mind that blackness is anything but a static concept based on biological fact. The same goes for whiteness, multiracialness, and any other racially based concepts. Race is an ever-evolving social construct which has different meanings depending on the context. In the United States, the way race is thought of in the early twenty-first century is very different from racial
thinking in the early twentieth century. Present-day racial categories and dynamics in Latin America are quite different from those in the US.

While the ethnic term “African American” is substituted in everyday speech for the racialized term “Black,” the ethnic term “Latina/o” is often used interchangeably with other ethnic monikers like “Hispanic” and even “Spanish.” Whereas Black is an overtly racial term, Latina/o, Hispanic, and Spanish are not explicitly but implicitly racial. Latina/o, Hispanic, and Spanish overtly point to a cultural group or a geographic region, not to a racial type or skin color; however, it is crucial to recognize that certain racialized physical characteristics and categories (brown, multiracial, mixed, butta pecan, “good hair”) are associated with these terms. (The color/racial descriptions of Latina/os may vary, but “black” is nearly always not one of them.) These varied ethnic terms to refer to people of Latin American ancestry also provide their own share of confusion. Latina/o (derived from the word “Latin”), Hispanic (derived from “Hispania,” another name for Spain), and Spanish all privilege the European dimension of Latin American heritage while slighting its strong Native American and African dimensions – not to mention other ethnic influences such as Chinese, Japanese, Lebanese, and numerous others.

Although as groups both African Americans and Latina/os are multiracial, African Americans are thought of primarily in terms of their African ancestry and Latina/os primarily in terms of their European ancestry or their so-called mixed heritage (as if African Americans do not also have a mixed heritage). This veils the racial and cultural differences among Latina/os as well as the similarities between African Americans and certain Latina/o groups.

Latina/os are most often thought of as not only non-Black (in the ethnic sense), but also as non-black in the racial sense. In the contemporary latinidad / blackness divide, Latina/os of African descent are expected to choose latinidad over blackness. That is not to say, however, that there are or have been no Latina/os who oppose the dichotomy. One of the most famous early twentieth-century examples is Puerto Rican Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, whose work as a researcher and collector focused on the history of Africans and their descendants. In the field of literature, contemporary writers like Piri Thomas, Willie Perdomo, and Loida Maritza Pérez (the first is Puerto Rican/Cuban, the second is Puerto Rican, the third is Dominican) have also put into question the presumption that being Latina/o makes a person non-black. The New York Times published in 2003 an article entitled “For New York’s Black Latina/os, A Growing Racial Awareness”; it explored the intersection of race and ethnicity among people who, ethnically, identify as Latina/o and, racially, as black.

Puerto Rican hip hop and reggaetón artist Tego Calderón puts it succinctly: “I say I’m black first and then Boricua ’cause it don’t matter where I go, what you see is a black face.” When people hear a statement like his, they may assume one of Tego’s parents must be Puerto Rican and the other African American (as is the case with hip hop artist Noreaga, who describes himself as a “Nigga Rican”). However, unlike Noreaga, Tego is not claiming a double ethnic
identity. For Tego, his ethnic and national identity is Puerto Rican; it is his racial identity that is black.

Do Puerto Ricans have more in common with Mexicans and Argentineans than they do with Jamaicans? Ask Tego and he might answer that he has more in common with a black Jamaican than he does with a white Argentinean, a white Mexican, or even a white Puerto Rican from the elite.

Do Dominicans have more in common with Salvadorians than with Haitians? Not necessarily. It depends on what social sectors (class, race, geographic region, etc.) we focus on and also what cultural aspects are given emphasis in identifying commonalities. For example, if official language is taken to be the defining factor (which it often tends to be), then the existing similarities between Spanish-speaking, Anglophone, and Francophone people will remain unexplored. Although Puerto Ricans, Argentineans, Dominicans, and Salvadorians all share a history of Spanish colonialism, they differ widely in terms of the specific impact that Africans and their descendants have had on their respective national histories. Furthermore, centuries of intense migration within the Caribbean islands, the United States, and the Caribbean coastal regions of Central and South America account for striking cultural similarities among groups like African Americans and Cubans, Jamaicans and Panamanrians, Puerto Ricans and Haitians – ethnic groups that are usually placed in opposing sides of the latinidad/blackness divide. The often-invoked separation based on language between Latina/os and African Americans also gets complicated by the fact that the first language of great numbers of US-raised Latina/os is actually English and not Spanish.

New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone

I wrote the book New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone with various purposes, among these: highlighting and celebrating Puerto Rican contributions to the development of hip hop art forms; explaining how the experience of Puerto Rican hip hoppers is an important part of the history of Puerto Rican culture; and offering New York Puerto Ricans who participate in hip hop as an example of the similarities and shared histories between “Latina/o” groups and “Black” groups.

“Why are you guys trying to take hip hop away from us?” I was angrily asked by a non-Latino Caribbean (“West Indian”) student at John Jay College during a presentation of my work. I was momentarily stunned by the hostility of her tone and body language, and by the approving nods and comments her statement generated among some of the other students. I had just explained that celebrating Puerto Rican participation in hip hop is not an attempt at undue recognition. I had also explained that carving out a much-deserved space for Puerto Ricans within hip hop history does not take anything away from African Americans or West Indians; on the contrary, it uncovers and celebrates our shared histories. The self-identified Latina/os in the room were open to and curious about my
arguments. But my message was generating anger and resentment among many of the self-identified African American and West Indians students. The gulf that was imagined to separate "us" Puerto Ricans/Latina/os and "them" African Americans/West Indians was thought to be not only immense, but somehow "natural." Within that context, my arguments seemed counterintuitive and even outrageous. (Would my ideas have been perceived any differently had I been a dark-skinned Puerto Rican? Perhaps, though I will never know for certain, since I can only speak from my light-skinned body.)

Hip hop is most often historically defined in terms of music, visual arts (graffiti), and dance (breaking, popping, locking, rocking). Language, mannerisms, fashion, and other expressions of culture are considered by some to also be defining aspects of hip hop. Hip hop, like earlier cultural expressions, has in many senses served as a bridge between Puerto Ricans, other Latina/os, West Indians, and African Americans. Conflicts have always existed between these groups, but they also share a century-long history of joint political and cultural action. During the 1970s in New York, there may have been ethnic tension among them. Still, together they developed hip hop. Davey D Cook, an African American who grew up during this time in the South Bronx, explains from his popular website Davey D's Hip Hop Corner: "Hip Hop was multicultural in the sense that it was Blacks and Puerto Ricans who put this whole thing down. We lived next to each other and for the most part shared the same urban problems. We also shared the same legacy of exploitation, oppression and colonization."

Nevertheless, particularly in terms of hip hop's musical component, Puerto Ricans' cultural "entitlement" has been a realm of contention, ever since the earliest days of DJing and rhyming in the early 1970s.

During rap music's earliest years as commercial music (1979 to early 1980s), notable Puerto Rican DJs and MCs included DJ Charlie Chase (Cold Crush Brothers), Whipper Whip and Rubie Dee (Fantastic Five), and O.C. and Devastating Tito (Fearless Four). Many of these artists, plus famous Puerto Rican and Latina/o graffiti artists and dancers, were featured in the 1982 movie Wild Style. This film and its ethnically diverse cast provided an accurate portrayal of the vibrancy of the early hip hop scene, before the musical aspect of hip hop gained supreme ascendance over the other hip hop art forms — and before hip hop was branded "black" to the exclusion of Latina/os.

There is a scene in Wild Style when the Cold Crush Brothers face off the Fantastic Five in a basketball court. I use it during lectures as an example of how the myth of Latina/os being non-black or lighter-skinned than African Americans gets perpetuated. When I show it, I ask those present to point out the Puerto Ricans. DJ Charlie Chase is always easily singled out from the group of brown-skinned men because of his cream-colored skin and barely wavy hair. But then viewers are at a loss. "Oh, the one with the straight nose is probably Puerto Rican, right?" someone may say, pointing out Rubie Dee. And then there is usually silence. There are more Puerto Ricans in that scene? Which one? How to pick out the other Puerto Rican from the group of black men? So much for the
fabled golden-skinned Butta Pecan Rican! However, it is easy to picture how the myth gets perpetuated. We can imagine audiences throughout the world watching the film and assuming that, aside from Charlie Chase, the other men are black. And they are black, according to racial categories as they are most commonly defined in the United States. But what cannot be deciphered by the naked eye is that two of those (racially speaking) black men are not (ethnically speaking) African American, but Puerto Rican.

In the mid-1980s, as graffiti and the "breakdancing" craze faded into the media background, hip hop music became commercial popular music and thought of as almost exclusively African American. Back in the 1980s most people in the US did not know or care what a Puerto Rican or a Latina/o was. There was no Ricky Martin, no J-Lo. Latina/os were not yet "hot." Rap was celebrated as "a black thing – you wouldn't understand." Black was being used, of course, in its narrowest ethnic sense. However, that is not to say that there were no Puerto Ricans involved in commercial rap music during that time. Prince Markie Dee Morales of the Fat Boys, the Real Roxanne, and producer Ivan "Doc" Rodriguez were active and had a strong commercial presence during this period, though their ethnicity was not openly flaunted as became common with other Puerto Rican and Latina/o artists later on.

A particular commercial space dubbed "Latin rap" was occupied most prominently by non-Puerto Ricans like Kid Frost and Mellow Man Ace in the late 1980s, to mention only two examples. However, these artists were largely perceived not to be doing "real hip hop" but a type of "Latina/o hip hop" catering to that particular ethnic group. Notice that because his music was infused with Spanish lyrics and alluded to his Latino identity, Mellow Man Ace, a black man born in Cuba, was not perceived to be doing "black" music (real hip hop) but a Latina/o version of hip hop. He was placed in the same musical category as Kid Frost, a Chicano who has no obvious African ancestry.

How were the record companies supposed to market a Puerto Rican or a Latina/o rap artist within the realm of "real hip hop"? Back then, not many seemed to have a clue. Rap's blackness was a big part of its commercial appeal. But it was not clear if Latina/os were a lighter version of black or not black at all. The industry gatekeepers were not often willing to take a risk by signing Latina/os. That is, until Latina/os, and particularly Boricuas, became a ghetto-tropical fad in the mid-1990s and then it became trendy for Latina/os and non-Latina/os to include words in Spanish and references to Latina/os in rhymes and have Butta Pecan Rican mamas adorning videos. The market was then particularly ripe for Puerto Rican hip hop artists like Fat Joe, Big Pun, Angie Martinez, Hurricane Gee, and DJ Tony Touch.

The media "Latino explosion" branded Latina/os as commercially hot in the latter half of the 1990s. And, suddenly, hip hop became known as a "Black and Latino" thing. Nowadays, most people recognize that Latina/os have been part of hip hop since day one. But there is still plenty of confusion regarding what that means.
When hip hop is described as “Black and Latino,” pioneering DJ Kool Herc, a black man born in Jamaica, is thought of as part of the Black contingent, while black men born in Cuba like Mellow Man Ace and his brother Sen Dog (of the group Cypress Hill) are assumed to be part of the Latina/o contingent. Granted, when Mellow Man Ace and Sen Dog identify themselves as Latina/os within hip hop, they become part of an ethnic group that includes people of much lighter hues. These black Cuban brothers, as Latina/os, are part of a group that includes great numbers of people whose ancestry (genetic and cultural) is heavier on the European and indigenous side, than it is on the African side. Nevertheless, how does a black Latina/o’s ethnic affiliation end up making them perceived as somehow less black? Aren’t we doing a disservice to Afro-diasporic history when we exclude from blackness huge numbers of people of African ancestry, just because they were born in (or their immediate ancestors hail from) lands where Spanish is the official language?

Part of the reason for the somewhat precarious position of Puerto Ricans and other Latina/os within hip hop – particularly its musical zone – has to do with the fact that understandings of blackness and Afro-diasporic cultural identity frequently are fractured along national or ethnic lines. Thus, the cultural connections – past and present – among African Americans, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Trinidadians, and Cubans, among others, remain virtually ignored. Much of the history of political thought, activism, and cultural expression regarded as either discretely African American or Puerto Rican actually has been a product of various Afro-diasporic ethnic groups. However, it is all too common to ignore the complexities of the African diaspora, relying instead on narrow visions of history and identity. The result, unfortunately, is that the connections between those populating what Paul Gilroy has termed “the black Atlantic” are camouflaged, particularly when it comes to Black and Latina/o groups.

Hip hop music’s ruptures in the rhythmic structure, syncopation, repetition of a certain rhythm and/or melodic phrase, and call-and-response patterns, as well as its heavy emphasis on lyrical competition, boasting, improvisation, and commentary on current events are characteristic of most African-derived music in the Americas. However, since hip hop music often is described only in terms of US-based blues-derived traditions and African American oral practices – and from there the historical jump is made to West African cultural sources – the myth of separation between Afro-diasporic cultures in the Americas is perpetuated.

The rise in the 1970s of the particular style of rhyming over a musical background that became known as MCing or rapping is an example of the existing similarities among various Afro-diasporic traditions and the way in which they feed into hip hop. David Toop has noted the variety among rap’s forebears, including “disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, . . . acapella and doo-wop groups, ring games, skip-rop rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying and the dozens, all the way to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia.”
The Hip Hop Zone

Not only have New York Puerto Ricans participated along with African Americans in many of these rap antecedents—such as street funk, doo-wop groups, and children’s games—but island musical traditions like plena, bomba, and música jibara can be invoked just as easily among rap’s forebears. Verbal duels featuring boasting, trading insults, sexual innuendoes, and improvisation are common in all three. Like rap, they are notorious for historicizing everyday events. DJs use their turntables as percussive instruments whose scratching sounds recall those of plena’s and música jibara’s ever-present güiro or gourd scraper. Bomba shares with rap the use of the voice as an instrument that foregrounds tonality and rhythm as much as—and sometimes more than—meaning.

When New York Puerto Rican youngsters began participating alongside African Americans in the early development of MCing as a lyrical/musical style, they were not exactly “defecting” from Puerto Rican tradition. In terms of social function and aesthetics, Puerto Rican oral and musical styles can be invoked as precursors of MCing as much as African American ones. By the time hip hop surfaced in the early 1970s, there was already a longstanding tradition of Puerto Rican participation in genres most commonly identified as African American, such as jazz in the early decades of the twentieth century, doo-wop and rhythm-and-blues during the 1950s, and boogaloo and Latin soul during the 1960s and 1970s. Even the use of English lyrics among Puerto Ricans was nothing new, as evidenced through these music genres that preceded hip hop.

Then there is the issue of breakbeats relying heavily on music thought of as African American. But what would breakbeats be without the decades-old influence of Puerto Rican and Cuban musical traditions on African Americans in New York City? Those timbales and conga solos that were the heart of so many breakbeats got into soul and funk records from Africa via the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

The construction of Puerto Rican identities in New York City often has relied on drawing sharp distinctions between us and African Americans. While the European aspect of Puerto Rican heritage gets highlighted, African Americans are associated primarily with the African side of their ancestry. No wonder, then, that the relationship of Puerto Ricans to hip hop music and dance has been so often misunderstood. What to make of those Puerto Rican youngsters who started rhyming in English and dancing to breakbeats right alongside African Americans and West Indians in the 1970s? What to think of all those English-dominant “Spanish” kids with nappy hair and dark skin who no longer were easily distinguishable from the morenos? Unfortunately, many opted for the easy way out by ignoring the areas of cultural overlap—past and present—between African Americans and Puerto Ricans, choosing instead to explain the presence of the latter in hip hop as their treading on African American territory.

The myth of hip hop being an African American realm and representing a rupture in Puerto Rican tradition has served to weaken Puerto Ricans’ perceived entitlement to hip hop; it has prevented young African Americans, Puerto Ricans,
and other Caribbean folks from fully understanding their shared heritages; and it also has perpetuated frictions between these groups. This myth, in turn, is one of the many factors that make us all—whatever our ethnic background may be—more vulnerable to the dictates of the entertainment industry, which has turned the desire for roots, purpose, self-definition, and collective identity of the hip hop generations into a multimillion-dollar empire.

Why My Book Is Not Called “Latina/os from the Hip Hop Zone”

Although the book sounds interesting, I think a more comprehensive look at Latina/os in Hip Hop would give the book more resonance. Cubans for instance have made huge inroads. Kid Frost, a Chicano, in the late 80s until present day.... Sounds like the book only presented a piece of the pie when it could’ve served the whole thing. (eseguerrito)

The above is an excerpt from a lengthy chatroom discussion on the website www.migente.com which took place right after my book New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone was published in 2003. Migente.com is a website that caters mostly to young US Latina/os. Many of the entries, like the one above by “eseguerrito,” suggested that not focusing on Latina/os as a whole was a missed opportunity for my book. Some entries even claimed that the book was part of a larger phenomenon of Puerto Rican chauvinism which makes Puerto Ricans think “we” are better than other Latina/o groups.

I use the migente.com electronic conversation as an example of a question and/or criticism I am frequently faced with: Why focus my research and writing on hip hop solely on Puerto Ricans? Puerto Ricans have not been the only Latina/os involved in hip hop. So why focus specifically on them?

Some participants of the migente.com discussion defended my decision to make the book specifically about Puerto Ricans (and, to get even more specific, about New York Puerto Ricans):

the author focuses on puerto ricans cuz back in the 70s and 80s puerto ricans were clearly the majority in NYC. as far as mexicans and cubans go the book is about NY not the west coast or florida. (nuyorican05)

As for Chicanos being included in this book – why does everything have to be pan-“Latina/o,” let Puerto Ricans have their time to shine. . . . People write books about Mexicans all the time – isn’t it OK to write one about Puerto Ricans? They have their influence . . . you have yours. (La_Manita)

The discussion also included blatant examples of the aforementioned Puerto Rican chauvinism, exemplified in this brief exchange:
The Hip Hop Zone

Boricaus are number 1 when it comes to Latina/os contributing to hip-hop culture and rap music! You can't deny us, why would you want to you need us. (GULLYseeGULLY)

Ayo Im speakin up for all ma dominican gente...is true as a Dominican we dont get alot of attention..da Boricaus swear they da only ones who know about da game and hey maybe they do but lemme tell ya Dominicans have helped Hip Hop...
(HotDominicana)

Dominicans HA, HA, HA...you've gotta be kidding... The only way Dominicans might have affected the Hip-Hop game back in the day was the Dominicans selling drugs to people within the Hip-Hop culture up in Washington Heights. (GULLYseeGULLY)

This last comment generated a heated debate that included an assortment of stereotypes and insults directed at different Latina/o subgroups. A few participants periodically intervened, trying to steer the conversation away from petty name-calling and focusing more on the merits of the historical revisions and thematic emphasis of my book:

Once again, migente posts delve into childish azz debates over which Latina/o group is better. The Bottom line is that Puerto Ricans deserved their shine, as do all other Latina/os in the foundation of hip hop culture. All this other beef is pointless. (power_rule7)

My book documents and celebrates New York Puerto Ricans’ contributions to hip hop. Never does it suggest that other Latina/o groups are unimportant to the history of hip hop. However, it seems that my choosing to highlight and examine the specificities of the experience of one group is automatically deemed by many to be a problem because it allegedly excludes, ignores, or minimizes the importance of other groups. I argue throughout the book that, on the contrary, the gravest danger is ignoring the specificities of each Latina/o group by lumping them all into a pan-Latina/o mass. That is not to say that a book that focuses on Latina/os in hip hop as a whole will necessarily slip into this pitfall. My point is that we need books about the general Latina/o experience in hip hop and also about the specific experiences of different subgroups within the Latina/o experience. Because of numerous factors, Puerto Ricans and African Americans have tightly interwoven histories; hip hop is a case in point. Puerto Ricans fit into the Latina/o category and into the African diaspora in very particular ways. Those particularities deserve to be explored with care.

In theory, there is nothing wrong with focusing on specifics. However, we must acknowledge that chauvinism and inter-Latina/o rivalries are strong, dangerous, and debilitating and must be combated. However, we can explore our differences while still acknowledging commonalities, having solidarity with each other and even a common political agenda.
Raquel Z. Rivera

...this is just one of many stories that need to be told. So ya'll can stop trippin on each other about kid frost vs. big pun, frijoles vs. habichuelas, yuca vs. platanos, whatev!!!(power_rule7)

It gave me immense satisfaction that, though an academic book, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* was being discussed in popular forums such as these. Even people who might never actually read the book were exposed to some of its ideas through this forum.

This chatroom debate, classroom discussions with my students, and plenty of other instances have highlighted for me the importance of furthering a dialogue about race and ethnicity in the United States, particularly in terms of the way these concepts impact Latina/o lives. The richness of our actual lived experiences is too often stifled by the assumption that our realities have to fit into oversimplified identity categories. Thus, we must continue to explore and celebrate the amazing diversity which exists among Latina/os; we also have to seek a greater understanding regarding the intersections and commonalities that Latina/os have with other groups.

**Conclusion**

Blackness and *latinidad* are often imagined as discrete categories that do not intersect. This leads to two related problems: one is that widely diverging Latina/o experiences tend to be homogenized; the second is that the cultural convergences between Latina/os, African Americans, and non-Latina/o Caribbeans are frequently glossed over.

Though blackness and *latinidad* most frequently continue to be misrepresented as mutually exclusive categories, there are scores of hip hop artists, musicians in other genres, writers, educators, and activists challenging that lamentably prevailing view. Tego Calderón is certainly not alone when he claims blackness as an integral part of his experience and identity.

With the increasing growth of the US Latina/o population, there is also a growing tendency to naturalize the ties that bind Latina/os to each other and to gloss over the internal variety within the collective, the specificities of each subgroup, and the historical relationship that each Latina/o subgroup has to other ethnic groups. There is a dire existing need for artistic, activist, educational, and scholarly work that explores Latina/o experiences within the context of the African diaspora in the Americas (as well as within other contexts). There is also a strong need for work that dismantles the myth of racial democracy in Latin America and among US Latina/os. We have yet to adequately confront our lasting legacy of Eurocentrism and racism – a legacy which many still want to deny and which is one of the many reasons why the blackness vs. *latinidad* false dichotomy keeps being perpetuated. As Tego said in his 2003 song entitled “Loiza”: “They want to make me believe that I’m part of a racial trilogy/Where
everyone’s the same, no one receives special treatment/I know how to forgive, the problem is you don’t know how to apologize."21

Within the field of Latina/o studies, I strongly advocate for educational and scholarly work that focuses on the specificities of the different Latina/o populations and institutional support for such work. Currently, academic institutions (and also cultural ones) are under pressure to shift from serving specific national-origin groups to serving a wider Latina/o population. However, though there is a pressing need for pan-Latina/o work and institutions, we must also bear in mind the crucial importance of work and institutions which focus on specific national-origin groups and their connections to non-Latina/o populations.

Notes


4 See Davis, Who Is Black?


Raquel Z. Rivera


21 The translation is mine.