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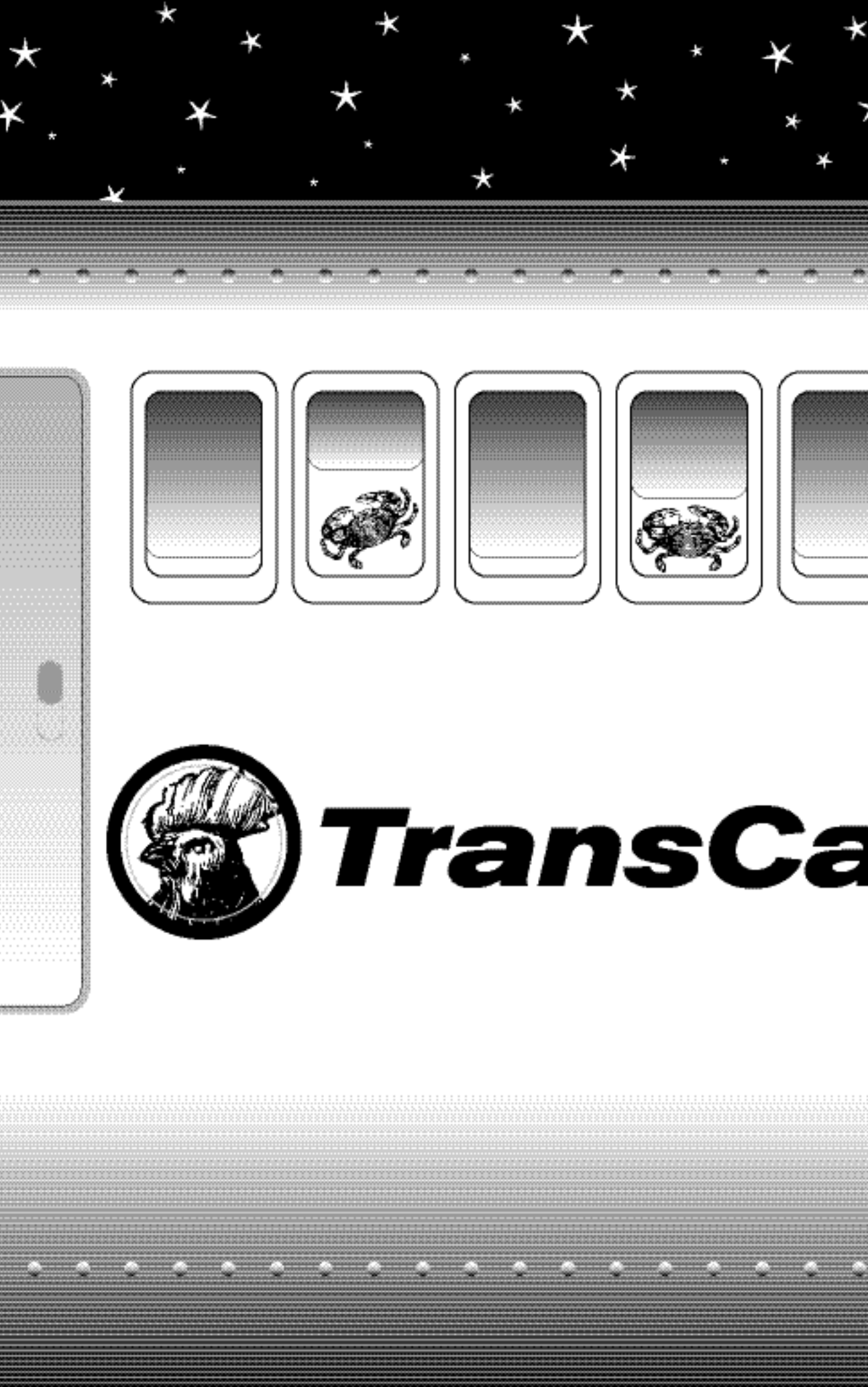
CREOLITÉ IN THE 'HOOD: DIASPORA AS SOURCE AND CHALLENGE

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Creolité in the ‘Hood: Diaspora as Source and Challenge*

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the role of the Puerto Rican community in New York as the social base for the creation of Latin music of the 1960s and 1970s known as salsa, as well as its relation to the island. As implied in the subtitle, the argument is advanced that Caribbean diaspora communities need to be seen as sources of creative cultural innovation rather than as mere repositories or extensions of expressive traditions in the geographical homelands, and furthermore as a potential challenge to the assumptions of cultural authenticity typical of traditional conceptions of national culture. It is further contended that a transnational and pan-Caribbean framework is needed for a full understanding of these complex new conditions of musical migration and interaction. [Key words: salsa, transnationalism, authenticity, cultural innovation, New York music, musical migration]

The flight attendant let out an icy scream of terror when she noticed a pair of hefty jueyes, native Puerto Rican land crabs, strutting down the center aisle of the plane.

It was one of those infamous red-eye flights from San Juan to New York, filled to the last seat with Puerto Ricans from all walks of life, while the panicky flight attendant is referred to as a stereotypical white-bred gringa, “angelical and innocent, a frigid blond like Kim Novak in her days as a frigid blond.” What is this, a prank or a hijacking? Who are these terrorist jueyes? The hysteria spread to the crew, and to the passengers, though among the *boricuas* there is an underlying but pervasive giggle, that familiar jocularity laced with irony that Puerto Ricans call *jaibería*, or *el arte de bregar*, the art of dealing with the situation.¹ The stage for a dramatic cultural collision is set.

Students of contemporary Caribbean culture may well recognize this memorable scene from the opening sentences of the fanciful creative essay by Puerto Rican author Luis Rafael Sánchez entitled “La guagua aérea,” the “air bus.”² This highly entertaining and suggestive story set aboard the air shuttle known to the majority of his countrymen has become nothing less than canonical since its publication in 1983, capturing as it does the existential feel of a people caught up in a relentless process of circular migration, in which they carry their indelible cultural trappings back and forth between the beloved but troubled homeland and the cold and inimical but somehow also very familiar setting in the urban United States. The story struck such a chord among its public that it has been republished countless times in a range of languages; is required reading in many schools and colleges on the island, in the U.S. and in Latin America and the Caribbean;

became the basis of a widely publicized movie; and serves as the guiding metaphor for two books about modern-day Puerto Rico, significantly titled *The Commuter Nation* and *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*.³ With its irresistible title alone, *la guagua aérea* has assured its place as perhaps the best-known work of contemporary Puerto Rican literature.

Present-day migration, no longer the momentous, once-in-a-lifetime trauma of earlier times, is now a commute, an everyday kind of excursion, like jumping on a bus or subway and arriving at an equally familiar destination. In the story, the feeling aboard that hilariously nervous flight is so matter-of-course that passengers comment how they lose track which way they’re headed, and wonder whether they’ll be arriving in New York or San Juan. The two end-points become interchangeable, so much so that the jueyes caught and cleaned in Bayamón are sure to find their place in a stew-pot in the Bronx, no questions asked. No serious danger of losing the culture by being away from the island, either, for the cultural practices and sensibilities typical of the home culture are just as much at home in New York, New Jersey, Chicago, or Florida. How resilient, how immutable “*el arte de bregar*,” how ineradicable that famous *mancha de plátano!* The fears of a national schizophrenia, or cultural genocide, are assuaged by the comforting sense of trans-local equilibrium.

Yet, when looked at more closely, *la guagua aérea* in the well-known story only moves in one direction; the migratory voyage, presented as a commute, is still basically one-way. That is, the cultural baggage aboard the flight is entirely that of the island, the readily familiar, almost stereotypical trappings of the national traditions, emblemized by the shocking land crabs but omnipresent in the gestures, humor, and gregarious, gossipy ways of the passengers. As for the

other final stop of the commute, the New York City environment and its cultural life, mention is made of the Bronx and El Barrio and other familiar scenes, but only as sites for the playing out and preservation of traditional island life-ways, not as a setting that is in fact home and the primary cultural base of half of those bi-national commuters. The rich liminal space between home culture and diaspora becomes nothing but a zone of cultural authentication, while the cultural and human salience of that “other” home is reduced to the anxieties of an up-tight gringa airline stewardess plagued by nightmares of King Kong atop the Empire State Building.

Thus the story begs a key question: what about the cultural baggage that goes the other way, the experience and expressions learned and forged in the diaspora that make their way back to the homeland, there to have their impact on those rapidly changing traditions and life-ways? With all the vast and burgeoning studies devoted to the cultural changes brought by modern migrations, transnational flows, and diaspora communities, and with the widespread understanding that these movements are most commonly circular and multidirectional, it is indeed striking how little attention has gone to the cultural experience and consequences of the massive population of return migrants and their children who grew up in the diaspora. For too long, and too uncritically, I would suggest, it has been assumed that the main cultural flow, and especially the main line of cultural resistance, has been from the colonial or post-colonial point of presumed “origin” to the diaspora enclave in the metropolis, and that the flow in the other direction, from the metropolis to the colony/post-colony, is strictly “from above,” hegemonic, and reinforcing of the prevailing structure of cultural imposition and domination.

These abiding assumptions, I would further suggest have been amply present in the discussion of Caribbean music and may go to perpetuate an at times misleading sense of the dynamic of Caribbean musical innovation and change, and therefore of the place and function of the music in contemporary Caribbean communities. In some recent writings there has been a beginning discussion of what is called “transnationalism from below” and “social remittances,” which I have extended in referring to “cultural remittances.” Some of these lines of thinking might have interesting bearings on our understanding of Caribbean music, historically and especially in our own times. I invite you to join me, then, on the *guagua aérea* and head in the other direction, from the diaspora to the islands, and thereby glimpse some of the history of Caribbean music from a different aerial view than is more commonly the case.

One of the most frequent passengers on the cultural airbus is Willie Colón. His life and music commute back and forth between his home turf in the Bronx and his ancestral Puerto Rico, with more than casual stop-offs in other musical zones of the Caribbean. His first albums, produced in the later 1960s at the threshold of the salsa era, attest to his programmatically and defiantly eclectic stylistic agenda; while composed mainly of Cuban-based *sones* and *guaguancós*, the titles and cover images of *El malo* (Bad Boy), *The Hustler*, *Cosa Nuestra*, and *The Big Break/La gran fuga* proudly present the persona of the Latin superfly, the borderline criminal street thug. The music, too, veers off from its Afro-Cuban base by references to and samplings from styles from Puerto Rico, Colombia, Panama, and that “other” ancestral homeland, Africa, while also demonstrating the young Nuyorican’s

native familiarity with jazz, soul, and rock. Along with his partner in crime, vocalist Héctor Lavoe, Colón projects from the beginning of his pioneering salsa career the new musical mixes resounding in his beloved Nueva York barrios, a singularly diasporic “creolité in the ‘hood.”

But it is in *Asalto navideño*, his immensely and enduringly popular Christmas album released in 1971, that Colón transports us on the airbus and makes the relation between diaspora and Caribbean homeland the central theme of his work. An undisputed classic of the salsa canon, this compilation puts the lie to the widespread notion that salsa is no more than an imitation of purely Cuban sources by mostly Puerto Rican exponents, and that Puerto Rican music has little or no presence. Rather, the educated listener recognizes immediately that the strongly accented son, *guaracha*, and guaguancó weave of the musical fabric is laced with vocal, instrumental, and rhythmic qualities typical of Puerto Rican *seis*, *aguinaldo*, *bomba*, and *plena*. Most notably, aside from the decidedly jíbaro quality of Lavoe’s vocals, Colón brings in the famed Yomo Toro on the *cuatro*, the emblematic instrument of traditional Puerto Rican music. This *popurrí navideño* (Christmas medley), as one of the cuts is titled, is clearly intended as a dialogue with Puerto Rican culture. Even the album title, using the word *asalto*, makes reference to the age-old tradition of Christmas-tide musical “invasions” of the houses of close friends and neighbors for the sake

of partying and sharing in the holiday spirit, much in line with the primarily adoring, nostalgic tenor of that diaspora-island dialogue. But in light of the sequence of previous album titles, there is a thinly veiled double-entendre here, with the even more common meaning of “asalto” as “attack” or “mugging” lurking ominously close to the surface.

Two selections from that compilation,

“Traigo la salsa” (I bring you salsa) and “Esta Navidad” (This Christmas), are of special interest to our discussion, since both lyrically and musically they enact the diaspora addressing the island culture in a complex, loving but at the same time mildly challenging way. At one level, “Traigo la salsa” is about “bringing” Latin music to the immediate New York or North American audience, and along with it holiday cheer from the warm tropics. Yet even here, it is not the usual salsa fare that is being offered; at one point the lyrics state, “Yo les traigo una rareza,” “a rarity,” and the singer goes on to explain that on this occasion he is adding in the *cuatro*, an instrument atypical of salsa, “por motivo de Navidad.” At this level, though, salsa plus *cuatro* is clearly a sign of the island cultures being “brought” to the New York scene as a delicious Christmas offering, or as an “asalto” on North American culture much like the land crabs aboard the airbus. However, there is another dimension to this act of “bearing” or “bringing” the music at play here, and it refers to bringing New York salsa to the island. Indeed, the opening words and body of the lyrics, beginning with “Oígame señor, préstame atención...,” would seem to be addressing the personified island itself, and to be saying that the singer is bringing salsa for him (“para tí”). The closing lines of the stanza, which say “como allá en la isla” (like there on the island), make this geographical differentiation evident. That is, in addition to being a marker of Puerto Rican or Latino authenticity in the New York setting, salsa is at the same time, in Puerto Rico itself, a marker of diasporic Nuyorican authenticity, distinct from and originating externally to island musical traditions. In other words, as Juan Otero Garabís has argued in a paper which I have found extremely helpful in preparing the present reflections, on the return trip aboard

la guagua aérea “traigo la salsa”.⁴ Salsa is the musical baggage, the stylistic remittance of the diaspora on its return to the island.

This ambivalence, or bi-directional meaning, is conveyed in the musical texture of the song as well, and in the album as a whole. Yomo Toro’s *cuatro*, for example, with all its symbolic weight as an authentication of Puerto Rican culture, is deployed for both Christmas airs of *la música típica* and, as is most obvious in the opening cut, “Introducción,” for virtuoso riffs more resonant of jazz and rock than of the familiar cadences of *seis*, *décimas* or *aguinaldos*. Another diaspora-based departure from the traditional Caribbean sources of the salsa instrumentation is of course Colón’s trombone, a stylistic device introduced into the New York Latin sound by Barry Rogers, José Rodríguez, and other masters of Eddie Palmieri’s pathbreaking “trombanga” band, La Perfecta, in the early 1960s. It is the improvisational trombone lines that are perhaps the sharpest marker of the urban diaspora in Afro-Caribbean music, the herald of the friendly yet defiant musical “asalto” on territorially and nationally circumscribed tradition. Let’s not forget that as late as 1978 salsa was still referred to by some on the island as “an offensive, strident, stupefying, intoxicating and frenetic music openly associated with the effects of sex, alcohol and drugs.” As Otero Garabís notes, for people of that mind-set, to uphold the idea that salsa is “typical Puerto Rican music” is “to plant a bomb in the foundation of the national culture.”

It should be mentioned in this regard that ironically, though fully consonant with the logic of the music industry and a commoditized cultural nationalism, by the early 1990s salsa had been domesticated and comfortably repatriated to the island, to the point that it came to be equated with Puerto Rican identity as such. As signs of this reversal,

the Puerto Rico pavilion at the 1992 Columbus Quincentenary celebrations in Seville was emblazoned with the slogan “Puerto Rico Es Salsa,” and the independent documentary of those same years, *Cocolos y Roqueros*, showed salsa fans on the island justifying their preference for salsa over the advertently foreign, imposed rock music with the claim that “salsa es de aquí” (salsa is from here). The prevalent interpretation is actually a pan-Latino or Latin Americanist version of this nationalist appropriation, salsa being commonly identified as “tropical music” or, in the most influential book on the subject, *El libro de la salsa*, as “música del Caribe urbano.”⁵

In any case, the Christmas celebrated in *Asalto navideño* is obviously not the usual holiday occasion, but a very special one somehow askew of the expected and accepted customs; it is, in short, one which, rather than enforcing the comfort of a known and familiar identity, is instead riddled by contrasting, and to some degree clashing and contending, identity claims. It is, emphatically, “esta navidad,” (*this* Christmas). This complex, contradictory relation between diaspora and island cultures is addressed even more directly in the tune of the title, “Esta Navidad.” There the multiplicity of claims is dramatized in the frequent and varied naming of the symbol of Puerto Rican identity, “el jíbaro.” Striking up a contagious *aguinaldo* air at the beginning, the typical *cuatro* parts play in continual counterpoint with the mischievously playful trombone line, as though setting up a counterpoint that will run through the entire piece. The lyrics tell of the attitude of the jíbaros who arrive from the United States only to look down on their island friends with “un aire de superioridad” (an air of superiority) and of great wisdom. This is the theme of the song that is most remembered by the public, and is generally assumed to be its main message: that those from the

diaspora have been corrupted by their experience away from the homeland and authentic home culture, and try to get over, or fake it, as captured in the word *guillar*. But then, in an interesting twist, the lyrics continue with the speaker identifying himself as one of those “jíbaros *guillados*,” a kind of bogus jíbaro, who is nonetheless, in a bold assertion, “pero un jíbaro de verdad” (but a jíbaro for real). (“Hay jíbaros que saben más/y aquí queda demostrado/ soy un jíbaro guillado/pero un jíbaro de verdad”; roughly, “There are jíbaros that know more/and here it’s clearly shown/I am a would-be jíbaro/but a jíbaro for real.”)

What entitles this returning diaspora Puerto Rican to feel confident about his knowledge and to claim “realness” after all? Evidently it is the song itself, as suggested in the phrase “aquí queda demostrado” (here it is shown). Indeed, the song proceeds to the chorus, “Esta navidad, vamos a gozar,” and then ends in vocal and instrumental improvisations very much in the guaguancó-based salsa style, the *tumbaito*, which by the end explicitly replaces the trappings and cadences of *típica*, the *leiloi-lai*, with which it had begun. Or actually, in tune with that diasporic wisdom suggested in the lyrics, the lead voice draws the traditional holiday music into the eclectic, inclusive jam of this special Christmas celebration, making sure to add, “tambien invitaré a mi amigo, mi amigo Yomo Toro” (I’ll also invite my friend, my dear friend Yomo Toro).

The music known as salsa, then, which has become the prototypical marker of Spanish Caribbean expressive identity, is in its inception the stylistic voice and practice of the Puerto Rican diaspora concentrated in New York City. Rather than the direct extension or imitation of Cuban or native Puerto Rican styles, it is rather the source of a new, newly hybridized and creolized adaptation of those styles in their interaction and admixture with other forms of music-making at play in the diasporic environment.

Even prior to the official advent of salsa by that name, and in even more dramatic ways, Nuyorican and Cuban musicians and music publics had fused son and mambo sounds with vernacular African-American styles such as rhythm and blues and soul music, as evidenced in the short-lived but wildly popular experiments of Latin boogaloo. And more famously, in the 1940s New York Latin music had witnessed the momentous innovations of Cubop and Latin jazz, which along with the mambo were more strongly rooted in the urban diaspora than in the Caribbean, the original home of those traditions.

But it is in times closer to our own, with the dramatic growth and increased diversity of the Caribbean diaspora, and with decades of ongoing interaction with Afro-American culture, that we witness the full force of diaspora as source and challenge in Caribbean music history. In the post-salsa period, it is hip hop that has emerged as the most influential and innovative field of musical expression in most parts of the Caribbean. In this case there can of course be no doubt as to the music’s urban diasporic origins, though it is still less than accepted knowledge that Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Dominicans, and other Caribbean diaspora peoples and their musics played a formative role in its story since the beginning in the 1970s and 80s. Purists and traditionalists from those background cultures are still bent on denying or minimizing the Caribbean-ness or Latinismo of hip hop in its many manifestations, regarding it as strictly African American; at times, as in the call to ban hip hop floats from the Puerto Rican Day Parade, this demarcation takes on blatantly racist overtones. But in all cases it indicates a failure to understand the dynamic of contemporary diasporic cultural realities, particularly among the kind of diasporic youth who have taken part in the founding of hip hop; this dynamic is well described in the following quote in Robin Cohen’s book *Global Diasporas*:

“Aesthetic styles, identifications and affinities, dispositions and behaviours, musical genres, linguistic patterns, moralities, religious practices and other cultural phenomena are more globalized, cosmopolitan and creolized or ‘hybrid’ than ever before. This is especially the case among youth of transnational communities, whose initial socialization has taken place within the cross-currents of more than one cultural field, and whose ongoing forms of cultural expression and identity are often self-consciously selected, syncretized and elaborated from more than one cultural heritage.”⁶

Fortunately, a book like Raquel Rivera’s recent *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* is guided by just such an understanding, and helps identify the role and importance of diaspora youth in forging new stylistic possibilities without abandoning or turning their back on their inherited cultural background.⁷

While it remains important to document and analyze the diasporic origins and social roots of emerging Caribbean music-making, close attention also needs to be focused on the diffusion of new styles and themes in the Caribbean home countries and the challenges they bring to traditional assumptions about national and regional musical traditions. Before undertaking her pioneering work on Puerto Ricans in the New York hip hop scene, Rivera was studying the arrival of rap in her native Puerto Rico, and found herself confronting the avid resistance of cultural gatekeepers of all political stripes. In her Master’s thesis, “Para rapear en puertorriqueño: discurso y política cultural,” she ascertained that it was return Nuyoricans who initiated hip hop styles and practices on the Island in the late 1970s and early 80s. As she put it, “Rap, being a form of expression shared by Caribbeans and African Americans in the mainland ghettos, forms part of the

cultural baggage of the young people who return or arrive on the Island. Being an integral part of the cultural life of the young [return] migrants, it therefore cannot be considered a mere foreign import.”⁸ Even Vico C., the first rapper to gain wider recognition, was born in Brooklyn, and teamed up with his partner Glenn from California to write his early rhymes, which gave voice to life in the working-class neighborhood of Puerta de Tierra in San Juan where he grew up. The style migrated from ‘hood in the U.S. to ‘hood on the island, and even though it was quickly commercialized and domesticated in Puerto Rico by the mid-80s, the underground scene continued to serve as a venue for the articulation of life in the marginalized and impoverished *calles* and *caseríos* that had been out of bounds for all other forms of artistic expression.

While the introduction of rap in Puerto Rico was first dismissed as a fad, and then more ominously regarded as still another instance of American cultural imperialism, history has it that hip hop went on to take firm root in its new location and in fact articulated with important shifts already afoot in the national imaginary. The diasporic content provoked new sensibilities on issues of sex, gender, and race, while rap’s social moorings among the urban poor raised uncomfortable problems of class and social inequality typically ignored by the cultured elite. Interestingly, there was also a notable reverse in the direction of social desire for the geographical other: while traditionally the translocal Puerto Rican sensibility was characterized by the emigrant longing for the beauties of the long-lost island, in some rap texts and among street youth it was the urban diaspora settings of the Bronx and El Barrio that became places of fascination and nostalgia. Nuyoricans, commonly the object of public disdain and discrimination on the island, became sources of admiration and solidarity among many

Puerto Rican young people who had never left the national territory. Such radical challenges to traditional cultural values and assumptions, largely associated with the hip hop invasion, have retained their appeal in subsequent decades, such that important young verbal artists like Tego Calderón and José Raúl González (“Gallego”) continue to voice a fresh sense of what it means to be Puerto Rican in our changing times, in both cases with positive reference to the example set by their counterparts in the diaspora.

From being an isolated, subcultural phenomenon on the Island’s cultural scene, rap has over the years established its place as a ubiquitous component of everyday life, vibrantly present in town festivals, religious events, and at activities on street corners, in schoolyards and neighborhood parks. It has also found its place in the country’s musical soundscape, and has been fused with more familiar styles such as salsa, bomba, and plena. Hip hop’s presence in Puerto Rico also has its Caribbean dimensions, its introduction coinciding in significant ways with the inroads of reggae and *merengue*, with meren-rap and reggaeton being but the best known of the varied fusions and crossovers present in the contemporary repertoire.

Nor is Puerto Rico unique, of course, in its importation of rap via its return diaspora aboard la guagua aérea. The influence of its huge diasporas in New York and San Juan has been of dramatic note in the Dominican Republic, and again hip hop has been a crucial conduit. One Dominican cultural critic has gone so far as to title his book *El retorno de las yolas* (The Return of the Rafts),⁹ while Frank Moya Pons, a prominent historian, has the following to say about the full-scale transformation of Dominican national identity resulting from the urban diaspora experience, and makes direct reference to the new musical sensibility:

“Social and racial discrimination as experienced by thousands of Dominicans in the urban ghettos of New York made them aware of their actual racial constitution, and taught them that they are not too different from the West Indian neighbors.... Many returned to Santo Domingo and their home towns transformed both outwardly and inwardly in their thoughts, their clothes, their feelings, their language, and their music.... Afro-Caribbean music and dance were incorporated into Dominican folk dances and songs, particularly in the national merengue, while music groups expanded their repertoires..., showing, not always consciously, how much Afro-American culture had pervaded Dominican popular culture. The discovery of Dominican négritude was not the result of an intellectual campaign as had been the case in Haiti and Martinique, after Jean Price-Mars and Aimé Césaire. The real discovery of the Dominican black roots was a result of the behavior of the returning migrants.... Racial and cultural denial worked for many years, but migration to the United States finally cracked down the ideological block of the traditional definition of Dominican national identity.”¹⁰

All over the Caribbean, and in growing numbers of countries in the postcolonial era, “The diaspora strikes back!”

Throughout their history Caribbean cultures have been traveling cultures, transformative departures and arrivals to and from, between and among and en route, and Caribbean musics are traveling musics best understood in their full range and complexity from the privileged vantage of la guagua aérea. In our times of mass and multidirectional migrations of people, styles and practices, many new islands have been added to the archipelago. New sites of creolization and transculturation, unimagined in earlier periods of cultural definition and self-definition,

are catalyzing unimagined changes in both lands of origin and places of arrival and settlement.

Paris, London, Toronto, Amsterdam, New York, and a range of other far-flung urban centers are now Caribbean islands, of a sort, or actually new poles of interaction and intersection among diverse Caribbean and non-Caribbean cultural experiences and traditions. The magnitude and structural implications of these contemporary diasporic formations is well captured in these terms by Orlando Patterson:

“In structural terms, the mass migration of peoples from the periphery in this new context of cheap transportation and communication has produced a wholly different kind of social system.... What has emerged is, from the viewpoint of the peripheral states, distinctive societies in which there is no longer any meaningful identification of political and social boundaries. Thus, more than half of the adult working populations of many of the smaller eastern Caribbean states now live outside of these societies, mainly in the immigrant enclaves of the United States. About 40 per cent of all Jamaicans, and perhaps half of all Puerto Ricans, live outside of the political boundaries of these societies, mainly in America. The interesting thing about these communities is that their members feel as at home in the mainland segment as in the original politically bounded areas.... The former colonies now become the mother country; the imperial metropolis becomes the frontier of infinite resources....” And Patterson concludes by observing, “Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Barbadian societies are no longer principally defined by the political-geographical units of Jamaica, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Barbados, but by both the populations and cultures of these units and their postnational colonies in the cosmopolis.”¹¹

Caribbean societies, cultures, and musics cannot be understood today in isolation from the diasporic pole of their translocal realities, nor of course strictly from the vantage point of the diaspora alone. Rather, it is the relation between and among the poles of national and regional history and diasporic re-creation—what has been referred to, in a discussion of Haitian *konpas*, for example, as negotiation across the “insular-diasporic barrier”¹²—that provides the key to present-day analysis of Caribbean expressive possibilities. Thus the long march of Caribbean creolization proceeds apace in our time, but under radically altered geographic circumstances, with the diasporic settings located well outside of national and regional territories making for the most intense “points of entanglement,” to use Edouard Glissant’s felicitous phrase. It is this “creolité in the ‘hood,” the infinitely inventive mingling and mixing of Caribbean experience and expressive ways in the urban centers of the metropolis, that is most radically re-fashioning what being Caribbean is about, and what Caribbean music sounds like, a process that becomes most clearly visible when we are attentive to the impact of this new mix as it reaches back to the historical region itself.

Of course this kind of reverse flow, if you will, from the metropolis to the colonial or postcolonial societies, is not new in Caribbean cultural and musical history, nor should it be separated from the ongoing and forceful movement in the other direction, which has wrought so much change, most of it unacknowledged, to the imperial societies themselves. Perhaps the key thing about this cultural migration is that it is and has been circular, as the age-old back-and-forth between jazz and Cuban music, or reggae and rhythm and blues, or the zig-zag stories of merengue, calypso, or konpas illustrate so well in the archive of Caribbean sounds and rhythms.¹³ Throughout that history,

creative innovations have resulted from the travels and sojourns of musicians themselves, and for over a century recordings, radio broadcasts, movies and television, and the whole range of media have exposed musical practitioners and audiences to music-making from elsewhere, in great preponderance from the disproportionately endowed metropolitan centers, and very often as part of the imperial project.

But today's musical remittances are different; there has been a shift, as one study of the history of merengue in New York puts it, "from transplant to transnational circuit."¹⁴ That is, these musical remittances are not just contemporary instances of traveling musics or of media-induced exoticist fascination, whether that fascination is based on healthy curiosity or on ideological or commercial persuasion. Rather, the return "home" of Caribbean music, which has been re-cycled through the urban diaspora experience, is a mass collective and historically structured process corresponding directly to patterns of circular migration and the formation of transnational communities. The musical baggage borne by return diasporas, while rooted in the traditions and practices of the Caribbean cultures of origin, are forged in social locations having their own historical trajectories and stylistic environments, and are thus simultaneously internal and external to the presumed parameters of national and regional musical cultures. It is this ambivalence that goes to explain the mix of consternation and adulation with which members of the diaspora are received on their entry, or re-entry, into the home societies: they cannot be repelled out of hand for being foreigners,

nor can they be squared neatly with the musical and cultural dynamic at work in the societies from which they originally sprang.

Much of this work of transnational diffusion, of course, is done by the corporate media, and aligns directly with the taste-making and trend-setting projects and hierarchies of imperial power. No doubt "transnationalism from above" remains a prominent if not the predominant driving power behind this uprooting and re-routing of styles and practices and their re-introduction into the societies of origin in diluted and bastardized form. But since it is prevailing regimes of accumulation and the coercive management of flexible labor forces that impel patterns of circulatory migration and manage the shifting locations of transnational communities, the formation and the re-location of diaspora musics and cultures may also exemplify the process of what is called "transnationalism from below," that is, nonhegemonic and to some degree counter-hegemonic transnationalism, or, as one commentator capsulized it, "labor's analog to the multinational corporation."¹⁵

Despite and in the face of corporate and state power, Caribbean music today, and its movement to and from its massive diasporas, remains *popular* music in the deepest and most persistent sense: whether in the region or in its diasporic settings, and in its migration back and forth between them, it lives on as the vernacular expression of people and communities seeking, and finding, their own voice and rhythm.

All of this, and more, are lessons to be learned aboard the "guagua aérea," but only if we take the time and effort to travel round-trip.



NOTES

* This was first presented as the keynote address at the "Caribbean Soundscapes" conference held in New Orleans on March 12-14, 2004. The opening pages of the essay build directly on ideas set forth by Juan Otero Garabís in his writings (see note 4 below) and in personal conversations.

¹ See Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, *El arte de bregar* (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2000). On *jaibería*, see *Puerto Rican Jam*, eds. Frances Negrón Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

² Luis Rafael Sánchez, *La guagua aérea* (San Juan: Editorial Cultural, 1994).

³ See Carlos Torres, et al., eds., *The Commuter Nation: Perspectives on Puerto Rican Migration* (Río Piedras: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1994) and Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁴ See Juan Otero Garabís, "Terroristas culturales: en la 'guagua aérea' 'traigo la salsa,'" (Unpublished manuscript). See also, Juan Otero Garabís, *Nación y ritmo: "descargas" desde el Caribe* (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2000).

⁵ César Miguel Rondón, *El libro de la salsa: crónica de la música del Caribe urbano* (Caracas: Merca Libros, 1980). See also, Ángel Quintero Rivera, *Salsa, sabor y control: sociología de la música tropical* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1998), and Félix Padilla, "Salsa Music as a Cultural Expression of Latino Consciousness and Unity," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 2.1 (1989): 28-45.

⁶ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 128.

⁷ Raquel Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

⁸ Raquel Rivera, *Para rapear en puertorriqueño: discurso y política cultural* (Unpublished M.A. thesis, 1996).

⁹ Silvio Torres-Saillant, *El retorno de las yolas: ensayos sobre diáspora, democracia y dominicanidad* (Santo Domingo: Ediciones Librería La Trinitaria, 1999).

¹⁰ Frank Moya Pons, "Dominican National Identity in Historical Perspective," *Punto 7 Review* (1996): 23-5.

¹¹ Orlando Patterson, "Ecumenical America: Global Culture and the American Cosmos," in *Multiculturalism in the United States*, eds. Peter Kivisto and Georganne Rundblad (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2000), 465-80.

¹² See Gage Averill, "Moving the Big Apple: Tabou Combo's Diasporic Dreams," in *Island Sounds in the Global City: Caribbean Popular Music and Identity in New York*, eds. Ray Allen and Lois Wilcken (Brooklyn: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1998), 152.

¹³ For helpful and informative discussions of some of these interactions, see *Island Sounds in the Global City*, cited note 12 above.

¹⁴ Paul Austerlitz, "From Transplant to Transnational Circuit: Merengue in New York," in *Island Sounds in the Global City: Caribbean Popular Music and Identity in New York*, 44-60.

¹⁵ Alejandro Portes, "Global Villagers: The Rise of Transnational Communities," *The American Prospect* 2 (1998): 74-77.

