2004
Juan Flores
CREOLITÉ IN THE ‘HOOD: DIASPORA AS SOURCE AND CHALLENGE
Centro Journal, fall, año/vol. XVI, número 002
City University of New York. Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños
New York, Latinoamericanistas
pp. 282-293
Creolité in the ‘Hood: Diaspora as Source and Challenge*

JUAN FLORES

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 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, these terrorist jueyes? The hysteria in her days as a frigid blond. “What is innocent, a frigid blond like Kim Novak white-bred gringa, “angelical and all walks of life, while the panicky flight situation. The stage for a dramatic bregar familiar jocularity laced with irony that underlying but pervasive giggle, that memorable scene from the opening culture may well recognize this cultural collision is set.

Latin America and the Caribbean; public that it has been republished The story struck such a chord among its setting in the urban United States.

Troubled homeland and the cold and 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. 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 programmatic 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
The prevalent interpretation is actually a pan-Latino or Latin American 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." 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
My friend, my dear friend Yomito."

"También invitaré a mi amigo, mi amigo Yomito" (I'll also invite my friend Yomito).

The Christmas celebration, making sure to draw the traditional holiday music into the eclectic, inclusive jam of this special troup. This is still less than accepted knowledge that 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, Jamacians, 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, 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 affiliations, dispositions and behaviours, musical genres, linguistic patterns, moralitites, 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."

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.

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 raper en puertorriquena: discurso y politica 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."

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 on 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 (“Calle 13”) 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 abroad 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), 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.... 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.

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 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 culturation, 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.

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 konpans, “insular-diasporic barrier”11—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 Édouard 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 metropolises, 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 brought 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.10 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.” 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 dilated 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 music 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.”

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 setting, 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 about the “guaguá aérea,” but only if we take the time and effort to travel round-trip.