

**PROTEST THROUGH PERFORMANCE: THE (DE)CONSTRUCTION OF
CONTEMPORARY NUYORICAN IDENTITIES IN NEW YORK CITY**

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ABSTRACT

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By Jannine Golder

The aim of this thesis is to examine the extent to which contemporary Nuyorican poetry emanating from grassroots locales in New York City elucidates the construction, performance and critique of an alternative vision to mainstream US society, in which solidarity is forged through difference as opposed to the national roots generally associated with Puerto Rican identities. The term Nuyorican became popularized in the 1970s as a means to overturn the pejorative expression 'New Yoricán', a conjunction of New York and Puerto Rican, which was used by island-based Puerto Ricans to imply that their mainland compatriots occupied an interstitial status in which they were neither Puerto Rican nor American. An examination of the literature and poetry produced by US-based Nuyorican writers demonstrates not only how those issues which continue to be overlooked in the island's nationalist traditions such as race and language can be dealt with on the mainland, but also shows how the conflation of literature and revolutionary discourse goes some way to confronting the reluctance of many post-colonial theorists to engage with a materialist perspective.

The introductory section of the thesis places the idea of Nuyorican identity and performance poetry in the context of both the United States and Puerto Rico, as well as other minority groups in New York City. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the concept of the US as empire and the ways in which traditions of white civic nationalism were entrenched in the construction of the nation from the very inception of American independence. These were solidified through both internal strategies regarding US ethnic minority groups, as well as external policies regarding Latin America, the Caribbean and Puerto Rico in particular. Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on the social history New York's Puerto Rican community from the beginning of the twentieth century up until the 1970s, demonstrating that an intellectual tradition containing germinal seeds of resistance was evident among the earliest migrants. In addition, these chapters illustrate the historic affiliation between the Puerto Rican and African American communities in New York City in sharp contrast to the denial of the latter's component within Puerto Rican culture on the island. Chapter 5 places contemporary performances of Nuyorican poetry in the wider field of hip hop and the mainstream commodification of ethnicities, and analyzes the ways in which hip hop has acquired an African American focus to the detriment of Puerto Rican artists. Chapter 6 offers a corrective to this, focusing on the ways in which the commercial success of the Nuyorican Poets Café on the spoken word circuit has become a potentially powerful means through which to increase the symbolic capital of New York Puerto Ricans. Chapter 7 considers the poetry of the Bronx-based Acentos collective and how contemporary notions of Nuyorican identities are taken in new directions away from the ethno-centric focus of the original poets and the commodified ethnicities evinced in the spoken word and slam scene. Chapter 8 assesses some of the integral problems within Nuyorican poetry, such as those related to gender and generations, as well as the continued barrier between island- and mainland-based poets. Notwithstanding these, the reconciliation which Nuyorican poets achieve between a literary project and practical social change suggests a new paradigm for US inter-cultural relations in the 21st century, as they transform the 'borderland' space they occupy from a cultural no-man's land to a nexus of freedom, challenge and negotiation.

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INTRODUCTION

In New York City, to identify as Nuyorican is more than an allusion to one's ancestral roots in Puerto Rico. It is to imply a volitional undertaking of performance and negotiation which results in what postmodern scholars would refer to as a 'hybrid' or 'borderland' identity, an identity which neither refutes the tie maintained with Puerto Rico nor denies the lived experience of the United States. To identify as Nuyorican is to acknowledge the history and struggles of both migrants and US-born Puerto Ricans throughout the twentieth century, yet at the same time to recognize the constantly shifting nature of the space in which Nuyorican identity is performed. The mutability of the term Nuyorican demands its adherents, many of whom are third and fourth generation, to question the idea of belonging to an 'imagined community' which does not seem to have any localized essence following the mass influx of other Latino groups, particularly Dominicans and Mexicans, in the last few decades of the twentieth century. In many aspects, the lived experiences of these groups in terms of ethno-racial discrimination, poverty, drugs and poor education follow the paradigm carved out by first and second generation Puerto Ricans in the mid-twentieth century and thus challenge the idea of Nuyorican as exclusive territory which does not apply to other ethnic groups. This is not to imply, however, that the Puerto Rican experience in the US, and particularly New York, should be regarded as routine for Latino and Caribbean groups and therefore understated; only to suggest that the idea of Nuyorican identity as pertaining to a lived experience as opposed to an essentialist and therefore restrictive designation is potentially a powerful tool for uniting not only themselves with other Latinos, but also with anyone else who has suffered a similar social trajectory to themselves through institutionalized discrimination.

The coining of the term Nuyorican is often accredited to Miguel Algarin, the founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café, who is understood to have popularized the term amongst New York Puerto Ricans as a means to contest the rejection felt by the community from not

only mainstream American society, but also from island based Puerto Ricans. In an interview with Carmen Dolores Hernandez, for example, Algarin states that whilst visiting Puerto Rico, he overheard a group of people referring to him and his friends as 'New Yoricans'¹, a conjunction of New York and Puerto Rican. He recalls that 'they were looking down on us, as if we were nothing. We were Puerto Ricans speaking in English, and to them that was contemptuous' (1997: 40).² Thus as a means to overturn this pejorative term and contest the discrimination against him as a New York Puerto Rican, Algarin used the term 'Nuyorican' as the title for a 1975 anthology which brought together Puerto Rican poets writing in English. In this way, not only was he 'taking away the sting which the islander had thrown at him' (ibid), but by investing the previously derogatory term Nuyorican with real social meaning, Algarin was putting a name to and consequently validating the lived experience of thousands of New York Puerto Ricans.

The extent to which Algarin should be credited with the Nuyorican neologism, however, is debatable: according to Jose Angel Figueroa, for example, the term was first used by the Puerto Rican writer Jaime Carrero in his work entitled 'Neo-Rican Jetliner'.³ The elevation of Algarin to almost legendary status, primarily as a result of the incredible success of the Nuyorican Poets Café in the 1990s, is but one of the divisions which exists amongst the 'imagined' Nuyorican community leading to the insinuation that the term Nuyorican has become as pernicious as the enigmatic concept of a pan-Latino identity or *Latinidad*. *Latinidad*, defined by Lao-Montes and Davila as 'an analytical concept that signifies a category of identification, familiarity and affinity'⁴ (2001: 3) is nonetheless a heterogeneous category which can be utilized both as means as empowerment for grassroots Latino communities as well as a weapon of control by US corporations. The idea of Nuyorican as a unit of identification has met with similar ambivalence; whilst on

¹ The term New Yorician derives from the Puerto Rican idea of going to 'El Norte' or later 'Los Neuyores,' which became the generalized destination for Puerto Ricans migrating to the mainland US (see Eduardo Seda Bonilla (1977), 'Who is a Puerto Rican: Problems of Socio Cultural Identity in Puerto Rico' in *Caribbean Studies*, 17 (1-2): 105-121).

² In Hernandez, Carmen Dolores (1997) *Puerto Rican Voices in English: Interviews with Writers*, Praeger Publishers (Westport, Connecticut, London).

³ Personal interview (May 2005).

⁴ Lao-Montes, A. & Davila, A. (2001) *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City*, Columbia University Press (New York).

the one hand it is clearly employed as a means of empowerment for a disenfranchised community, on the other it is considered by some to connote a specific economic and social status which reinforces depreciatory stereotypes of Puerto Ricans. Thus the concept of 'Nuyorican' as a means of identification has become both fractured and contentious, particularly over the last decade, in large part due to the popularity of the Café founded by Algarin and Miguel Pinero in 1973. The commercial success of the Café⁵ - once described by Allen Ginsberg as 'the most integrated place on the planet'(Morales, 2002:110) - has resulted in the idea of Nuyorican poetry corresponding more to a particular performance-based, hip hop style or aesthetic amongst young poets than to any connection with the lived experience of being Nuyorican. Thus to identify as Nuyorican in a poetic sense is a source of power as well as a lived experience, as a result of which to use the term Nuyorican in any sense can be controversial, essentializing and evoke a variety of emotions amongst those who have any connection to the term.

Despite such internal divisions, the Puerto Rican community occupies a distinct place in New York for a variety of reasons. As the first Latino group to arrive in New York on a mass level, Puerto Ricans are considered to be the pioneers of many Latino movements and institutions which have emerged since the 1960s.⁶ Thus whilst their political and demographic supremacy does not go uncontested,⁷ the history of the Puerto Rican community is nonetheless acknowledged and consequently their voice has been considered indicative of the 'Latino community' at large. Having said this, in many respects the Puerto Rican trajectory bears a closer resemblance to groups such as the African Americans who have also experienced similar subjugation as an internally colonized minority. The African American experience, entailing a history of

⁵ The Café's commercial success is such that its 30th Anniversary Concert, for example, was attended by Hollywood actors Rosie Perez and Benjamin Bratt.

⁶ Clara Rodriguez gives an overview of the many achievements accomplished by the Puerto Rican community in New York in 'Forging a New, New York: The Puerto Rican Community, Post 1945' (Haslip-Viera, G. et al. (eds) (2004) *Boricuas in Gotham: Puerto Ricans in the Making of Modern New York City*, Markus Wiener Publishers (Princeton, New Jersey). For example, she notes the 1974 Aspira Consent Decree requiring that the Board of Education address the bilingual needs of non-English speakers in school, as well as the many Puerto Rican Studies programs and departments established, some of which have since expanded to become Latino or Ethnic Studies programs (p.207).

⁷ An article printed in *The New York Times* in 2000, for example, reported that the Puerto Rican population actually decreased for the first time in more than a century throughout the 1990s resulting in their accounting for only 37% of New York's Latino population.

subordination and displacement in which a population was coercively uprooted from their home country, bears strong analogies to that of Puerto Ricans. For whilst Puerto Ricans were never enslaved by the US, following the 1898 US invasion of the island Puerto Ricans have continued to be dominated by US policies and requirements to the extent that 'that tiny island in the Caribbean has been a bigger source of profit for US investors during the twentieth century than any other country in the world' (González, 2000: xvi).⁸ The vast population of Puerto Ricans living in the US – which now outnumbered that in Puerto Rico⁹ - can be said to be the direct result of US authority and control, not only due to effects of the 1917 Jones Act, which granted the right of US citizenship to all Puerto Ricans, but also on account of US demands for cheap labour as well as the 'safety valve' procedure, which drew on US cities as a solution to the unemployment generated in Puerto Rico following the rapid industrialization of the island after the 1940s. The fundamental role which Puerto Ricans have subsequently played in constituting the backbone of US economic structures is well-documented; with reference to New York, for example, Virginia Sanchez-Korrol notes that if it were not for the labour of Puerto Ricans in the city's industries, 'cheap and exploited as it may have been, many more companies would have fled to other parts following the globalization of industry after the 1960s' (2004: 4). In fact, the extent of Puerto Rican participation in the industrial sector of New York City was such that the catalyst for unemployment and informal work which appears to be endemic amongst the Puerto Rican community was the shift from a manufacturing to a service based economy; as Mike Davis notes, 'Puerto Ricans were standing on the track when Industrial Restructuring came around the bend at 100 miles per hour' (2001:126). According to Davis:

between 1970 and 1980 New York alone lost 268000 manufacturing jobs, a loss not offset by an increase in low level service jobs, the other major area of the Puerto Rican work force (ibid: 86,75).

⁸ Slavery was, however, an integral part of Spanish colonialism in Puerto Rico resulting in a shared history between black Puerto Ricans and African Americans. The practice officially ended in the US in 1867 (4 years after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 given the necessity of amending the Constitution so as to allow for its institutionalization), and in Puerto Rico in 1873 following a long campaign from abolitionists such as Jose Julian Acosta and Ramon Emeterio Betances.

⁹ According to *The Puerto Rican Herald* (November 22, 2004), the number of Puerto Ricans in the US stands at approximately 3.9 million as opposed to 3.6 million on the island.

As a result, from the early 1960s and continuing up to the present, a large portion of New York's Puerto Rican community have found themselves increasingly trapped in situations of extreme poverty and underemployment.

Thus a combination of factors such as the prevalence of poverty and joblessness, as well as the distortion of US history which disregards the colonial relationship between the US and Puerto Rico, has meant that disparaging images of the lazy, welfare-dependent Puerto Rican migrant have been widespread. This is primarily due to the fact that unlike other immigrant groups – European, Latino and Asian – Puerto Ricans have ‘failed’ to climb the social ladder, allegedly on account of their colonial mindset and unwillingness to work. Clearly, such misconceptions fail to consider not only the colonial relationship between the US and Puerto Rico, which has been compared to ‘a single woman being kept by a rich married man’ (Morales, 2002: 259) - but also the fact that Puerto Ricans ‘entered the US at a different point in the development of world capitalism’ to the Europeans which had come before them (Bryce-Laport, 1987: 64).¹⁰ That is to say, the ‘Great Migration’ of Puerto Ricans occurred at a time when the US had already established its position as the hegemonic world power; subsequently the same employment and economic opportunities were simply not available as they had been to the Italians, Jews, Germans and so on, particularly when combined with the racial order and concomitant discrimination in the US. Similarly, comparisons have been made between the differing economic fortunes of Cubans and Puerto Ricans, given that both are Caribbean Latino groups originating from islands suffering from a number of social ills. What such parallels fail to consider, however, is the immense amount of support both financially and morally which the Cubans received upon arriving in the US given their opposition to Fidel Castro, which allowed them to establish economically successful and powerful communities.¹¹ Puerto Ricans received no such assistance which would raise

¹⁰ Laport, Bryce (1987) in Sutton, C.R (ed.) *Caribbean Life in New York City: Sociocultural Dimensions*, Center for migration Studies (New York).

¹¹ In ‘Latino Caribbean Diasporas in New York,’ for example, Ramon Grosfoguel and Chloe Georas note that ‘the pre-1980s Cuban migrants managed to escape the negative symbolic capital of Puerto Rican racialization through the billion-plus dollars they received from the US government’s Cuban Refugee Program. They affirm that ‘every city where Cubans settled received millions of dollars in government

their status in the eyes of US society; the welfare and benefits they accepted were simply further confirmation that they were a dependent people, void of any symbolic or cultural capital and therefore unworthy of respect.

Yet for many poor immigrants to whom citizenship is denied and whose livelihoods depend on work in informal economies, the idea of Puerto Ricans as subjugated victims is absurd. Clearly, this view is filtered through to other sectors of society given the fact that most of the literature concerning the Puerto Rican community has been written by Puerto Ricans themselves, or else is subject to theories relying upon assumptions of pathological 'cultural deficiencies' to explain the failure of Puerto Ricans to climb the social ladder and assimilate into mainstream American society.¹² Negative stereotypes of Puerto Ricans as 'knife wielders, prone to violence and drug addiction' have permeated mainstream US media since the 1950s (González, 2000: 90), when the effects of the first mass migrations of Puerto Ricans to the mainland began to be felt.¹³ Since then, little has been done to mitigate the institutionalized discrimination experienced by Puerto Ricans; in fact, current US discourse concerning 'cultural pluralism' encourages the vilification of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos given its celebration of packaged, commodified 'ethnic difference', to the extent that those not fitting into such representations are considered as victims of their own pathological deficiencies. The idea of J-Lo as America's sweetheart, salsa clubs as the epitome of city chic, as well as the numerous Latin-style restaurants and art galleries fosters the illusion of a cultural tolerance and ethnic harmony between the imagined Latino community and mainstream America. Thus what is actually promoted by US multiculturalism is an array of images palatable to Anglo America, which are for the most part at odds with the true, working-class realities of Puerto Rican and other Latino communities, and which discourage further examination into the reasons why they remain at the bottom of American society.

assistance to cover expenses in education, welfare, hospitals and other public services for the refugees. This made them radically different from Puerto Ricans' (2001: 111).

¹² A notorious example of this is Linda Chavez' *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation*, (New York, Basic Books, 1991).

¹³ Clara Rodriguez also attributes the negative portrayal of Puerto Ricans in the media to the fact that the Great Migration (1946-1964) coincided with a period of heightened political conservatism, that is, the McCarthy era (2004: 205).

The idea of an invented multicultural discourse put forward by US authorities is intimately connected to the Latinization of the US in general, a phenomenon which has become one of the most convoluted topics in contemporary US/Latino studies. The demographic increase in the Latino component of the US population is such that:

it is transforming the ethnic composition of the country and challenging key aspects of its accepted national identity, language, culture and official history, a seismic social change that caught the power structures and institutions of US society unprepared (González, 2000: xi).

According to the 2002 US Census Bureau, for example, 37.4 million Latinos were living in the US, representing 13.3% of the total, a figure which is expected to increase to a full quarter by the year 2050. Clearly, this proliferation has provoked 'enormous insecurity among citizens of European descent' leading to the perception of Latinos as 'modern day huns.... barbarians at the door', an attitude which is currently provoking anti-Spanish backlashes, ethnic discrimination and demands for tougher immigration laws (ibid: xii). As a result of this, it is not only imperative that the ignorance currently dividing Anglo and Latin/o America is brought to an end through an awareness of the shared historical trajectories between the US and the various Latin American countries, but also that an alternative vision for the future of US society contesting the idea of exclusive ethnic identities is promoted, no matter from which sector of society that vision emerges. For what fails to be emphasized in such reports documenting the growth of Latino and other minority communities are the reasons why these ethno-racial blocs have developed in the first place; they are, in large part, due to US imperial policies. The civil wars, unemployment and poverty resulting from US intervention, either overtly or surreptitiously, in countries such as the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua have forced many thousands of Latinos to leave their countries and settle in the US. Consequently, they must be regarded as neo-colonial or internally colonized people.

The Application of Theory

A contemporary understanding of New York's Puerto Rican population is therefore imperative; not only in order to dispel the disparaging stereotypes which have labeled Nuyoricans as victimized by a welfare mentality, but also in order to enhance existing understandings of the ways in which the academically fashionable concepts of post-colonialism and post-colonial theory are lived out in US society. Here, a distinction must be made between the two expressions as they are employed as demarcations both materially and discursively; that is to say, post-colonialism as it refers to a specific political epoch succeeding the colonial era, and post-colonial discourse which refers primarily (though not exclusively) to the analysis of literary texts as a means of comprehending the ways in which the conflation of nationalism and literature served colonial metropolises in their imperialist projects. Neither of the two is descriptively unproblematic, as expounded by Anne McClintock in her article 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Post-Colonialism'. Here, McClintock notes that the very fabrication of the term 'post-colonialism' – devised as a tool with which to deconstruct the integral power dynamic of imperial domination – is itself paradoxical since:

the term is haunted by the very figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle. Post-colonialism marks history as a set of stages along an epochal road from 'the pre-colonial' to 'the colonial', to 'the post-colonial' – an unbidden, if disavowed, commitment to linear time and the idea of 'development (1994: 292).

The incompatibility which McClintock highlights between the endeavor of deconstruction implied by 'post-colonialism' and the fact that such an assignment necessitates the reducing of all time periods to their standing in relation to the colonial era results in 'the re-orientation of the globe once more around a single, binary opposition: colonial/post-colonial.' The term consequently 'confers on colonialism the prestige of history proper; colonialism is the determining mark of history' (ibid: 293). As a result, the prestige afforded to Western accounts of history and the subsequent

suppression of those narratives which fall outside of that denomination remain in place. A further complication which emerges as a result of the generalization implied with post-colonialism is the fact that whilst its usage may be politically accurate to the extent that imperialism as associated with the acquisition of geographic territories is, for the majority of the globe, over,¹⁴ such a circumscription refutes those territories for whom political subjugation remains the reality. Equally, it overlooks the fact that for many nations whose independence was achieved in the 20th century, the structures of centre/periphery as based upon elite domination and global exchanges of power were so firmly entrenched within native society that the achievement of national independence was not synonymous with colonial termination. That is to say, the ways in which imperialism traversed categories of race, gender and class resulted in the systematic repression of many subaltern¹⁵ peoples who remained marginalized from nationalist projects once political independence was accomplished in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. In this way, John McLeod is correct in affirming that:

over-turning colonialism is not just about handing land back to its dispossessed peoples, returning power to those once ruled by the Empire. It is also a process of overturning the dominant ways of seeing the world and representing reality in ways which do not replicate colonialist values (2000: 17).

This is not to say that European imperialism is fully reprehensible for the oppression of native populaces as illustrated, for example, through the paradoxical relationship between women and post-colonial projects in which national traditions are often premised upon patriarchal discourses and female subjugation. However, the ensconcing of economic

¹⁴ Exceptions include American Samoa, Puerto Rico and Guam. For a full list of the world's remaining colonies, dependencies and territories, see <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0762461.html>.

¹⁵ Benita Parry defines the subaltern as 'the colonized subject' (2005: 6) whose origins lie in the 'military term used for officers under the rank of captain – somewhat inconsistent with its current usage, borrowed from Gramsci, as a shorthand for any oppressed person' (ibid: 49). The widespread use of the term is often attributed to Ranajit Guha, who employed its usage when analyzing Indian history to designate 'the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those we have defined as elite; the elite being dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous' and the indigenous divided into all those who operated at the 'all-India level' and those who operated at 'the local and regional levels' as members of the dominant all-India groups (ibid: 166).

supremacy – not so easily relinquished as political possession – together with indigenous elite complicity¹⁶ and the ever-accelerating power wielded by multi-national corporations rendering the possibility of standing outside Western supremacy almost negligible, results in a perpetuated ‘neo-colonial’ status for many nations formerly subordinated to European metropolises.

In addition, the application of post-colonial discourse in a literary context is also problematized by two principal factors. Firstly, the understanding of post-colonial theory as related to the ‘exploration of ways in which representations and modes or perception are used as fundamental weapons of colonial power to keep colonial peoples subservient to colonial rule’ (McLeod, 2000: 17) has become inextricably linked to the examination of colonial literary texts as a means through which to establish the norms and values of the imperial power as it projects fears, doubts and national insecurities on to the Other as opposed to factual evidence of the society under scrutiny. Building on the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the arguments advanced by Edward Said in *Orientalism* are particularly relevant since his analysis of representations of the Orient as a repository for a Western value-system as constructed upon the negation of what it is/not in comparison to the East leads him to pronounce that:

the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony... The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be* – that is, submitted to being – *made Oriental*’ (2003: 5-6).

¹⁶ In his chapter ‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness’ in *The Wretched of the Earth* (first published in 1961), for example, Frantz Fanon laments that ‘the national middle class which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an under-developed middle class’ with practically ‘no economic power and in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace’ (2001:119-120). This leads it to ‘send out frenzied appeals for help to the former mother country’ who will subsequently ‘come to the nation as tourists for the exotic, for big-game hunting and for casinos’ (ibid: 123). Thus, the ‘national bourgeoisie turns its back more and more on the interior and on the real facts of its underdeveloped country, and tends to look towards the former mother country and the foreign capitalists who count on its obliging compliance’ (ibid:133).

Said's reference to the ways in which the Orient has been *made* Oriental through literary texts (amongst other forms of representation) in contrast to presenting tenable evidence of its inferiority and subsequent need for Western influence illustrates not only how concepts of the Orient were naturalized in Western imaginations as a means to justify the region's colonization, but also suggests how such images were forced upon the indigenous populace in order to ensure their subjugation was accepted.¹⁷ Notwithstanding the dangers inherent in generalizing the colonization process, which clearly differed according to region and metropole, such processes occurred through the imposition of customs, values and language upon the native peoples resulting in the obfuscation at best (extinction at worst) of their own traditional culture(s). In this way, the aforementioned 'decolonization process' is recognized to not only extend beyond political definitions and official withdrawal of power, but can only be achieved through an active 'decolonization of the mind' as associated with such post-colonial activists as Frantz Fanon¹⁸ and Amilcar Cabral,¹⁹ which involves the re-inscription of native customs and languages into national history. In this way, the current trend of 'post-colonial literature' – represented in the title of Ashcroft and Tiffin's illustrious work *The Empire Writes Back* - places a strong emphasis on not only the traditions and native language of the formerly colonized

¹⁷ In this way, Said follows the paradigm set out by Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony in which the state maintains domination in a capitalist society through a conflation of coercion and consent. This concept had previously been used by Marxists such as Lenin, but was advanced by Gramsci to include the notion of 'common-sense' values instilled by the dominating classes on to the rest of the population in order to maintain their own supremacy. This could sometimes result in apparently paradoxical policies where the state would make concessions to the proletarian classes ostensibly to its own detriment; however, the premise of preventing grassroots revolution lies at the core of such apparent incongruities.

¹⁸ Born in Martinique in 1925, Fanon was a trained psychiatrist who worked in an Algerian hospital during the war against France. He eventually joined the national liberation movement and is best known for his works *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins, White Masks* (both of which were first published in 1967). Throughout both texts, Fanon effectively demonstrated the psychological as much as socio-economic damage wrought upon subjugated societies, resulting in a denial of their own humanity and subsequent imperative for a 'de-colonization' of the mind.

¹⁹ Cabral was born in Bafata, Portuguese Guinea in 1924 and became Secretary-General of the African Party for the Independence for Guinea and the Cape-Verde islands (PAIGC) (Parry, 2005: 169). In 'National Liberation and Culture,' Cabral states that the 'value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated' (1993: 54). Subsequently, he affirms that 'it is generally within the culture that we find the seeds of opposition which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement' and 'a people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if, without complexes and without underestimating the importance of positive accretions from the oppressor and other cultures, they return to the upward paths of their own culture which negates any kind of subjection to foreign culture' (ibid: 56).

territory, but also on the ways in which distortions and contradictions instilled through imperial rule continue to affect the development of the 'nation'.²⁰

It is here, however, that the predicament arises concerning regions or nations whose socio-political trajectory does not conform to the purported linear route of 'pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial.' That is to say, what of those areas which not only continue to remain in an official colonial relationship, but which have historically been subjugated to more than one metropolis? If the answer to 're-inscribing' an independent cultural role freed from imperial constraint is to turn to the language and customs which idealistically would be found in a preserved form upon their excavation - a contentious postulation in itself - how does this translate for those nations whose 'pre-colonial' traditions were also obscured by imperialism? In other words - is it possible for those regions that have been doubly subjugated to reconcile an independent national culture with a dual colonial legacy - or are they forever doomed to remain victims of the insurmountable paradox which arises through the 'post-colonial' illogicality of replacing one imperial language with another? For this reason, a case study of insular Puerto Rican literature is illuminating in itself - not least to observe the ways in which a conglomerate of ethno-national contradictions have sustained the construction of a purported 'alternative' to US imperialism. That is to say, whilst a recourse to bucolic *jibaro*²¹ culture as premised upon white, European based traditions is inherently constructed in insular notions of *la puertorriquenidad*, what remains obscured from such images are the ways in which these are evoked at the expense of other aspects of the island's ethno-racial populace, historically obscured through the legacy of Hispanic colonization. In defending her literary decision to write in both English and Spanish, for example, island-based author Rosario Ferre repudiates notions of being culturally treacherous by remarking 'I defend my language, Spanish, but yes, I am anti-Spain. What has Spain done for us lately?' Yet in a society where 'literature in Spanish has long compensated for the absence of a

²⁰ One problematic inherent in the construction of a post-colonial national identity is not least the fact that for countries in Africa and Latin America, for example, the 'nations' whose culture and language is purportedly defended were geographically delineated through imperial powers.

²¹ According to Ana Ramos-Zayas, the image of white *jibaros* or mountain folk were employed as part of a nationalist ideology connected to 'moral values, close-knit kinship, whiteness, hospitality and generosity' in sharp contrast to the 'morally depraved and barbaric American invaders and in negation of the African and immigrant elements of national identity' (2003: 24).

sovereign state by performing the role of a “national constitution” (Negron-Muntaner, 2004: 183), the literature produced by bilingual writers such as Ferre – along with those mainland Puerto Rican authors who do the same or alternatively write solely in English – are considered as linguistic betrayal since Puerto Rican writers ‘imagine themselves as virtual heads of state and protectors of the nation’s integrity against foreign penetration and domestic contamination – at least on paper’ (ibid). The cultural incongruity inherent in substituting one imperial language with another remains unaddressed in (ethno)-national discourse, with the result that the ambiguous status of the island continues to be politically anomalous in the 21st century.

In this way, a close examination of the literature produced by US-based Puerto Rican writers is particularly appealing – for not only do the literary works here address those issues which continue to be overlooked in the island’s national traditions (such is the need to present a united cultural front in the face of an international community), but also go some way to resolving a second criticism launched at current post – colonial theorists, that is to say, the contemporary reluctance of many scholars to engage with a materialist perspective and concentrate on the field as a ‘theoretical position freed from the categories of political theory, state formation and socio-economic relationships’ (Parry, 2004: 4). According to Perry Anderson, for example, it was with the evolution of critical theory in the 1930s that ‘revolutionary discourse became divorced from revolutionary social practice’ (ibid: 5) and rather than being a field of struggle against capitalist exploitation and domination as its title would imply, post-colonial discourse has become more concerned with ‘an exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity and multiculturality... and a refusal of an antagonistic or struggle based model of politics’ (Lazarus, 2005: 423). It is to be lamented, as far as Benita Parry is concerned, that ‘colonialism has been re-presented for study as a cultural event’ in which ‘discursive violence’ has taken place over the practices of a violent system, and the intrinsically antagonistic colonial encounter is reconfigured as one of dialogue, complicity and transculturation (ibid). For whilst a materialist perspective such as Parry’s is not to disavow that these phenomena are contained within the colonialist trajectory, the problem which scholars such as Parry have with the emphasis placed on such attempts at

reconciling the colonial past is their insinuation that colonialism was more of an innocuous colloquy than one of violence and subjugation. That is to say, clearly colonialism was a rhizomorphic practice in which those present in the 'contact zone' (to use Mary Louise Pratt's neologism) were engaged in a cultural exchange, but this exchange was by no means equal as implied by concepts of hybridity and multiculturalism – and subsequently should not obfuscate the fact that colonialism was exploitative first, and transcultural second.

The reasons for a shift in post-colonial theory away from the liberation philosophy of Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral and towards the precedence of 'an essentially textualist account of culture' (Parry, 2004: 3) are, in my opinion, threefold. Firstly, following the lack of success of both twentieth-century socialist movements and several new, independent nations (particularly in the Caribbean), either through a failure to react to economic change (Horsman, 1994: 264) or as a result of sabotage from more powerful nations, enthusiasm for popular social change has waned amongst many post-colonial critics, who consider there to be no alternative to US capitalism. Secondly, any movements which are perceived to contain any Marxist or anti-colonial sentiment are considered to be nativist, atavistic – and consequently essentialist and dangerous. Thus they are shunned by scholars who fear any implication of political strife. Thirdly, as noted by Parry:

the transition from the realist model in cultural studies should be seen in the context of a wider shift within social theory itself away from materialist understandings of historical processes and the symbolic order, and towards collapsing the social into the textual (ibid: 4).

The three factors combined are sufficient to discourage post-colonial discourse from engaging in any serious discussion with liberation theories, as a result of which, such ideas or movements become further marginalized and are considered to be too radical to be taken seriously by many branches of Western academia.

To some extent, the trepidation of post-colonial critics towards contemporary activism is understandable – particularly in the light of terrorist and fundamentalist fear following 9/11. For this reason, upon arriving in New York I was particularly drawn towards the performance poetry scene then sweeping the cultural circuit of the city for here, a conflation of literary prowess with community activism leads to a distinct analogy between the processes of cultural synthesis and Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic theory, which neither attempts to construct an idealized, essentialist view of the past nor does it dispel liberationist ideals and principles. Alternatively, in *The Black Atlantic* Gilroy postulates the nexus of the Black Atlantic as a means of affiliation and forging connections which can ultimately result in both an augmentation of symbolic capital and practical social change for those capable of recognizing attachments which reach beyond national identities. In this way, Gilroy echoes scholars such as Homi Bhabha who affirms the emancipatory potential contained within the 'cross-culturality' of diasporic communities; that is to say, whilst the cultural 'no-man's land' implicit in the idea of a borderland or hybrid identity can appear bewildering and paradoxical, the freedom afforded to such communities in terms of their ability to recognize, challenge and change those nationalist traditions from which they are kept marginalized places them in an enviable position of cultural agency. With regards to New York's Puerto Rican communities, for example, their historical connection to the African American contingent of the city's populace has forced an acknowledgement of the African diaspora which continues to be subjugated in the cultural legacy of the island. In this way, Gilroy's Black Atlantic theory, which breaks with national traditions and instead looks more towards lived experiences (that is to say, the idea of routes in time and space as opposed to routes in a geographic location) is alluring at the same time that it confesses to provide little more than a recognition of transatlantic history. Gilroy states:

If this appears to be little more than a roundabout way of saying that the reflexive cultures and consciousness of the European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the Indians they slaughtered and the Asians they indentured were not, even in situations of the most extreme brutality, sealed off from each other, then so be it (1993: 2).

In breaking with national cultural models, Gilroy's hypothesis can clearly extend beyond the Black Atlantic and into other areas which are not touched by transatlantic slavery. In fact, Neil Lazarus would argue that such an expansion is not only appealing but exigent, in view of the fact that Gilroy's privileging of slavery over other institutions such as wage labour and forced migration 'leaves assumptions as to the Western provenance of modernity potentially undisturbed' (1999: 63). A definite parallel exists, for example, between the trajectories of African slaves and the colonial histories of Caribbean islands such as Puerto Rico, as well as Latin American countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador. In *Harvest of Empire*, Juan González makes this connection explicit as he notes the relation between the current dilemmas of poverty, discrimination and racism faced by today's US Latinos and the process of US expansionism, which began in the nineteenth century and has continued throughout the twentieth and twenty-first under neo-imperialist guises. As González states, the escalating number of Latin American immigrants arriving in the US is due to the 'raping and pillaging by US capital since its independence' with the 'millions of desperate workers now coming in such numbers to reclaim a share of that wealth' (2001: xvii). González notes that US history has either been distorted or concealed so as to belie the colonial trajectory of Latin American peoples, particularly in the Puerto Rican case where the island's colonial status was justified through the people's purported unsuitability for self-government. In this way, Puerto Rico bears a close affiliation with other internally colonized groups such as African Americans and Chicanos, although explicit reference to either group as 'colonized' is denied along with the concept of US imperialism in general.

Also salient in Gilroy's hypothesis is his focus on cultural vehicles, notably music, as powerful tools in both communicating information and galvanizing consciousness as well as 'constructing utopias through a politics of transfiguration' (ibid: 36-37).²² Here, Gilroy evokes the concept of a 'politics of transfiguration' in order to refer to:

²² For further expansion on this concept see Seyla Benhabib (1984), *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, Columbia University Press (New York).

the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations... and the formation of a community of needs and solidarity which is made magically audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural utility and reproduction.

This black cultural expression becomes not only a counter-discourse but instead:

a counter-culture that defiantly reconstructs its own critical, intellectual and moral genealogy in a partially hidden sphere of its own (ibid: 38).

Here, Gilroy's indication of not only the intellectual content but also the material consequences of black music (with its role in the 'formation of a community of needs and solidarity') addresses the predicaments brought to light by scholars such as Parry, who disdain the textual focus of much of contemporary post-colonial theory and its subsequent divorcing from the realities of quotidian life for the communities whom it purports to represent. The thwarting of revolutionary potential contained within post-colonial theory as a result of its literary spotlight is re-inscribed in *The Black Atlantic*, with the identifying of germinal seeds of social change within vehicles of contemporary black culture. As will be seen in later chapters, however, the historic conflation of non-Western cultures and notions of immaturity results in the frequent disavowal of such vehicles as 'youth practices,' which are subsequently overlooked as a form of real agency and instead belittled as spectacle or entertainment. For this reason, the application of *The Black Atlantic* to the Nuyorican 'community' upon which I have based my thesis is particularly relevant, for just as the marriage of music and revolutionary potential is brought to light through a study of Black British culture, so too is an 'alternative vision' or 'politics of transfiguration' synthesizing within the performance poetry community in New York City. Here, the vehicle of spoken word or performance poetry – which conflates the oral tradition of the African diaspora with a written legacy gradually permeating US society and its national traditions – is employed as a means through which to address the mainstream boundaries and divisions hitherto obstructing a 'community' premised upon shared experiences of ethno-racial discrimination and a 'colonized

mindset.' This 'deconstruction' process is manifest through the poetry performed and written by those 'organic intellectuals'²³ (to adopt Antonio Gramsci's idiom) who not only engage in staunch critique of global society, but also do so in ways which promote the creation and maintenance of socially conscientious, politicized and educationally committed collectives dedicated to counteracting the forces of racism, sexism and poverty endemic in the construction of the US nation. Within this community, the contribution of the Puerto Rican diaspora towards constructing the utopian vision characterizing such efforts has been paramount, not least because of the increasingly prominent role of the Nuyorican Poets Café, which occupies a prestigious place on the performance poetry circuit. Issues of bilingualism, forced migration, inter-racial identities and ethno-nationalism have long been prominent on the Puerto Rican agenda - yet are only relatively recently surfacing for other mainland diasporic groups. Subsequently, the ways in which the diverse experiences of mainland Puerto Rican life can oscillate between an array of racial, ethnic and social groups attests to the potential of not only Puerto Ricans but Latinos in general as 'leaders in the US multicultural experiment',²⁴ as illustrated in the thematic of much of the work produced by contemporary Nuyorican poets.

The alternative education system which comprises the spoken word movement bears a strong analogy to the hypothesis expounded by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Like Fanon, Freire is cognizant that the 'humanistic and historical task of the oppressed is to liberate themselves and their oppressors' from their subjective positions as 'manifestations of de-humanization' (1996: 26-30). In recognizing the need for a mental freedom in addition to the economic liberation implied in decolonization, Freire builds on the works of Fanon and Cabral as he affirms the exigency of overturning the 'culture of silence' which characterizes the under-classes. However, whilst he notes that in order to do this 'the oppressed' must be made aware of the functioning of the capitalist system in which they find themselves (for 'only as they discover themselves to be "hosts"

²³ Gramsci evokes the term of organic intellectuals as those bourgeois scholars who have strong roots in their communities, in this way avoiding the complicity of traditional intellectuals of falling into dominant ideologies. Gramsci saw his works as a clarion to galvanize the intellectual and activist energies from not only the bourgeoisie but the working classes in order to construct a revolutionary consciousness.

²⁴ As quoted in interview with Ed Morales (May 2005).

of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy' (ibid: 30), this cannot be achieved by mainstream education, which simply inculcates the values and the ideologies of the oppressors leaving no space for revolutionary potential. Consequently, Freire advocates an alternative pedagogy which makes 'oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for liberation' (ibid). Through the systemization of the educative programs outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which are presented in such a way that the premise 'knowledge is a gift bestowed upon those knowing nothing' is refuted (since this imparts a projection of ignorance onto the oppressed from the teacher consequently perpetuating their state of oppression), Freire postulates a pedagogy in which 'teachers and students are both subjects – not only in the task of unveiling reality but in the task of re-creating knowledge.' In this way, the oppressed are educated at the same time that the 'revolutionary leadership' comprised of teachers and social activists refrain from becoming oppressors themselves in their constant dialogue and process of learning with their students.

Similarly, within New York's spoken word movement, the poets and artists performing their work actively engage in such a pedagogical mission through providing a readily accessible repository of knowledge in which (particularly) young people can situate themselves in the socio-economic structures around them. As such, they are able to view the discrimination, disenfranchisement and other forms of victimization which they may experience not as evidence of their inferiority or 'pathological failings' (which as will be seen in later chapters is still an entrenched notion of racial relations in the 21st century) but as ramifications of the strategies employed by mainstream society in order to ensure their subordination and functioning of the status quo. Subsequently, by engaging with the spoken word artists through feedback with the individual poets as well as gestures and expressions made throughout the performances (more about which will be said in Chapter 6), the 'oppressed' take one step further in their own emancipation as well as that of others as they allow the poets or 'revolutionary leadership' to empathize with their concerns and anxieties. Such performative participation is also demonstrated in Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the concept of which involves an enactment of

historical moments which become re-configured on stage in a collective endeavor to subvert repressive outcomes and propose alternative visions for society. For example, with the radical theatre explored by Boal, the audience members become 'spect-actors' rather than spectators given their ability to join in the performances at their own volition if they have their own suggestions and proposals as to how a particular historical moment could have resulted in positive social change had it occurred differently. In this way, a crucial distinction is made between Anglo American theatre, in which 'frivolity, historical continuity, muted transformation and cold rationality are privileged as markers of character; there is an insistence on theatre as illusion' (Rossini, 1996: 33) and the notions of identity, potential subversion and 'self-transformation' which characterizes the political theatre of Nuyorican and Chicano communities.²⁵

The process of mental emancipation and agency promoted by Freire and Boal is also critical in revealing the fallacy of those classifications set out by mainstream society as a means through which to 'divide and control' since 'the minority cannot permit itself the luxury of tolerating the unification of the people, which would undoubtedly signify a serious threat to their own hegemony' (Freire, 1996: 122). Here, the theory advanced in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is invaluable in elucidating the performed nature of gendered identities – and, by extension, to any identity presupposing a pre-discursive category or 'biological essence' which results in cultural ramifications consequently ossified as 'natural' and expected. For example, Butler states that:

gender is the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts (1990: 7).

Here, Butler notes the inherent paradox in feminist representation whereby the 'subject' of woman is – rather than a pre-determined biological classification – a product of the discourse arising from the system of power in which it is embedded. For:

²⁵ In *Jose, Can You See?* Alberto Sandoval Sanchez notes the increasing commodification of Latino theatre and that the political register was more apparent in the 1960s and 1970s (1999: 105-106).

if gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way (ibid: 5).

Yet, as expressions of gendered identities are rigidly determined by mainstream society to the extent that any aberrations in the social order are considered as transgressive (for example, trans-gendered individuals, homosexuals and so on), it follows that their inference of 'sex' as an 'anatomical, chromosomal, hormonal essence'(ibid: 6) is purely performative. This is not to say that such performances do not contain real social meaning (to the extent that they reveal the underlying structures of power in a 'patriarchal' society and the ways in which these are produced and perpetuated). In terms of pre-supposing a biological explanation for their existence, however, performances of gendered identities must be seen as reflections of 'the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established' (ibid: 7) as opposed to an inference of pre-determined sexual categories.

The analogy which can be made between Butler's hypothesis of 'gender' inferring 'sex', which must then be questioned as biologically essentialized, and the concept of ethno-racialized identities is unavoidable. For just as gender is viewed as the composition of the cultural ramifications of sex, so too can ethnicity be considered as the cultural ramifications of race – given that, as will be explored in Chapter 1, ethnicities are synthetic constructs designed to perpetuate a white supremacy without resorting to an outright hierarchical racial taxonomy which would contradict claims of civic nationalism. That is to say, features and traits of specific ethnic groups have historically been attributed to race (with concepts of biological determinism) and later, to environmental factors. Yet even in the 21st century, specific ethnic groups are considered to possess certain fundamental or 'natural' traits, a factor which becomes particularly relevant with the issue of (physical) performance. For as noted by Jane Desmond, 'in North America it is no accident that both "blacks" and "Latins" are said to "have rhythm" given their lumping together in race, national origins and genetic propensity for rhythmic movement' (1997: 48). Desmond's point is crucial in understanding the ways in which the ethnic

performances of Nuyorican and other Latino groups appear to substantiate proposed linkages of blacks with 'sexuality, sensuality and a natural proclivity towards physical ability and expressivity' (ibid: 43). In reality, as with gendered performances, they are the products of a hegemonic discourse of power which assigns them such roles (that is to say, identities associated with the physical and not the intellectual thereby consolidating white supremacy) by virtue of a purported biological essence. As a result, it stands to reason that since racialized bodies are the canvases upon which white oppression has been exerted, it is through the physical presence and performance of these same bodies that resistance is made. In this way, the very act of an ethno-racialized performer standing on a stage – thereby adhering to the role expected of him by a mainstream audience who would consider such a spectacle as 'natural' of a non-white individual – and using this as a platform by which to engage in an intellectual critique with Anglo-America (as so many poets and artists do) as opposed to providing a content-free performance palatable to the tastes of white spectators, can be seen as demonstrative of subversion and protest as well as an ethnicized performance.

Yet if it is the case that in order to sustain its own existence, capitalist society must imbue subjugated identities onto those whom it needs to remain oppressed – what hope is there for representation of demoralized subjects which is not detrimental to their own emancipation since they are forced (at least superficially) to identify in mainstream terms? For instance, Cuban-Puerto Rican poet Rich Villar writes the following in his poem *Noche Buena*, 1986:

*on this night, none of us hail from suburbs or city,
this night we are all straight off the boat.*

*trading in suburban squirrels for lizards and coquis
three piece conformity for dress shoes and guayaberas
laughing at Uncle June and Uncle John
trip in halting jíbaro tongue*

*'Coño, y la comida, donde está?'*²⁶

Here, even Rich – a well known activist and advocate of cross-cultural affiliations – takes advantage of the binary which he acknowledges to exist between the material culture of mainstream US society and the natural, carefree existence of his Latino family to exalt the virtues of the latter, thereby rendering himself complicit in the perpetuation of 'performed' ethnic identities with their concomitant inferred 'spiritual' essence. If the oppressed – including the 'revolutionary leaders' who consider themselves to be the torchbearers of a new consciousness and alternative cultural vision – play into the illusions fostered by the mainstream ethnic lexicon, Freire's affirmation cited below appears to be as unresolved today as it did upon the time of his postulation:

the central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participating in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?
(1996: 30):

Or does it? As briefly demonstrated above, the recourse to a stereotyped ethnic identity is not always emblematic of a 'colonized mindset' or a failure to recognize the fallacy of ethnic classifications; often a parodied or hyper-inflated persona (such as that of Jennifer Lopez) can provide a 'first point of call' to garner attention from a mainstream audience in order to reveal the incongruence inherent in such portrayals. Lopez, who unabashedly conforms to a Bronx fly-girl image devoured by Anglo-America, is currently one of Hollywood's highest-paid female performers, thereby revealing the paradox of the lack of agency embedded in representations of Puerto Rican women and the lucrative rewards which can ensue from such self-portrayals. Yet perhaps the most illuminating feature of contemporary Nuyorican 'performances' through which an ethnic representation is simultaneously evoked and contested is the priority given to lived experiences as a means of solidarity, as opposed to a privileging of national origin or race. As will be discussed throughout the forthcoming chapters, contemporary explorations of the designation Nuyorican as they are played out in political as well as commodified spaces reveal the

²⁶ Taken from *Fuacataa! Trite and Insipid Latino Verse From the Semi Secret Files of El Profe* (chap book – copyright 2004: Rich Villar).

increasing irrelevance of the ethno-racial connotations previously attached to the term, given the almost identical quotidian realities for an array of oppressed groups.²⁷ Consequently, whilst a degree of strategic essentialism is employed in order to provide the necessary clarion for action, the nucleus inferred in the concept of Nuyorican becomes questioned at the same time that it is called upon, as the term has expanded to incorporate whites, African Americans and Asians within its tradition. In this way, the pan-American identity at the heart of José Martí's *Nuestra America*,²⁸ in which the ideologies of the dominant US classes are contested and belied through recourse to a teaching of all American peoples, is lived out and actively promoted in the urban setting of New York City, through the concept of a hybrid, multi-cultural Nuyorican identity.

Before considering a breakdown of the chapters which have been devised to provide the context and background for an analysis of contemporary Nuyorican performance poetry, a word must firstly be said on the term 'Puerto Rican community' which will be used throughout the thesis. In many instances, the idea of a community will be evoked as much for semantic expedience as for the invocation of a shared collective of history and ideals, since as illustrated throughout Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, such a conjecture is rarely accurate in so much as it pertains to a cohesive unit of like-minded peoples. As an ethno-racial collective, the 8.5 million individuals comprising the Puerto Rican 'community' are united through a common ancestry and affiliation to a geographic entity in which they are not resident. The differences within the 'community', however, are often so great as to preclude the advancement of any socio-political agenda, leading to an array of diverse experiences resulting in the very notion of a Puerto Rican or Nuyorican community as deceptive and fallacious.²⁹ Disparities premised on political

²⁷ As will be seen in Chapter 7, the term oppressed groups does not just apply to ethnic minority groups, particularly in a post-industrial capitalist society where whites can be just as economically and psychologically subjugated as ethno-racialized individuals.

²⁸ *Nuestra America* was written by Cuban poet, essayist and journalist José Martí in 1891 and expounded his views on America as a continent and hemisphere.

²⁹ In his article 'New Ethnicities', Stuart Hall notes that 'you can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject' (1995: 225). For whilst at one time such a representation was a 'necessary fiction,' to re-employ this would be tantamount to acknowledging that 'all black people are good and all black people are the same,' thereby confirming 'one of the predicates of racism that "you can't tell the difference because they all look the same"'. Consequently, Hall affirms the need for a politics which can

stance, class, affiliation to a particular ethnic group and place of residence all contribute to the fractured character of New York's Puerto Rican populace, as a result of which the appeal to solidarity as based upon difference conjectured through the poetry performed on the city's spoken word circuit is all the more attractive. That is to say, in the face of a historical vacuum of grassroots leadership and a collective ethos, the concept of building with other ethnic groups with shared experiences as a means to both raise awareness of the Puerto Rican plight(s) as well as promote active social change is proving to be increasingly seductive.

The objective of this thesis, therefore, is twofold. Firstly, by means of countervailing the historical stereotypes of New York Puerto Ricans as a pathologically deficient ethnic group devoid of cultural capital, I wish to construct a genealogy of those strategies traditionally employed as resistance to the subjugated identities which mainstream society has attempted to impart upon the diverse sectors of the community. These will then be linked to contemporary strategies of confrontation, thereby attesting to the ways in which current attention given to Puerto Rican media celebrities, authors and performance poets is not indicative of a 'Latino boom' suggested by mainstream society, but is instead a reflection of a commodified cultural pluralism seeking to thwart fears of US balkanization. Secondly, my thesis will examine the extent to which contemporary Nuyorican poetry emanating from grassroots locales in New York City elucidates the construction, performance and critique of an alternative vision to mainstream US society, in which solidarity is forged through difference as opposed to the national roots generally associated with Puerto Rican identities. The exigency of such a vision will become increasingly apparent throughout the various chapters, as the context is provided for not only the translocal position in which today's generation of Nuyoricans find themselves, but also for the continued relevance of such concepts as internal colonialism and US imperialism, both of which are repeatedly euphemized with ostensibly innocuous theories of globalization. It is exactly this concept which provides the basis for Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, in which the concept of globalization is presented as the face of

work 'with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common resistance and struggle possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities' (ibid).

a de-territorialized 21st century empire as opposed to the materially based colonial policies of European powers. In his critique of *Empire*, however, Atilio Boron notes that 'deterritorialization' connected with US imperialism fails to consider that:

the acceleration of globalization in the final quarter of the last century, instead of weakening or dissolving the imperialist structures of the world economy, magnified the structural asymmetries that define the insertion of the different countries into it... Thus the great majority of countries witnessed the growth of their external dependency and the widening of the gap that separated them from the centre (2005: 3-4).

Subsequently, in his article 'On Globalization, Again!' Ali Behdad affirms that:

while technological advances have dramatically altered the velocity of global flow, the general structures of economic and political power do not differ that radically from their colonial counterparts (2005: 69).

Thus despite efforts to describe globalization as 'an utterly novel phenomenon in need of a whole new vocabulary and conceptual framework' (ibid: 66), Behdad confirms that a brief genealogy of globalization which 'underscores the critical and historical shifts that have occurred at each stage of its development' demonstrates that the uneven nature of global flow 'explicates the political shift from European colonialism to US imperialism' (ibid: 77). He notes, for example, that:

the quick academic shift from post-colonialism to globalization has ironically short-circuited the possibility of understanding the ways in which the geographical and cultural displacements of people and things by European colonialism informed the so-called cartography of globalization today (ibid: 70).

Consequently, he infers that globalization is simply a lexical veneer to conceal US neo-colonial strategies which materially are not so far removed from European imperialism as 'the cartography of globalization' would suggest.

The concept of the US as empire is dealt with in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis, both of which illustrate the ways in which traditions of white civic nationalism were entrenched in the construction of the nation from the very inception of American independence. In Chapter 1, for example, it is considered how the 'colour line' as postulated by W.E.B. Du Bois is not anomalous to an otherwise ethnically harmonious US society, but is instead firmly ensconced in nationalist tradition, leading to the continued discrimination and lack of opportunities for non-white peoples. Such an acknowledgement counter-acts the idea of the US as a munificent immigrant state, since those who are accepted into mainstream society are able to do so only if they conform to their assigned level on the social ladder. Chapter 2 deals with the ways in which the expansionist policies of the US throughout the 19th century to a large extent provided the backbone for its nascent imperial status, a rank which was only made possible through its political and ideological relationship with Latin America. Here, representations of the latter were diffused in such a way so as to naturalize its uncivilized and inferior cultural ethos, thereby justifying the relentless incursions on the region and the exploitation of its wealth and resources. The relationship between Puerto Rico and the US is particularly emblematic of this point; for since the invasion of the island by US forces in 1898, Puerto Ricans have been stereotyped as incapable of self-government and dependent on US assistance. For whilst US citizenship was afforded to all Puerto Rican inhabitants with the Jones Act of 1917, a recognition that this was as much for US benefit due to labor shortages in the war is vital in countervailing the notion that citizenship has afforded Puerto Ricans with a panacea for the ills faced by other Latin American citizens. The inclusion of a specific section on the relationship between Puerto Rico and the US in this chapter was deliberate in order to emphasize that whilst Puerto Rico is geographically Caribbean and politically a US territory, culturally the island bears the same legacy of Hispanic colonization and US neo-imperialism as the rest of Latin America. This fact will be an important recognition in later chapters in which it will be considered how contemporary Nuyoric identities

expand beyond Puerto Rico to include other Latino groups based on a shared cultural history.

Chapter 3 considers the early Puerto Rican community in New York, and illustrates the ways in which it would be erroneous to imply a prototypical experience within the communities since colour and class had a massive impact on an individual's quotidian existence. Also salient in this chapter is the fact that an intellectual history was prevalent amongst the grassroots working class throughout the early migratory years, refuting the notion that the contemporary 'Latino boom' in mainstream US society accounts for an increased cultural militancy amongst Puerto Ricans, as opposed to being a continuation from activist traditions. In addition, this chapter will highlight the historic affiliation between the Puerto Rican and African American communities, which led to an increased recognition of the fallacy of island-based culture in which the African role has been consistently denied as the white *jibaró* culture, with its Euro-centric connotations, has been extolled. The challenge presented to the ancestral homeland by the Puerto Rican diaspora becomes solidified with the Nuyorican movement examined in Chapter 4, where the field of Nuyorican poetry illustrates how the term was initially coined as a means to subvert pejorative stereotypes as well as provide a designation through which to validate the interstitial existence of the contemporary Puerto Rican communities. The militant attitude of the early Nuyorican poets was strongly embedded in the social activism of 1960s, as the category of race became questioned and minority groups sought to take advantage of the political leniency afforded to them throughout the Cold War years. Also demonstrated in this chapter is the fact that despite the ethno-racial connotations attached to the term Nuyorican, the connections and attachments to other prominent groups of the time such as the Black Arts and the Beats illustrate how the concept of Nuyorican identity did not develop in a vacuum and increasingly came to place less emphasis on ethno-racial specifics as opposed to shared historical and contemporary experiences. The solidarity which Nuyoricans developed with other ethnic groups was exacerbated by the rejection they encountered on the island, where they were considered as cultural and linguistic traitors. Subsequently, the recognition of freedom and power inherent in any borderland culture to challenge homeland based traditions was also applicable to nascent

Nuyorican ideologies. The use and validation of Spanglish in much of the early work, for example, was emblematic of a linguistic reconciliation between English and Spanish which refused to succumb to either colonizing language. Such issues, however, are rarely addressed on the island, where the Spanish vernacular is still considered to be the most potent weapon in consolidating the Puerto Rican ethno-nation.

Chapter 5 constitutes an introduction for the second half of the thesis, in which the cultural history and resistance strategies outlined in the previous chapters are evinced in the contemporary productions of Nuyorican spoken word poets. Here, hip hop is a major influence on poets such as Mariposa, Anthony Morales and La Bruja; as such, this chapter provides a brief history of its cultural background and the ways in which the Puerto Rican role has been traditionally excluded as the genre has acquired an African-American focus. In addition, this chapter analyzes the ways in which contemporary discourses of multiculturalism resulting in the commodification of ethnicities complicate the means through which Nuyorican poets and artists perform; that is to say, strategies employed to resist mainstream vilification and denials of an intellectual history range from the self-tropicalizing strategies of Jennifer Lopez to the outright militancy of the Welfare Poets and cultural activism of the Acentos participants. All of these have their germinal seeds in poets and activists of the earlier decades, however, the recognition of which allows for the structuring of a Nuyorican genealogy which contests the idea of diasporic collectives as 'communities without history.'

Chapter 6 examines contemporary spoken word as a vehicle of cultural expression which is predominantly (although not exclusively) associated with ethnic minority youth. The ways in which spoken word poets are able to integrate with mainstream audiences through their appropriation of urban spaces and locales indicates that far from being 'sell outs,' such individuals are discovering new ways to negotiate the two apparently irreconcilable philosophies of capitalism and activism. This chapter also looks at the ways in which the commercial success of the Nuyorican Poets Café has become a potentially powerful means through which to increase the symbolic capital of New York Puerto Ricans; however, the extent to which its marketable image is constructed to the

detriment and obfuscation of 'traditional' Nuyorican voices results in the Café being received with ambivalence by a good number of contemporary Latino poets. For these reasons, the poetry of the Acentos collective will be considered in Chapter 7, in which a focus on the Bronx-based Latino poetry reading series illustrates how contemporary notions of Nuyorican identities are being taken in new directions away from both the ethno-centric focus of the original poets and the commodified ethnicities evinced in the slam scene. The poets involved with Acentos give far more prominence to the construction of a literary legacy which documents the Nuyorican experience, in this way marrying the two disparate institutions of academia and grassroots activism. In addition, their focus on transcending boundaries and de-constructing (neo-)colonized mentalities results in the forging of strong ties with other ethnic groups, illustrating how the idea of neo-colonization in 21st century US society has moved beyond race to incorporate all of those who fall victim to the political, economic and psychological strategies employed to sustain the ideal of post-industrial capitalism.

Chapter 8 considers that whilst the concept of Nuyorican has expanded beyond an ethno-centric designation to the extent that individuals from all ethnicities can identify with its vision, there still remain integral problems in the foundations of its legacy in terms of gender and class. For given that ideologically, the concept of Puerto Rican culture has historically been 'feminized' (primarily on account of independence never having been achieved thereby denying national traditions of any claim to virility afforded to other Latin American nations), by means of contrast, Nuyorican poetry has traditionally been premised on notions of working class masculinity. Consequently, the idea of Nuyorican feminism has acquired particular exigency given their 'triple subjugation' from both mainland, insular and patriarchal traditions. As a result of this, poets such as Sandra Maria Esteves and Mariposa find themselves imbued with the responsibility of reconciling a feminist standpoint with the hyper-masculinity of the culture with which they identify. Also discussed in this chapter are the ways in which not only the association between the term Nuyorican and the performance poetry of the Nuyorican Poets Café have, to some extent, undermined the community-based connotations of the term – but also how those deciding who performs the role of continuing the Nuyorican

legacy is left in the hands of the earlier poets, who consider themselves to 'pass the baton' on to a select few performers whose style and thematics are similar to their own. Naturally this evokes a degree of contention amongst other poets who feel ostracized by such circumscription, and as such find the moniker of Nuyorican as limiting as it is inclusive.

Finally, my concluding remarks note the irony of how the US – itself having provided the first regional model for post-colonial literature - now finds itself in a cultural volte face as ethnic minority groups find new ways to challenge its ethos from a post-colonial standpoint. The reconciliation which contemporary Nuyorican poets achieve between a literary project and practical social change suggests a new paradigm for US inter-cultural relations in the 21st century, which, in contrast to the commodified pluralism of the mainstream, is based on lived experiences and a real commitment to redressing social ills. In this way, the Nuyorican and Latino poets who provided the data for this thesis are spokespeople for their communities and generations, who are gradually changing the face not only of the US, but of the Americas as a whole as the 'borderland' space they occupy is transformed from a cultural 'no-man's land' to a nexus of freedom, challenge and negotiation.

CHAPTER 1

US RACIAL FORMATION AND CIVIC NATIONALISM

An integral component of the representation of US American identity in the international arena has long since been as a refuge for oppressed peoples of the world. Particularly in times of war,¹ when the cultivation of cultural and racial tolerance has been required as an alternative social order to that presented by a totalitarian foe, the image of the United States (US) as a cosmopolitan meritocracy has been crucial not only in justifying its intervention in what are considered to be less racially democratic societies, but also in preventing the diffusion of ideas promoted by the more radical sectors of its ethnic minority groups.² With a history that encompasses a colonial revolution, unprecedented international migration and an ostensibly unrelenting commitment to democracy and cultural relativism, the self-attributed anthropomorphic qualities of the US as welcoming, benevolent and scrupulous have served to corroborate its international status as a paragon of multicultural society. Internal challenges to this conception have typically met with accusatory responses of anti-Americanism - particularly in the late twentieth century - with dissidents meeting with expulsion from the invented national traditions comprising US nationalism through incarceration, vilification in the media or outright deportation.³

¹ Throughout World War II, for example, the dangers of racial thinking were fully exposed, compelling US society to express a more egalitarian attitude towards its own minority groups (Jacobson, 1998: 95).

² Here Homi Bhabha's notion of interpellation is useful, since he argues that certain internally colonized groups can be encouraged to accept their place in society even whilst it is detrimental to them by 'flattery' and concessions. Contemporary discourses of cultural pluralism can be seen to do this by welcoming certain ethno-racial traits into the mainstream through a commodified form of ethnicity.

³ Throughout the McCarthy era or the 'Second Red Scare' (which roughly lasted from the late 1940s until the mid 1950s) thousands of American citizens were accused of having succumbed to the communist influences pervading America and suffered interrogation, loss of employment and even imprisonment. According to Gary Gerstle, the 'Red Scare rendered suspect anyone who dared to challenge American capitalism or to insist that class inequality disfigured American life' (2001: 245).

Whilst critics of US society have been both vociferous and endemic, it is important to note that, as will be discussed later, at least up until the latter decades of the 20th century the majority of these were framed within civic nationalist traditions. That is to say, as opposed to adopting a separatist stance with objectives and demands antithetical to the US ethos, particularly throughout the 19th century ethnic minority aims were directed towards inclusion in the US state and consequently the conflation of democracy and racial equality.⁴ Without close scrutiny of the foundations of US political identity, it seemed as though these two ideologies were not incompatible but instead could provide the epitome of a modern nation state to which an array of ethnic peoples contributed. In practice, however, the idea of a US racial democracy proved to be oxymoronic, as events of the twentieth century revealed the incompatibility between the bedrock of civic nationalism underlying US politics and a genuine commitment to racial equality. After all, the civic nationalist tradition enshrined in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 had ensconced the hegemony of European whiteness as the only expedient for the construction of a great nation to rival other imperial powers such as England, Spain and France. As a result, any attempt to redress the subordination of any ethnic group falling outside of this circumscription would ultimately fail, once it was realized that America's fallacious meritocracy, in which success and equality was purportedly open for all, was a delusion.

The idea of the US as an immigrant nation implies two fundamental characteristics, both of which are misleading. The first of these is that following the 'discovery' of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492, what are now North and South America were both populated by the English and Spanish respectively from the 16th century onwards. Whilst it is true that this did take place, the concepts of discovery and of the

⁴ The stance of African American author and leader Booker Washington (1856–1915) provides a useful illustration of the ways in which minority demands were framed within the ethos of the US nation state. Washington, whose notorious statement in 1895 advocated that blacks should lower their expectations and learn the virtues of labour instead of demanding outright equality, is seen as an unpopular figure today but nonetheless 'recognized that a lack of self determination was the problem' (Archdeacon, 1983: 92). In contrast, Repatriation movements were suggested by other leaders such as Martin Delaney, who in 1835 proposed the construction of a Black Israel on the East Coast of Africa. Such ideas were also revived in the 20th century with the Pan-Africanism of Marcus Garvey and W.E.B Du Bois. See Omi and Winant (1994: 39-40).

'creation' of a prototypical American (in North America at least) from the multitudes of European immigrants which alighted upon American shores clearly negates the existence of the indigenous American peoples already inhabiting there, or at least relegates their status to one outside the invention of America's European origins. As Ali Behdad points out in his essay 'On Globalization, Again!', this 'fixation on the significance of 1492 as the beginning of modernity proves symptomatic of a North American form of historical interpolation', one in which world systems as well as American societies existing before 1492 are displaced and forgotten (Behdad, 2005: 63). In actual fact, as would become a recurring theme in US history, the concept of staging internal or external warfare at sporadic intervals whenever American identity was threatened or in need of rejuvenation, has been such so as to actually erase the histories and contributions of those ethnic groups not descendent from European origins. The initiation of this truculent jingoism began with the series of 'Indian Wars,' a gradual process designed to enervate the indigenous population of the Americas given their 'unsuitability' for modern civilization, the desire to appropriate their lands and the need to create at least the illusion of a generic American identity based on virility, intrepidity and, most importantly, European ancestry.⁵

Secondly, the evocative capacity of the term 'immigrant nation' to conjure up impressions of tolerance and egalitarianism is somewhat concealing of the fact that in the case of the US, immigration was initially considered as a necessity for land population rather than as a munificent gesture towards Europe. In his book 'Becoming American: an Ethnic History,' for example, Thomas J. Archdeacon notes that unlike Spain and Portugal, England's colonial policy towards the US consisted of more than simple 'outposts,' instead, 'they learned to fill the land with self-sustaining communities that replicated their English prototypes' (1983: 1). The original supposition of the colonial government, therefore, was the creation of a manifold replica of English society in which culture, religion and politics would be based upon English ideals and practices. As Archdeacon points out, up until the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War, whilst the provinces of America had begun to depend increasingly on non-English

⁵ According to Stephen Steinberg, the indigenous population of the US numbered 800,000 when the first colonial settlements were founded, with the last Indian War being fought in 1880 (Steinberg, 1982: 6).

sources for their white population, 'they entered an English based culture and were expected to operate within it' (ibid: 12). Similarly, Stephen Steinberg notes that 'it was out of economic necessity rather than a principled commitment to the idea of America as an asylum that the US imposed no nationality restrictions on immigration,' especially since despite the toleration of non-English cultural elements in America, 'there was no question as to the exclusive (English) claim on the state' (1982: 9-11).

With the Revolution and consequent retraction from English nationalism, however, after 1776 the emphasis on Anglo supremacy to the detriment of other European cultures was forced to adapt to a more concessionary attitude. The idea of a prototypical American, already in its nascent stages with the succession of Indian Wars, was invigorated by the necessary distinction between the US and England, a concept which not only justified the Revolution but also served to mark the US as 'the first step towards the establishment of the millennium, a time when holiness would prevail and Christ would reign on earth' (Archdeacon, 1983: 64). The idea of the US as bestowed with a divine mission to instill its own ideas of government and culture into the rest of the continent – if not the international community in general – was to play a fundamental role in its relationship with the numerous Latin American countries to the south of its borders, particularly those situated in Central America and the Caribbean, as will be discussed later in this chapter. For the moment, however, it will suffice to acknowledge that the Revolution required the burgeoning American nation to foster an identity as much predicated on 'E Pluribus Unum'⁶ as upon its auspicious if illusionary beginnings as a hallowed yet temporal entity, destined to magnanimously impart its civilized societal practices upon any within its reach.

At this point, it is interesting to note that unless it is politically expedient to exalt the multicultural aspect of America's political foundations, in general the legacy of US democratic traditions is Eurocentric. That is to say, the 'core ideals of a belief in the fundamental equality of human beings, in every individual's inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and in a democratic government that derives its

⁶ 'E Pluribus Unum' is the original US motto and is Latin for 'One from many' or 'One from many parts.'

legitimacy from the people's consent' (Gerstle, 2001: 4) are presumed to have emerged from at least the melting pot of European traditions, if not specifically from an Anglo standpoint. In 'Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America', however, Juan Gonzalez addresses the dialogue which took place between the Iroquois community and the English settlers, eventually resulting in the appropriation from the latter of customs and procedures which would influence the 'democratic ideas of our own Founding Fathers' (2000: 25). Gonzalez acknowledges the work of scholars such as Lewis Henry Morgan, Felix Cohen and Jack Weatherford in stating that practices such as devotion to individual rights, egalitarian democracy, the separation of military and civilian power and the impeachment of elected leaders were 'due to the influence of Iroquois traditions on the settlers.' This, he notes, is in stark contrast with other former British colonies such as India, Jamaica or South Africa, which 'failed to produce the unique combination of strong and stable representative government with individual liberty found in the United States' (ibid: 25-26). Here, Gonzalez highlights the aforementioned theme of America's proclivity to act as a cultural vortex by either arrogating or erasing any custom or practice which by its very existence in the construction of the nation would challenge the historical axiom of white supremacy as natural and self-evident.

The implied legitimacy of Europe as the torchbearer of modernity and civilization is the focus of Enrique Dussel's 'Beyond Eurocentrism: The World System and the Limits of Modernity'. Here, Dussel notes the misapprehension inherent in the concept of 'the centrality of Europe in the (first) world system as the sole fruit of an internal superiority accumulated during the European Middle Ages over and against other cultures' (1999: 3). Through juxtaposing what he terms the Eurocentric and planetary paradigms of modernity, Dussel argues that the former of these, in which Europe is seen to have 'exceptional internal characteristics that allowed it to supersede, through its rationality, all other cultures,' has been permitted to obfuscate the latter, in which 'European modernity is not an independent, autopoietic, self-referential system but instead is part of a world-system; in fact, its centre.' The crux of Dussel's argument is that contrary to the idea that the orchestration of the first world system with capitalism at its centre can be attributed to innate European rationality and judiciousness, the prevalence of Western

ideas in international relations and operations was due to the 'discovery, conquest, colonization and subsumption of Amerindia' (ibid: 5). This, he contends, 'gave Europe the determining comparative advantage over the Ottoman-Muslim world, India and China, thus modernity can be seen as the fruit of these events, not their cause' (ibid: 6).

In addition to the substantiation of white hegemony and the prerogative for Euroamerican culture to self-aggrandize at the expense of others, Dussell notes that another important ramification of this apocryphal account of global history has been that following the early attempts of Hispanic humanists such as Bartolome De Las Casas,⁷ 'Eurocentrism (the super-ideology that will establish the legitimacy, without falsification, of the domination of the world-system) will no longer be questioned until the end of the twentieth century' (ibid:14). Thus the economic and political rationale responsible for the enslavement of Africans, usurping of Indian lands and annexation of Latin American territories – all of which were exculpated by the divine mission of the US to 'Manifest Destiny' – was verified in its ability to become a natural feature of the global landscape, a concept which would later be developed by Social Darwinists and the Eugenics movement.

The impact which this ontological certitude would have on the relations between Euroamerica and other peoples – both within and outside of its geographic borders – would be paramount, as we shall see. Whilst immigration was seen as economically expedient and therefore welcomed, the imagining of the American nation was from the start restricted to those considered as worthy for self-government. In 1790, for example, a law was passed limiting naturalization to free white persons, with the classification of white being predominantly considered as European. Given that between 1840 and 1880 'virtually all of the eight million immigrants who came to America had their origins in north-western Europe' (Steinberg, 1982: 35),⁸ with the massive population explosion in

⁷ Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566), a Spanish Dominican priest and settler in the New World, campaigned relentlessly on the iniquities of the maltreatment of the native population by Spanish colonists. See, for example, Bartolome de las Casas 'A Brief Narration of the Destruction of the Indies' in Andrew Hadfield (ed) (2001), *Amazonos, Savages and Machiavels: Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550-1630: An Anthology*, Oxford University Press (Oxford).

⁸ Steinberg also notes that in 1790, 61% of the US population were of English descent with 'even the non-British having important cultural affinities to the English majority (most in northern or western Europe), up to 99% were protestant.' (1982: 7).

Europe between 1750 and 1845 resulting in 32.7% of the overall American population being immigrants or the children of at least one immigrant parent by 1890 (Archdeacon, 1983: 55), at least up until the latter half of the nineteenth century, the correlation of whiteness and European was seen as unproblematic. Attitudes towards immigration oscillated between tolerance, embracement and blatant hostility – yet the idea that ‘free white people’ of any European nationality could take their rightful place in the American nation remained largely unquestioned.

The concept of the nation as an imagined political community is largely attributed to Benedict Anderson, who coined the phrase given that ‘the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion’ (1983: 6). Throughout his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson illustrates how any nation can never be more than an illusory concept which exists only ‘by the style in which it is imagined’ (ibid) and as a result of the waning of other modes of thought previously employed to give structure and meaning to peoples’ lives.⁹ This is not to say, however, that the idea of a nation is fictitious, since the ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ (ibid: 7) which is implored by such a concept can provide not only substance for a secular society, but is also responsible for the laws and regulations which govern peoples’ lives. Consequently, whoever is included in the invented traditions¹⁰ of the nation finds themselves with a sense of belonging as well as access to the political rights and privileges of that society, with all the concomitant cultural capital¹¹ that this entails. As an imagined concept, however, the restrictions as to who can

⁹ Anderson notes, for example that 18th-century Western Europe was characterized by ‘the dusk of religious modes of thought and ebbing of religious beliefs’ (ibid: 11); consequently, there was a need to find a replacement structure for the governance of society.

¹⁰ Here, Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of the ‘Invention of Traditions’ is evoked to illustrate the ways in which the national elite invent and employ myths and narratives to explain the structures and organizations which keep them in power and others in their place. In the introduction to his 1983 work *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), edited by Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, he notes that ‘invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’ (1983: 1).

¹¹ The concept of cultural capital is associated with Pierre Bourdieu’s analogy of an ‘individual’s access to cultural resources in order to explain the workings of the educational system in a class-divided capitalist society’ (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2004: 98). The term was first used in *Cultural Reproduction and Social*

and who cannot belong in the nation are not ossified, but instead have the ability to retract and extend according to societal need. This notion is epitomized by the attitude of the US towards its immigrant communities, the experiences of which varied in accordance with the nation's current foreign policy, the psychological threat perceived by other 'races' and the need for cheap labor to support its expanding industrial capitalism.

The increasing role of industrial capitalism in the construction of the American nation was to play an integral role in the formation of racial and ethnic hierarchies in the US, particularly throughout the nineteenth century. The Indian Wars had effectively ousted the indigenous tribes of America from any role in the nascent state,¹² which, together with the connection between whiteness and freedom, resulted in a massive demand for coerced labor which could enable the flourishing of an industrial capitalist society. This labor would need to be expendable from the nationalist traditions of America, so as to not belie the commitment to freedom and democracy reified in the Declaration of Independence. As such, any source of forced labor would need to lie outside of Europe in order to sustain the myth of European hegemony, which considered any person of white pigmentation to be above servitude.

The solution to this problem was of course found in chattel slavery. The incorporation of a distinct 'race' of people, considered as valuable only for their brute strength and force of numbers, into positions of such low rank that no-one else could be considered to be substitutes was an ideal solution for the capitalist ideology of the time. Consequently, Africans were brought by their thousands into America, where they were predominantly concentrated in the South and in particular, towards work in the cotton industry.¹³ At this point, it is important to consider that whilst Anglo-Americans had by no means come

Reproduction (1973) and is extended 'to all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation' (cited in Harker, 1990: 13). Consequently, cultural capital includes the acquisition of knowledge that can result in status and power not defined by the dominant class relations of society.

¹² According to Archdeacon, for example: 'By the 1830s the stubborn vitality of some aspects of aboriginal life and the simultaneous deterioration of others pointed to the conclusion that the Indian was not ready for mainstream society' (1983: 68).

¹³ Steinberg notes that in 1800, the slave labour force totaled approximately 530,000. This figure had jumped to 2,340,000 by 1860, by which time cotton accounted for 60% of US exports (1982: 28).

from an egalitarian society in terms of class and ethnicity – numerous scholars such as Matthew Frye Jacobson have noted the ‘violent colonization of Ireland as the template for English understanding of North American savages and the course of North American colonization’ (1998: 37) – it was not until the nineteenth century that ‘the language of racism proper, the language of “genus”, “species”, “poly(-)” and “monogenesis”, “craniometrics”, “phenotypes” and “genotypes” would frame discussions of human groups’ (ibid: 30). As will be seen later, African slavery was not the only factor in the construction of whiteness as the superior ‘race’ – defined as much by what it was not, from its juxtaposition with other racial groups such as Africans and Latinos, as from what it considered to be its inherent features of virility and intellect. Events such as the annexation of Mexican territories, the Spanish-Cuban War and the Indian Wars also contributed to the substantiation of white ethnic groups as the unrivalled masters of the international community. It was the need to rationalize and justify the coerced labor of millions of foreign people in order to sustain the growing capitalist market, however, which lay at the heart of the colour line’s traversing of America.

This is not to say that other avenues had not been explored prior to the arrival of Africans upon US shores. Steinberg notes that ‘long before chattel slavery had been introduced, southern planters had experimented with a system of white servitude by importing indentured servants from Europe’ (1983: 25). As these proved to be both ‘scarce and expensive,’ as well as the fact that ‘as contract laborers they could bargain for more acceptable terms before entering the ranks of free labor,’ this proved to be both a costly as well as untenable project, since ultimately any degree of liberty afforded to workers would be disproportionate to the prosperity of America’s nascent industries. With Africans, however, their vulnerability in US society was accentuated by the fact that in contrast to the European immigrants who were arriving contemporaneously with them, they were not responding to the needs of a free capitalist market¹⁴ and as such, could be prevented from owning property and ascending the social ladder. In addition, the

¹⁴ According to Robert Blauner, for instance, the ‘European groups were a free labour force. They had the advantage of European ancestry and white skins. There was a degree of choice which made it likely that individual Europeans and entire ethnic groups would identify with America and see the host culture as a positive opportunity rather than an alien and dominating value system’ (1972: 55).

opposition with which their immediate entry into the United States was met regarding the maintenance of their cultures, tribal affiliations, family networks and traditions was also detrimental to the survival of a sense of self-determination amongst the African slaves. For once in the United States, the Africans ceased to be individuals or even members of distinct ethnic groups such as Ashanti or Yoruba; instead, they simply became consignees of an identity imposed by the US racial taxonomy which labeled them as Negroes, just as the Sioux, Crow and Iroquois were subsumed under the label Indian. The US fixation with tabulating its population under labels which often hold no relevance for the people they purportedly represent has become an invariable feature throughout America's social history, and one which has resulted in a huge amount of contention and resistance, as we shall see throughout this chapter.

Notwithstanding the exigency of a serf class to bear the backbone of industrial development, it was evident to much of the white American population that slavery as an institution was both immoral and illegal. The very act of forcing an entire racial group into a demarcated section of the labor force from which there was clearly no opportunity for upward mobility or integration abrogated the very foundations of the American nation and the reasons for its origin. Consequently, if the idea of slavery and the curtailing of individual freedom were not to disavow the essence of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, a dogma would be needed which would not only ostracize the African population from the national mythology, but which would also be palatably contained within the religious and scientific lexicon with which white Americans were comfortable. After all, the self-ascribed duty of the US to inculcate its socio-political culture and economic doctrines under the guise of Manifest Destiny was the *raison d'être* for the nation's invasive foreign policy towards Africa, Latin America and elsewhere. The application of this rationale to the trans-Atlantic slave trade would not only exonerate the US from the iniquities which the institution of slavery demanded, but would also ensure that this was viewed from a fatalistic perspective. Thus by permitting what was considered to be a backward and primitive race of people into the apex of modern society – albeit as less than citizens – America was fulfilling its role as God's political herald as well as providing the solution to its dearth of laborers. Clearly, this was the ideal

conflation of religion, politics and economics – a triad purposely authenticated by the scientific hypotheses generated at the time.

At this point, it is necessary to scrutinize the very definition of race – which is, after all, a construct not a fact of existence. The decision of the US government to continue mustering African slaves as an expedient labor force was consecrated once it had been realized the indigenous tribes and European servants were not sufficiently malleable for this role. The union of religious, economic and political motivations for this in itself sufficed to prevent the compunction of the majority of the white populace as to the appalling conditions in which the slaves found themselves. However, a scientific justification for the inferiority of Africans would add an epistemological assurance that their role in American society was appropriate. Consequently, scientists and academics throughout the nineteenth century dedicated immense amounts of time to concocting elaborate theories explaining African inferiority and their predisposition for degeneracy should they not be exposed to a higher culture and civilization.

This is not to say, however, that prior to the nineteenth century relations between white Americans and other peoples had been viewed as equal. In 'Biological Diversity and Cultural Diversity: From Race to Radical Bioculturalism', for example, Alan H. Goodman notes that prior to 1492 'the other might be feared, revered or an object of desire' – however, they were 'not thought to be different and less worthy based on biological meanings' (2001: 31). In 1735, Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* was produced – a 'classificatory system of living organisms' which exemplified the tendency of scholars to 'identify and rank variations of humankind.'¹⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century, however, awareness of the Other expanded beyond apprehension or curiosity into the development of techniques deliberately designed to verify the inferiority of some peoples and hence the justification for their subordinated roles in society. Alleged physical and mental differences were explicated through the theory of polygenesis, a hypothesis which 'proposed the existence of acts of creation and stated that blacks were created separate and unequal' (Archdeacon, 1983: 66).

¹⁵ As cited in Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994: 63).

The concept of 'race' subsequently evolved from the need to situate non-white people in a hierarchical taxonomy to the advantage of American industrial capitalism. Thus Jacobson states that 'race resides not in nature, but in politics and culture,' given its fabricated origins yet its 'awesome ability to pass as a feature of the natural landscape' (1998: 9-10). Somatic comparisons were drawn between whites and all others outside of this designation with accompanying rationalizations as to how these accounted for mental and cultural pathologies. Naturally, the classification of white remained race-free, whilst other peoples were assigned a role of black or, later on, Asian.

Thus the 'problem of the color line' formulated by W.E.B Du Bois in 1903 was firmly entrenched in American society by the mid nineteenth century.¹⁶ The greatest evidence of this lies in the history of the American Civil War (1861-1865), a conflict which evolved for multiple reasons but came to revolve around the issue of slavery. It is useful to note here the inaccuracy of referring to America as a monolithic entity – and thus the significance of Anderson's notion of imagined nationalism – evinced by the Civil War.¹⁷ In contrast to the Northern Union, for example, who viewed the abolition of slavery as both morally imperative as well as economically expedient, the Southern Confederation relied upon African slaves as both certification of their own superiority as well as the basis of their cotton and sugar plantations. The victory of the Union and the subsequent period of Reconstruction,¹⁸ in which the pledge was made to reverse as far as possible the residual effects of slavery, eventually collapsed, primarily on account of the fierce opposition encountered from the South, resulting in President Andrew Johnson allowing

¹⁶ Du Bois' clearest reference to this is cited in his illustrious work *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which he states: 'The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line; the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War; and however much they who marched North and South in 1861 may have fixed on the technical points of union and local autonomy as a shibboleth, all nevertheless knew, as we know, that the question of Negro slavery was the real cause of this conflict' (1999: 17).

¹⁷ It is also important to note the differences in State attitudes regarding slavery. For example, the institution was banned in Rhode Island in 1774 and New York in 1799, whilst the newer states of California and Wisconsin had no recourse to slavery from the outset. The official banning of slavery elsewhere occurred in 1808.

¹⁸ The period of Reconstruction began with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and collapsed in 1877. Throughout this period, issues of how Southern states would return to the Union as well as the legal status of African American freedmen were analyzed. For further information see John Hope Franklin (1994).

the Southern States a free hand in the implementation of the policies of the period. This basically resulted in little more than a transfer from the designation of former slaves to 'free men,' since in reality the effect of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 saw their economic and political conditions far from revolutionized. In addition to the economic risks that the abolition of slavery posed for plantation holders in the South, of paramount importance was the psychological threat which the integration of free blacks into American society held for white Americans. In his book *Wages of Whiteness*, for example, David R. Roediger demonstrates how the formation of a racial ideology based upon white supremacy was concomitant to the development of capitalist work discipline, and the fears and anxieties resulting from this. According to Roediger, the very presence of African Americans in the US allowed the white working class, struggling to reconcile the prized value of 'independence' with their status of wage-labourers, a 'touchstone by which dependence and degradation were measured', thus 'the pleasures of whiteness functioned as a "wage" for white workers' (1991: 20, 13). Here, Roediger emphasizes that in a society increasingly characterized by capitalist work discipline and the ensuing sacrifices of pleasure and freedom which this entailed, white workers capitalized on their skin colour as a means of compensation for their former life style.

As a result of this, the industrial needs of the North were met not by emancipated slaves, who remained tied as share croppers in the South, but from 'unlettered European peasants' (Blauner, 1972: 60).¹⁹ Such was the risk imposed by black integration to the revealing of the synthesized and consequent superficiality of white supremacy that European immigrants – each with their own particular customs and attitudes – were welcomed to the US as free laborers, able to participate in the ongoing construction of the nation so long as they stripped themselves of their former cultural vestiges and assimilated into American society. At this point, it is crucial to emphasize that black integration was never intended to form part of the American nation. African slaves had

¹⁹ Blauner illustrates the long term ramifications of this discrimination by noting that 'without such a combination of immigration and white racism, the Harlems and South Chicagos might have become solid working class and middle class communities with the social and economic resources able to absorb and aid the growing masses of Southerners, much as European groups have been able to do for their newcomers' (1972: 64).

been coerced onto America shores under the guise of their biological inferiority, and were thus considered to be deserving of the subordinate position in which they found themselves. Once the Civil War demanded their emancipation, however, immediately ideas were put forward for their repatriation to Africa, although these could never seriously be considered given the value of their commoditized labor. Consequently, a solution was fabricated in which former slaves were granted the chimerical idea of freedom, whereby one day they might be able to achieve a share in the American meritocracy, when in reality they were little more than feudal serfs tied to their landlords and to the sharecropping system. This idea was also substantiated by some black figures of the time, most notably Booker Washington, who urged the black communities not 'to demand equality,' but instead to 'learn the virtues of ordinary labor' and 'accept social segregation in return for some economic opportunity' (Archdeacon, 1983: 91). The exclusion and subordination of black Americans (and, as we shall see later, other peoples of non-Western origins) must therefore be seen not as anomalous to US traditions, but instead as advertently constituent in the production of an industrial society built upon the compulsory marriage of racial and civic nationalism.

The experience of the new European immigrants diverged significantly from those who had preceded them in the 17th and early 18th centuries on account of the fact that, unlike the Old World immigrants, they were entering the US at a time when the underpinnings of the nation's traditional whiteness were already set in place. The immigrants, who came largely from Southern and Eastern European countries, not only threatened the homogeneity of American whiteness in terms of language and religion, but most importantly questioned the propriety of the correlation between whiteness and self government, the notion of which had validated US incursions on 'racially inferior' peoples throughout the 19th century. In addition, the vast labor force necessitated by industrial capitalism also demanded that the proletarian workers 'knew their place'. That is to say, there was a fundamental tension between the 'imperatives of democracy and the imperatives of capitalism' given that 'the very inferiority that suits a given group to a particular niche in the economy may raise serious questions about its participation in a self-governing democracy' (Jacobson, 1998: 20). Consequently, given that racial

relations in the US were considered as more or less a black and white dichotomy, the influx of olive skinned immigrants was particularly threatening to a republic founded upon white hegemony, and especially to one which relied on the subordination of the majority of the population to maintain a capitalist ideology and consequently an illusion of the American Dream.

Once again, the solution to this predicament was found in scientific theorizing. The ideology of Social Darwinism, cultivated from Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, published in 1859, neatly overlapped with the nascent Eugenics movement at the beginning of the twentieth century to consolidate the widely held conviction that some peoples – including certain European groups – were inferior to others. This consequently allayed the anxiety of 'old stock' white European groups, who embraced a 'survival of the fittest' mindset, on the understanding that those new immigrant groups from Southern and Eastern Europe – whilst not as distant from themselves as blacks – were nonetheless incapable of self-government and that their cultural vestiges would gradually evanesce from US society as testimony of their weakness. It is therefore important to recognize that whilst these groups were permitted a place in the construction of US society, the pressure placed on them to Americanize, through such means as Anglicizing their names and taking citizenship classes, was immense. Failure to do so could result in accusations of their being 'anti-American' and the subsequent preclusion of their progression in society. Despite these exigencies, however, the prospects of succeeding in the US were at least there for European immigrants, for all that these came at the loss of personal identity. For emancipated African slaves, the necessity of their remaining outside of white society and thereby serving as a reminder for all emasculated, underprivileged, proletarian whites that they were at least one up on the racial score, denied them any possibility of acceptance in the US national mythology.

Thus by the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea of a monolithic 'whiteness' had fragmented into an organized hierarchy of several different groupings, based not on the capacity of each for self-government but also on the location of each group on the economic ladder. For just as the phrenologists' scientific offerings at the time were

developed as a validation of slavery, the theory of Social Darwinism was tailored to fit the outcome of a capitalist society and justify the disparity of wealth between the various racial and intra-racial groups. At the top of this chain of command were the mighty Nordics or Teutons, followed by the Alpines and lastly came the Mediterraneans and Jews (Archdeacon, 1983: 162). The urgency of fashioning this white ranking was attested to by the anti-immigrant backlash which began to emerge towards the end of the nineteenth century; for example, the Immigrant Restriction League was founded in 1894 contemporaneously with the endemic Yellow Peril on the US West Coast.²⁰ By this point, Social Darwinism had been superseded by the Eugenics movement, which held that 'heredity determined all of a person's capacities and that genetic inferiority predisposed men and women to crime, poverty and sickness' (ibid: 161).²¹ Taking into account the legacy of Social Darwinism, however, it was clear how the conjunction of racial hierarchies and the notion of hereditary characteristics could result in the rationalizing of anti-immigration, except from those groups deemed advantageous for US society.²² Thus it was that immigration acts were passed in 1917, 1918, 1921 and most notably in 1924, curtailing the influx of all foreigners into US society by approximately 85%. The Immigration Act of 1924 was particularly egregious in its exposure of contemporary racist attitudes, by the fact that its concomitant Quota System allowed just under 154,000 men and women to enter the US with 'the visas set aside for British, Irish, German and Scandinavian immigrants accounting for almost 76% of the total' (ibid: 175). Thus the immigration laws of the early twentieth century were less about stabilizing an existing melting pot of various ethnic groups, than about preventing the degeneracy of American society by its exposure to 'inferior' peoples whose nationality fell outside of Western Europe.

²⁰ In the opening years of the 20th century, anti-Japanese sentiment was prevalent in the West Coast of US society, due to the influx of immigrants and Japanese military expansion (Archdeacon, 1983: 164).

²¹ For an excellent overview of this topic see Ruth C. Engs (2005), *The Eugenics Movement: An Encyclopedia*, Greenwood Press (Westport, London).

²² In 1924, for example, the Racial Integrity Act was issued in Virginia prohibiting miscegenation through inter-racial marriages, highlighting the national preoccupation with keeping the US population within (European) white boundaries. This was eventually overturned in 1967 with the Loving versus Virginia civil rights case. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loving_v._Virginia (accessed 20th March 2007).

Resistance to the idea of biological distinctions and hierarchies was wide-spread, and already by the opening decades of the twentieth century protagonists of an 'Ethnicity Theory' were beginning to make considerable strides in repudiating both the notion of racial superiority as well as the necessity to assimilate. Horace Kallen's *Democracy Versus The Melting Pot*, published in 1915, for instance, openly challenged the idea that the relinquishing of any cultural identity was compatible with American democratic ideals, and instead proposed that the US should be seen as analogous with a 'symphony orchestra,' with each ethnic group bringing a unique contribution to society which should be celebrated and not subdued. In contrast, Robert Park from the Chicago School developed the race relations cycle hypothesis, a theory comprising four stages of contact, accommodation, assimilation and eventual amalgamation into US society. Despite Park's presumption of the excoriation of national particularities, his emphasis on integration and equality nonetheless posed a significant challenge to the eugenicists of the day with their exclusive approach towards a Nordic prototype.

Both branches of 'Ethnicity Theory', however, failed to consider the fact that their privileging of ethnicity over race and the subsequent reduction of the latter to a 'variable' of the former resulted in the confusion of ethnic equality with racial equality. As demonstrated, the black and white binary entrenched in US society could not be resolved by any theory premised upon the European immigration experience, for as scholars such as Steinberg have pointed out, 'ethnic pluralism in the US has its origins in conquest, slavery and exploitation of foreign labour'. This has resulted in blacks consistently 'experiencing the bitter side of pluralism' with 'ideological justifications for maintaining ethnic boundaries always carrying invidious overtones of racial segregation' (1982: 5, 255). Consequently, whilst laudable in their attempts to belie the purported epistemological certainty of racial hierarchies, proponents of Ethnicity Theory made no attempt to de-stabilize race as a social category, instead seeing it as a variable of ethnicity, or to theorize the experience of racial immigrants as distinct from white Europeans.

To some extent, these shortcomings failed to be addressed in the succeeding decades of the twentieth century, despite the fact that the US experienced two world wars, both of which profoundly shaped the nature of racial relations and the ways in which these were considered. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 resulted not only in the distrust of thousands of German and Austrian Americans, which contributed to the already fractured category of whiteness, but also in the increased resentment of African Americans and Latinos who fought in the battles' front lines. To them, their willingness to die for the glory of the nation was evidence enough that they deserved respect as American citizens, which together with the increased patriotism generated by the War resulted in a revision of attitudes towards race and racial relations.

This consequent revision, however, turned out to be a double edged sword; whilst on the one hand biological notions of racial subordination were belied and discouraged, on the other, the gradual replacement of theories of biological inferiority with theories of cultural inferiority simply masked the racist foundations of US society. Rather than rupturing the idea of race as a means to classify Americans of different backgrounds and account for the economic inequality amongst them, works such as Franz Boas' *Race and Democratic Society* (1945) produced in the first half of the twentieth century simply sought to establish cultural and environmental factors as the reasons behind this disparity, as opposed to recognizing the US as a racial dictatorship. According to Steinberg, this substitution can be regarded as a 'New Darwinism' in which 'good things come to those with the "right" cultural values', with the blame moved away from societal institutions, and a 'moral interpretation of history' adopted to account for society's ills (1982: 80,85). Whilst it is true that there were some scholars who attempted to exterminate the idea of race as a defining characteristic of human classification, in general, the need to explain the disproportionate distribution of wealth within US society without challenging its democratic ideals precluded the success of these works.²³ Even Gunnar Myrdal's illustrious *An American Dilemma*, produced in 1944, failed to note the fact that a US racial democracy would be oxymoronic given its foundations of racial oppression and

²³ Such scholars included Julian Huxley (*We Europeans* – 1935), Ashley Montagu (*Race: Man's Most Dangerous Myth* – 1942) and Ruth Benedict (*The Races of Mankind* – 1943).

inequality, as well as the fact that its emphasis on ethnicity did not account for different African or Latino ethnicities, only those which existed among whites.²⁴

In *Exposing Prejudice: Puerto Rican Experience of Language, Race and Class*, Bonnie Urciuoli succinctly elucidates the fundamental differences between common perceptions of ethnicity and race and the reasons why they can never be synonymous. According to Urciuoli, both race and ethnicity are about 'belonging to the nation, but belonging in different ways' (1996: 15). Whilst 'racialized people are typified as human matter out of place: dirty, dangerous, unwilling or unable to do their bit for the nation-state', in ethnic discourses 'cultural difference is safe, ordered, a contribution to the nation-state offered by striving immigrants making their way up the ladder of class mobility' (ibid: 15,16). Consequently, whereas ethnicized immigrants 'act like Americans in crucial ways' given that 'their origin is pedigreed by an external high culture that validates their difference,' racialized people supposedly 'differ fundamentally from whites in values, habits, language, character and aspirations' (ibid: 16, 17). If racialized people are to be considered as un-American given the indelible distinctions from the prototypical white mainstream, it thus follows that considering the various ethnic groups within that race would be meaningless. If an individual's ethnic group equates to an innocuous appendage to their classification as American, their racial group is the determinant of whether or not they can 'belong' to US society. As we shall see, this distinction was maintained throughout the first half of the twentieth century not only by the reasons above, but also through the creation of the category Caucasian. This racial neologism was a clear manifestation that within US society, race was as much an invention as ethnicity, with its ability to include and exclude people according to economic need and social pressure.

The category of Caucasian evolved from the restriction of immigration and therefore decreasing heterogeneity of mainstream white society following the Immigration Act

²⁴ According to Omi and Winant, for example, Myrdal's arguments were 'predicated on the European immigrant model of assimilation' implying that 'black assimilation was an ineluctable imperative which presented the nation with a clear choice' (1994: 17). Similarly, Gerstle notes that Myrdal's notion of the American Creed was flawed as it 'presumed that racialist thought was extraneous to the creed's core civic principles and thus that such thought could be repudiated without calling into question fundamental notions of American identity' (2001: 193).

(also known as the Johnson-Reed Act) of 1924. The ever increasing pressure to Americanize – particularly in response to the communist Red Scare beginning in 1919 - resulted in the gradual restoration of a monolithic white identity and subsequent mitigation of anti-immigrant hysteria. In addition, the massive migrations of African Americans from the South to Northern and Western cities between 1910 and 1940 resulted in the black and white binary being further engraved into US society, with the result that differences amongst whites themselves became less important in comparison. The classification of Caucasian included all those of European ancestry, regardless of skin colour, country of origin or ranking in the previously revered white ethnic hierarchy, and thus demonstrated the permeability of America's national boundaries to those who did not pose too much of a threat to its civic or racial nationalism.

The increased contact between blacks and whites also generated a change in the burgeoning field of racial studies. According to Jacobson, for example, whereas 'moral-intellectual content was previously presumed to govern relations between different racial groups', this reversed in the 1930s and 1940s with 'social relations governing the presumed moral-intellectual content of racial distinctions' with 'race in and of itself holding very little interest' (1998: 103). Once again, however, the category of race, whilst to some extent de-essentialized, nonetheless remained unchallenged as the fundamental division within society, which given the supposed 'environmental' differences amongst America's various constituent groups seemed reasonable, as well as ineradicable. This was further accentuated by the fact that, as noted by Robert Blauner in *Racial Oppression in America*, 'the study of racial relations developed in a kind of vacuum' with the disparate approaches adopted 'sharing the key assumption of general (European) sociology that racial groups and racial conflict were epiphenomenal and ephemeral' (1972: 6).

Thus was the social climate within the US on the eve of World War II. The catastrophic years between 1939 and 1945, however, were to have a dramatic impact on the way in which African Americans, Latinos and other people of colour were to view their place in American society, and thus determine the course of racial relations over the following

decades. In the first place, as with World War I, thousands of men from all ethnic groups fought for the Allies with the hope of proving their allegiance to the American nation and subsequent receipt of first-class citizenship. When this was proven not to be the case and African American and Latino war veterans were treated with the same contempt as before the War, frustration and indignation ran high. Unlike the first World War, however, people of colour now had an additional ideological weapon with which they could fight the dominant racial regime; the involvement of Japan in World War II and the infamous attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 meant that for the first time white supremacy was being challenged by a non-Western people. Thus as Gary Gerstle notes, 'for coloured people everywhere, World War II became a fight not only against the Axis power but against the racialized system of imperial rule' since 'Japan had demonstrated that a people of colour could defeat, even rout, the Western imperialists' (2001: 194). The fact that a non-Western nation could openly attack the United States afforded blacks, Asians and Latinos the opportunity to see the cracks in the nation's invincible shield of divine protection, and therefore the possibility of confronting the core ideals of the US themselves. In addition, given the fact that the Axis powers were allegedly being fought in the name of justice and democracy given the totalitarianism, imperialism and racist intolerance of Germany and Italy, the US had no choice but to adopt a more charitable attitude towards its own racial groups at home.

It was consequently in this period that the seeds for the civil rights movement were sown. Spurred on by the Cold War, in which the threat posed by the extension of Russia's communist ideology to sympathetic members of American society – generally high born Anglo Americans²⁵ – greatly surpassed the dangers posed by racial groups, the racial minority groups of the US clamoured for social change. The climate for this was congenial for demands framed within the civic nationalist tradition, not least on account of the fact that the ideological battle between capitalism and communism for international

²⁵ In 1950, for example, Congress passed the Internal Security Act declaring past/present members of Communist and fascist organizations ineligible for US entry. The Act also made resident aliens with such ties liable for deportation. According to Archdeacon, for example, such was the national obsession with communist subversion that 'the formerly derided peoples of central and southern Europe became valuable allies, and restrictionists became as concerned with the political philosophy of would-be immigrants as with their ethnic background' (1983: 181).

allegiance meant that racial equality had to be at least superficially present, given that two thirds of the world is composed of non-white peoples. The US could scarcely expect to convince under-developed African and South East Asian nations of the benefits of capitalism whilst flaunting an Anglo-Saxon supremacy, as a result of which, non-white peoples in America found the 1950s far more receptive to their plight than the previous decades. In 1952, for example, the exclusion of Asian immigration and naturalization was removed with the passing of the McCarran-Walter Act.²⁶ In addition, 1955 saw the staging of a one-woman protest by Rosa Parks in Alabama, who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. This incident is often cited as a pivotal moment in inciting the Civil Rights Movement, usually considered as beginning in 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* in Topeka, Kansas, which outlawed school segregation.

Of equal importance in the re-evaluation of US racial relations, however, was the creation of over 30 independent nations in the period leading up to the Civil Rights Movement. The collapse of European colonialism and subsequent independence of countries such as India (1947), Ghana (1957) and Nigeria (1960) accentuated the optimism of black Americans that they too could be liberated from oppression, and an identification with these nations contributed to a developing black consciousness (Blauner, 1972: 73).²⁷ It is important to recognize, however, that as mentioned earlier in this chapter, at this time the majority of demands put forward by black leaders such as Martin Luther King were framed within civic nationalist traditions, and not with separatist objectives. African American peoples, they argued, had contributed to US society with the same zeal and assiduity as European Americans, and consequently deserved equal treatment and respect. The elasticity of America's national boundaries, as attested to by their expansion to include Celts, Hebrews and Slavs, which only a few decades before had been regarded with contempt and suspicion, was presumed to possess the capacity to include non-white peoples, now that most African nations had achieved self-government and the invincibility of the US in the face of a non-Western foe had been discredited.

²⁶ It was only in 1965, however, that the racial quota of 1924 was removed with the Hart-Celler Immigration Act.

²⁷ It was around this time that an African-American intellectual legacy focusing on the history of slavery and anti-capitalism was taking shape with works produced by scholars such as Henry Louis Gates and John Blasingame.

Unfortunately, however, the corner stones of the US nation as a capitalist society premised upon white hegemony evaded the possibility that non-whites could be invited into the imagined national community as the European immigrants in the decades and centuries before had been. Laws may have been passed, but both grassroots and elite attitudes remained the same. Racial inequality had been instilled into mainstream American society since the nation's very inception, with the result that centuries of hegemonic ideologies could not be erased within the space of a few years. In addition, the legacy of slavery and repression had already established African American communities on the bottom rungs of society at a time when economic opportunities were available to allow them to progress to upper echelons. Those opportunities had now passed, and with US society entering the post-industrial period in the early 1960s, many low-paying, non-skilled jobs were eliminated as potential sources of progression for peoples of colour. As a result, the illusion that the US had finally become a racially democratic society proved to be detrimental to the African American cause, since the passing of equal rights laws was not concomitant to their progression in society and thus they were held responsible for their own destitution. 'Culture of poverty' theories subsequently developed in which black or Latino cultures were blamed for the persistent failure of these groups to advance in society, a trait which has remained a constant amongst numerous American sociologists to date. In 1963, for example, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan published *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City*, an influential study which 'largely attributed the source of the (black) problem to the defective institutions of the black community' (Steinberg, 1983: 119). The consequences of the Civil Rights movement and 'Great Transformation' period will be explored in later chapters. For the moment, however, it is sufficient to note that the contemporary focus on racial neo-liberalism is to a large extent redolent of the Ethnicity Theory paradigm set out in the early decades of the twentieth century. That is to say, for 'racial realists' – or those who 'set out to demolish the claims of colour-conscious policy advocates and anyone who suggests that racial discrimination is a persistent American

problem' – to achieve the ostensible US goal of a colour blind society thus must involve 'recognizing black failure' (Brown et al., 2003: 7).²⁸

One significant change which has taken place, however, has been the increasing visibility of minority groups not classified by either a black or white racial identity. I refer particularly to the heterogeneous national groups comprising the pan-ethnic term Latino, a designation often used interchangeably with Hispanic given the shared heritage of Spanish colonialism which exists among the countries 'south of the Rio Grande'. The mushrooming presence of 'Latinos' (as the term describes anyone of Latin American descent residing in the US) has forced a gradual re-evaluation of American society on a number of different levels, as much in the political and economic fields as on a cultural basis. The following chapter will be concerned with tracing the trajectory of US and Latin American relations, in order to not only account for the peculiarities of the insertion of 'Latinos' into the US ethnic/racial order, but also to elucidate the reasons why they are present in the first place. As a Latin American (ethno-)nation, Puerto Rico inherits the legacy of Hispanic colonization associated with the rest of the continent, however, both the geographical and ideological location of Puerto Rico places the migratory trajectory of Puerto Ricans to the US on a par with other Caribbean groups such as Dominicans and Haitians in terms of their placement in the mainland racial binary. As a result of this, the issue of blackness inherited from the institutionalization of slavery, as in the rest of the region, has resulted in a close affiliation between mainland Puerto Ricans and African Americans, the ramifications of which will be seen in subsequent chapters, where an appreciation of the solidarity provided by the African diaspora was used as a vehicle of resistance against discriminating insular traditions.

²⁸ In the Introduction to *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Colour Blind Society* (Brown et al., 2003), a useful overview of those scholars currently postulating a reversed discrimination of society in which minority groups are afforded privileges to the detriment of white Americans is provided. Such authors include Jim Sleeper (*Liberal Racism* – 1997), Tamar Jacoby (*Someone Else's House* – 1998) and Dinesh D'Souza (*The End of Racism* – 1995).

CHAPTER 2

US AND LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS

The population of US Latinos currently stands at just over 35 million, a figure which is estimated to rise to 100 million by the year 2050 (Suarez-Orozco and Paez, 2002: 1-2). The term Latino, however, is one which collapses a multitude of differences in nationalities, immigration histories and racial backgrounds, and as such is constantly forced to justify its validity as means of ethnic classification in the US. For whilst the diverse countries of South America share a history of 300 years of Iberian colonization resulting in a common Spanish vernacular (with the exception of Brazil), a legacy of Catholicism and a traditional emphasis on ascription rather than merit,¹ the enormous disparities which exist among the various Latin nationalities are often sufficiently overwhelming to render the commonalities between them as obsolete. In 'Latino Caribbean Diasporas in New York', for example, Ramon Grosfoguel and Chloe S. Georas note the divergence in immigration trajectories from those national groups who fall under a colonial rubric, that is to say, those whose presence in the US can be seen as directly linked to US imperial strategies within their countries of origin, and those whose experience is more analogous to the European experience of free persons entering a new society and assimilating thus. Even with national groups such as those from Chile and Argentina, however, whose experiences approximate the European immigrant paradigm more than the colonial model, the shared history of asymmetrical power relations with the US – albeit with disparate results – does offer a locus for collective solidarity and integration. Clearly, when referring to the Latino population in the US, there is an array of factors which determine the extent to which this source of commonality is agreed upon. The aim of this chapter, however, will be to look at the reasons why a 'coloniality

¹ In *The United States and Latin America; Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature*, for instance, Frederick Pike refers to status in Latin America as decreed by birth and naturality as opposed to the work ethic traditionally associated with the US (1992: 115).

of power' has been able to govern US and Latin American relations since the beginning of the nineteenth century, as well as the extent to which the continental identities of both regions have been crystallized as a result of their mutually dependent relationship with the other.

Anibal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power is a basic reference to the ways in which 'social power relations today continue to be governed, organized, constituted and conditioned by the European/non-European axis built globally during centuries of Western colonial expansion' (ibid: 98). Offering a broader and more inclusive approach than the internal colonialism model proposed by Robert Blauner (more about which will be discussed in the next chapter), Quijano notes that even though formal colonial relations in Latin America came to an end with Cuban independence in 1898,² the inability of political independence to dismantle the existing colonial relations between Europeans and non-Europeans (as well as between the elites and the masses) resulted in the upholding of subjugation that had initially been justified on the grounds of racial and cultural inferiority. Similarly, if an understanding of imperialism is to extend beyond the acquisition of territories and to encompass a wider range of hegemonic strategies, the increasing power imbalance resulting from the consolidation of a US empire in direct disproportion to the social and economic strife of the countries south of the Rio Grande, has meant that Latin American denizens in the US are embroiled in a colonial relationship despite the fact that their home country may never have been officially colonized by their northern neighbour. The subsequent homogenization of those national groups considered to be the lesser partners in the US/Latin American correlation has resulted in a nexus of shared historical experiences amongst those of Latin American descent residing in the US. Thus, given that 'the very term Latino has meaning only in reference to the US experience' (Suarez and Paez, 2002: 4), it is no surprise that the discordant experiences of Latin American countries are often homogenized, as much as a means of empowerment on account of two centuries' experience of cultural and economic subjugation, as a method of taxonomic control from US bureaucracy.

² Here, Puerto Rico is the exception to the rule, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Following the Spanish American War in 1898, the island became a colony of the US with a change in status afforded in 1952, when it became a Commonwealth.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that the history of US and Latin American relations is simply a narrative of conquest, Anglo-American supremacy and occupation for material gain. To do so would be not only a direct affront to Latin American politicians, revolutionaries and intellectuals such as José Martí, Ramón Betances and Jacobo Arbenz, who have worked relentlessly towards proving their suitability for self-government and independence, but also a denial of the internal dissension within the continent as a result of racial or political differences. For whilst it is true that the US cannot be exonerated from any of the above, it is also imperative to recognize that the continuing inter-dependency of the US and Latin America in defining their own identities and using the other as a projection of their fears and desires is as crucial a component in their continued relationship as economic and political factors. The US may have taken advantage of the civil problems experienced by the various Latin American republics beginning from the earliest days of their independence and continuing until the latter decades of the twentieth century. However, such incursions and interventions could not have succeeded had there not been support from within Latin America itself. It is equally important to recognize that such criticisms levelled at the US in terms of racial separatism - which again are not to be refuted - by Latin American intellectuals, who instead have stressed the miscegenation of their countries as a means of national identity as opposed to the black and white binary imposed by the US, have originated from societies in which racism is just as virulent and pervasive, albeit based upon a different and more mutable understanding of race. In a recent essay by Mario Vargas Llosa, for example, the Peruvian author notes the recent manifestations of Latin American style racism through such left wing candidates in the 2006 Peruvian, Bolivian and Venezuelan elections as Isaac Humala, Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez. The rhetoric of these, Vargas Llosa argues, has been such as to allow racism to 'gain centre stage and even a certain respectability'³ on account of their 'attempt to replace the prejudices of some Latin Americans, who think of themselves as white, against Indians, by equally absurd prejudices of Indians against whites.' Here, Vargas Llosa is referring to the ways in

³ Taken from on-line article 'Race, Boots and Nationalism' dated 15th January 2006. See www.vcrisis.com/index.php?content=letters/200601231434 (accessed 18th January 2006).

which Latin American racism, whilst always perceived in cultural as opposed to biological terms, is so insidious as to actually become a valued component of a political manifesto, despite its flagrant abhorrence of large sectors of the individual populations of Peru, Venezuela and Bolivia. In fact, the emphasis placed on the social and economic content of racial descriptions in Latin America has been such as to lead to their interpretation as 'social and economic prejudices by the privileged against the exploited and the marginalized' (ibid). As such, Vargas Llosa rightly points out the hypocrisy inherent in the fact that 'a part of the Left Wing, spurred on by commander Hugo Chávez, the coca grower Evo Morales or doctor Isaac Humala, is bestowing legitimacy on a renewed form of racism.' The point to be made here is that the prominence which Latin American intellectuals and politicians such as José Vasconcelos have placed on the cultural and biological pluralism of Latin America should not be read as verification of an array of racial democracies, but instead as part of an ongoing dialogue with the US in terms of national/regional self definition. That is to say, however the US is portrayed on an international level has been historically counterbalanced by an alternative ethos, emanating as much from Latin American academics as on a grass roots level allowing for the crystallization of a regional identity based upon spirituality, generosity and racial mixing.

A cursory glance at the epistemological origins of Latin America provides further substantiation of this point. Whilst Ed Morales, for example, notes that the coining of the term Latin America was a 'public relations ploy to explain why a French emperor was installed in Mexico City' (2002: 2) the fact that the affinity of Latin languages was used as a vehicle for regional solidarity in contrast to the English based culture in the north of the continent can be read as indicative of the persistent identity quest in both North and Latin America in defining their societies as antithetical to the other. Thus whilst a strict adherence of the term Latin America would refer to all those countries using a Latin based vernacular, clearly this becomes problematic in terms of the inclusion of Brazil (colonized by the Portuguese) as well as Caribbean nations such as Jamaica, whose inhabitants speak an English-based Creole. For whilst the term Latin America was initially devised to promote a collective identity based upon language, the propinquity of

all the nations south of the Rio Grande as well as the Caribbean to the US has resulted in the term providing as much a regional as a cultural identity. The traditional power balance which has existed between each nation in the region and the US has consequently served to conjoin disparate countries in what is otherwise considered to be one of the most fragmented regions of the world. An example of this would be the recent success of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in promoting a sense of regional solidarity using largely anti-US rhetoric and imperialist denunciations. For whilst it is true that Chávez has not gained support from all sectors in Latin America, the simultaneous tours of the region undertaken by himself and the American President George Bush in March 2007 suffice to illustrate the image portrayed by Chávez as fostering a sense of regional integration in order to counteract the US/Latin American corroboration expounded by Bush. In this way, Chávez epitomizes the ways in which the symbol of US hegemony and domination can be employed as a canvas through which Latin Americans can at least temporarily realize a common objective and recognize their shared experiences.

In this way, a strong analogy can be made between the various Latino populations in the US and the global African diasporas theorized by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*. The fundamental point stressed by Gilroy in this study is that the various African diasporic groups throughout the world are connected as much through their shared social and historical experiences as through their roots in Africa, a point which is often cited as a criticism of the theory in general given the 'virtual exclusion of Africa from discussions of black transnationalism' (Chrisman, 2000: 117).⁴ Consequently, if Gilroy's hypothesis – which does not include a discussion of Latin America or colonialism per se – can be conflated with Quijano's notion of the coloniality of power, it is possible to surmise a framework in which the Latino experience in the US can be analyzed. The differences amongst the various Latino groups in the US in terms of language (given that many Latinos are monolingual English speakers), race and degree of cultural assimilation often appear to be so extensive as to preclude any kind of cohesion between them. However, along with the diasporic consciousness which exists amongst these diverse units is the

⁴ As cited in Fionnghuala Sweeney's article 'The black Atlantic, American Studies and the politics of the postcolonial' (2006).

historical memory that the social and political trajectory of their home countries has been at best shaped, at worst distorted, by their relationship with the US.

Such a conclusion, however, would appear to be so generalized that it could apply to numerous countries and regions throughout the world such as the Middle East and South East Asia, both of which have been on the receiving end of US neo-imperial strategies and intervention. The peculiarity of the Latin American situation, however, resides in the proximity of the region to the US in terms of geographics, as well as the time around which independence was achieved. With regards to the latter, this greatly affected the burgeoning correlation between the two as the nascent Latin American republics, the majority of which achieved independence within 60 years of the birth of the US, looked to their northern neighbour for support and direction.⁵ In *Harvest of Empire*, for example, Juan Gonzalez cites numerous examples of the emulation of both the US and French Revolutions, including the tour undertaken by Simon Bolivar in 1806 which provided the inspiration for the Venezuelan uprising a few years later (2001: 30). Gonzalez also notes that 'several of the new nations modeled their constitutions on the US' and after independence 'sought friendship and assistance in their postwar reconstruction' (ibid: 32). This resulted in the effective invitation of the US into the region as a guide and mentor; in Nicaragua, for example, it was as a result of the request from the Liberal faction within the country's elite that William Walker visit the country for counsel and advice that the latter ended up as the country's first President in 1856.

Yet as Gonzalez's study clearly illustrates, from the beginning of the nineteenth century 'most US leaders coveted the Spanish colonies as targets for the nation's own expansion' (ibid: 32), as opposed to providing the necessary support to allow the emerging republics to flourish. One of the earliest and most lucid manifestations of this came from the Monroe Doctrine, expounded in 1823 by President James Monroe. The premise of the Monroe Doctrine was to thwart any future European efforts at intervention in Latin America; thus the slogan 'America for the Americas' came to delineate the ostensible

⁵ Independence was achieved for Venezuela in 1811, Paraguay in 1811, Argentina in 1816, Colombia in 1819, Mexico and Central America in 1821, Ecuador and Brazil in 1822, Peru and Chile in 1824, Uruguay and Bolivia in 1825.

continental solidarity promoted by this policy. The acrimony between the native *criollos* and the Spanish *peninsulares*, which had resulted from the refusal of the Spanish crown to grant the colonies equal representation in the Cortes following their support against Napoleon's invasion, was ample reason for Latin American elites to welcome the Monroe Doctrine, as a result of which, the rhetoric was set for the remainder of the century in which European interference in the region largely ended and US intervention – involving the annexation of large portions of American land – was instigated. The underlying significance of the Monroe Doctrine was compounded with the introduction of 'Manifest Destiny' in 1845 by John O'Sullivan, the editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. An Anglo version of national supremacy theory (Novas, 2003: 68), 'Manifest Destiny' became the representative catchphrase of the underlying belief in the divine right – and duty - of the US to diffuse its innate superiority and individualistic ethos throughout the globe, beginning with the region closest to its reach. As will be seen later in this chapter, the propagation of Manifest Destiny synthesized neatly with the fabrication of Latin Americans as primitive, uncivilized and incapable of self-government, just as 19th-century scientific theorizing depicted African Americans in the same light, consequently justifying their suitability for slavery. In this way, the domestic policies of the US as regards the various ethnicities within its national boundaries were reflected in the foreign policies adhered to throughout the 19th century, which relied upon constructed notions of racial hierarchy and cultural inferiority to rationalize their ensuing imperialist actions.

It is important to recognize, however, that whilst the consolidation of the US territorial empire throughout the 19th century necessitated the representation of Latin Americans as inferior, the role which the region's populace has played in the construction of US national identity has always been a dichotomy of condescension and attraction. For the resultant wealth accrued by the US from the appropriation of Mexican lands as well as the institution of slavery did not go uncontested, as demonstrated by the numerous countercultural movements of the 20th century. Within these movements, the figure of the African American or the Indian was often revered as a repository of spiritual or cultural values, which the US was considered to have lost in its quest for economic success and

territorial expansion. As a result of this, by extension of the value accorded to 'the primitive', Latin America experienced similar bouts of sporadic extolment by academics and politicians such as Waldo Frank and Henry Wallace, both of whom praised the spirituality and purity of the region's populace and played significant roles in the formulation of Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbour Policy and New Deal.⁶

As noted by Frederick Pike, however, the admiration of US counterculturalists towards those whom they considered as primitive begged the question of who was actually the 'real Negro', since 'the black man of the white person's fantasy generally was not the intellectual, artist or writer but instead a renegade from civilization of the sort encountered on a geographical frontier' (1992: 233). Here, Pike alludes to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, in which innate traits, features and personal qualities are projected on to a distinct people or The Other, in order to assist the construction of the subject's own identity. According to Said, for example, 'the Orient has helped to define Europe for the West as its contrasting image, idea and personality experience' and thus is an integral part of European material civilization and culture (2003: 1-2). It is thus inferred that a Western understanding of the Orient as constructed through literary texts cannot be considered as an accurate portrayal of the region or its people, but instead as a reflection of the power relationship which exists between the West and the Orient. As Said notes, however, this is not to imply that the Orient is subsequently a 'creation' with no corresponding reality (ibid: 5), but that its representation through Western eyes should be read more as a sign of Western power which has 'Orientalized' the Orient in accordance with what the construction of its own identity has required it to be. In this way, Said's theory bears a strong resemblance to Freud's object relations theory, in which the self can only exist in relation to other objects or beings. Whilst the jump from psychoanalysis to texts and national identity is not unproblematic, as noted by Charles Ramirez Berg, the underlying premise of object relations theory is nonetheless useful when considering notions of the Other given that it 'allows us to think of stereotyping as society's own negative tendencies by assigning them to an Other' (1997: 108). In this

⁶ Frederick Pike affirms that the inter-American consciousness advocated at this time was largely the result of efforts made by novelist and activist Waldo Frank, along with Henry Wallace, the New Deal's Secretary of Agriculture until 1940 (1992: 274).

way, the image of Africans, Indians and Latin Americans as indolent, child-like and consequently in need of civilizing didacticism can be viewed as inherent to the nation-building process of the US, given the latter's requirements for an expendable labor force and encroachment on foreign lands.

The perception of the Latin American populace as inferior to the US was justified through numerous criteria, particularly throughout the 19th century. Notwithstanding the historic rivalry between England and Spain, which translated across the Atlantic to its New World colonies, the pervasion of Catholicism in Latin America as a result of its Iberian colonization was considered as both corrupt and retrograde by US individualists. The Catholic Church had long been chastised by Protestant sects for its endemic deception and avarice, yet for US politicians intent upon accruing wealth and maximizing the potential of the region, Catholicism, with its emphasis on fate and individual powerlessness, was in addition perceived as impeding the material development of Latin American land. Of equal importance was the construction of Latin American peoples as uncivilized primitives, incapable of managing their own resources and subsequently leaving themselves open to external assistance. In this way, Marianna Torgovnick's study *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* is useful in elucidating how our understanding of the primitive is based upon the fact that 'it does what we ask it to do... Voiceless, it lets us speak for it' - and subsequently, the imputing of whatever characteristics are considered expedient for the subject in order that they 'see themselves that much more clearly' becomes possible (Torgovnick, 1990: 69).⁷

Whilst Torgovnick does not draw specifically on many Latin American examples, her ideas have been developed in this context along with those of Said in Frances A. Aparicio and Susana Chavez-Silverman's *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*. Here, the theories proposed by Said are translated into a specifically Latin American framework in which the perception of Latin America as an alien region with exotic natives, at once dangerous and alluring, becomes reified through the joint ventures

⁷ As cited in Debra A. Castillo's article 'The Tropics of the Imagination: 'Quetzalcoatl and All That' (1997).

of novelists, media images and foreign policy. By way of introducing the concept, Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chavez-Silverman note that 'to tropicalize means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group or nation with a set of traits, images and values' (1997: 8). As discussed in the previous chapter, the justification of slavery and the debilitation of Indian societies within the US required a combination of scientific rationale and quotidian practices in order to instill the idea of a hierarchical society in which every race had its place. Similarly, the synthesis of literature, politics and popular culture also served to cultivate the idea of Latin America as a virginal, feminized region awaiting penetration from the civilizing forces of the US. In 'A Textbook of Americanism: Richard Harding Davis's *Soldiers of Fortune*', for example, Beatriz Urraca demonstrates how the works of this illustrious American author 'sought to redefine US national identity primarily through the terms of its new role as a world power and its relationship with the rest of the world' (1997: 21). Given that 'in the 1840s the US notion of Americanism was still a question of asserting cultural independence from Europe and rarely involved a consciousness of Latin America's role in New World relations', it was essential to Davis that *Soldiers of Fortune* – a novel 'received not only as an accurate reflection of an extra-textual reality but also as playing a key role in that reality' (ibid: 31) – provided a canvas upon which any doubts of the inevitability of US supremacy could be explored and repudiated. In order to do this, the context for the novel was Olancho, a fictitious Central American republic replete with a megalomaniac dictator and endemic corruption, which could provide the perfect contrast to the self-ascribed image of the US as politically monolithic. For given the close corroboration between Davis and Theodore Roosevelt, novels such as *Soldiers of Fortune* were bestowed with a political responsibility to confirm the accomplishments of US capitalism and democracy by their success in tropicalized lands, where the heroic feats of such individuals as Robert Clay⁸ are illustrative of the innate valour and acumen of the ambassadors of US civilization. At the same time, however, it is crucial to note the insistence upon the 'uncivilized countries' to the south of the border retaining their political independence, so as not to contradict the US societal cornerstones of freedom and democracy. Thus despite the

⁸ Clay features as the protagonist of the novel, an engineer hired to extract ore from a mine who 'single handedly restores freedom and democracy to the country after a military coup' (Urraca, 1997: 25).

flagrant interference of the US in the internal affairs of countries such as Olancho through figures such as Robert Clay (considered to bear a striking resemblance to the first Nicaraguan President, William Walker), 'leaving Latin America politically independent temporarily reassures the United States of the prevalence of its own exceptionalism not only against Europe, but within the western hemisphere' (ibid: 45).

Authors such as Davis, therefore, were deeply complicit in the production of US national identity throughout the 19th century. Maintaining a political and cultural distinction from Europe was only one consideration in the demarcation of both territorial and ideological boundaries; of greater significance was the definition of the US national identity through the juxtaposition of its own cultural and political ethos with that of the region beneath it. Such evaluations, which always merged against the backdrop of purported Latin American anarchy, fell neatly into line with the growing desires of large sectors of the US population to expand their empire into what would otherwise be a decadent and underdeveloped terrain of vast natural resources.

At this point, it is important to recognize that even whilst it would be erroneous to inculcate US ambition alone for the territorial annexations and land incursions which typified its 19th-century relationship with Latin America, from the very outset of US independence, desires to appropriate lands from the south region were clear. In terms of geographic location and natural resources, at the beginning of the nineteenth century the amalgamation of territories beginning to tentatively explore the concept of a continental identity were far richer than those of its northern neighbour. To a much greater degree than the US, however, the South American constituent nations were plagued by incoherent political agendas and petty national rivalries, resulting in the preclusion of any real sense of intra-regional solidarity. To this extent, one can note the irony in the self-ascribed monolithic identity of the US based upon individualism and the factionalism of the 'racially integrated' Latin America, which facilitated the divide and conquer tactics of the US. Notwithstanding this fragmentation, however, the conflation of 'Manifest Destiny' and the Monroe Doctrine determined the political fate of Latin America long before the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary, which effectively assigned to the US the role of a

regional police force authorized to intervene in Latin America whenever it was perceived that its liberal capitalist forces were not being obeyed. Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, for example, the US continued to appropriate sizeable chunks of land with a view to expanding its territorial borders and surpassing the Europeans as overlords in the region. In 1819, the purchase of Florida from Spain for \$5m provided further testimony of US intentions to exert their political prowess throughout the continent, as well as the perception that any land to the south of the border was in fact their own backyard and as such open to infiltration. For concomitant to the Floridian purchase was the US pledge to Spain that it would not provide any support to the emergent patriotic movements emerging throughout the region, as ratified in the Adams-Onis treaty in the same year.

Perhaps the clearest example of this can be seen through the Texan filibusteros, a term used to describe the Anglo-American settlers who came to inhabit the region originally part of Mexico. According to Juan Gonzalez, Anglo settlers had started moving into East Texas in the 1820s, drawn by the fraudulent sale of cheap land (2001: 41) and encouraged at least initially by the Mexican government, given the concomitant material advantages which this would bring. What the Mexican government did not anticipate, however, was the subsequent clarion for Texan independence emitted from the Anglo settlers and the eventual cessation of the region from Mexico following the Battle of Jacinto in 1833. Perhaps of greater outrage to the Mexican government, however, was the annexation of the territory to the US in 1845, effectively imputing the identity of 'citizens yet foreigners' onto its remaining Mexican denizens.

The incorporation of Texas into the US, however, did nothing to quell the insatiable appetite of those who desired the further expansion of the Federation into Latin America. In 1848, the Mexican American War was brought to a close with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which resulted in the designation of US statehood to California, Utah, Nevada and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico and Arizona. At this point, the prototypical relationship between the US and the various Latin American countries was fast becoming ensconced in national mythology; the US, by virtue of its heroism and cultural superiority had not only the prerogative but also the obligation to extend its

influence beyond the initial 13 colonies, even if this meant taking on the cumbersome duty of 'the white man's burden' lyrically explicated in Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same name. For whilst the encroachment upon Central American lands was clearly seen as indispensable to the construction of a strong US empire, what was seen as less desirable were the thousands of inhabitants that came as part of the territorial package. In this way, Peter Hopkinson Smith is quite right to note that 'racism bore a paradoxical relationship to US imperialism' (1996: 50); on the one hand, the invention of their inferiority could easily translate into a strong rationale for invading their lands, yet on the other, the fear and repulsion which many US inhabitants felt at the prospect of incorporating such unworthy beings into their Federation was sufficient to galvanize widespread protest against further annexations of Latin American regions. Cuba, for example, had been a highly prized commodity in the eyes of Washington since the earliest days of US independence, as reflected in the persistent repudiation of Cuban efforts for independence despite the desire to oust Spain as an influence in the region.⁹ Yet as a society founded upon a slave-based economy, with the cultural influences which resulted from this, such as Santeria, the Caribbean island posed too great a threat to the desired ethnic homogeneity of the US to be incorporated as a state, despite its strategic location and copious natural resources.

It was largely for these reasons that following the Spanish-American War in 1898 which saw the cessation of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines to the US, the concept of US imperialism transmuted from one based upon territorial acquisition and settlement to one based on Latin America as a sphere of influence. In this way, parallels to the Roman Empire have been considered by some, such as Hardt and Negri, as more explicative of the nature of US imperialism than traditional colonial models. According to Vilashini Cooppan, the fundamental principle of the US empire as expounded by Hardt and Negri's *Empire* is that its power has no actual and localizable terrain of centre – thus it is 'situated after the territorializing impulses of colonialism, imperialism and nationalism' (2005: 82). Consequently, in the same way that Rome applied its 'expansionist

⁹ By the 1880s, Cuba was a Spanish colony in name only since 94% of its sugar exports were to the US, with a quarter of its imports being received from the US (Gonzalez, 2001: 53)

republicanism, networked power and syncretic englobing culture' as the fundamentals of its Empire, the US has sought to convert Latin America into a *mélange* of financial protectorates and political minions, ensconcing the imperialist nature of its policies in rhetoric of 'uplift' and 'democracy'. Such a strategy dexterously combined the need to promote a strong national identity for the US, by projecting its ideals of capitalism and democracy onto an underdeveloped region (and consequently substantiating the pre-eminence of both as opposed to the primitive communism of agrarian societies such as Mexico and the Andes), with the desire to prevent the population of that region from contaminating the ethnic composition of the US even further. In the Dominican Republic, for example, the US placed a definitive stamp on the western half of Hispaniola when it consolidated the massive amount of debt accrued by President Heureaux, who ruled the nation between 1882 and 1889. The economic chaos resulting from Heureaux's rule eventually brought about the 1916 invasion by the US, who paid off all the Dominican arrears owing to European investors under the premise that the nation would become a financial protectorate of Washington. Whilst US custodianship did bring a great many benefits to the nation in terms of infrastructure and education, the total lack of independence which was compulsory in order to benefit from this eventually generated a good deal of disdainful sentiment, particularly when the country was under the dictatorship of President Trujillo. Notorious as one of the most brutal and ruthless dictators throughout the history of the continent, Trujillo was able to curry favor with the US for the majority of his term in office, despite his flagrant atrocities regarding human rights, primarily on account of his anti-communist beliefs. As with so many of the Latin American *jefes* throughout the Cold War, Trujillo's subsequent ability in preventing the Dominican Republic from succumbing to the communist influences infiltrating various other parts of Latin America throughout the 1940s and 1950s made him an erstwhile ally of the US at the same time that socialist revolutions, such as in Guatemala or Chile, were condemned for their emphasis on land reform and egalitarianism.

Thus a major trend in US foreign policy – not only with regards to Latin America but to the rest of the global community in general – is illustrated through Washington's actions vis-à-vis the countries to the south of its border. That is to say, the construction of US

identity on an international level has largely been informed by actions undertaken outside of its own borders. Any attempts from 'foreign' peoples to reciprocate such interferences by (culturally) fighting the US on its own turf have been met with revulsion and offence. For whilst the premise of this chapter is to elucidate the ways in which US and Latin American identities are mutually dependent, it must be recognized that until the latter part of the twentieth century, when the US finally recognized that 'the barbarians were at the door' (Gonzalez, 2001: xii), the self-ascribed privilege of the US to interfere in the affairs of other countries resulted in the construction of its identity as a projection from without. The instances in which the US was able to assert itself and reassure its citizens of the supremacy of its capitalist ethos were all carried out on foreign terrain as opposed to within its own borders. In contrast, countries such as Guatemala and Chile, who were on the receiving end of such interventions, were compelled to excavate their own achievements and failings as nations by way of reaction to this. Thus an argument could be made for the constant obsession of the US to define itself from without as demonstrative of a tactical maneuver to evade both the analysis of its own national shortcomings, as well as the recognition that the nucleus of its society as a homogeneity of whiteness was little more than an invented tradition. For on most occasions, the successful intervention of the US in Latin American affairs resulted in the confirmation that US political culture was more advanced, more sophisticated and consequently more realistic than the agrarian economies against which it was self-pitted. Latin American countries, however, were on the receiving end of an external force seeking to take advantage of their internal factions, consequently resulting in the validation of their stereotyped perception as 'unsuitable for self-government'.

The translation of this understanding into the US nation itself was marked by its treatment of the 75,000 Mexicans who automatically became consignees of US citizenship following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. For despite the fact that official citizenship was extended to the newly acquired Latin conglomerate, this was less a de facto practice than a de jure obligation on the part of the US to corroborate its image as democratic and embracing. In actual fact, however, even for those Mexican Americans who embraced their newly acquired status as citizens of the US through the possibilities

of economic gain – as well as the chance to distance themselves from the less affluent echelons of society – prejudice and intolerance amongst Anglo Americans ran high. Lynching and land seizures were prevalent features of the mid-nineteenth century South West, with the adoption of American citizenship bearing little reflection upon the treatment of Mexican peoples. The ambivalent status of Mexicans as both a valued source of cheap labour and a potential source of ethnic peril meant that they were regarded with suspicion, resentment and patronization. According to Oscar Martinez, for example, the designated rank of Mexicans as an internally colonized people meant that the elites lost their wealth, power and influence, internal laws were not respected and incidents of police brutality, fraudulent arrests and prejudiced courtrooms were widespread (2001: 53-54). Such repressive actions were persistently justified by the proliferation of Mexican stereotypes which showed them to be as ‘closer to animals than to humans’ (ibid: 54), with the attendant attributes of indolence, irrationality and lack of personal hygiene. For example, the image ratified by Hollywood throughout the early decades of the twentieth century of the prototypical Mexican was that of ‘the Greaser,’ a moniker described by Chon Noriega as denoting ‘a product of American thought and popular culture since the 1820s’ which acted as a ‘textual filter of a Mexican-bandit stereotype’ (1997: 91). Such characters as those appearing in movies such as *Licking the Greasers* (1910), *Guns and Greasers* (1918) and *Broncho Billy’s Mexican Wife* (1915) were invariably complicit in plots involving murder and rape, and as such served to justify the abuse encountered by the Mexican-Americans in the South West at the hands of Anglo Americans.

The injection of the Mexican American population into US society consequently rendered their experience as distinct from any other Latin American group which succeeded their ‘arrival’. For whilst the Mexicans residing in those parts of the South West were assigned a new identity as US citizens, this was a decision in which they had played no part; that is to say, the national borders of the US had traversed through their land, and as such designated them as an internally colonized group within that nation overnight. In this way, the ancestral claims which Mexican Americans can lay to these parts of the US are analogous to the Native American experience in which the internal colonialism model, as developed by Robert Blauner, offers the most appropriate

representation for explaining their current socio-economic status in the US. Yet despite the particularities of the Mexican American experience, the myopic tendency of the US to homogenize disparate groups on account of their most obvious physical traits resulted in the assignment of all the negative traits attributed to Mexicans to other Latin Americans present in the US thereafter. In the California Gold Rush of the 1850s, however, it became particularly expedient to employ the idea of Mexicans as primitive and indolent in order to encroach upon the *californios*' land. Suzanne Oboler, for example, points out that the attitudes of the forty-niners during the Gold Rush,¹⁰ who included 5000 South Americans, were such that 'all Latin Americans – regardless of race, class, or nationality – became the potential and real targets of robberies, murders, rapes and lynchings' given that 'the thousands of Yankee Anglo-Saxons pouring into the gold-mining regions made no social distinctions among the varied Latin American national groups' (1995: 35).

The extension of such degrading images applied not only to Latin Americans residing within the US, but also throughout the entire continent. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, for example, such disparaging representations of Latin Americans as 'unfit for self government' justified no less than 30 invasions on the part of Washington under the protection of the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary. The Roosevelt Corollary, which as aforesaid resulted in the promotion of the US to a continental global police force (later extended through the global community with the 1945 Truman Doctrine), ostensibly afforded the Latin American region the independence it required to sustain the democratic tradition of the US, yet affirmed that intervention in the region could be justified in projects which were for their own welfare. That is to say, if the US concluded that events in Latin America were such that basic 'civilizing' institutions and interests were threatened, then intervention could be justified. In Nicaragua, for example, US occupation was almost constant from 1909 to 1934, in Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and in the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924. Yet as Peter Smith points out, given that not a single one of these incursions led to the installation of a democracy in Latin America, when 'stripped of rhetoric', Washington's actions had 'clear geopolitical and economic

¹⁰ The forty-niners were so-called in reference to their arrival in California in 1849. Oboler states that in this year alone, 100,000 newcomers from all over the world arrived in California including 8000 Mexicans (ibid).

motivations to assert US influence throughout the greater Caribbean Basin, eliminate the European presence and protect business investments' (1996: 60-61).

By the advent of World War II, however, it appeared as though some form of aberrancy had taken place in US policy towards Latin America. A combination of the doctrine of cultural pluralism advocated by Franz Boas, the Harlem Renaissance and the sympathy afforded by a division of counter-culturalists to the burgeoning Latin American intellectual movement instigated with the 1900 publication of *Ariel* by José Enrique Rodo, influenced the 'Good Neighbour Policy' promoted by Franklin Roosevelt, in which continental solidarity between North and South America was strongly encouraged. The underlying premise of this course of action was a cessation of land invasions and 'bullying' tactics, which were instead replaced by a withdrawal of troops, an abandonment of uplift expectations, an embracing of Latin American cultural practices such as music and dance, and the endorsement of economic aid programs. Yet whilst the alleged reason for this departure from previous strategies was a newly accorded rapprochement and respect between the two regions, in actual fact the Good Neighbour Policy 'recognized that a political intervention and democratic proselytization a la Woodrow Wilson were ineffective and that the costs were greater than the benefits' (Smith, 1996: 64). Thus, with the additional factor that the US achieved almost unanimous support for its role in World War II, Smith is right to point out that 'in retrospect, the Good Neighbour Policy was not so much a departure from past practice as an adaptation and extension of it' (ibid: 85). In addition, with the fall of the Spanish Republic in 1939 and the onset of the Cold War, the brief period in which the spiritual dimension and aestheticism of Latin America were considered valued counterparts to the materialism in the US was brought to a close. For as noted by Frederick Pike, the contradiction inherent in a 'US embrace of concepts of moral equivalence amongst disparate cultures and different peoples when locked in a mighty struggle with Hitler's Germany and Emperor Hirohito's Japan' (ibid: 290) was sufficient to discourage the majority of US citizens from embracing a continental identity with the tropicalized Latin American peoples to the south of its border.

Moreover, the imperative of national security throughout the Cold War resulted in the revival of perceptions of Latin Americans as incapable of self-government, as had existed prior to World War II. Consequently, the various Latin American nations were considered to be incapable of protecting themselves against the forces of communism which were fast taking hold throughout the global community, particularly in poor regions, where the emphasis on revolution and social justice was especially appealing. Such was the weight that Washington placed on the 'Domino Theory' – that is to say, the fear that once communism took hold in one country, it would quickly infiltrate into the surrounding nations – that it was considered more advantageous to US national interests to ally with merciless Latin American dictators, despite their flagrant dismissal of international human rights legislation, or to allow CIA sponsored coups to overthrow a working democracy, than to allow for the germination of communism through the election of a socialist president. In 1951, for example, Jacobo Arbenz succeeded Juan José Arevalo as the President of Guatemala, under the assurance that he would continue to build upon Arevalo's 'spiritual socialism' with the instigation of agrarian reform laws, eventually resulting in the redistribution of 1.5 million acres of uncultivated land from large plantations to the native peoples. Naturally this provoked outrage from the plantation holders, particularly those belonging to the United Fruit Company (UFC), who at once turned to Washington in order that they take action against Arbenz to protect US economic interests. Since Arbenz had been democratically elected and his policies were not contravening international law, Washington was unable to indict the Guatemalan President or invade the country under the pretext that national interests were threatened. What the US government could do, however, was liaise with the CIA and sponsor an internal coup in 1954, instigated by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, a conspiracy which involved financing and training the latter's rebels in Somoza's Nicaragua and supporting the invasion with CIA-piloted planes (Gonzalez, 2000: 137). As justification of this coup, US President Eisenhower announced that Guatemala had forged an alliance with the Soviet Union and was consequently a threat to US national interests. Following the coup and the issue of the threat that unless the Guatemalan military withdrew its support from Arbenz, the US would bomb Guatemala City (Novas, 2003: 249), Arbenz fled the country and his agrarian reforms were reversed under Castillo Armas.

It is also worthy of note that whilst the underlying premise of the coup was clearly US fear of communism taking hold in the country, Noam Chomsky's argument that 'it is the small, weak countries that pose the greatest threat to American foreign policy' is also extremely relevant when considering US actions towards Latin America. According to Chomsky, given that it is the 'protection of "our" raw materials' which has played a central role in the formulation of US foreign policy since the 1940s, the idea of any Latin American president allowing the indigenous population to use their own raw materials for their own purpose is a 'conspiracy that has to be stopped' (1999: 35). This consequently explains why 'little countries like Laos and Grenada and Nicaragua' become so significant for US national interests, despite the fact that their populations are extremely small. That is to say, if the presidents of these countries use their own natural resources for the benefit of the whole nation and there is any kind of economic and social development, they 'may constitute a model for other places' and thus 'have a demonstration effect.' In this way, the smaller the country and the lesser the resources, the greater threat this poses to US national interests if the country succeeds in implementing socialist reforms, as the necessary substantiation is there to show that an alternative to the US capitalist ethos can exist.

The socialist government introduced by Salvador Allende in Chile provides a further example of the strategies undertaken by the US once they felt that their security interests were threatened in the Cold War period. Allende, who took over the Presidency in 1970, 'presented Washington with its worst case scenario – a free and fair election that gave power to the left' (Smith: 173). In US ideology, 'communists could only come to power through conquest or subversion' (ibid), thus a democratically elected socialist president was both oxymoronic and potentially perilous. In reaction to Allende's election, the CIA spent no less than \$8 million between 1970 and 1973 in an attempt to overthrow his government through a relentless campaign of discouraging private investment, shutting down economic assistance, diplomatic pressure and covert support for electoral opposition to Allende's Unidad Popular government (ibid: 176). It was not until 1973, however, that US goals were finally achieved with a military coup orchestrated by

Augusto Pinochet, in which the Chilean Congress called for the military to overthrow Allende with the support of Washington and the CIA. Thus began the political career of one of the most ruthless dictators in Latin American history, along with the affirmation that the brief period of social reform and continental solidarity advocated by John F. Kennedy's 'Alliance for Progress' was long in the past.

Yet as noted by Smith, to hold the US as entirely responsible for the deposition of Allende would be erroneous since 'in retrospect it appears that his overthrow was due more to the escalation of social and political conflict within Chile than to the efforts of the US' (1996: 181). Here, Smith refers to a salient feature of US and Latin American relations, the fact that the fixation of the US in constructing Latin American peoples as simultaneously abhorrent yet alluring has been counterbalanced by a similar dichotomous representation of North Americans in the eyes of Latin Americans. Not only did the Latin American republics begin their political independence by looking to the US Constitution for stimulation and guidance, but since the earliest days of interactions between the US and Latin America, the latter has persistently looked to its northern neighbour for financial assistance through economic aid programs, private investment and the encouragement of US immigrants. In addition, as illustrated through the Chilean coup in 1973, internal dissent within numerous Latin American countries has always provided the US with opportunities to intervene in the region's internal affairs, often through solicitation. The case of Panama is particularly illuminating in this respect, since the creation of the nation itself in 1903 came about as a result of the offer from Colombian President José Manuel Marroquín to grant the US sovereignty over a 10-kilometre zone on both sides of a canal route. The US had long since had designs on constructing such a canal in Central America, and following the refusal of Nicaraguan President José Santos Zelaya to cede to this proposal, both the Colombian and US governments agreed to the Hay-Herran Treaty of 1903, in which the terms of the canal zone were ratified. When the Colombian Congress rejected the proposal, however, Washington refused to abandon the project and instead conspired with a rebel band of Colombians to capture the zone and declare Panama's independence. Thus whilst the revolt was instigated by the US, it was from within Colombia itself that the original proposal for the canal zone emerged, as well

as the necessary manpower needed to establish Panama's independence. Throughout the whole of Latin America, appeals to the US for assistance with civil unrest as well as financial aid have been a constant in the rapport between the two regions, a fact which is often omitted when considering US involvement with Latin American affairs.

In addition, scholars such as Frances Aparicio and Debra A. Castillo have noted the tendency of Latin American writers, actors and musicians to realize an act of 'self-tropicalization' when this is considered to be expedient to their material success in the US. That is to say, in order to make themselves and their works more palatable for the mainstream US public to which they look for their audience, writers such as Mario Vargas Llosa have purposely assumed the guise imbued upon them by a US audience as 'tropicalized writers' by 'using the exotic as the validating trope of authenticity' (Castillo, 1997: 88). Castillo remarks that just as stereotypes of Latin American people, in which their perceived exoticism is central, are exalted in US popular culture, authors such as Vargas Llosa ('the Latin American city dweller') 'looks to the exotic margins of Peru for the image of an authentic narrative voice' in works such as *Hablador* and *La tía Julia y el escribidor*. By engaging with the images created in the US and performing to the idea of the tropical and primitive as 'the authentic', Vargas Llosa is consequently entering into a dialogue with US mainstream culture and perpetuating the ideas which are expounded particularly by the US media. Similarly, Aparicio refers to the complicity of actors such as Maria Conchita Alonso in the continued representations of Latin Americans as unabashedly emotional, volatile and consequently irrational by noting the latter's admission that 'we Latins have this fire inside us, in our hearts, in our skin, the flesh... You just go for it' (1997: 199). In this way, it could be argued that the Latin American reaction to the perception of themselves as inferior beings has oscillated between abhorrence and a need for approval, as well as a desire to benefit from the material wealth of the US.

This has clearly not been a unanimous rejoinder amongst Latin American artists and intellectuals, however, as manifested through works such as José Enrique Rodo's *Ariel*

published in 1900.¹¹ Here, the Uruguayan author issued a clarion call in order to galvanize popular resentment against US behaviour, which together with José Martí's anti-imperialist rhetoric 'opened up the road taken by Hispanic intelligentsia in portraying the Anglo-Saxon civilization and the US government as the devil incarnate' (Stavans, 2001: 184). In his book *The Hispanic Condition*, Ilan Stavans refers to the 'Hispanic psyche' as a description for the 'solid, ongoing search for an authentic collective identity' and for the quest to 'figure out our metabolism' (ibid: 183). Stavans cites the publication of *Ariel* as illustrative of this intellectual movement seeking to cultivate a regional identity in order to counteract the 'ultra-aguilismo'¹² of the US, in which the Anglo-Saxon population are portrayed as materialistic, coldblooded and ruthless in contrast to the humanistic, spiritual and racially integrated ethos of Latin America. With regard to the last of these traits, perhaps the most noted work of the time was José Vasconcelos's *La Raza Cósmica*, a 'theory about a sort of Hispanic supremacy in the international arena' which stated that 'the only alternative for the Indian population was their adaptation to Latin Civilization' (ibid; 188). Whilst this hypothesis of Hispanic supremacy has since been dismissed as racist on account of its apparent dismissal of indigenous cultures (as well as a 'loopy overreaction to positivism' (Morales, 2002: 35), *La Raza Cósmica* nonetheless presented a challenge to Anglo-Saxon supremacy and the subsequent attempts on the part of the US to 'uplift' the various Latin American peoples.¹³

In this way, it is clear to see that the object-relations theory discussed earlier in this chapter, in which subliminal fears and desires are projected onto the Other as a denial of their existence, applies just as much to Latin American images as the US as vice versa. For just as the US has ejected its dread of political fragmentation and inferiority vis-à-vis Europe onto a primitive and tropicalized Latin American canvas, so Latin America too

¹¹ According to Stavans, the premise of *Ariel* is a dialogue with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which the character of Ariel symbolizes Hispanics whilst Caliban represents the US. Throughout *Ariel*, Rodo 'encourages young people to defy the tempting US model of behaviour and be authentic, original, un American' (2001: 184).

¹² This term was coined by José Martí and refers to 'the extending over much of the earth the wings of the American eagle' (cited in Ripoll, 1984: 11).

¹³ Other works include Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo*, Euclides da Cunha's *Sertões* and José Carlos Mariátegui's *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*.

has dislodged both its disdain and envy of US materialism through simultaneously constructing a counteracting regional identity of aestheticism and morality, at the same time as requesting US assistance in financial and political affairs. Yet to refer to Latin America as though it were a social and political monolith would be fallacious, given that the links between the various countries are tenuous at best, as illustrated by the persistent apathy afforded to projects aimed at economic solidarity, such as the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the Andean Community of Nations (CAN).¹⁴ In regional formations such as these, states Carlos Zuniga Izquierdo, the larger economies in the bloc tend to consider their own interests first without exercising any clear hegemony by which to lead the weaker countries and open their markets to other countries. In this way, Smith's comment regarding the first half of the twentieth century, in which 'Latin America's search for self-identity became profoundly, inextricably and necessarily entwined with the US' (1996: 113), is as relevant in the first decade of the 21st century, with the ever growing Latino population in the US necessitating a re-evaluation of US and Latin American relations. With regional fragmentation remaining a consistent feature within Latin America, to a large extent the one factor which the disparate countries share is an asymmetrical power relation to the US, which particularly for those nations in which civic unrest – often encouraged if not actively sponsored by the US, such as the Contras during the Sandinista government in Nicaragua or Castillo Armas's US-backed military dictatorship in Guatemala – has been egregious, millions of Latin American denizens have chosen to relocate to the US as opposed to endure the legacy of violence endemic in their country of origin. The title of Juan Gonzalez's book, *Harvest of Empire* consequently demonstrates the acuity of the author in addressing the fundamental association between the current Latino population(s) in the US and the subordinate relationship which their various native countries have experienced with their northern neighbour.

Yet as Silvio Torres-Saillant observes, despite the shared experience of being uprooted by socioeconomic forces emanating from the US, as well as the linguistic, regional and

¹⁴ See, for example, 'Recipe for a True Integration' (*Noticias Aliadas*, 07-12-06) in which it is argued that neither of these agreements has brought about concrete results due to the great economic asymmetry amongst their participants.

religious links which exist amongst US Latinos (2002: 438), the 'need for unitary political practices does not translate automatically or unproblematically into ontological sameness'. To assume this would be tantamount to 'impairing our ability to combat the anti-Indian and negrophobic traditions inherited from Latin America' (ibid: 444). Here, Torres-Saillant alludes not only to the discrepancies which exist between the various Latino groups within the US, but also to the fact that discrimination based on social status and skin pigmentation exists on both sides of the continent. Consequently, to privilege a Latin American heritage as a basis for collective solidarity, without scrupulous examination of the racialism inherent within that legacy, is as pernicious as to unite through whiteness, masculinity or any other label containing inherent prejudicial tendencies. This is not to say, however, that to identify as Latino or Latin American is a negative practice per se, but simply to note that to exalt this identification as a means to counteract the hegemonic forces within the US can only be a positive application if Latin America as a root for that identity is not considered to be idyllic or romanticized. In this way, we can return to the premise underlying Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* theory that diasporic identities, such as those based on the shared experience of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, are constructed from a synthesis of roots in a territorial place and routes through time and experience. Acknowledging the symbiosis between the US and Latin America and the ways in which the actions and reactions of both towards the other are complicit in the identity formations of both regions, is an essential part of comprehending both the roots and routes of Latino identities in the US, as will be discussed in the forthcoming chapters.

US and Puerto Rico

The impalpable nexus which comprises twentieth-century US and Latin American relations as based upon a contrast of abhorrence and desire is nowhere more poignantly illustrated than through the trajectory of Puerto Rico, that 'tiny island in the Caribbean which has been a bigger source of profit for US investors than any other country in the world' (Gonzalez, 2000: xvi). Following the Spanish-American War and subsequent Treaty of Paris in 1898, Puerto Rico – along with Guam and the Philippines – was

annexed into the growing US territorial empire where it has remained, in all but name only, as a colony until the present day.¹⁵ The ambiguous political status of Puerto Rico has resulted in a number of cultural idiosyncrasies within the island's national traditions, affecting not only the ways in which an insular identity is consolidated and performed in the face of political disenfranchisement, but also the strategies through which those *boricuas* (Puerto Ricans) residing on the mainland reconcile their translocality as US-based citizens of Puerto Rican origin. That is to say, whilst the intense industrialization of the island throughout the 1940s and 1950s compelled huge sectors of the Puerto Rican populace to leave their homeland and migrate to the US, where they were inserted into an alien socio-racial classification system, the legacy which they both left behind and took with them of white-based Hispanophilia established the appreciation of blackness as solidified through relationships fostered with other Afro-diasporic groups as a powerful weapon of countervailing racist island traditions. That is to say, despite the recourse to an idyllic countrified existence for many of the urban-based migrants (particularly up until the 1960s) as a means of mitigating the hardships of life in the US, the incongruities and paradoxes of an ostensibly unified insular culture premised upon Eurocentrism became increasingly untenable as returning migrants found themselves ostracized and vilified as traitors amongst their compatriots. Consequently, the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s witnessed the crystallization of a 'Nuyorican' identity, which explicitly challenged insular based notions of politics, race and class through cultural vehicles such as poetry and salsa music. The day-to-day realities of life in the US, in which many Puerto Ricans found themselves racially categorized as 'black' along with African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans/Latinos, superseded (though they did not replace) an erstwhile loyalty to the island, which was now viewed in the light of its racist ideologies and disparaging stereotypes.

The salience afforded to whiteness and European values in Puerto Rican national tradition places the island in the same cultural history as other parts of the Caribbean, which also share a twin experience of colonialism and slavery. According to Franklin

¹⁵ The Spanish American War marked the end of both Spanish colonial power in Latin America as well the territorial acquisition phase of the US Empire. As a consequence of the War, Anglo-American domination was secured over the region for the next century (Gonzalez, 2001: 57).

Knight and Colin Palmer, for example, the synthetic ethno-racial societies which emerged in the Caribbean designate the region 'distinct in the world' since 'Europeans, native Americans, Africans and Asians came to create a new society, a new economy and a new culture' (1989: 2).¹⁶ The population profile of Puerto Rico constitutes a mixture of African, European and Mulatto¹⁷ ethnicities, in addition to that of the Taino Indians, the island's indigenous population.¹⁸ With the arrival of the Spanish, however, the island's autochthonous culture came to a halt and Puerto Rico became the site of a complex process of synthesis and creolization¹⁹ on a variety of levels. African slaves accounted for approximately 11.5% of Puerto Rico's population in 1846 (Quintero Rivera, 1974: 101) although their contribution to the island's society and culture has been historically obfuscated by an emphasis on Hispanic traditions such as the Spanish language, Catholicism and musical genres such as the *seis* and *danza*. In his article 'Cortijo's Revenge', for example, Juan Flores notes that it was only in the 1980s that discussing the African roots of the island became a theoretical issue in the definition of Puerto Rican culture as a response to Eurocentrism, with the endemic racism on the island emphasized in the uproar created by the suggestion that Puerto Rico's *Centro de Bellas Artes* be named after the black *bomba* and *plena* singer Rafael Cortijo. Flores's article illustrates the fallacy in the island's purported racial democracy, which has led scholars such as Clara Rodriguez to romanticize the multi-racial populace as a 'rainbow people' (1989: 45). For whilst racial divisions in Puerto Rico may not be collapsed into the black and white binary which characterizes the US,²⁰ the *blanqueamiento* (racial whitening) and *mestizaje* which are promoted as a means for ascending the social ladder illustrate the

¹⁶ See Knight and Palmer (1989). Notable works have also been provided by David Lowenthal (1972) *West Indian Societies*, Oxford University Press (London) and Sidney Mintz (1985) *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, Viking (New York).

¹⁷ This is the common designation for a person of mixed African and European ancestry.

¹⁸ Whilst the Taino population was quickly exterminated by the Spanish, many of their words and customs continue to survive as symbols of national identity. The most salient example of this is the common usage of the island's original name 'Borinquen' and the derivative of *Boricua*, to which many Puerto Ricans self-ascribe.

¹⁹ Edward K. Brathwaite provides a useful definition of creolization as a 'cultural action' or social process whereby hitherto cultural strangers respond to a new society and environment in 'spiritual, psychological and material' terms. See Brathwaite (1995).

²⁰ According to Jorge Duany, for example, whilst Puerto Ricans usually group people into three main racial groups (black, white and brown), such systemization is 'not like the one-drop theory in the US' since the 'vast majority of Puerto Ricans in the island consider themselves to be white' (2002: 237-9). Duany states that 'more than descent, phenotype defines one's racial identity in Puerto Rico, as in much of the Caribbean and Latin America', with the premise that 'money whitens' in the desire for *blanqueamiento* (ibid: 241).

disparities in symbolic and cultural capital attached to the various classifications of pigmentation according to their degree of 'whiteness'.

The extolling of Hispanic culture – particularly the idealization of the *jibaro* peasant immortalized in early New York music (most notably Rafael Hernandez *Lamento Borincano*)²¹ – as a means to forge an identity in the face of contemporary US cultural imperialism may at first glance seem understandable. The Americanization programs immediately instilled within the island, such as the compulsory learning of English,²² quickly fostered the development of a 'middle class dependent on American markets, commercial treaties and good will for its continued existence and comfort' (Christopoulos, 1974: 131).²³ The trajectory of US policies in Puerto Rico throughout the twentieth century was typical of any colonizing power; immediately upon annexing the island, for instance, the US introduced the Foraker Act (1900) which concentrated all political power in the hands of the metropolis with only token representation in Washington.²⁴ The act also provided the 'legal framework for economic dependency' through the extension of the North American tariff structure, currency and congressional commercial regulations to the island (Silvestrini, 1989: 148), as well as prohibiting Puerto Rico from negotiating treaties with foreign nations or designating an independent tariff structure (in a manner similar to that of all US states). This is not to say that whilst the island was

²¹ Duany also notes that throughout Latin America in general, 'nationalist discourses have privileged the European and indigenous sources of cultural identity over the African Other' (ibid: 270). Consequently, whilst Hispanic and Taino cultures are revered on Puerto Rico – given their 'enormous ideological value for writers engaged in the construction of a national identity on the island in the second half of the twentieth century' (ibid: 269), this has been achieved at the expense of the African component of society, which has subsequently been 'symbolically displaced' (ibid: 262). Ana Ramos-Zayas also notes how the largely landowning constituency of the Nationalist Party also 'turned to the Spanish colonial legacy as a cultural and ideological tool against US influence', although the emphasis which the party placed on national sovereignty 'that precluded all other local issues including deepening class schisms limited its popular support and therefore any potential threat to US society' (2003: 25).

²² According to Christopoulos, for example, from the very inception of colonial rule 'Americans did very little to dispel the image of cultural imperialism; they clearly considered education and Americanization synonymous cures for all Puerto Rico's ills' (1974: 133).

²³ Ramon Grosfoguel et al. also note that the 'public display of emerging nationalist symbols such as the Puerto Rican flag were also banned' (1997: 11).

²⁴ It was not until 1948, in response to growing pressure from the United Nations, that Congress allowed Puerto Ricans to elect their own governor (Gonzalez, 2001: 62).

under Hispanic rule the traits for a capitalist economy were not in place,²⁵ however, it was the first half a century of US domination which saw the major conversion of Puerto Rico into a monocultural, export-orientated capitalist society involving the growth of *centrales* (large sugar mills), the proletarianization of the work force and subsequent displacement of land from the *jibaros* or self-sufficient farmers. In addition, the limitations placed on the Puerto Rican export market, which precluded the island from conducting business with any other nation than the US, resulted in 92% of its imports arriving from the US with 98% of its exports going to the mainland (ibid: 150). Christopoulos also notes that by 1930, 50% of the total sugar crop, which accounted for 44% of all cultivated land, as opposed to 15% in 1898 (1974: 130) was in the hands of five US corporations.²⁶

In the face of such an impingement on the national identity of the island, recourse to a pre-American way of life and cultural traditions would consequently seem a natural course of action. Yet as with the array of Latin American countries previously discussed, it would be erroneous to assume that the encroachment of the US onto Puerto Rican land was purely a destructive, self-aggrandizing project on the part of the US. Prior to their arrival, for instance, tension between the island's middle classes and creole *hacendados* was mounting, as evinced through the 'El Grito de Lares' revolt instigated by Ramon E. Betances in 1868. Unlike the rest of the Spanish colonies throughout Latin America, however, the bourgeois class was only in its incipient stages towards the end of the nineteenth century. Thus its ideologies were a long way from being crystallized and consequently the 'pre and semi capitalist formations tied to Spanish bureaucratic military operations were fragile obstacles to the elephantine institution of US imperialism' (Petras, 1974: 2). Moreover, as Manuel Maldonado Denis points out, from the US takeover up until the 1930s, Puerto Rican nationalism was 'the expression of a sector which had never had a sufficiently broad social base enabling it to break with the existing

²⁵ According to Quintero Rivera, for example, in the 1880s 'haciendas had come to cover almost half of the land under cultivation', thereby 'dominating the agrarian social structure and constituting a structural step towards capitalism' (1974: 96, 98).

²⁶ These were the South Puerto Rican Sugar Company, the United Fruit Company, the Fajardo Sugar Company of Puerto Rico, the Central Aguirre Association and the United Puerto Rican Sugar Company. Together they were the main tenders of Puerto Rico's agricultural wealth, although some Puerto Rican planters also prospered.

colonial regime' (1976: 39). Here, Maldonado-Denis illustrates the great failing of Puerto Rican nationalists; they were largely composed of middle-class professionals and intellectuals who were unable to translate their elitist ideals into an accessible ideology for the poor masses. Throughout the twentieth century, nationalist movements such as the Puerto Rican National Party (established in 1922 and headed by Pedro Albizu Campos)²⁷ and the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) have for the most part proven to be elitist, insular affairs, which have been paradoxically centered either on a previous colonial legacy in order to counterbalance an existing one, or else have been isolated from the masses and unable to generate popular support.

It is also important to remain cognizant of the fact that the historical apathy towards independence as it translates into popular social struggle²⁸ is as much connected to the benefits afforded to Puerto Rico as a result of its incorporation into the US Empire as to the vicarious knowledge acquired through the history of other independent Caribbean islands such as Haiti and Cuba,²⁹ as well as the elitist nature of nationalist movements. In his article 'The Divorce of Nationalist Discourses,' for example, Ramon Grosfoguel discusses the ways in which throughout the twentieth century, US policies towards Puerto Rico have oscillated between political and economic exploitation to instances where 'concessions have been made to the working classes (which have rarely been made to other colonial or post-colonial peoples) primarily because of the *military* and *symbolic* strategic importance of the island' (1997: 58). Throughout the article, Grosfoguel examines how from the earliest days of the US regime Washington's policies towards Puerto Rico differed from those carried out in other parts of the Caribbean such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, 'where the government relied on authoritarian

²⁷ Under the leadership of Albizu Campos, the Nationalist Party 'denounced the US colonization on the Island as illegal, called attention to Puerto Rico's colonial status in international forums, fore-grounded the flag and anthem as national symbols, and engaged in several episodes of armed struggle against the colonial regime'. Ramos-Zayas, 2003: 25).

²⁸ Ed Morales, for instance, states that 'it has long been said that most Puerto Ricans favor independence in their hearts but only around 5% of the electorate have chosen that option in national elections or in the four status plebiscites that have been held since 1952' (2002: 263).

²⁹ Grosfoguel et al., for example, state that 'the revolutionary experiences of diverse Caribbean and Central American nations, where attempts to construct alternate economic arrangements have been crushed militarily (Grenada), defeated through United States-financed warfare (Nicaragua, El Salvador), or strangled economically (Nicaragua, Cuba), have also contributed to widespread skepticism regarding Puerto Rico's ability to combat US economic hegemony in its own sphere of influence' (1997: 9).

alliances with the landowners and/or the political/military elites to protect its interests' (1997: 63) in that with Puerto Rico:

the US strategy relied on a populist-democratic alliance with the working classes and progressive liberal middle-class sectors at the expense of the coffee landowners. The extension of democratic rights to the colony precluded the working classes sympathizing with a nationalist solution to the colonial question.

The weakening of the land owners' or *hacendados*' power base, to which Grosfoguel alludes, upon the arrival of the US not only explains the enthusiasm with which the US marines were met in 1898, but also illustrates one of the fundamental contradictions in the emancipatory potential of post-colonial theory when applied to diverse societies throughout the globe. That is to say, whilst for the *hacendados* and those who benefited from the Hispanic colonial regime, clearly the US annexation of the island was culturally debilitating and economically catastrophic, for the majority of the working classes – especially for the female component (more about which will be discussed in succeeding chapters)³⁰ – the ousting of the Spanish overlords was seen as 'an opportunity to establish civil and labor rights by pressuring the US government to extend their legislative laws to the island' (ibid: 62).³¹ In this way, Grosfoguel affirms that 'by extending labour rights to Puerto Rican workers, the pro-annexationist position of the labour movement was strengthened, which impeded the impossibility of a pro-independence alliance' (ibid).

In addition, the necessity of showcasing the island as an exemplar of capitalist success throughout the Cold War years resulted in an elaborate model of development

³⁰ The advantages which US imperialism brought to Puerto Rican women, however, are seriously compromised by the obligatory sterilization programs which were employed as a means of population control. In *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and US Imperialism in Puerto Rico*, Laura Briggs provides an excellent analysis of this topic, in which she notes 'in the context of Third World decolonization and the Cold War, development became an anti-colonialist policy, and one of the first places it was tried was in the 'laboratory of Puerto Rico' (2002: 18).

³¹ Labor laws were extended to the island as a means to gain popular support, thereby 'impeding the possibility of a pro-Independence alliance' (ibid). Reforms of the New Deal were also introduced to Puerto Rico in the form of Chardon Plan, although they were limited in success due to opposition from US sugar plantations.

concentrating on 'attracting foreign capital through cheap labor, development of industrial infrastructure, and tax free incentives for corporations' (ibid). As a result of this program, many Puerto Ricans were lured by the US proposition to resolve the chronic unemployment on the island – generated through the mass industrialization of 'Operation Bootstrap'³² – through applying its own cities as a 'safety valve'.³³ That is to say, in order to capitalize on the granting of citizenship to all islanders through the Jones Act of 1917,³⁴ the US encouraged the marginalized proletarians (hitherto employed in the antiquated *haciendas*) to uproot to mainland cities. As a result, the migration process which, as will be discussed in the succeeding chapter, had tentatively begun towards the end of the 19th century with political exiles finding a haven in cities such as New York, jumped from 2000 migrants in 1940 to 69,000 in 1953 (Christopolus, 1974: 150). The draining of the island's overpopulation of workers, however, established a very particular stereotype to those migrating to the mainland or 'El Norte', predominantly to New York City. The idea of *Los Neuyores*³⁵ became associated with a black, working-class populace who had abandoned the island and were threatening to the idea of a monolithic Puerto Rican identity, the evocation of which was necessary in order to thwart the loss of a national identity in the face of US cultural imperialism.

The notion of *la puertorriquenidad*, itself a polemic concept given its premise of docility, feminization and lack of virility as expounded by Antonio S. Pedreira in *Insularismo*³⁶

³² Operation Bootstrap refers to the 'free-trade, outward looking model of development – consisting of incentives to export-orientated US firms – pursued from the 1950s up until the present, with only minor modifications' (Benson-Arias, 1997: 78). Championed by Luis Munoz Marin, founder of the Popular Democratic Party and the first democratically elected governor of Puerto Rico in 1949 (a position he maintained for 16 years), Operation Bootstrap 'lured foreign investment to the island, invariably US companies, by offering them low wages, a tax-free environment to set up their factories and duty-free export to the mainland' (Gonzalez, 2000: 63).

³³ The idea of US cities as 'safety valves' is not unique to Puerto Rico, however, with Mexico (particularly during the first and second World War periods when US labour was at a low) providing the strongest analogy. The border between the US and Mexico has long been seen as a 'dam' to a reservoir of Mexican labour which is encouraged by the Mexican government – as with the Puerto Rican – as a solution to its increasing problems of overpopulation.

³⁴ Juan Gonzalez suggests that the Jones Act was issued in response to the request of the full Puerto Rican House of Delegates that the island be granted its independence in 1914, despite the fact it was unanimously rejected (2000: 62).

³⁵ See Eduardo Seda Bonilla (1977) for further details on the origins of this term in 'Who is a Puerto Rican? Problems of Socio Cultural Identity in Puerto Rico' In *Caribbean Studies*, 17 (1-2): 105-121.

³⁶ The Generation of 1930 included authors Antonio Pedreira, Tomas Blanco and Vicente Geigel Polanco and was predominantly concerned with the contemporary discourse defining the Puerto Rican nation.

and Rene Marquez in *El puertorriqueño dócil* was considered to be the terrain of writers and intellectuals to excavate and elucidate from the amalgamation of insular and mainland influences that had become Puerto Rican culture by the mid-twentieth century, in this way attesting to Frances Negron-Muntaner's postulation that:

the rallying cry of 'one history, one culture, one language and one race' ultimately has less to do with saving Puerto Ricans from becoming stuttering Americans than it does with masking struggles amongst classes in Puerto Rico (2004: 187).

Here, Negron-Muntaner highlights the a crucial recognition of the smokescreen provided by an illusionary 'essence' of Puerto Rican culture which not only contradicts the centuries of 'creolization' taking place on the island in the centuries preceding US domination, but also overlooks the fact that:

contrary to what the majority of island intellectual opinion during this century sustains, most Puerto Ricans did not (and still do not) perceive the central political contradiction to be one between colonizer/colonized but rather to be between different class/race/gender interest not mechanically determined by nationality (Grosfoguel et al., 1997: 6).

Once this admission is recognized, it becomes evident how the mainland Puerto Rican communities have become a convenient scapegoat for a projection of national insecurities which are rarely discussed in the cultural history of the island. In this way, an analogy can be made with the ways in which the US has followed a similar trajectory with regards to Latin America; that is to say, as previously discussed the stereotyped images diffused amongst US society of Latin Americans as uncivilized and politically immature were little more than a) a justification for territorial expansion and exploitation of the region's

According to Jorge Duany, five ideological premises constituted '*la puertorriquenidad*': a) the Spanish language b) the geographic territory of Puerto Rico c) a sense of common origin d) resistance to the US through a shared history e) a local culture and folklore. In *Insularismo*, Pedreira affirmed that the geographic situation of Puerto Rico accounted for the fact that the native populace felt passive and belittled (2002: 22-23).

natural resources and b) a means through which to unite a politically and ethnically heterogeneous nation in its incipient stages. In this way, the continued reluctance of island cultural traditions to recognize the diaspora as part of the Puerto Rican nation can be read as the endeavor of a culturally nationalist elite to divert attention from the antagonism and grievances which exist amongst its own social classes and ethnic groups. For despite the fact that the binary between the two is becoming addressed in academic and literary circles,³⁷ amongst all sectors of the population a stigmatized attitude towards mainland *boricuas* still remains which renders insular Puerto Ricans as complicit as the US in perpetuating ideas of inferior and degenerate communities as based on cultural and symbolic capital.³⁸ In no other field is this more poignantly illustrated than through the issue of language, which has proven to be one of the most effective vehicles of resistance (using resistance in its most liberal of contexts given the collusion of the Puerto Rican political elite in encouraging the association of Puerto Rico with the US as a Free Associated State) against US ideologies. In his article 'Nationalism, Language Policy and Nested Games in Puerto Rico', for example, Amilcar A. Barreto illustrates how the Spanish vernacular is considered to be Puerto Rico's 'icon of cultural distinctiveness', which the island refuses to relinquish even at the expense of becoming a US state.³⁹ Whilst ostensibly a cultural issue, the issue of language is elucidated by Barreto to be as much connected to the politics of the island, as he illustrates how Spanish has been used by Puerto Rican political parties to promote their own status preference; in 1991, for example, PPD Governor Rafael Hernández Colón – convinced of growing US sympathy towards Puerto Rican statehood – passed a language law abrogating that passed in 1902

³⁷ See, for example, Jorge Duany, who in *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the US* postulates that the idea of nationhood is no longer synonymous with the idea of a nation-state. He asserts that the Puerto Rican nation should be redefined 'not as a well-bounded sovereign state but as a translocal community based on a collective consciousness of a shared history, language and culture' (2002: 4). Duany notes the error of many island based nationalists in failing to recognize the diaspora as part of the Puerto Rican nation, since *el vaivén* (the circulatory migratory movement between the island and the US) means that spatial boundaries are less and less significant in the construction of national identity. The movement creates 'porous border zones which migrants continually cross and transgress' (ibid: 33), with the island gradually becoming re-conceptualized from a nostalgic homeland to simply one point in a transnational circle.

³⁸ This concept is explored in greater depth in Chapter 8.

³⁹ Here, the problem with statehood lies with the fact that to incorporate a Spanish-speaking, Catholic territory into the US would be antithetical to the US Constitution and ideologies. Having said this, both Louisiana and California are now recognized as bilingual federal states, suggesting that US reluctance to grant statehood may go beyond linguistic differences, possibly to include those of increased welfare rights and representation.

affording equal status to both English and Spanish as the island's official languages. With the new law, Spanish was instated as the island's only official language, with the purported justification that Hernández Colón was safeguarding Puerto Rico's identity. In fact, however, what took place was a successful attempt to 'play on Congressional fears that even if Puerto Rico became a state it would likely retain a nationalist movement' (ibid: 38).

In this way, the use of Spanish on both the island and the mainland has as many political as cultural connotations, as a result of which the fact that for many 2nd-, 3rd- and 4th-generation Puerto Ricans in the US, Spanish is no longer their only or even first language – if it is spoken at all – is a primary factor surrounding their stigmatization on the island. For these reasons, the exaltation of Spanglish, or a mixture of both English and Spanish, became a crucial weapon against the rejection felt by Puerto Ricans in the 1960s not only by a hostile US society, but also by the homeland which they had long idealized as an idyllic haven. In this way, the construction of Puerto Rico as an 'ethno-nation' – a moniker employed by Ramon Grosfoguel et al. as it refers to the imagining of a Puerto Rican nation without a Puerto Rican state (1997: 17)⁴⁰ – has proven to be both hindering and beneficial to mainland Puerto Ricans. To the extent that the US citizenship concomitant to the island's political annexation has obviated the thorny predicament in which other Latin American migrants find themselves – that is to say, the paradox of being (often illegally) resident in the US whilst at the same time citizens of other nations – the arrangement seems advantageous for Puerto Ricans in that a national identity can be maintained simultaneously with the benefits of US economic and political protection.⁴¹ In this way, mainland based Puerto Ricans are able to manipulate their translocality according to whichever identity suits the situation at hand; that is to say, if it is more economically or socially beneficial to identify as a US ethnic group or as a diasporic

⁴⁰ For example, the island continues to have its own Olympic team, Miss Puerto Rico and flag without having an actual state apparatus.

⁴¹ José Trias Monge notes that by 1940, \$8.3 million was being filtered into Puerto Rico in the form of federal grants and aid. The following government census website: <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/08s1289.xls> also states that Puerto Rico receives \$5,667,796,787 each year in the form of direct payments to individuals for retirement and incapacity. In total, Puerto Rico currently receives more than \$4.2 billion in federal aid for education, housing, nutrition and so on.

community. In terms of federal aid, for instance, it is clearly more beneficial to evoke the citizenship afforded to Puerto Ricans; in cultural issues such as the Olympics or even the Miss World pageant, however, a national identity is called upon.

On the other hand, the low symbolic capital attached to Puerto Ricans as an US ethnic group has resulted in the percolation of a very definite stereotype of Puerto Ricans as indolent, lazy and effeminate throughout US society. This has resulted from both their supposed 'welfare mentality', as advocated through such neo-conservatives as Linda Chavez,⁴² as well as the fact that unlike other Latin American nations, Puerto Ricans have historically shown little fighting spirit with which to afford them any national respect.⁴³ These disparaging images, conjoined with those diffused on the island of mainland Puerto Ricans as linguistic and cultural traitors (such is the need to maintain the monolithic cultural identity of the 'ethno-nation') result in a 'flipside' to the apparent panacea of US citizenship, the consequences of which will be explored in subsequent chapters.

⁴² Chavez – once the highest-ranking Hispanic in the Reagan administration (Morales, 2002: 124) - published *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Immigration* (Basic Books, New York) in 1991 with a view to demonstrating how Hispanics are victims of their own cultural pathologies and as such have failed to ascend the social ladder.

⁴³ In her opening chapter to *Boricua Pop*, Frances Negrón-Muntaner postulates that the invasion by the US in 1898 is the essence of the tropes of shame still associated with performances of Puerto Rican identity. She notes, for example, that 'not only were Puerto Ricans dismissed by the new metropolis as unfit for self-government since the "nation" was declared black (not Hispanic), a "race" (not a people) and effeminate (not virile), most *boricuas* actively participated in bringing about this new state of affairs and intimately – if not contradictorily – invested in its reproduction' (2004: 33).

CHAPTER 3

THE EARLY PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY

The peculiar status granted to Puerto Ricans as a consequence of the 1917 Jones Act, affording each islander the privilege of US citizenship, has informed the construction of US born Puerto Rican identities from a uniquely translocal position. In a typically poststructuralist analysis,¹ US born Puerto Ricans find themselves in the intersection of multiple locations and subjectivities encompassing national, racial, pan-ethnic, class and political identities. As a result of this, theories such as those offered by Nestor Garcia Canclini and Homi Bhabha in which national identities are considered to be obsolete in view of the developing transnational communities in all parts of the globe (thus repudiating the idea of collective action based upon one's country of origin) have proven to be valuable in attempts to theorize the particularities of the formation of the diverse Puerto Rican experiences. To some extent, these experiences have set the basis for the concept of contemporary pan-Latino movements based on both historical memory and shared understandings of social conditions in the US.

The literature surrounding the development of diasporic identities, particularly in a post-colonial context, is immense and is by no means limited to a single framework by which to analyze the myriad borderland communities pervading the colonial metropolis of global society. For whilst there may be common features amongst such peoples, such as a shared experience of exile or forced migration, each diasporic community is composed

¹ A post-structuralist position advocates that 'all subject positions are caught up in an endless process of displacement engendered by the instability of language, the "arbitrary" relation between signifier and signified, and the impossibility that meaning can ever be captured in a moment of pure, self-present utterer's intent' (2004: 300). Consequently, Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick argue that 'the claim is that post-structuralism affords a potentially liberating space, a space of "plural", "decentred", multiple or constantly destabilized subject-positions where identities can no longer be defined according to such old essentialist notions as gender or class affiliation' (ibid: 302). Post-structuralist scholars include Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

from numerous subjectivities which endow a diversity of experiences onto their collectivity as these become increasingly conflated with the facets of other minority groups in the face of social and economic marginalization. Thus within each diasporic group is a heterogeneity of race, class, political affiliation and sexual orientation which demands specific attention to the history of the group if its role in the shaping of US ethnic relations throughout the history is to be clearly understood.

The concept of borderland identities is clearly expounded by Gloria Anzaldua in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981). Here, Anzaldua states that:

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds....this task – to be a bridge... the pull between what is and what should be...the mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe, *El Mundo Zurdo*. I belong to myself and not to any one people.

Anzaldua's statement alludes to the ambiguity of borderland consciousness, which has given rise to not only a sense of double marginalization from both the host nation² as well as the national traditions of the community's homeland (by which they are often viewed as cultural and linguistic traitors),³ but also to the power which can be invested in a hybrid people given their position to question and challenge the legitimacy of the traditions from which they are excluded. In addition, as Homi Bhabha affirms in his concept of the 'mimic man', the concept of a dual identity provides an ideal location

² An interesting article on perceptions of Latino immigrants can be found in Wayne A. Cornelius's 'Ambivalent Reception: Mass Public Responses to the "New" Latino Immigration to the United States'. Here, Cornelius argues that 'an ethnocultural objection to the most recent wave of Latino immigration underlies persistent US public concern about immigration levels, regardless of the state of the macroeconomy' (2002: 165). That is to say, 'despite an increasingly tight domestic labour market in the United States', anti-Latino sentiment has persisted in the US due to 'the basic claim that the latest wave of immigrants – especially Mexicans and people from other Spanish speaking countries – are clinging stubbornly to their home countries' language and culture, and they are now numerous enough to change or dilute America's core culture' (ibid: 178).

³ This is particularly heightened in the case of Puerto Rico where a unified national culture has historically been encouraged – albeit superficially – in order to countervail US influences.

through which the dominant culture of the host country can be questioned through strategies of mimicry and parody, in which a masked assimilation is adopted by a member of the diasporic group in order to reflect the fallacy of a national and ethnic homogeneity. In this way, Bhabha insinuates that by feigning or at least imitating the societal norms of dominant society, a diasporic community is able to subvert the ethno-racial rules of that society which reveal them to be little more than de-essentialized performances of nationalism.⁴

In *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Robin Cohen assumes the underlying notion of a diasporic community as a group upon which the mother country, to which it is constantly looking across time and space, will always have a claim. The sense of anomie which is encountered by those diasporic communities which are considered to threaten the imagined homogeneity of the host country in terms of race, politics or religion, frequently results in the mythologizing of the ancestral land, which consequently becomes an essential source in the process of forming a new borderland consciousness. As Jorge Klor de Alva affirms in his article *Cultural Nationalism*, for both Chicanos and Puerto Ricans the concepts of Aztlán and Borinquén respectively have provided the locus of solidarity necessary to sustain the cohesion amongst the diverse sectors of Latino solidarity comprising these groups. In the face of social exclusion and economic marginalization, the idea of a homeland outside of US national borders offers a welcome juxtaposition to the disenfranchised situation in which many ethnic minority groups find themselves in the face of WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) hegemony. The idea of an indigenous identity to contrast with the hostile reception with which peoples of colour have traditionally been met in the US has generally conflated with a necessary degree of adaptation to US culture as a means of survival. This has resulted in a mosaic of hybrid identities which simultaneously reject full assimilation into Western society at the same time as adjusting to those elements which are deemed necessary or expedient to (economic) success.

⁴ Bhabha's most illustrious work remains *The Location of Culture* (1994) in which he builds on the psychoanalytical works of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud to discuss the contradictory ramifications on colonized individuals.

In this way, borderland cultures have become a focal point in post-colonial theory, which endeavours to shatter the concept of colonial forces as specific to a historical enterprise resulting in vast parts of the world being placed under Western jurisdiction. The coterminousness of post-colonialism and globalization frequently results in the validation of neo-colonial forces as an explanation for the continued displacements of peoples to either their former metropolises or to those societies under whose economic domination their homelands are subservient, and consequently the construction of interstitial ethnic identities. In this way, Partha Chatterjee's proposition of the nation as a construct of European modernist thinking offers further substantiation of collective transnational formations as concomitant to a global era in which the concept of nationalism is becoming increasingly obsolete. If nations are a fundamental cornerstone of industrialized capitalism, as asserted by Chatterjee, then it would follow that the invented traditions and other attempts to form a national ethnic monolith are inconsistent with the breakdown of national borders brought about by global interconnectedness and globalization. Instead, diasporic communities, which manifest the fabrication of national borders, are not only potentially liberating in view of their freedom from the restraints of homogenizing national institutions but are also more readily equipped to deal with the challenges posed by globalization, such as the need to adapt to new languages and cultural norms, than the societies of their homelands.

Unfortunately, however, the prospective potency of diasporic communities in terms of leading former (and current) metropolises towards a truly pluralistic society has been persistently thwarted by periodic resurgences of nativism, not only in the US but throughout all erstwhile imperial nations. Here, ethnic minority groups whose ancestral roots lie outside of the host country are relentlessly accused of refusing to assimilate into dominant societal norms, and are thus pernicious to the sustaining of national identity. Clearly, not only is such an outlook conveniently dismissive of the ways in which the engagement of identity process from hybrid communities incorporates elements from both the dominant culture as well as their homeland, but is also ignorant to the ways in which different diasporic groups have been incorporated into US society, and how this has subsequently affected the survival strategies which they have undertaken. In *Racial*

Oppression in America, Robert Blauner makes a clear distinction between the two means through which diverse ethnic groups have arrived in the US. The first of these, the Western (and later Eastern) Europeans, share a trajectory of free immigration; that is to say, the immigrants left their host countries – most of whom bore similar societal institutions and cultural/educational norms which would facilitate their adaption to the US way of life – as free laborers with the concomitant capital (economic, social and cultural) that this brought.⁵ In contrast, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, African slaves were afforded no such freedom of choice as their life in the US began as chattel slaves, which later converted into a history of indentured labour and consequently a paradigm of internal colonialism.⁶ Similarly, diasporic groups such as Caribbeans and Latinos were also subject to the imperial strategies of the US, resulting in their forced migration to the region as a result of Washington's policies in their home nations. Consequently, whilst not the victims of an overt form of slavery, the lack of alternatives available to those subaltern peoples whose futures were determined by the vicissitudes of US foreign policy resulted in their trajectory to the US as analogous to the internal colonial model which characterized the African American experience.⁷

⁵ Stephen Steinberg, for instance, notes that despite the poverty of late-19th-century Jewish immigrants, their 'indispensable role in the rural economy as merchants and traders prepared them for life in a modern industrial economy... Jews were concentrated in economically advanced sectors of their countries of origin and therefore had industrial experience and concrete occupational skills that would serve them well in America's industrial economy' (1982: 93, 95).

⁶ In his article 'African Americans as an Internal Colony: The Theory of Internal Colonialism', Peter Bohmer also cites Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) as early proponents of this hypothesis. According to Bohmer, these activists 'found relevant the analysis of the domination of oppressed people based on the violence of the colonizer, the exploitation of their land, labour and natural resources and the systematic attempt to destroy the culture of non-European people in the search for profits'. See <http://academic.evergreen.edu/b/bohmerp/internalcolony.htm>. Accessed 1st July 2006.

⁷ The model of internal colonialism expounded by Blauner is, however, criticized by Bohmer (see above reference) who states that 'the internal colonialist theory lacks a developed theory of the State and its practices, and is more applicable to the US before 1960 than after' since 'the context for examining the State is a highly industrialized capitalist society, where racial categories are relevant and whites are the majority of the population, with a white elite that has preponderant economic power, and the State is not overtly discriminatory.' Consequently 'the relation between the State in the US and African-Americans is different from the relation between an imperialist state and residents of third World nations.' Similarly, Michael Omi and Howard Winant recognize that whilst Blauner 'effectively employs the distinction between "colonized and immigrant minorities" to criticize the ethnic group paradigm', none of the 'protest phenomenon which Blauner cites (ghetto riots, cultural nationalism, ghetto based community control movements) necessitates the internal colonialism perspective as a framework of exploitation' (1994: 45-46). They also note that the internal colonial model 'neglects class cleavages within minority communities, inter-minority rivalries and the extensive interpretation in the US of minority and majority societies which casts into doubt the analogy in respect to territoriality at the very least' (ibid).

The impact which this divergence of immigration histories would bear on the ability of the various diasporic groups to be accepted in US society has been immense. For whilst it would be erroneous to presume that Europeans had a painless journey towards gaining approval as American citizens, their passage was greatly facilitated by the sympathy afforded to their white skin and burgeoning capitalist ethos, as well as the convergence of their arrival in the US with the current available economic opportunities. With Africans and Latinos, however, whilst their appearance on the US landscape was welcomed economically, on a social level the construction of US national identity on a bedrock of white supremacy prevented their acceptance into mainstream society. As a result, both groups found themselves on the fringes of American social order and forced into segregated living and working conditions, with the bittersweet effects of rich cultural productions and grassroots education occurring at the same time as intra-group hostilities and cultural vilification from the mainstream. Yet whilst such ambivalence may have resulted in a great deal of psychological confusion and subsequent aggression towards essentialist ideals, the necessity of surviving in US society as well as the empathy generated by the shared experiences of internal colonization was sufficient to create a nexus of cross-cultural affiliations which would sow the seeds for an transnational consciousness. These attachments would reach beyond the terrain of mythologized nostalgia for the homeland as well as the desire to assimilate into US hegemonic ideals, and instead concentrate on the shared experiences of racial oppression and social rejection to constitute a de-essentialized spatial capacity for socio-political progression and change.

Blauner states that 'since the racial colonialism of the US is embedded in a context of industrial capitalism, the colonized must look to the division of labour and politics of larger society for their individual group aspirations' (1972: 69). The point made here is that the dichotomy of social marginalization and economic acceptance within which internal colonial groups are situated has resulted in the formation of allegiances which often place working-class (as opposed to ethnocentric) interests at the forefront of their socio-political agenda. This is not to say that ethnicity becomes completely superseded by class interests as advocated by a traditional Marxist perspective. However, in terms of

quotidian survival tactics in US society, identifying with other ethnic groups within a class framework has often proven to be more expedient in demands for social justice than contesting inequality from an ethno-national perspective. Clearly such an affirmation is riddled with ambiguities and contradictions, not least being the fact that not all Puerto Ricans belong to the working-class sector of society. For whilst the majority of those migrants who entered the US throughout The Great Migration years were from the working classes,⁸ just as the Mexicans in the South West who found they had become US citizens overnight reacted in diverse ways to their newly-found status, so Puerto Ricans have found that their degree of acceptance into US society has varied according to the extent to which they can 'pass' as mainstream American citizens. This has resulted in a vast oscillation of experiences amongst stateside Puerto Ricans which often produces as many fractures and tensions as between the more marginalized sectors of the diaspora and Anglo American society. The works of author Pedro Juan Labarthe, for example, illustrates not only the influence of class and racial differences in the diverse reactions of Puerto Ricans towards US culture, but also the power of US cultural hegemony and nascent imperialism as the two staunchly advocate a pro-assimilation stance and laud the region responsible for the continued colonized status of their homeland.

Notwithstanding the fissions amongst the various Puerto Rican enclaves which were to disseminate throughout New York City in the first half of the twentieth century, a gravitation towards definitive strategies of negotiation regarding the ambiguity of their position was becoming evident around this time. For whilst the diverse experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York could be considered as sufficient to preclude any form of circumscription as to the various ethno-cultural tactics employed to resist mainstream hegemony, the initiation of resistance through grassroots education, racial masquerade, solidarity with other Latino groups as well as African Americans and self-tropicalization is manifest through both the literature and the social practices of the early Puerto Rican migrants. In particular, an examination of the works produced by Bernardo Vega and Piri Thomas – both of whom are considered pivotal figures in the trajectory of Nuyoricán

⁸ Such was US policy to 'empty' the island of surplus labour which could tarnish its image as the Shining Star of the Caribbean (Rodriguez, 1989: 5-6). In addition, however, Clara Rodriguez also cites the appeal of the US way of life and a reduction in travel costs as reasons for the increased migration at this time.

literature – illustrates the array of methods by which Puerto Ricans contested both their economic marginalization as well as the imputation of a foreign identity on to their racialized bodies. A close analysis of these strategies is vital for any understanding of the Puerto Rican experiences in New York, not only to repudiate the notion of the ‘culture of poverty’ thesis, as advocated by Oscar Lewis in *La Vida*,⁹ whereby the quagmire of destitution provides the backbone of Puerto Rican culture, but also in order to dismantle the idea that Puerto Ricans are ‘barbarians at the gate’ (Gonzalez, 2000: xii) aiming to instill a specific ethno-national identity on US society. It must be acknowledged that the strategies of resistance which will be examined throughout this chapter were carried out against forces of racism, xenophobia and economic subjugation, evils present not only in the US but also in Puerto Rico and Latin America in general. As examined in Chapter 1, the relationship between the US and Latin America was by no means as straightforward as to denounce the US as solely responsible for the iniquities of global society. However, as noted by Juan Flores et al, given the working-class character of the majority of Puerto Rican migrants, as well as the ethnic diversity of the working class in general, it is often the case that ‘general class exploitation manifests itself as national oppression’ (1976: 121) – and consequently meets with an array of nationalist resistance in return. Thus whilst the migrant communities may have appeared to be adversaries of US society through their tenacious grasping of native traditions, in actual fact the myriad of confrontations experienced on a grassroots level was more concerned with humanity versus brutality, as opposed to one national culture pitted against another. For as mentioned above, the experience particularly of black Puerto Ricans in the US necessitated a revision of racial relations on both the island and throughout the whole of Latin America. Clara Rodriguez’s quaint though somewhat misleading concept of Puerto Ricans as a ‘rainbow people’ obfuscates the way in which the covert nature of black subjugation on the island was just as pernicious if not more so as white hegemony in the US. Thus a careful examination of the methods utilized by Puerto Ricans to both reconcile the disparate elements of their positioning – culturally, economically, socially and politically – is crucial in establishing that since the nascence of Puerto Rican

⁹ *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York*, was first published by Lewis in 1966 and has become one of the key texts in demonstrating the pathological cultural deficiencies which have become inextricably linked to the Puerto Rican populace in New York City.

communities in New York, their plight has been concerned with battling injustice and not solely with national aggression. This is not to disavow the nationalist element of Puerto Rican resistance, however, but simply to surmise that the propagation of insular customs and traditions which could be read as subversive might equally be viewed as recourse of nostalgia and survival in a foreign land.

Neither does this suggest that the relationship between the US and Puerto Rico did not influence the nature of the Puerto Rican experience(s) in New York City. By the time of The Great Migration (1946-1964), a sizeable community of Puerto Ricans had already come to take definitive shape. Beginning in the mid-1800s with the growing trade relations between the US and the Spanish colonies, New York developed into a haven for political exiles amongst whom the fostering of a pan-Latino resistance movement against both US and Hispanic imperialism was critical. Again, however, the thrust of this movement was aimed towards quelling imperialist hegemony in general within the region, and not just the imperialist strategies of a North American kind. In 'The Emergence of an Antillean Nation 1860-1901', for example, Nancy Raquel Mirabel notes that whilst a monolithic vision of nation or community was by no means agreed upon amongst the Cuban and Puerto Rican revolutionaries of the time, there was a general consensus that 'their struggle was a shared one' with 'the emergence of an Antillean nation serving as a powerful reminder of how determined many were to avoid any form of political and economic control' (2001: 58). Mirabel notes that through the use of the term Antilles – a designation signifying an 'association with the Caribbean devoid of any outside influences,' Latino-Caribbean *independentistas* 'reconfigured the islands' to evade the possibility of imperialist expansion through instead looking towards Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and the West Indies to 'inform how they would define community and identity' (ibid). Thus whilst the US as Empire was naturally considered as antithetical to political independence, the same disdain was also applied to Hispanic hegemony and as the 20th century wore on, to other potentially colonizing powers.¹⁰

¹⁰ For example, 17,855 Puerto Ricans fought in World War I and 65,034 in World War II to thwart Germany's totalitarianism (Gonzalez, 2000: 253).

The apparent contradiction between using the US at once as a base from which to launch an anti-America attack whilst benefiting from its shelter was subsequently countervailed through the notion that what was under attack was the concept of imperialism in general, an ideology into which thousands of Puerto Ricans and Cubans had been swept through no desire of their own. Thus whilst the US – and New York in particular – may have offered a magnet for those Caribbean Latinos in need of protection from Spanish forces, the idea of North America as providing a substitute for the homeland was not part of contemporary political consciousness. The formation of a new concept of nationhood incorporating both Cuba and Puerto Rico – and on occasion the Dominican Republic – with the concomitant notion of the US as a temporary base lay at the heart of many Puerto Ricans' yearning to remain detached from the mainstream society of their host country.¹¹ This desire was compounded by the fact that as a racially heterogeneous, non-English speaking, politically ambiguous people, Puerto Ricans posed a great threat to the national cornerstones of US political culture as founded upon whiteness, democracy and Anglo-centrism. Yet the paradox implicit in any colonial society, whereby a subjugated people migrates to the metropolis only to find an exertion of pressure to become 'like' the dominant culture, whilst at the same time remaining several steps back from it, forced an ambiguous sense of identity upon Puerto Ricans in which they were psychologically compelled to 'act' American, yet at the same time were encouraged to remain segregated in ethnic enclaves in which their native traditions were able to proliferate.

The 'double consciousness' as expressed by W.E.B. Du Bois in relation to the African American identity crisis, in which 'one ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro;

¹¹ In his article "Que Assimilado, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao": The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the US', Juan Flores proposes four definitive moments in the awakening of Nuyorican cultural consciousness, the first of which is 'the Puerto Rican's immediate perception of the New York that surrounds the person.... The day to day reality of abandoned buildings, welfare lines, rundown streets, frigid winter nights with no heat; in short, the conditions of hostility, exclusion and disadvantage' (1997: 178). In order to countervail such hardships, Flores notes that throughout the formative years of the Puerto Rican communities, the second moment arrives in the form of a nostalgia towards Puerto Rico which, whilst 'generally less geographical than spiritual and psychological', demonstrates the desire of the migrants to remain attached to their homeland as opposed to assimilate into New York society. The second moment tends to 'present an idealized image of Puerto Rico and is only rarely informed by any political account of the migration and the colonial conditions that propelled it' (ibid: 178). Thus, Flores affirms, the 'contrast between the cultural barrenness of New York and the imagined luxuriance of the Island culture cannot be dismissed as mere archaism for even the opposition of physical environments implies an ecological and esthetic rejection of the imposed New York conditions'.

two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one body' (1903: 11) was subsequently as applicable for Latinos as for any other people of colour who 'became' American, albeit a different kind of American to their European migrant predecessors. This incongruity would become increasingly significant in the construction of specific forms of both resistance and adjustment to US society, for whilst it is true that the fundamental ethos of white industrial capitalism would prevent Puerto Ricans from ever assimilating into mainstream US culture (along with the lack of enthusiasm generated by this concept amongst Puerto Ricans themselves), an alternative form of accommodation became increasingly evident throughout the first half of the twentieth century, which culminated with the nascence of Nuyorican identity in the 1960s. Up until this point, however, the enormous demands placed on Puerto Ricans as well as other ethnic groups to assume the American way of life, abandoning their native traditions and customs in the process, was such that an outright repudiation of mainstream US society was completely unfeasible. Exacerbated by World Wars I and II, US society throughout the first half of the twentieth century displayed an obsession with cultural homogeneity in which racial, ethnic and linguistic differences were seen as pernicious by all but a minority favoring the cultural pluralism of Horace Kallen and Franz Boas (see Chapter 1). As a result, Puerto Rican migrants throughout these years were forced to perform to the vicissitudes of mainstream US society, sometimes in a genuine attempt to assimilate and mitigate their economic hardships, other times as a means of subterfuge in order to at least provide solidarity through cultural insiderism in the face of such derogatory representations.¹²

Vivid representations of the realities of Puerto Rican lives throughout the 1940s and 1950s are clearly illustrated in *The Memoirs of Bernardo Vega*, a testimonial account of the nascent socialist ethos permeating the *tabaqueros* of New York City, and Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*, the auto-biography of a dark-skinned Puerto Rican

¹² This term is employed by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* to refer to 'an absolute sense of ethnic difference' which is 'maximised so that it distinguishes people from one another' (1993: 3). He notes that this is generally associated not only with ideas of national belonging, but with other more locally based form of kinship. Amongst the Puerto Rican communities in New York, whilst an absolute sense of ethnic difference was less connected to discrimination towards other ethnic groups such as African Americans, such collective solidarity was encouraged as evinced through the literature and music produced at the time as a means to provide a juxtaposition to their mainland subjugation.

compelled to undertake a self-odyssey in order to reconcile his dual identity as both racially and ethno-nationally specific.¹³ Close scrutiny of these two works is invaluable for any study of New York's Puerto Rican communities which seeks to analyze the situational identities of contemporary Latino groups and the ways in which the methods employed to anchor a definite locality in the US ethno-racial landscape (related but not identical to those of other minority groups) can be traced back to the early decades of the twentieth century. In this way, the notion of *el vaivén* applied by Jorge Duany in order to signify the nature of Puerto Rican migration as 'a transient and pendulous flow, rather than as a permanent, irrevocable, one way relocation of people' (2002: 2) can also be employed to describe the ways in which current processes of identity formation are as much rooted in the past as in the present, thereby refuting the idea of contemporary subjectivities as not only demarcated within a particular geographic space or national/racial group, but also within a specific epoch. In this way, the negative concept of *la memoria rota* as proposed by Aracadio Diaz-Quñones,¹⁴ in which Puerto Rico's national history is not conceptualized as an uninterrupted linear process, but instead as a fractured route of disjointed memories and denials, can be countervailed by the recognition that at least within the Puerto Rican diaspora, the persistence of both overt resistance and clandestine subversion as a means to determine their place within US society provides a corrective to the concept that they are a people without history or collective tradition. Such acknowledgement, in view of the ostracism suffered by the stateside Puerto Rican communities from both insular and mainland national traditions, can therefore provide not only a psychological panacea to the pains inflicted by a colonized mindset but also through which to promote ethnic solidarity in the face of class and racial cleavages.

The ethnic and social backgrounds of Bernardo Vega and Piri Thomas are sufficiently disparate to consider the conflation of their works as presenting a diversity of Puerto

¹³ Vega's *Memoirs* begins with his arrival in New York City in 1916 and narrates his experiences until 1947. *Down These Mean Streets* opens in 1941 when Piri is 13 years old and relates his life story until his release from prison in 1956.

¹⁴ In *La memoria rota* (1993), Diaz-Quñones discusses the 'broken memory' of Puerto Rican cultural history, which he refers to as the 'ruptures and repressions that have left present-day public discourse devoid of any recognizable field of critical reference' (Flores, 2000: 49).

Rican voices, not only their own but those with whom they interact. Vega, a self-ascribed insular *jibaro* who arrives in New York at the age of 17, moves along a trajectory circumscribed by the tensions created by the aforesaid economic inclusion and social exclusion experienced by many white Puerto Ricans. Whilst their experiences were still difficult and pervaded with racism and xenophobia, at the very least more opportunities for employment were available for them than for dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, rendering Vega's account of the New York City experience in the first half of the twentieth century as directed more towards labour struggles, working-class organizations and grassroots education than issues of racial identity and belonging. In contrast, as the only dark-skinned child of a black Cuban father and white Puerto Rican mother, Thomas finds himself in the intersection of a multitude of various subjectivities not least being those which exist on a microcosmic level in his own household. Thomas' childhood experiences of being tacitly juxtaposed by his father against his lighter-skinned brothers as a result of the father's own negative experiences as a black Latino in New York City result in an obligatory exploration of his relationship to African Americans and blackness. This takes shape from Thomas' earliest days in Harlem, when he is forced to justify his humanity to a group of Italian American youths who place him in the derogatory category of 'nigger', noting that he was 'born in the hospital where all them black bastards get born at' (1997: 25). The fallacy of such pejorative racial categories is later exposed by the same children themselves as they recognize the commonalities between themselves and Piri; this occurs when a fight between them results in Piri's face being covered with ground asphalt in an underhand tactic from the Italian-American boy whom he is fighting, causing his other opponents to recognize that despite his colour, he 'got much heart.... For anybody' (ibid: 32). This corrective from the gang leader to the member who previously noted Piri's heart 'for a nigger' demonstrates that despite having previously stripped Piri of his humanity earlier in the chapter, his ability to stand up for himself and tackle adversity affords a respect and acceptance which transcends the siphoning of people into specific ethno-racial categories. Piri's initial objection at being referred to as a 'nigger' is later proven to be less concerned with his own racism (his best friend Brew, for instance, is African American) than with having to perform to an identity imposed from the outside, an aspect which will be explored later in this chapter.

Vega's *Memoirs* opens with his arrival in New York City in 1916 and the immediate introduction of the concept of New York City as a 'modern Babylon, the meeting point for peoples from all over the world' (1984: 10). Vega notes that around this time 'Harlem was a socialist stronghold' in which 'young people would get together not only for political purposes but for cultural and sports activities and all kinds of parties' (ibid: 11). In particular, Vega depicts the strong sense of solidarity fostered in New York amongst those Cuban and Puerto Rican *independentistas* who had left their respective islands in order to use the US as a base from which to fight for independence. Through his own memoirs and those of his Uncle Antonio, Vega illustrates how the parallel struggles between Puerto Rican and Cuban patriots conjoined to provide the nucleus for a pan-Latino community, founded upon – but not limited to – a shared political struggle against imperialism. Vega notes the numerous societies and institutions which developed from the mid 19th century promoting the sense of a pan-Antillean community. For example, the array of socialist newspapers disseminated throughout New York, such as *Cultura Proletaria*, *El Heraldo*, *Las Novedades* and *La Prensa* all attest to Benedict Anderson's notion of print capitalism as pivotal in the cultivation of ethno-national identities.¹⁵ In this way, Mirabel correctly affirms that at this time Spanish was used as 'a tool by which Puerto Rican and Cuban migrants could create an exclusive and distinct political community that could exist and thrive in a place where Spanish was not the official language' (2002: 61).

Yet Mirabel's comment also alludes to the problems inherent in using such an ethnocentric approach as a means of resistance to both political imperialism and linguistic hegemony. Firstly, whilst the concept of a shared political struggle provided a locus for the various Caribbean diasporic groups in New York, the sustainability of this was strongly contingent on outside factors. The fact that the pursuit of independence was largely affixed in geographical spaces across the Atlantic meant that any fluctuations

¹⁵ In his chapter 'Origins of National Consciousness', for instance, Anderson refers to the ways in which print-languages laid the bases for national-consciousness in three ways; by 'creating unified fields of exchange and communication above the spoken vernaculars,' by giving 'a new fixity to language' and by 'creating new languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars' (1991: 44-45).

occurring not only in Cuba or Puerto Rico but in the trajectory of socialism in general could strongly impact the community in terms of both cohesion and morale. For example, Vega alludes to the support given to the cause of Republican Spain from Puerto Rican socialists in the mid 1930s, noting that 'the Abraham Lincoln Brigade that 'fought so valiantly in Spain included a fair number of Puerto Ricans' as well as the empathy shown by those who remained in New York through the many demonstrations of solidarity with the Republic and 'against the intervention of Hitler and Mussolini' (1984: 191).¹⁶ Clearly, whilst the support shown for international causes is laudable, once such socialist projects were defeated, as proved to be the paradigm throughout the first half of the twentieth century, this greatly weakened the drive and cohesion of the socialist groups within the US, who subsequently turned to other causes around which to ally. For example, Frederick Pike notes that once the nascent Spanish Republic had been quelled, 'much of the heart was taken out of US adversary culture and much of the spirit which had united blacks and white disappeared' (1992: 287). This enervative effect naturally permeated into the Latino socialism as well as the white American countercultures, with the ramification that as the century wore on, Puerto Ricans began to look more towards their idiosyncrasies as a US ethnic minority group in order to unite against oppression in addition to international causes. This is not to say that the affinity between themselves and other global situations was relinquished as events of the 1960s would confirm. As it became increasingly obvious that the correlation between the New York diaspora and international objectives was not particularly expedient to the advancement of the socio-economic realities of everyday life in the US, however, interest gravitated more towards practical concerns such as housing and wages, which had a direct impact on the development of working-class consciousness. Vega notes the marking of 1898 and the US takeover of Puerto Rico as the ending of an era in the history of New York's Puerto Rican community, stating that 'once the thunder of revolutionary struggle against Spain had subsided in the Antilles, the Cuban and Puerto Rican emigrant community in New York fell silent' with the only groups to remain active thereafter being the *tabaqueros* or cigar makers (1984: 83). Whilst allied to the cause of Puerto Rican independence, the

¹⁶ Vega notes, for example, that 3000 Latin Americans fought in Spain, including 300 Puerto Ricans (1984: 197).

principal objective of the *tabaqueros* was socialism within a US context, as attested to by Vega's numerous references to participation in political parties and campaigns such as the Democratic Party of the United States¹⁷ and the allegiance given to political figures not directly related to Puerto Rico, most notably Congressman Vito Marcantonio.¹⁸ Unions involving Spanish-speaking workers, Jews, Italians and other ethnic groups, such as the *Trabajadores Amalgamados de la Industria del Tabaco*, were established and strikes and protests were frequently carried out by Puerto Rican *tabaqueros* in solidarity with other workers.

Remonstrations were carried out not only in connection to economic issues, but also in reaction to the pejorative stereotypes endemic in mainstream US culture throughout the first half of the twentieth century. A particularly revealing incident is recounted by Vega in which he and some of his *tabaquero* work companions visit a movie theatre in order to view a film set in Puerto Rico. Vega is already aware of the prevalence of racialized stereotypes in Hollywood including 'effeminate Frenchmen' and 'South American savages.' As the film develops, however, and the denizens of the island are portrayed as 'half-savage little boys climbing coconut trees like a bunch of monkey' and 'half-naked women walking along mountain trails carrying huge baskets of tropical fruit' awaiting 'the shining Yankee goodguy who can overcome all dangers to save the naïve girl longing to be enlightened by American civilization', he and his compatriots are unable to hide their disdain and stage a protest in the lobby of the theatre (1984: 33). Incidents such as this were prevalent amongst the Puerto Rican community at this time, as attested to in *Memoirs*. Given the credence accorded to Antonio Pedreira's *Insularismo* of the 1930s (see Chapter 2), however, and to alleged Puerto Rican apathy in general, the pugnacity intrinsic in these occurrences was conveniently overlooked in the succeeding decades. Instead, the aforesaid 'culture of poverty' mentality, as advocated by Lewis, proved to be far more acceptable as a means to portray Puerto Rican attitudes in accounting for their

¹⁷ In the Alfred Smith campaign in 1918, for example, 7000 Puerto Ricans registered to vote. The Club Democrático Puertorriqueño was 'a major force behind the drive' of this campaign (Vega, 1984: 111).

¹⁸ Marcantonio was the Italian-American mayor of Harlem largely credited with achieving what few other local politicians of the time were able to, that is to say, the unification of the vicinity's minority groups.

failure to ascend the social ladder, thereby discounting a traditionally established form of resistance amongst the diasporic community.

Vega's recollections of the prejudice and hardships endured by Puerto Ricans throughout this era attest to Mike Davis' affirmation that Puerto Rican poverty 'rebutts the facile claim that citizenship provides a magic carpet for immigrant success' (2001: 123). From Vega's fruitless search for employment following his arrival in New York – involving numerous incidents of being robbed and deceived – to the final chapter of *Memoirs* in which he laments the unwarranted location of Puerto Ricans as the nation's scapegoats,¹⁹ the work translates as a sequence of poignant images confirming the social marginalization of New York's Latinos. For Vega, one of the most illuminating episodes of the misjudgement of Puerto Ricans such as himself occurs towards the end of *Memoirs* in which his interview by the postal censor's office ends acrimoniously when his potential employer asserts that 'Puerto Ricans can't speak or write proper Spanish', a point which the clerk attempts to verify by requesting that Vega interpret the meanings of '*prothesis, epenthesis, paragoge, sincope, aferesis, metathesis, antithesis and sinalefa*' (1984: 211). When Vega's refusal to comply is misinterpreted for lack of knowledge, he responds acutely to his examiner displaying not only a finely-tuned knowledge of Spanish grammar, but also his indignation at being so challenged by a man upon whom he 'did not see a scholar's cap' (ibid). For Vega, such confrontations were not only humiliating but grossly ignorant of the process of grassroots education amongst the *tabaqueros* which rendered them one of the most highly educated components of New York's working class at the time.

The institutionalization of grassroots education amongst the Puerto Rican diaspora was imperative, not only on account of the inherent discrimination within the mainstream educational system – particularly following WWI and the cessation of bilingual instruction – but also as a means to both combat disparaging stereotypes and to offset the contemporary hegemonic ethos which sought to expunge both insular and mainland

¹⁹ Vega alludes to a series of articles from the *World Telegram* in October 1947 in which Puerto Ricans were held responsible for 'destroying the economy, suffocating the culture of their adopted community and spreading tuberculosis' (1984: 230).

Puerto Ricans of their own history as a people. Consequently, within the 3000 plus cigar making factories in New York City (500 of which were owned by Hispanics [ibid: 73]), the Puerto Rican workers provided a strong contrast to the general neutrality of North American socialists (ibid: 24) through their array of cultural activities providing them with an alternative pedagogy, such as the *Circulo de Tabaqueros* in Brooklyn, the *Francisco Ferrer y Guardia* school and, perhaps most significantly, the systematic functioning of readers and researchers in each of the factories. The *tabaqueros*, long since considered as hotbeds for revolutionary activity (particularly given the influence of Jose Martí throughout the 1880s and 1890s), were invigorated by the political readers who visited the factories on a daily basis, such as Luisa Capetillo and Fernando Garcia, who Vega recalls as 'reading to us for one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon' (ibid: 21). These sessions were dedicated to current news as well as 'more substantial readings of a political and literary nature', such as the writings of Dumas, Tolstoy and Jules Verne, of which the workers' own selection was of paramount importance. As a result of the factory readings and their subsequent analysis and discussion, Vega concludes that at this time the *tabaqueros* became 'the most enlightened sector of the working class' (ibid: 22).

Such an affirmation, when conjoined with the fact that in the early 1900s cigar makers and their families made up more than 60% of the Puerto Rican population, is a significant remedial to the longstanding notion that New York's Puerto Rican communities are traditionally deficient by educational standards in comparison with mainstream statistics. In this way, the concept of grassroots education is analogous to Ana Y. Ramos-Zaya's notion of 'critical pedagogy' as an 'educational philosophy that encourages students to analyze power relations by situating themselves in the context of a neocapitalist, postcolonial framework' (2003: 83). Ramos-Zaya, who employs the term as a means to express the educative curriculum at the Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS) in Chicago, provides a valuable insight into the ways in which the quantifying methods of 'measuring by the white man's yard stick' (Rodriguez, 1989: 45) are being challenged by contemporary teaching practices. What is omitted, however, is the reference to an explicit connection between such techniques and those of earlier generations, which would

substantiate her later assertion, in reference to the grassroots historiography or autobiographical writings of barrio youth, that 'when autobiography is available, anthropologists cannot simply view an ethnoracial community as a 'people without history' (ibid: 153). Extending this postulation to include the historical connection between current working-class practices and those of the 1920s and 1930s would further corroborate the suggestion that once a grassroots history is constructed, its subjects 'cannot be reduced to folkloric images that prevent any critical staging of a counter-hegemonic critique' (ibid).

The application of a grassroots education and politicization was also expanded to include events taking place in Puerto Rico, in this way re-affirming the ancestral roots between the diasporic community and their homeland. Yet even with regards to those issues related directly to Puerto Rico, whilst the idea of *Borinquen* as both a temporal and symbolic entity has remained a constant in the construction of Puerto Rican identities until the present day, the ambiguity of insular conceptions of the diaspora as both an extension of the island as well as a bastardized collective resulted in both solace and tensions between insular and mainland Puerto Ricans. For example, whilst the Puerto Rican *tabaqueros* in New York manifested a strong sense of camaraderie with their compatriot workers on the island (for example, Vega refers to the sugar workers' strike in Puerto Rico in 1920, which was met with strikes of sympathy carried out in New York), the disparity between the associations organized by the Puerto Rican government to maintain cohesion between themselves and the diaspora and the everyday realities of stateside Puerto Ricans became increasingly problematic. For example, Virginia Sanchez Korrol refers to the establishment Migrant Division or the New York branch of the Puerto Rican Department of Labour as one of many institutions designed to 'ameliorate the adjustment process for new migrants' through providing guidance in overcoming cultural and linguistic difficulties and acting as arbitrators with seasonal contract employers and other such opportunities. Yet whilst the intentions of the Division were commendable, given the counterbalance it offered to 'the actions and attitudes of an inhospitable, bigoted American society' (2004: 11), nonetheless the overall achievement of its influence was to result in the 'virtual exclusion of stateside Puerto Ricans from the

political scene' at this time through its 'inhibition and undermining of grassroots leadership emanating from diaspora communities'. Thus Sanchez Korrol affirms that the necessity of a re-evaluation of the New York's Puerto Rican community, including an acknowledgement of its composition from 'recent arrivals, settled pioneers, US-born 'Americanized Hispanics', individuals who clung steadfastly to a traditional island culture and those who had forged a stateside blended brand of *lo puertorriqueño*' (ibid: 10), could not be provided by an institution whose policies were dictated to by an insular government not cognizant of the peculiarities of the diasporic experience.

Thus one of the most significant contributions which Vega makes to the understanding of the Puerto Rican experience in the first half of the twentieth century is the way in which working-class interests became equally as important, if not more so, than a perpetuated allegiance to Puerto Rico. Yet as noted above by Sanchez Korrol, the heterogeneity of the Puerto Rican communities at this time was such that for some migrants, the destitution and adversity encountered in the US was sufficient to place an idyllic existence on the island at the forefront of their constructed identities. At the beginning of *Down These Mean Streets*, for example, we are quickly introduced to Piri's mother, a light-skinned Boricua who nostalgically remembers her '*isla verde*' as she recalls 'the *coquís* and the *pajaritos* making all the *música*....' When Piri asks her if 'everybody loved each other' on the island – no doubt as a means to provide an imaginary alternative to the difficulties of life in New York – she responds with 'in Puerto Rico those around you share *la pobreza* with you and they love you....sometimes (the US) is a cold place to live – not because of the winter... but because of the snow in the hearts of the people' (1997: 10). The idealization of the island illustrated by Piri's mother was a common reaction to the industrial capitalism of the US, as attested to in Ruth Glasser's study of Puerto Rican music produced around this time. In *My Music Is My Flag*, Glasser refers to the popularity of *El Lamento Borincano*, an anthem for Puerto Ricans and other Spanish speakers in the 1930s, written by Rafael Hernandez and recorded by Manuel 'Canario' Jimenez and Co., amongst other protest songs recorded throughout the Depression era. The *Lamento Borincano* narrates the prototypical story of a Puerto Rican *jibaro* who arrives in New York with visions of the American Dream, only to have them crushed as

he realizes he is simply one of many destitute *boricuas* whom no-one wants to buy produce from or afford hospitality to. The *jibaro* then wonders what will become of his children and his home back in Puerto Rico as he prepares himself for a lifetime of despair, an experience which clearly resonated with thousands of migrants not only from Puerto Rico but from throughout the whole of Latin America (Glasser, 1997: 164-165)

Thus the utilization of Puerto Rico as a repository for values considered to be obsolete in a capitalist society provided stateside *boricuas* with the possibility of one day being able to return to a familiar existence (for those raised on the island at least). For those Puerto Ricans born and raised in New York, the concept of a society in which they would not be regarded as anomalous to the mainstream or as unwelcome visitors was to bear a strong impact upon the relationship between insular and mainland Puerto Ricans in the succeeding decades. Throughout the first few decades of the 20th century, however, the haven of a temporal homeland afforded Puerto Ricans a means by which they could resist the suppression of mainstream US society – particularly for those Boricuas whose subjugation was compounded by their black skin. Injected into a culture which recognized only two forms of ethno-racial identity, black Boricuas such as Piri's father could turn to an exaggeration of those characteristics which marked them as Latino, such as an emphasis of their accent, thereby distinguishing them from the black and white binary which failed to provide them with an accurate locus of solidarity. Such marks of differentiation, however, were often interpreted by African Americans as indicative of a desire to maintain distance between themselves and the black communities so as not to be afforded the same prejudicial treatment. Even between Piri and his best friend Brew such tensions could sporadically arise, as illustrated through a game of dozens in which Piri refers to Brew as 'an ugly spook' (1997: 121). In response, Brew questions Piri's deprecating use of the term 'spook' given that he is also dark skinned; when Piri replies that he is 'Porty Rican' – thereby illustrating the jovial nature of the game in which mainstream derogatory stereotypes of 'spooks' and 'Porty Ricans' are assumed and mocked – the conversation becomes intense, as Piri insists that his status as Puerto Rican supersedes his skin pigmentation. His comment 'it must be tough on you Negroes' (ibid: 123) draws a heated reaction from Brew, who accuses Piri of being:

a goddamned Negro with a white man's itch.... Yuh think that being a Porto Rican lets you off the hook? Tha's the trouble. Too damn many you black Porto Ricans got your eyes closed. Too many goddamned Negroes all over this goddamned world feel like you does. Jus' cause you can rattle off some different kind of language don' change your skin one bit. Whatta yuh all think?

Piri is quick to defend his remarks, however, by insisting that he too 'hates the paddy trying to keep the black man down.... But I'm beginning to hate the black man too 'cause I can feel his pain and I don't know that it oughta be mine. Shit, man, Puerto Ricans got social problems too' (ibid: 124). Piri's endorsement of Brew's attitude, however, is later manifest through his journey to the South in order to explore his individual relationship to blackness, in the hope that this will neutralize the loneliness he feels at home through being the only dark-skinned child in contrast to his lighter-skinned siblings. Thus Piri's assertion of Puerto Ricanness as a means of separation from his blackness illustrates the extent to which this was related more to a psychological need for self-preservation in the face of mainstream taxonomical control than to racism against African Americans. As with all internal colonial peoples, the state of disenfranchisement percolated throughout all aspects of everyday life which were beyond individual control; retaining hold of one's self-identity was subsequently one of the few available means to resist the pressure of falling into the US racial lexicon.

Yet there were occasions upon which the artificiality of racial categories could be manipulated by people of colour as opposed to being subsumed by them. It is important to recognize that such forms of racial masquerade – analogous to Judith Butler's hypothesis of performance as expounded in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* – were not only actuated as a means to further one's career or social status, but also had the concomitant effect of exposing the fallacy of the US racial classificatory system from the 'subjects' themselves. In her work on the performative aspects of gender classifications, Butler notes that the 'juridicial formation of language

and politics that represents women as 'the subject' of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics' (1990: 2). Thus it follows that in the same way that gender, as a cultural as opposed to biological construction, can become 'a free floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one' (ibid), the idea of racial categories as social rather than fixed classifications results in their malleability and capacity to be employed as both a means of empowerment as well as exploration.

The concept of racial transvestism had long been used by whites engaging in the practice of blackface as a process through which they could explore their fears and stereotypes of African Americans, whilst clearly remaining safe in the knowledge that they were not black. In this way, racial masquerade acted as a means through which race as a naturalized category of classification was verified, thereby perpetuating the idea of unalterable essential differences between blacks and whites. In contrast, the interchangeability with which African Americans and Latinos weaved in and out of their assigned labels in the racial nomenclature revealed not only the superficiality of such markers, but also the folly of mainstream society in allowing them such credence. For example, Glasser refers to the ways in which Puerto Rican musicians conformed to white ideas concerning 'black musical abilities' (that is to say, their performance as 'natural and spontaneous musicians' with an instinct for music as opposed to performing from transcripts) in order to further their career paths as musicians at a time when Latin music was not popular in the city (1997: 59). Similarly, in his article 'The Latins from Manhattan: Confronting Race and Building Community in Jim Crow Baseball, 1906-1950', Adrian Burgos Jr. illustrates how 'talking jibberish' which sounded Spanish proved expedient for African American baseball players wishing to join 'black baseball's first elite team', the Cuban Giants. Burgos postulates that 'the act of consciously identifying the team as Cuban reveals that before the twentieth century, African Americans had acquired the racial knowledge of a Cuban type they could imitate' with the manipulation of the racial category posing 'the most significant challenge to US racial categories by inserting consideration of nationality and ethnicity' (2001: 77). Burgos fails

to expand upon the precise reason why the Cuban Giants were formed on the basis of a Latino identity in the first place, however, leading the reader to concur with Alayce, Brew's girlfriend in *Down These Mean Streets*, that despite the hardships of being Puerto Rican or Cuban, 'anything's better'n being a li'l ole darkie' (1997: 159). Piri's father, for example, openly admits his concurrence with this declaration when he tells his son that:

I ain't got one coloured friend, at least not one American Negro friend. Only dark ones I got are Puerto Ricans or Cubans. I'm not a stupid man. I saw the look on white people when I walked into a place where dark skin wasn't supposed to be. I noticed how a cold rejection turned into an indifferent acceptance when they heard my exaggerated accent. I wanted a value on me, son (ibid: 153).

Unlike his father, Piri's exploration of his relationship to the African diaspora leads him to both reject and assert his blackness. The sympathy he affords to the identity crisis of Gerald Andrew West, a 'tan-coloured not very Negroid looking' research student who later describes himself as 'one-eighth Negro,' despite the latter's clearly patronizing and outside perspective of African American culture, demonstrates that in contrast to Brew, Piri recognizes the affinity between himself and Gerald given that 'he was a Negro trying to make Puerto Rican and I was a Puerto Rican trying to make Negro' (ibid: 177). Thus Piri's attempts at feeling pride in being black also lead him away from blackness as a locus for solidarity and instead towards the concept of hybridity as expressed through this incident. In contrast, a later episode sees Piri take advantage of the self-assumption of a Negro typecast in order to reverse the black/white power dynamics through the ultimate act of masculine authority: sexual conquest. Having previously decided that he 'wanted to fuck a white woman in Texas', Piri is informed by his Mexican companion of a local hotel where he can do this provided he can pass for Puerto Rican since African Americans are not permitted. Despite this being the truth, Piri's parting comment to the prostitute in question leaves no question as to the motive behind the copulation:

“Baby, I just want you to know” – and I watched her smile fall off and a look of horror fill the empty space it left – “I just want you to know,” I repeated, “that you got fucked by a nigger, *by a black man!*” (ibid: 189).

Here, Piri actively uses a black identity in contrast to that of his Puerto Rican nationality as a means to subvert the prototypical African American as subjugated and powerless, instead manipulating the symbolic weight of white fear afforded to a black racialized body in order to castigate the representation of white hegemony epitomized by the prostitute.

Relations between Puerto Ricans and African Americans were thus fraught with tensions and ambiguity. On the one hand, the desire of some Puerto Ricans to resist the black identity thrust upon them resulted in strife and resentment; on the other, the proximity of living and working conditions as well as the mutual empathy which each group afforded to the other on account of their shared experiences meant that a diasporic consciousness was able to develop in which the fallacy of racial essentialism was recognized. Perhaps the most symbolic figure attesting to this is Arturo Schomburg, a black Puerto Rican who preferred to live amongst the African American community in Harlem and who devoted his life to compiling papers and other contributions made by the African diaspora to transamerican civilization.²⁰ The friendship which exists between Piri and Brew, despite the occasional interjection of racial contention, is also symbolic on a micro-level of the solidarity felt amongst African Americans and particularly Caribbean Latinos in the face of mainstream adversity.

Thus a study of Bernardo Vega's *Memoirs* and Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* illustrates that by the second half of the twentieth century, the idiosyncrasies of New York's Puerto Rican community were already becoming established. The institutionalization of grassroots political education, an ambiguous relationship with the

²⁰ According to Lisa Sanchez-Gonzalez, Schomburg's 'definition of a diasporan subjectivity' suggested a 'mobilization that invites variously termed Caribbean and Latin American communities to the table of an insurgent, African diasporan collectivity' since he understood that 'racialization throughout the Americas involves diverse experiences of slavery, miscegenation, cultural syncretism and racial politics' (2001: 56-57).

African diaspora and the dexterity employed to manipulate synthetic racial categories were all in play by the beginning of the 1950s. Consequently, it becomes clear that the bifurcation implied by the Civil Rights Movement in the mid 1960s, in which 2nd-generation Puerto Ricans began to deviate from the dual migrant mindset of their parents (in which a desire to assimilate was conflated with a longing to stay close to Puerto Rico) and instead move towards identification as a US ethnic minority group, is not as uncomplicated as pre- and post- categorizations of this period would imply. In the decades succeeding the Civil Rights movement, Puerto Ricans had displayed a comparable belligerence in resisting mainstream efforts of ethnic decantation. The impracticality of an absolute rejection of US society, however, meant that it would only be in the 1960s that this would take place. Once the communities became animated by the simultaneous movements of African American and Mexican American activists in these years, it became possible to imagine a re-thinking of US society in which the idea of race as a construct could be challenged and denied. Consequently, the idea of a 'Nuyorican' identity was born: a social and ideological construct which neither denied the Puerto Rican ancestry of the community nor refuted its lived experience as a minority group in the US. Explorations of this construct were carried out in music, visual art, theatre and politics; it is the field of poetry, however, that the next chapter will examine as a means to elucidate how Nuyorican cultural productions of this time have become an integral part of Puerto Rican cultural history in the US.

CHAPTER 4

NUYORICAN POETRY IN THE LOWER EAST SIDE

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the instigation of strategies of resistance employed by the various factions of New York's Puerto Rican community towards forcible assimilation into mainstream US society. Having been compelled to cross the air bridge between Puerto Rico and the mainland as a result of the island's accelerated industrialization, the survival tactics utilized by *la Colonia Hispana* oscillated from outright militancy, including the political activism amongst island *independentistas* as documented by Bernardo Vega, to more subtle strategies of resistance regarding the imputation of a personal racialized identity such as the self-tropicalizations and affinity with blackness as illustrated by Piri Thomas and his father in *Down These Mean Streets*. Yet whilst these methods evince a history of defiance to which stateside Puerto Ricans have long been denied knowledge, the lack of institutionalized support and grassroots mobilization, as well as the conflict between insular and stateside Puerto Rican leadership prevented this resistance from being little more than isolated instances of individual/group insubordination to mainstream ethics. Whilst the various localized blocs comprising New York's Puerto Rican diaspora were self ascribed as an extension of the island, the correlation of the adverse reception experienced by 2nd-generation Puerto Ricans returning to their 'homeland' with both the Civil Rights Movement and the flourishing underground Lower East Side culture during the 1960s and 1970s, resulted in a gradual replacement of this conception with one prioritizing the specific experience of New York's Puerto Ricans as distinct from both island and mainstream US society.

Throughout these decades, the recognition that far from being a valued appendage to the Puerto Rican community (as defined by insular criteria) the stateside diaspora was represented in lamentable if not reproachful delineations from Puerto Rico's intellectual and political elite, resulted in the corresponding effect from designated 'Nuyoricans' who spoke English, were affiliated with African Americans and above all were considered to be ignorant of the island's political status, of constructing an identity based upon their lived experience as an internally colonized group in the US. Consequently, whilst this did not constitute a separatist ideology as demonstrated through the visible presence of Puerto Rico in the literary and musical works produced at this time as well as the numerous institutions, community educational classes and forums dedicated to the preservation of Puerto Rican culture, the identification of New York's Puerto Ricans with other disenfranchised groups who had also suffered from the colonial forces of displacement and cultural excoriation expanded from their germinal foundations in the 1940s and 1950s into a resolute commitment to confront social injustice through an appreciation of shared cultural roots in the African diaspora. The inter-ethnic solidarity manifest in the Young Lords (of whom 25% were African American),¹ the Harlem Writers Guild and the musical collaboration of African American and Puerto Rican musicians which produced Boogaloo² defied not only the black/white dichotomy inherent in US society but also the subordinate role to which African culture had been traditionally relegated in Puerto Rico itself.

The increasing appreciation of Afro-Boricua roots coincided with the political frustration felt by many emerging grassroots leaders, such as Antonia Pantoja and Herman Badillo, that the needs of the diasporic community could not be understood by the insular elite. Consequently, the efforts of the Migrant Division of the Puerto Rican Department of Labour, to whom the responsibility of the New York community had been assigned, were received with apathy and suspicion as the ideology of the diasporic community as a minority group in itself became increasingly crystallized. The 1960s

¹ According to Iris Morales, in addition to the 25% African American contingent of the Young Lords, other members included Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Panamanians and Colombians (1998: 215).

² See Juan Flores' chapter 'Cha-Cha with a Backbeat' in *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* for an account of the synthesis of Latino and African American musical traditions which produced Boogaloo.

alone saw the establishment of ASPIRA (1961),³ the Puerto Rican Family Institute (1963), the Puerto Rican Community Development Project (1964) and El Museo del Barrio (1969), all of which attested to the solidifying of a grassroots Puerto Rican community defined by its quotidian existence in New York.

The rejection of the diasporic community from the national mythology of Puerto Rico was clearly represented through the literary productions from some of the island's leading authors throughout the 1950s. In 1952, for example, Rene Marquez' *La Carreta* portrayed a lucid image of stateside Puerto Rican migrants as synonymous with a mirthless and pathetic existence symbolized in the eventual death of the stateside character. This novel was eventually counterbalanced through Tato Laviera's book *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*, the purpose of which was to emphasize the volition of stateside migrants and their choice to remain in the US as opposed to returning to an idealized homeland. In this way, the New York based poet Laviera challenged the prevailing notion that to live outside of island culture was to submit to one's own cultural demise, thereby contributing to the body of work which had been produced throughout the preceding decades by those 'Nuyorican' poets who had labored relentlessly towards documenting both an oral history of New York's Puerto Rican diaspora, as well as an aesthetic to accompany the anomie of a no-man's-land existence and its concomitant reactions.

This assemblage of poetry was as much linked in the politics of urban politics and community activism as in the existentialist creation of a utopian space, freed from the constraints of either Puerto Rican or US literary traditions and mythologies. In an article published in 1987, for instance, Miguel Algarín affirms that 'when you have nothing and can expect nothing, anything you do is something so that our experience makes it possible for us to write poems that describe our actual conditions without fearing that they might be too personal or too lost in the detail of the day and not metaphysical enough' (1987: 162). Here, Algarín points to the contradiction inherent in

³ Aspira was founded by Dr. Antonina Pantoja in 1961 and is an educative youth support organization, which includes drop-out prevention schemes, SAT preparation courses, college counseling and leadership clubs.

all post-colonial literatures regarding the lack of choice engendered by denial into either society (that is, from the host or home country) occurring at the same time as a renewed sense of liberation enabling the creation of new aesthetics unlimited by any national ethos. In this way, poets such as Pedro Pietri and Miguel Algarín could relate their poetic genealogy back to not only the 'Neo-Rican' poets in the 1940s and 1950s, such as Julio Marzan and Jaime Carrero, but also back to those poets firmly grounded in the American mainstream, such as William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman, who emphasized an ideal US cultural pluralism (which would not be incompatible with white-premised civic nationalism) and the imperative of democratizing the institution of poetry. In an interview with Bobby Gonzalez, for example, the self-ascribed 'indigenous story teller' refers to Whitman as:

America's poet; the first American voice among poets. He's the voice of what America should be instead of what it has become who everyone can claim as theirs from a right wing republican to a left wing anarchist.⁴

The fact that Gonzalez, whose ancestry lies in both the native American and Puerto Rican traditions, feels the connection between himself and Whitman emphasizes the extent to which the perceived separatism enforced by minority groups is not indicative of national antagonism. Where a mainstream voice is considered to be representative of oneself, connections and affiliations can be drawn which transcend national boundaries giving rise to a new concept of American consciousness which overlaps with, but is not subsumed by, mainstream ethics.

The traditional privileging of the written over the spoken word, however, has resulted in the continued exclusion of Latino and African American histories from the mainstream canon, thereby denying their rightful place in US official history. For, as noted by Harold H. Kolb, given that:

⁴ Personal Interview with Bobby Gonzalez (hereafter referred to as Interview – B.Gz) 17th July 2005.

a canon is a cultural mirror, a national repository of historical and social values, of pedagogical notions, of ideas about the purpose of literature (1990: 39)

the inclusion or omission of any minority group within the mainstream canon becomes a political as well as cultural decision. In 'The Oral Tradition and The Study of American Literature,' Theresa Melendez argues that the reasons for the exclusion of the oral tradition from the mainstream canon are connected to conventional definitions of what constitutes literature as opposed to folklore. Melendez notes that 'the problem largely began with the metaphor of the Book in the history of Western European thought as writing had a sacred character' (1990: 75), a factor not present in other societies, such as ancient Greece in which 'it was speech and not records that imparted wisdom'. Consequently, the Western association between the written word and the erudite – particularly given the 'separation of literary activity from everyday pursuits' since 'literature became an acquired product of an individual's official institutional education instead of an integral part of the society's culture'(ibid) – has traditionally constrained the oral documentation of history and narrative to the realm of folklore, thereby preventing its consideration as an object for literary as opposed to anthropological study. For whilst this is not to say that anthropology has not made great inroads in stressing the significance of oral narratives, particularly in the fields of ethnopoetics and performance theory,⁵ the association between 'less than civilized cultures' as understood by mainstream philosophy, with their lack of literacy has prevented the oral tradition from being considered as anything more than a precursor to the written word, as opposed to a genre in itself.

Compounded by the disinclination to invite minority cultures into US national traditions in general, the integral role which the oral tradition plays in both Latin American and African American cultures has subsequently disqualified a substantial

⁵ The field of ethnopoetics is largely associated with Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock, who employ the term to designate the study of non-Western poetry within a community and performative context in which 'the speaking storyteller is not merely addressing a hypothetical future audience, unlike the writer. The world evinced by the audible text, considered in its entirety, includes not only the world projected by the story proper but the world of the performer and audience' (Tedlock, 1983: 10).

portion of their narratives from being considered as part of US national history. With regard to Puerto Rico, for example, the role of *la trova* or improvised poetry performances, as well as the *declamador* and *la plena*, both of which were concerned in relaying local stories from the street to the people, illustrates the centrality of performance and the oral tradition in sustaining notions of community cohesion within island culture. For unlike a literary text in which the participatory element remains restricted to an individual experience between author and reader, with an oral performance, clearly the opportunity is presented for a collective renewal of ideologies, values, aesthetics and survival strategies relevant to the community in question. Thus Dennis Tedlock notes the 'third possibility' for speaking storytellers, which goes beyond those of 'making the separate world seem attractive or internally coherent and getting the hearers to project themselves into their private versions of that world.' That is to say, he postulates that:

instead of being at the other end of a journey, the world of the story enters the collective experience of the very room or dooryard where it is being told. There is a fusion of intimacies when the speaker calls attention to the fact that the stage set of a scene in the story was the same as the present set of its telling, or compares a character in the story with someone in the audience (1983: 11).

The imperative of such reaffirmations of cohesion naturally becomes heightened at times when such 'collective experiences' witness cultures in danger of becoming eroded or absorbed, thus attesting to the need for stateside Puerto Ricans to maintain a grassroots historiography documenting the array of lived experiences in the US which is both performed as well as written. For whilst poetry performances provide the necessary rejuvenation for a community ethos and spirit, the reliance of this upon the physical presence of a storyteller or poet results in its effects being limited to a particular moment in time. In contrast, with the construction of a written legacy, the emancipatory zeal contained within the words on a page becomes timeless and able to be absorbed without contingency upon a corporeal solidarity. This recognition has

resulted in the production and preservation of a rich body of literature emanating primarily from the East Harlem and Lower East Side neighborhoods, a literary corpus which has continued to play a vibrant role in the community up until the present day.

The validation of an identity constructed upon the lived experience of New York's Puerto Ricans was manifest through the coining of the term 'Nuyorican,' an adaptation of the pejorative term 'Neorican' used on the island to refer to stateside Puerto Ricans who were considered to have betrayed their home culture through the adoption of US customs and practices. Whilst it is Miguel Algarín who is traditionally credited with the neologism, in 1964 Jaime Carrero published *Jet Neorriqueño: Neo-Rican Jet Liner*. The difference between his use of the term and that of Algarín, however, lies in the fact that with Carrero the term is used as a differentiating marker, given his own status as a resident island Boricua and those on the mainland. With Algarín, however, the moniker 'Nuyorican' – with a slight written alteration in order to emphasize the centrality of New York in the denotation, was a definite act of appropriation in order to empower a disenfranchised community and provide them with a sense of legitimacy to offset their rejection from both US and Puerto Rican societies. Personal interviews with 2nd- and 3rd- generation Nuyorican poets are replete with individual encounters of negative reactions to their Puerto Rican 'homecoming'; Jose Angel Figueroa, for example, laments that 'during my youth I was punished for speaking Spanish – physically and emotionally – yet in our homeland I was treated as a stranger.' He affirms that 'the struggle of what it means to be a native has lots to do with the relationship to social class and education,'⁶ a sentiment echoed by Jorge Matos, a former poet and librarian at El Centro,⁷ who notes that 'on the island, race, class and discrimination are very closely intertwined... For many insular Puerto Ricans, this was the stereotypical Nuyorican (poor and black) who was also associated with drugs, violence and crime'. Jorge, who was born in Miami, spent his childhood in Puerto Rico and moved to New York in 1990. His assertion that 'in my family, we never talked about New York or Nuyoricans even though my Grandfather had been here in the late 1940s' is emblematic of the class

⁶ Personal interview with Jose Angel Figueroa (Interview – J.A.F) 12th May 2005

⁷ Personal interview with Jorge Matos (Interview – J.Mts) 21st April 2005.

prejudices which were entwined with the denial of the stateside diaspora as an extension of the Puerto Rican ethno-nation. Consequently, the conflation of both mainland and insular discrimination towards US born Puerto Ricans compelled the diasporic community in New York to forge their own identity incorporating their ancestral roots in Puerto Rico, but ultimately geared more towards other ethnic groups in the same position with whose quotidian experiences they could identify.

As with any practice of labeling, however, the issue of representation and to whom the marker of Nuyorican extends has remained a contentious subject since the term was first introduced into New York society. For whilst the term was initially assumed as a means of solidarity, the fact that the freedom celebrated by Nuyoricans as a multiracial, bilingual group became circumscribed is seen as oxymoronic by a number of poets whom the description ostensibly represents. Consequently, it is rejected as both limiting and divisive, since the connotations of working-class street culture inherent in the term do not resonate with every Puerto Rican poet who has been brought up in New York. Similarly, the presence of Puerto Rico in the lived experience of stateside Puerto Ricans varies according to each person's upbringing; according to Victor Hernandez Cruz, for example, for him the term Nuyorican is not appropriate, since his writing is part of the North American literary landscape to which he brings his Caribbean background. Cruz states that since 'poetry is a group of words come dance together, I don't know why they keep breaking it down into so many sub-groups and schools', and consequently he reiterates that 'I don't define myself within the context of any context but within the central actuality of "Poet" and the task that that implies' (Cabanillas, 1995: 53). Likewise, Jack Agueros affirms that as a New York Puerto Rican, 'I can't feel like a Nuyorican because I identify with many Puerto Rican things and I'm interested in the island's culture, but I would be a liar if I said that culture has been an influence over me' (Hernandez, 1997: 25). Jose Angel Figueroa confirms this sentiment by asserting that:

I'm very proud of being a Boricua but don't call me a Nuyorican. If you're gonna call me anything, call me a Boricua or a Boricua poet but I don't have to wave the flag around all the time to show it.

Figueroa also indicates the role which Puerto Rican poets have played in mainstream US culture as he states that despite the fact the American Dream remained:

private property for Puerto Ricans as we refused to give up our language and heritage, we have given the American language a new and fresh mind through writing in English and mixing it with Spanish and our Latino heritage. Our voices are multifaceted and that's why I say don't call me a Nuyorican poet.⁸

Here, the Boricua poet points to one of the fundamental tensions within Nuyorican poetry, the fact that the works are constructed within the polyglot of New York society and celebrate diversity, yet at the same time contain ethnocentric connotations specific to Puerto Rico and appear to denote a specific experience based around urban culture.

On the other hand, it could be argued that it is precisely the inclusivity afforded by the Nuyorican aesthetic which has garnered so much support for its ethos throughout the 1970s and beyond. For whilst the term does represent a particular ethnic background and the subsequent implication of an urban lifestyle, it must be recognized that at the time when the Nuyorican poets began to meet and consider the direction of their literary outpourings, Puerto Ricans were the dominant Latino group in New York. In effect, to be Latino in New York throughout the 1960s and 1970s was to be at least regarded as Puerto Rican and therefore subjected to the same discriminatory treatment as that ethnic group. For example, according to Panama Alba, a Panamanian-American political activist who worked with the Young Lords and many other Latino/African American social justice groups since then:

⁸ Interview – J.A.F.

I call myself Pana-Rican because when I came here, everyone thought I was Puerto Rican. I used to say that I wasn't as I didn't want get my ass whipped by the cops but basically I'm a nationalized Puerto Rican!⁹

This is not to say that other Latino cultures became subsumed by Puerto Rican demographics, however, but simply to acknowledge that the Latino experience of the 1960s and 1970s for the community in general was to a large extent determined by the actions of the Puerto Rican population.¹⁰ In 1974, for example, the campaigning of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Educational Fund (PRLDEF) resulted in the introduction of bilingual ballots in school board and general elections as well as the changes in hiring requirements in the police and other government jobs that had previously prevented Puerto Ricans from entering these professions (Falcon, 2004: 92). Clearly, these achievements benefited not only Puerto Ricans but the entire Latino community, which became far more heterogeneous in the succeeding decades.

The point to be made here, however, is that the emphasis on the Puerto Rican experience in the 1960s and 1970s was not necessarily due to a deliberate exclusion of other Latino groups, which particularly in the case of Dominican immigrants came to bear strong analogies to the Puerto Rican paradigm in the following decades, but simply due to demographic convenience. Consequently, the association of Nuyorican specifically with Puerto Rico is not to deny its inclusivity towards other ethnic groups, as can be seen in later chapters through the contemporary movements of Acentos and the trajectory of the Nuyorican Poets Café, which has expanded to become 'a Spanglish-based institution which could serve as a staging ground for one of New York's most viable cultural happenings' (Morales, 2002: 114). Furthermore, in connection with the working-class experience of the Nuyorican poets, it is worth noting that whilst a good portion of the literature and poetry produced at this time was concerned with urban lifestyle and culture, the backgrounds of the various poets connected with the early Nuyorican movements were quite diverse. Miguel Piñero, for

⁹ Quote from Panel with Micky Melendez (12th March 2005 at the Museum of the City of New York).

¹⁰ In 'De'tras Pa'lante' for example, Angelo Falcon notes that in 1960, Puerto Ricans constituted 80.9% of New York's Latino population. This had dropped to 70.4% by 1970 and 61.2% by 1980 (2004:167).

example, was in some ways the quintessential street poet given his emphasis on drugs, urbanity and inevitable incarceration (upon which he based his play *Short Eyes*). In contrast, Miguel Algarín, whilst also from a working-class background, holds BA and Masters Degrees in Romance Languages and Comparative Literature respectively. Sandra Maria Esteves, of both Puerto Rican and Dominican background, was educated at Pratt College by predominantly Anglo instructors in art, whilst Pedro Pietri was a Vietnam War veteran who began his political education during the conflict, and began his writing career 13 years later. Thus it is clear to see that whilst all of these writers may be subsumed under the label Nuyorican, this is not to say that their experiences have been monolithic and consequently are restricting in both their sociological and thematic outlook.

The gravitation of Nuyorican poets towards a collective locale where they could share their works, and subsequently provide the ideological nucleus for the synonymous community-building strategies taking place throughout Manhattan, was fostered by Miguel Algarín, who offered his living room as a meeting hub for himself and other poets such as Pedro Pietri, Bimbo Rivas, Lucky Cienfuegos, Miguel Piñero, Jesus Papoleto Melendez and Sandra Maria Esteves. Once it became clear that Algarín's living quarters were not sufficiently capacious for the poets gravitating towards the idea of a poetic community, however, the meeting place moved to 505 East 6th Street in 1975, where it became known as The Nuyorican Poets Café. This setting changed again in 1980 to 3rd Street, where it remained the cultural nucleus for the Nuyorican poets until its closure in 1983 as a result of the fiscal problems grappling the city at the time. The Café was to re-open again in 1989 from the same site, although under a somewhat different rationale and with completely distinct consequences, as will be seen in the succeeding chapters.

The location of this provisional milieu in the Lower East Side was significant, given the role that this vicinity had traditionally played in the trajectory of New York's countercultures. A traditional immigrant enclave which was home to working-class Jews, Ukrainians, Poles and Puerto Ricans, the multiculturalism of the Lower East Side,

together with its crumbling buildings and desperate need for urban reform, rendered it an attractive environment for white bourgeois subcultures seeking to break with the conformist demands of mainstream society. In the 1950s, for example, the Beatnik generation followed the precedent set by the Bohemians in the 1920s to establish the Lower East Side as the East Coast site of countercultural experimentation. The Beats, who were comprised from a 'collection of several diverse subcultures each centered around a cultural and not terribly political critique of bourgeois society' (Mele, 2000: 141) had the advantage, from a real estate perspective, of imbuing the neighborhood with a sanitized excitement and thrill factor, providing the area with an additional attractiveness to prospective middle-class buyers. Local reactions to the Beats ranged from empathy and cross-cultural awareness (as evinced through the numerous visits made by Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs to the Nuyorican Poets Café) to apathy and even hostility, given that for the working classes to whom daily life in the Lower East Side ghetto was compulsory, the voluntary detachment of white bourgeois youth from the safety of mainstream society was insulting.

It is important to recognize that throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the state of urban decay throughout the Lower East Side was ruinous. Both landlords and local governments, intent on attracting a middle-class clientele to the area, made conscious efforts to rid Lower East Side housing blocs of working-class immigrants through both increasing rents and adopting the 'slash and burn' policies of disinvestment, withholding services and general urban neglect, eventually resulting in the condemnation of buildings which could then be destroyed and the areas sold to private builders. Consequently, Christopher Mele is correct in pointing out that:

if the poor migrants from Puerto Rico could not be discouraged from coming to the city, the government could wield land-use policy to determine those areas where they could and couldn't afford to live (2000: 131).

Thus the contrast between the dissolution of white ethnic ghettos and the sustained existence of the destitute Puerto Rican neighborhoods was in large part due to the contrived urban policies designed to attract middle-class investors, and not to an innate inability on the part of the new migrants to escape from their impoverished lifestyle.

Yet media portrayals of the situation insisted on locating the source of Manhattan's ghettos in 'the Puerto Rican problem', reinforced by the release of *West Side Story* in 1957 and the publication of Oscar Lewis' *La Vida: a Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty* in 1966. The perpetuation of Puerto Rican ghetto life was attributed to the colonial, welfare mentality of the migrants themselves and not to the structural factors of distorted urban planning and the shift of New York's financial system from a manufacturing to a service-based economy. For, as Mike Davis postulates, 'Puerto Rican immigrants in the 1950s (like many African American migrants from the South) were shunted into precisely those traditional urban manufacturing jobs that were massively automated, suburbanized or exported overseas after 1960.' Consequently, he concludes that '*boricuanos* were, so to speak, standing on the track when Industrial Restructuring came around the bend at 100 miles per hour' (2001: 126). As a result of this, between 1958 and 1965, 87,000 factory jobs and 227 manufacturing companies were lost to the city (Berrol, 2000: 126), yet such massive redundancies were not offset by the incorporation of the Puerto Rican labour army into the mainstream service-orientated workforce. The excessive rate of unemployment resulted in an increased sense of marginalization and rejection on the part of Puerto Ricans, particularly when the root causes of their destitution were obfuscated through the dissemination of such derogatory stereotypes as those portrayed in *West Side Story* and *La Vida*. In *West Side Story*, whilst the film is lauded for its recognition of Puerto Ricans as a US minority group and as such momentarily removes them from their invisibility in mainstream culture, the use of blackface for the film's lead character Natalie Wood, as opposed to hiring an authentic Puerto Rican actress for the role of Maria, as well as the fact that all the Puerto Rican characters are portrayed as criminal (men) and victimized (women), resulted in the continuation of the prototypical Puerto Rican as being considered as less than acceptable by the mainstream (Negron-Muntaner, 2004: 62). Similarly, the

depiction of the Puerto Rican family entrenched in a social quagmire of prostitution and poverty in Oscar Lewis' *La Vida* also represents only one experience amongst the array of diverse Puerto Rican reactions to the hostility of New York. This is not to say that the experience presented by Lewis did not occur, however, the continued significance granted to both *La Vida* and *West Side Story* as prototypical representations of Puerto Rican culture at this time attests to their general lack of visibility in mainstream culture. Subsequently, the depictions which they afford of Puerto Rican migrants became inextricably attached to the community as a whole at this time, with the subjects themselves being denied any form of voice or agency.

As a result, the Nuyorican objective of documenting the community's history throughout the 1960s and 1970s was threefold: Firstly, in order to counteract the prevailing stereotypes of cultural deficiency and pathological criminality portrayed in popular mainstream culture. Secondly, to demonstrate that despite the overall working-class character of the Puerto Rican diaspora, the stateside Puerto Rican experience was heterogeneous and informed the emphasis which poets, artists and political activists placed on multiculturalism and inclusivity. Thirdly, in order to provide an aesthetic and ideology which could act as a clarion for New York Puerto Ricans to fight for a space which was theirs, given their ostracization from both island and mainland traditions. This space referred to both an existentialist utopia in which an individual could be freed from any outside constraints, as well as a more practical claim on the urban neighbourhoods which were under threat from gentrification and urban developers. As such, the body of literature emanating from the Nuyorican poets bears strong resemblances to post-colonial literature in general, particularly given the emphasis placed on the straddling of two cultures without the approval of either.

In addition, the issue of replacing the language of the colonizer with the native language of the homeland inherent in post-colonial writing is complicated for Puerto Rican writers, not least because both languages have at one time been equally oppressive upon both their island and mainland culture. Consequently, in ideological terms, to choose to write in Spanish over English would simply be to acknowledge a

preference for Spanish rather than US colonization. In both imperialist cultures, the African connection has been traditionally refuted and issues of chauvinism, classism and the elevation of one aspect of the society's culture to a lionized status have applied. As a result, the decision of many Nuyorican writers to write in 'Spanglish' is as much a volitional affirmation of their refusal to succumb to either linguistic tradition whilst recognizing the need to retain the mindset of one (Puerto Rico) at the same time as surviving in the other. In this way, the code-switching practices of Nuyorican poets can be placed within the framework of the Markedness Model, developed by Carol Myers-Scotton in 1993 in order to verify the interchangeability of two or more languages as performing to a socio-psychological function. Within the Markedness Model, the utilization of one language or the other arises from the motivation of the speaker/writer depending on the situation in which they find themselves. As noted by Ana Celia Zentella, the linguistic 'creative combinations' generated through the adaptation of English words with Spanish pronunciations such as *chopin* (shopping bag) and *los proyectos* (the projects)¹¹ 'remain identity markers that distinguish potential friend from stranger' (2004: 24). That is to say, the use of English vocabulary with a Hispanic syntax indicates the social register employed by Puerto Ricans in order to navigate the array of social situations in which they find themselves. If it is more expedient to speak in English (for instance, in a formal setting such as work or with a local authority), then naturally the use of Spanish vocabulary will be minimal. If, on the other hand, a narrative for the community will be more accurately understood and conveyed if Spanish words are employed at the same time as English, then this is the language in which the narrator will relate their message. Consequently, the employment of the English language by Nuyorican poets should not be read as a sign of assimilation, but instead as both a means of describing their experience in a North American city which Spanish vocabulary alone would not be able to accurately define, as well as a strategy

¹¹ In her article 'A Nuyorican's View of Our History and Language(s) in New York, 1945-1965', Zentella notes that some Nuyorican inventions 'sometimes took the form of new meanings for old words (for example, 'yarda' became the schoolyard and back alley in addition to the standard measurement), but English words with Spanish pronunciations were more generative' (ibid: 23). For example, she points to adaptations made, such as the changing of soft <th> sounds to <t> as in *trifti* (thrifty) and the substituting of the English <h> or Spanish <j> for <s> at the end of syllables in order to 'Puertoricanize the words we borrowed' (2004: 24).

to connect with a specific audience at a time when their lived experience required ideological validation.

For example, in the poem *Jitterbug Jesus*, Miguel Piñero code-switches freely between English and Spanish in order to emphasize the conflation between Latin culture and ghetto existence – hence the alignment between class and race in subjugating Puerto Ricans to an internal colonial existence akin to the third world:

*Tiempos is longin' lookin'
for third worlds laughter
to break out like a pimple on the face
of a youthful
latino eyes that chase el ritmo del guiro
en lo vagones del tren on school mornin'
shoutin' broken Spanish dream*
- *Si tu cocina como tu mama
como hasta el pegao
jitterbuggin' in wrinkled
worn out jeans
bailando new pride in bein' nuyoricano...*¹²

The poem is specifically referring to a Spanglish existence (if, as Ed Morales suggests the linguistic term can be appropriated as an analogy for Latino culture in general) which would naturally have registered with those living a similar lifestyle at the time. It is significant that the words Piñero chooses to write in Spanish are those with specific referents in Puerto Rican culture, such as *cocina*, *bailando*, *el guiro* and *ritmo*, whereas those concomitant to a North American existence such as *school mornin'*, *broken Spanish dream* and *third world laughter* naturally remain in English to convey their belonging to this way of life. The overall image conveyed in *Jitterbug Jesus* is one in

¹² Taken from *Nuyoricana Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975).

which the flipside of ethnic pluralism, as promoted by contemporary multicultural discourse, is illustrated as North American and Latino cultures – represented by their corresponding idioms – transculturate with the overall effect of relegating the latter to a lifetime of destitution. The analogy which Piñero makes at the end of the poem between the child born to the *two triple culture lovers* who meet *in this aroma of arroz and habichuela-tostones-pasteles* and Jesus Christ alludes to the paradoxical themes of hope and sacrifice which run throughout the poem as an analogy for the community as a whole. For whilst the poem concludes with:

*under this ghetto umbrella
a brown baby king is born
Jesus
Jesus Rodriguez
who talked with his father on a garden firescape
walked across the east river on empty beer cans
changed six barrels of dope into a finely blended rum
was stoned out of school
will be crucified on a set of works
&
will be crowned
King of the Dope-Fiends...*

.... the previous lines referring to the *pride in bein' nuyoricano* and *the two lovers who meet/reach out for each other* can also be seen as representing elements of brightness in an otherwise desolate urban landscape of *cocaine-drenched hallways* and *graffiti screamin' profanity*. The ultimate comparison with Jesus Rodriguez as being *crucified on a set of works* as *King of the Dope-Fiends*, however, leaves the reader with the sense that despite the optimism inherent in Nuyorican pride, the practical connotations of this are severely limited as they fight against the ineluctable forces of urban decay, drugs and racism.

The body of work produced by the early Nuyorican poets abounds with tales of dejection, drugs and isolation, yet as stated above, the purpose of this literature was not to encourage an acceptance of Puerto Rican suppression, but instead to galvanize the community into fighting against it. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this can be seen through the symbolic and practical appropriation of the predominant Puerto Rican enclave in the northeastern Lower East Side as 'Loisaida,' the Latino pronunciation of the area's current moniker.¹³ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Puerto Rican advisors to the War on Poverty believed that the best way out of the ghetto was to disassociate *latinidad* from particular neighbourhoods, as a result of which, the attempt to break up local Latin communities conjoined with urban disinvestment and gentrification in a forcible effort to dislocate the Puerto Ricans from their areas (Ševčenko, 2001: 293). By 1976, for example, there were 100 vacant lots and 150 empty buildings in the 36 block area between Area A and the East River and between Houston and 14th Street (ibid: 295). Yet far from accepting this compelled urban exile, the Puerto Rican denizens of this area began a community-restoration program involving such projects as grassroots education classes, street rallies, community garden installments and Adopt-A-Building renewal schemes, all in name of the Loisaida ideology. According to Liz Ševčenko, this constituted 'a spirit of working-class activism and ethnic pride expressed in a defined geographic area' which represented 'more than a simple symbolic appropriation of a neighbourhood.... It was designed as a tool to mobilize residents to roll up their sleeves and physically take over their environment' (ibid: 307). Signs, banners, shop names and even musical bands adopting the name Loisaida attested to the symbolic importance of this marker in constructing a social and ideological movement which had visible ramifications in the neighbourhood. Yet as with the idea of Nuyorican poetry, the adoption of a Puerto Rican neologism for an urban space which was principally, but not exclusively, inhabited by themselves was not synonymous with an ethnocentric discourse. Ševčenko establishes that just as Puerto Ricans celebrated Latinos as an inherently inclusive people, so too was *puertorriquenidad loisadeña* genetically predisposed to coalition building across ethnic lines and therefore 'ideally suited to leading the Loisaida movement among Europeans,

¹³ This was the area between Houston/14th St and between Area A (Alphabet City) and the East River.

Asians, African Americans and the many different Latin American and Caribbean people living in the neighbourhood' (ibid: 306). Echoing the Nuyorican ethos cultivated by the Lower East Side poets, amongst the Loisaida coalition builders, 'Puerto Rican heritage and culture stood for latinidad, serving as an umbrella identity for all Latinos living in Loisaida' with the area celebrating 'an identity of multiculturalism contained in the symbol of Puerto Rican ethnicity' (ibid).

The role of Nuyorican poetry in sustaining this philosophy was central, especially given that it was as a result of Bimbo Riva's 1974 poem entitled *Loisaida* that the name was coined in the first place. Here, Riva begins the poem by referring to his attachment to the Lower East Side, eventually replacing the area's denotation with its Spanish translation:

Lower East Side

I love you

You're my Fair Lady

No Matter where I am

I think of you!

The mountains and the

Valleys cannot compare

My love, to you.

Loisaida, I love you!

I dig the way you talk

I dig the way you look

En mi mente, mi amada

*Yo te llamo Loisaida*¹⁴

¹⁴ Taken from *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*.

The anthropomorphic strategy which Rivas uses to compare his devotion to the Lower East Side to that of a lover asserts the importance of geographic space in the Nuyorican aesthetic. The final stanza in the poem is significantly expressed in Spanish to illustrate both the symbolic and ideological claim of Nuyorican culture on a New York urban space, thereby contesting their forced channeling from North American and Puerto Rican national traditions and economic policies into a physical and psychological no-man's land. The concomitant role of Nuyorican poetry in community development programs can also be seen through the role of Pedro Pietri as the adopted 'house poet' for the Young Lords, a militant, community-based activist group affiliated to both the Chicano and Black Panther movements. According to Micky Melendez, one of the New York-based Young Lord pioneers,¹⁵ the movement began as an antiracist coalition which was at least initially 'primarily concerned with providing services not available in the community,' such as political education classes, child care, health care, TB testing and drug rehabilitation schemes.¹⁶ In the legendary episode in which the Young Lords took over the 1st Spanish Methodist Church in El Barrio, Pedro Pietri read his trademark poem 'Puerto Rican Obituary' to the crowd, thereby illustrating the political role inherent in much of Nuyorican poetry. Pietri himself was not amongst the more extreme political Nuyorican poets, yet his significance within the community as one of the fathers of Nuyorican poetry and the notions of injustice contained within the Obituary were sufficient for the Young Lords to consider this as a fitting oral accompaniment to their activism:

Juan

Miguel

Olga

Manuel

All died yesterday today

¹⁵ According to Pablo Guzman, another New York-based Young Lord, the organization was originally based in Chicago. However, chairman Cha Cha Jimenez 'breezily gave permission for us to organize as the New York chapter.' Guzman cites that 'we split from Chicago in April 1970 because we felt they hadn't overcome being a gang'; in contrast, the New York splinter 'published a weekly newspaper, had organized workers, including medical professionals in the city's hospitals and had a sizeable following on campuses across the country where we often spoke' (1998: 157).

¹⁶ Panel with Micky Melendez at City Museum of New York (12th March 2007).

*and will die again tomorrow
passing their bill collectors
on to the next of kin
All died
waiting for the garden of eden
to open up again
under a new management
All died
dreaming about America
waking them up in the middle of the night
screaming: Mira Mira
your name is on the winning lottery ticket
for one hundred thousand dollars
All died
hating the grocery stores
that sold them make-believe steak
and bullet-proof rice and beans
All died waiting dreaming and hating*

Throughout the poem, Pietri verbally paints a powerful image of a shattered American dream, of the cruel realities of the US meritocracy which does not apply to those who knew that:

*they were born to weep
and keep the morticians employed
as long as they pledge allegiance
to the flag that wants them destroyed
They saw their names listed
in the telephone directory of destruction
They were trained to turn*

*the other cheek by newspapers
that misspelled mispronounced
and misunderstood their names
and celebrated when death came
and stole their final laundry ticket*

*They were born dead
and they died dead*

The divide and conquer strategies employed by the US on a global scale can also be seen in the microcosm of New York's Puerto Ricans, as the hegemonic culture of materialism and competition is evident within the community's internal factions:

*Juan
died hating Miguel because Miguel's
used car was running in better condition
than his used car*

*Miguel
died hating Milagros because Milagros
had a color television set
and he could not afford one yet*

*Milagros
died hating Olga because Olga
made five dollars more on the same job*

*Olga
died hating Manuel because Manuel
had hit more numbers more times
than she had hit numbers*

*Manuel
died hating all of them*

Juan

*Miguel
Milagros
And Olga
because they all spoke broken english
more fluently than he did*

This allegorical narrative used by Pietri in order to emphasize the inanity of intra-group fighting as the real enemies of internally colonized groups capitalized upon their distress made a potent poetic counterpart for the Young Lords, as well as for Nuyorican poetry in general. Yet the sense of despondency conveyed throughout the Obituary is counteracted in Pietri's signature style of sanguinity as he makes explicit the true Puerto Rican spirit which, were the characters in the poem to be aware of it, would have been sufficient to save them from the perils of North American society:

*If only they
had turned off the television
and tuned into their own imaginations
If only they
had used the white supremacy bibles
for toilet purpose
and make their latino souls
the only religion of their race
If only they
had return to the definition of the sun
after the first mental snowstorm
on the summer of their senses*

Pietri ends the poem with the image of a Nuyorican paradisiacal space to where Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga and Manuel have transcended:

Aqui se habla español

Aqui you salute your flag first
Aqui there are no dial soap commercials
Aqui everyone smells good
Aqui tv dinners do not have a future
Aqui the men and women admire desire
and never get tired of each other
Aqui Que Pasa Power is what's happening
Aqui to be called negrito
means to be called LOVE.¹⁷

Yet whilst Pietri was famed for being one of the most existentialist of all the Nuyorican poets, his commitment to practical change in the community, such as his promotion of awareness regarding sexually transmitted diseases and the institution of *La Iglesia de la Madre de los Tomates*,¹⁸ attests to the grounded quality of his aesthetic. The importance of the Obituary, for example, was such that the poem became an anthem for the Nuyorican movement as 'not only did it lionize the Puerto Rican underclass, it also signaled the "death" of Puerto Ricans in New York and the subsequent birth of the Spanglish-speaking Nuyorican. The Nuyorican was class-conscious, darkly humorous and aware of a mixed race heritage' (Morales, 2002: 99).

The satirical quality of Pietri as illustrated in poems such as 'Suicide Note from a Cockroach in a Low Income Housing Project,' together with the realism of Miguel Piñero, the spirituality of Sandra Esteves and the 'muscular vision' of Miguel Algarín¹⁹ illustrate the array of techniques and strategies utilized within Nuyorican poetry. Yet the common feature amongst all of them is their emphasis upon the spoken word and oral tradition, a trait they can trace back (in an urban context) to Jorge Brandon. Brandon, described by Pedro Pietri as 'the father, the grandfather, the great-grandfather of the Nuyorican Poetry movement' was a resident Lower East Side street poet, whose

¹⁷ Taken from *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*.

¹⁸ According to Pietri, *la Iglesia* was a 'non-profit, profit-making organization. I think it's more of *espiritismo* than anything else'. Taken from his personal interview with Carmen Dolores Hernandez (Hernandez, 1997: 116).

¹⁹ In Carmen Dolores Hernandez's interview with Tato Laviera (1997: 80)

peripatetic existence with a shopping cart and coconut within which was a loud speaker (hence his epithet '*El Coco que Habla*') was firmly committed to oral performance in a truly *declamador* lifestyle. According to Jose Angel Figueroa, who cites Brandon as one of his main influences, this 'local legend could recite a poem for an hour without missing a beat; it was like he was possessed. He got into the habit of memorizing his work as nobody would publish him; he was considered to be crazy.'²⁰ The epitomy of the urban-styled, community-orientated, performance-driven Nuyorican, Brandon's dedication to the oral tradition which influenced so many of the Nuyorican poets succeeding him²¹ clearly illustrates the natural affinity between the poetry emanating from the Lower East Side's Puerto Rican community and literature produced by the African American community at this time. As discussed in Chapter 4, the shared living and working conditions in which (particularly dark-skinned) Puerto Ricans and African Americans found themselves throughout the 1940s and 1950s had resulted in a re-evaluation on the part of the former of the African heritage of their homeland's national traditions. In the 1960s, the onset of the Civil Rights Movement and the assertion of Black Power and cultural pride intensified this connection, to the extent that by the time both Blacks and Puerto Ricans participated in the 1968 teachers' strike over community control of the schools, the two were synonymously viewed as New York City's 'minorities' (Falcon, 2004: 90). In this way, Puerto Ricans disappointed a whole generation of perplexed social scientists such as Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, who in their 1963 edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot* had optimistically concluded that on account of their refusing a racialized, minority identity, Puerto Ricans would be able to ascend the social ladder as had the European immigrants before them in contrast to the ghettoized Black communities.

This hypothesis, however, was clearly grounded in Ethnicity Theory, which as explained in Chapter 1 placed the European experience at the centre of its assimilation paradigm with scant consideration of the advantages that whiteness (including the expansion of the category of Caucasian) had afforded to these 19th-century and early

²⁰ Interview – J.A.F.

²¹ Amongst those citing him as an influence include Pedro Pietri, Tato Laviera, Papo Melendez, and Miguel Algarín.

20th-century migrants. Notions of race were not taken into account, less so economic and structural factors such as the channeling of African Americans and Puerto Ricans into the ill-fated manufacturing sector, and as such the mutual attraction between these two groups was seen to represent a burgeoning pathological echelon of society forever destined to wallow in its own cultural deficiency.

In contrast, the increasing affiliation between African Americans and Puerto Ricans was resulting in an expansion of racial knowledge and approval on both sides. In no other place was this more vividly demonstrated than in the artistic realms of music and poetry, given that unlike with political and community control events, issues of economic rivalry and competition were less likely to occur. In 'Cha Cha with a Backbeat', for example, Juan Flores elucidates the cross-cultural appreciation manifest between African Americans and Puerto Ricans through the development of Latin Boogaloo, a creative synthesis of Latin genres, such as mambo and other Afro-Cuban styles, with 'the vernacular, blues, and gospel-based currents of African American music, the R&B and soul sounds that saturated the air-waves and enlivened broadly popular settings of the 1960s period' (2000: 89). Flores notes that particularly in the context of the preceding decades in which African American and Puerto Rican bands had been sharing the same billing (resulting in the production of Cubop or Latin jazz in the 1940s), the 'defining theme and musical feature of boogaloo is precisely this intercultural togetherness, this solidarity engendered by living and loving in unison beyond obvious differences' (ibid: 82). The increasing cohesion between African Americans and Puerto Ricans was in no small part due to the militant and separatist ideologies prevalent throughout the Civil Rights era, for despite the fact that not all Puerto Ricans advocated a belligerent, nationalistic stance (as symbolized through Herman Badillo, who promoted reform through the formal channels of party politics), the influence of such outpourings of cultural pride and social revolution could not help but disseminate throughout all sectors of North America's minority groups. The reasons why the Civil Rights movement occurred at this time are varied, although certainly the onset of the Cold War in the 1950s had contributed towards a turn away from immigrants and racial minorities as an ominous threat to cultural homogeneity, and

instead towards high-born Anglo-Americans with suspected Communist sympathies as the biggest risk to national security. In addition, the mass mobilization of African Americans occurring in the South allowed for the development of an active grassroots constituency capable of carrying out social change once it became apparent that the availability of 'normal' political channels was not applicable to America's racial minorities (Omi & Winant, 1994: 97). Consequently, this 'monolithic Southern resistance to desegregation' allowed for parallel movements in the South West amongst Mexican Americans, and in the Northeast amongst Northern Blacks and Puerto Ricans.

The renewed appreciation of the African diaspora in Puerto Rican culture is vividly demonstrated in Tato Laviera's poem 'Rafa', in which he pays homage to the legendary black Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena* singer Rafael Cortijo:

*as triangular ship deposited blacks
caribbean molasses deposited blacks
for slavery and cotton*

*as black african preserved original
culture inside christianity he was
forced to swallow;*

*as the puerto rican challenged
drums to bomba step's endurance
strength drummers against dancers;*

*as they created plena rhythms
to news events on southern ponce
streets;*

*as they searched for recognition
since 1500 finally melting into*

puerto rican folklore;

*as it all came down to Rafael
Cortijo playing bomba and plena
many pinones of my childhood;*

*as he finally exploded 1960
ismael rivera sounds puerto
rican charts creating music
the world over;*

*as we search through plena history
there's a godfather-padrino-figure
humble but stubborn to his traditions;*

*as we detail contributions
so must we all stand
gracious ovation
rafael cortijo
unanimous consensus
puerto rican people.²²*

Here, Laviera epitomizes the Nuyoric sentiment in lauding the renewed appreciation of the African traditions inherent in Puerto Rican culture as symbolized through the *bomba* and *plena* musical traditions. In an interview with Carmen Dolores Hernandez, for example, Laviera states that:

50 percent of my poetry, of my recitals, are for the black constituency of the United States for three reasons; they are very interested in my sense of

Caribbean blackness, and of urban blackness, and they are interested in the rhythmic quality of my poetry. Whether you like it or not, if you're a Caribbean writer, in the United States you don't write in white verse, you write in black verse (1991: 81).

Consequently, he alludes to the potential of the Nuyorican ethos in conflating elements from disparate ethnic groups such as Puerto Ricans and African Americans, in this way prioritizing their commonalities and shared experiences over superficial semantic divisions. Similarly, in *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*, Daniel Kane illustrates how the 1960s poetry scene was a hotbed of an unconventional social and literary project which was intent on community building and providing an alternative cultural ethos to dominant mainstream norms. Through such ventures and meeting hubs as St Mark's Poetry Project (with which Pedro Pietri was affiliated) and the Deux Megots Coffee House, the Lower East Side became a multicultural arena which fostered a truly international consciousness within which whites, Blacks and Latinos could integrate. For whilst it is true that the reasons for participating in New York's counterculture were varied – for Blacks and Puerto Ricans, for example, it was a matter of survival whereas for white bourgeois youth it could simply be an issue of teenage rebellion. Nonetheless, the ethos promoted by the poetic community made famous by Allen Ginsberg and his ilk was such that the democratization of poetry which channeled it into grassroots lore was a radical break with the conventional, academic notions surrounding the mainstream poetic tradition at the time. The integral features of the downtown poetry scene, such as the link of poetic performance to jazz, the new focus on the role of breath in determining phrasing, line length and line placement (2003: 27) conflated easily with both the Nuyorican and African American traditions, rendering the possibility of drawing clear cut lines between them an impossibility and consequently forcing the acknowledgement of a sense of commonality amongst all Lower East Side poets. This is not, however, to romanticize the sense of cohesion felt amongst the various ethnic factions – as evinced in David Henderson's poem 'The Ofay and the Nigger', however, in contrast to the ignorance and racial tensions pervading the contemporary mainstream, the very attempt

to provide some form of intercultural exchange at this time was a laudable undertaking. The main point to be made here, however, is the exigency in recognizing that whilst there may have been specific elements pertaining to the Nuyorican experience such as the colonial status of their homeland or the issue of bilingualism, the body of work produced at the time did not evolve in a vacuum. Surrounding influences such as the Beatniks and the Black Arts synthesized with the Nuyorican ethos to produce a multifaceted corpus of literature which provided the aesthetics for a realistic cultural pluralism.

Yet even amongst the Nuyorican poets themselves, contentious issues frequently arose - although it was in the succeeding decades that these were exacerbated with the commercialization of the Café and its concomitant divergence from the original meaning of the term Nuyorican. In an interview with Jesus Papoleto Melendez, for instance, the assertion is made that whilst the movement was valuable for what it provided at the time, ultimately the individual rivalries amongst the poets were pernicious enough to thwart its overall success:

We all went out and found each other, we read our plays and poetry together. However the movement suffered from people blocking each other. They all wanted to be the first Puerto Rican on the moon. This was a blatant contradiction; why act like that if the aim was to perpetrate culture for identification?²³

Yet whilst Papoleto laments the fact that such egotism prevented the movement from becoming more progressive, he also recognizes that:

we were creating something but we had no idea how it would take off. The problem in the '60s was that everyone was young. Too young to know what was going on.

²³ Personal Interview with Jesus Papoleto Melendez (Interview – J.P.M) 10th December 2004.

In contrast, the neo-Nuyorican generation of the 1990s and early 21st century have had the knowledge and experience of the earlier generation to build on, as well as the added benefits of advanced technology and the institutionalization of a multi-cultural discourse which (at least superficially) advocates pluralism and inter-ethnic harmony as its premise. As a result, the concept of Nuyorican has bifurcated in two directions; on the one hand, the ideas of community and social activism inherent within early Nuyorican works are still very much apparent in contemporary groups such as Acentos, whilst the commercial success of the Nuyorican Poets Café has resulted in an association between Nuyorican and a marketable image of hip hop-style poetry. The following chapters will analyze the ways in which the two interpretations are lived out in New York's spoken word community, as well as consider how they may not necessarily be incompatible but instead mutually beneficial to the advancement of the other.

CHAPTER 5

THE COMMODIFICATION OF ETHNICITY AND HIP HOP

The spirit of hope and determination conveyed throughout the Nuyorican poetry of the 1970s was unfortunately not met with corresponding developments for the Puerto Rican community in the succeeding decades. For whilst the Nuyorican movement had been successful to the extent that it validated the lived experience of an entire generation of New York-born Puerto Ricans, the literary legacy constructed through the poetry of Pedro Pietri and Miguel Algarín had little impact in destroying the pejorative mainstream media images of their culture given its virtual enclosure within the Lower East Side and the underground community. As evinced in Chapter 4, this is not to say that both the oral and written works comprising the Nuyorican tradition were not influential amongst groups outside of Puerto Ricans (as will be seen later in this chapter through their influence in hip hop). However, in so far as practical ramifications in the community were concerned, the city's ensuing fiscal crisis and increasing urban decay placed enormous limitations on the role which the poets could play in the improvement of their neighbourhood morale. Even the ostensibly triumphant gains of the Civil Rights Movement, which appeared to portend a new era in US racial relations - as well an intercultural awareness amongst its various ethnic groups - proved to be short-lived, as the right-wing backlash of the 1970s began to erode the purported partiality shown to racial minority groups at the expense of white (middle-class) Americans. Consequently, rather than steering America towards a trajectory of a true racial democracy, it transpired that the accomplishments of the Great Transformation had the adverse effect of cementing the black and white binary even further, as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 offered the necessary rationale for an egalitarian, colour-blind society in which the same legal opportunities were available to all American citizens regardless of their race or

ethnic origin. As a result, the members of the 'urban underclass' (as became the euphemism for the culture of poverty thesis popularized in the 1960s), comprised chiefly of African Americans and Puerto Ricans, became even more disparaged as victims of their own pathological deficiencies. After all, racial equality was now authenticated by official legislation, if ethnic minority groups could still not prove fit to jettison their ghetto lifestyles and ascend the social ladder, surely this was due to their own cultural shortcomings and not to any form of social injustice?

As in the 1960s and 1970s, any structural explanations for the endurance of the ethno-racialized ghettos remained obfuscated by explanations more palatable to the middle-class America, on account of the exoneration they provided for the part which state, economic and urban planning policies – all of which were tacitly condoned by the white middle class – might play in the continuation of working-class poverty. The consequences of the 1960s shift in New York's economy from a manufacture-based market to one centered around the service industry, for example, had not been mitigated throughout the 1980s, and were in fact exacerbated by the 1989 to 1993 recession, which saw the loss of a further 100000 jobs amongst Puerto Ricans. In 1999, it was recorded that 33.1% of Puerto Ricans in New York were living below the poverty level, with a 9.0% unemployment rate confirmed a year later (Rivera-Batiz, 2004: 115). The lack of economic growth within New York as a whole throughout the 1990s was reflected most poignantly amongst its poorest sectors; an actuality inflated by the fact that the lack of residential integration between Puerto Ricans and whites persisted well into the 21st century with a segregation rate of 69 % between the two being recorded in 2000 (Falcon, 2004:176). Perhaps most significantly in considering the imperative of an alternative grassroots pedagogy, however, was the fact that educational attainment remained well beneath the national average. In 1999, for instance, it was recorded that only 11.1% of Puerto Ricans were registered to have achieved 4 years of college as against 31.4% of the New York population as a whole and 45.0% of non-Latino whites (Rivera-Batiz, 2004: 115). In addition, according to Angelo Falcon, for example, a survey conducted in 1999 demonstrated that 42% of Puerto Ricans in New York City above the age of 25 had less than a high school diploma as against 11.8% of non-Latino whites (Falcon, 2004: 159).

As noted by Falcon, educational progress for Puerto Ricans has not divorced from other social processes such as poverty reduction and the desegregation of schools; consequently, the difficulties of Puerto Ricans advancing in the education system whilst remaining entrenched in the quagmire of urban poverty have remained endemic.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle facing the advancement of Puerto Ricans and other non-white groups in recent decades, however, has been the resurgence of the Right in US politics with their concomitant project of racial neoliberalism.¹ With the ascendance of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s and George Bush (Senior) in the early 1990s, the policies advanced by the liberal welfare state seeking to redress those social inequities rooted in racial inequality found themselves under attack from 'racial realists' who argued that racism was still prevalent in American society, but was now aimed specifically against whites and predominantly actuated by African American separatists. The basis of the backlash against liberalism was its apparent secession of basic US principles of freedom and democracy manifest in the favoritism shown towards minority groups. According to adherents of the New Right, such policies were tantamount to 'reverse discrimination' and fostered a state dependency mentality which encouraged irresponsible personal behaviour and a victimized mentality. Consequently, the 'common sense' notion which has prevailed amongst mainstream society since the mid 1980s is one in which individual responsibility in tangent with the ostensible US code of racial equality is sufficient to redress the centuries of victimization endured by non-white American citizens. The institutionalization of the Civil Rights Act was sufficiently prophetic in its vision of a colour-blind society, and any statistics which profess the contrary are simply acknowledging that 'blacks have failed to take advantage of the opportunities in front of

¹ For an excellent overview of the resurgence of racial neo-liberalism see the Introduction in *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society*. Here, Michael Brown et al. argue that there are three basic tenets to the 'new understanding of race and racial inequality' amongst much of mainstream US society. Firstly, 'they believe that the civil rights revolution was successful and they wholeheartedly accept the principles enshrined in civil laws which they assume ended racial inequality by striking down legal segregation and outlawing discrimination against workers and voters' (2003: 1). Secondly, they believe that 'if vestiges of inequality persist, it is because blacks have failed to take advantages of the opportunities afforded to them.' Finally, 'most white Americans think that the US is rapidly becoming a color-blind society, and they see little need or justification for affirmative action or other color-inspired policies' (ibid: 2). Consequently, having 'examined their souls and concluded that they are not personally guilty of any direct act of discrimination, many whites convince themselves that they are not racists and then wash their hands of the problem posed by persistent racial inequality' (ibid: 4).

them' (Brown et al., 2003: 1). The fact that racial relations in America are still seen in terms of a black and white binary has been only slightly addressed through incidents such as the 1992 LA riots; even here, however, the majority of attention was bestowed upon George Bush's affirmation that the riots were seen as indicative of the failure of liberal state welfare policies to achieve real social reform, and not on the fact that racial categories in the US might extend beyond those of white and black.²

With the publication of the US Census Bureau in 2000, however, the presence of the Latino population had to be considered in a new light. According to estimations based on the data collated in the Census, by the year 2050, some 50% of the US population would be members of ethnic minorities – 'making the term minority somewhat anachronistic' (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2002: 1). The same Census revealed that Americans of Latino descent comprise approximately 12.5% of the US population, with the corresponding evaluation that, in just two generations, the US will have the second largest number of Latinos in the world after Mexico (ibid). Notwithstanding the contention arising from the vortical nature of the moniker 'Latino', given its ability to conjoin such disparate national groups as, for example, upper-class Brazilians and impoverished Central American migrants (the differences between which can be religious, political, economic and linguistic), the recognition that American citizens of Latino descent were the fastest growing minority in the US afforded those falling under this designation a new perception in the eyes of mainstream society. In August 2005, for example, the front cover of *Time* magazine ran the headline 'The 25 Most Influential Hispanics in America', listing such luminaries as Alberto Gonzales, Jennifer Lopez, Mel Martinez, Robert Rodriguez and Antoni Villaraigosa amongst the most successful Latino personalities in the US.³ According to the magazine, the nation's 41.3 million Hispanics are 'just getting

² According to Juan Gonzalez, the riots were started when thousands of Hispanics, most of them Central American, 'joined in four days of arson and looting' after the acquittal of four police officers who beat black motorist Rodney King. Of the 12,000 who were arrested in the riots, 'there were more Latinos than blacks' with police identifying the most deadly street gang involved as Mara Salvatrucha, a Salvadoran group (2001: 144).

³ Alberto Gonzales was on the general council of George Bush in 1994 and was the first Hispanic Attorney General. Jennifer Lopez is a highly successful actress and singer, whilst Roberto Rodriguez is a Mexican American director, musician, writer and actor. As the junior United States Senator from Florida, Mel Martinez is the first Cuban American to serve in the State Senate and Antonio Villaraigosa is the first Latino mayor in Los Angeles in more than 130 years.

warmed up,' given their 'nearly \$600 billion in buying power' yet hitherto lack of mainstream attention resulting in their 'political clout lagging behind their numbers'.⁴ This is not to say, however, that considerable headway has not been made by Latinos in the political arena, particularly amongst the Puerto Rican segment of the populace. In New York alone, for example, the 1980s saw the election of Democrat Mario Cuomo as governor of the city in 1982 and Fernando Ferrer as Bronx borough president in 1987 (a position that Herman Badillo had given up 20 years earlier) (Falcon, 2004: 96). In the early 1990s, Nydia Velazquez became the second Puerto Rican to be elected to the US Congress, which together with the seats held by Jose Serrano (who won a special election in 1990 to the House of Representatives) and Chicago Puerto Rican Luis Gutierrez, provided a 'crucial factor in the debates which took place on the political status of Puerto Rico, the US naval presence on the island of Vieques and the release of the Puerto Rican political prisoners in the late 1990s' (Haslip-Viera, 2004: 134).

Yet at the same time that inroads are being carved out in the eyes of mainstream America, for the majority of working-class Latinos the reality of their status remains detached from such ostensible achievements. Consequently, in the same way that Michael K. Brown et al. note that:

America is now a nation so racially complicated that one black person can be a secretary of state, while another is racially profiled or sodomized in a New York City police station, all in the same historical moment (2003: X)

so too do those Latinos considered to authenticate the US meritocracy with their rags to riches success stories remain divorced from the working-class realities of the majority of their compatriots. The paradox inherent in the fact that the increasing visibility of Latinos in mainstream America is occurring at the same time as their vilification as gangsters, drug addicts and welfare dependents demonstrates the strategies employed by corporate

⁴ At the time of writing, the only Latinos in the US Senate are Robert Menendez (New Jersey) and Ken Salazar (Colorado). Their recent pledge to furthering the cause of US Latinos was evident in September 2007's designation as Hispanic heritage month. See <http://menendez.senate.gov/newsroom/record.cfm?id=283291>.

America in their attempts to thwart a nativist backlash and subsequent balkanization of the US.⁵ For whilst 'anti-Latino' sentiment has surged throughout the 1990s and early 21st century, as illustrated through harsh immigration and English-only laws as well as the number of hate crimes directed against immigrants (Gonzalez, 2000: XII), the enthusiasm with which mainstream America has welcomed Latino media icons such as Ricky Martin, Salma Hayek and George Lopez demonstrates the conflation of commercial avarice and national security in promoting the illusion of cross-cultural awareness and a harmonious ethnic conglomeration. Such ethnic commodification, however, in which the most palatable and salient traits of a purported national culture are extracted, inflated, and produced in the form of a sanitized product to be purchased and displayed in accordance with the vicissitudes of the capitalist market, is in no way intended to confront the inbuilt racial divisions of American society as discussed in Chapter 1. Instead, the overriding necessity of preventing national hysteria related to the erosion of white American culture as premised on Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, the English language and individualism demands the bestowal of a 'place in the sun' (to use John Hutnyk's expression) for at least a few select Latinos – preferably those who are not too visibly, politically or racially disturbing to the mainstream eye. In this way, not only can the aforesaid racial realists remain reassured in the fact that a true racial democracy is being lived out before their very eyes, but are also provided with the necessary verification that those who have failed to ascend the social and economic ladder have only their own cultural trappings or individual shortcomings to blame.

Nonetheless, the absorption of a particular Latino style or 'chic' into mainstream society remains problematic for numerous reasons. In his book *Critique of Exotica*, John Hutnyk examines the ways in which a 'politics of visibility' accounts for the ways in which Asian ethnicity in Britain can be welcomed and admired without this 'translating into any significant economic redress of multi-racial exclusion in Fortress Europe' (2000: 4). By contrasting such groups as Kula Shaker – considered by Hutnyk to be emblematic of the 'magical mystical tourism' which passes for transnational understanding yet in actual fact

⁵ In his chapter 'Disabling Spanish' from *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Re-Invent the US City*, for example, Mike Davis discusses the current 'national crusade' against bilingual education which is 'vilified as the principal cause of Latino educational failure' (2001: 139).

amounts to nothing more than 'a souveniring of sound and culture only possible on the basis of a long history of colonial power and theft' (ibid: 88) - and the politically savvy, community orientated Asian Dub Foundation (ADF), Hutnyk illustrates the incongruity between mainstream appreciation for curry houses, bindis and nose rings and the corresponding social reality for Asian-Brits as described by groups such as the ADF and Apache Indian. In this way, the importance of addressing issues surrounding Asian crossover into mainstream culture is not so much connected to providing an accurate representation of a multicultural Britain, as with the urgent need to counteract the delusion that Asian culture is little more than an exotic appendage to a predominantly white mainstream society. In a similar vein, Maria Elena Cepeda proposes that as the latest object of the pop music industry's attention, the visible presence Latino musicians such as Ricky Martin and Marc Anthony 'does not necessarily guarantee that mainstream audiences are being educated with regards to the multiple and conflicting realities of US Latina/o audiences.' For not only do media representations of such celebrities 'uncritically mirror existing stereotypes of Latin American performers,' but also repackage long-standing career holders such as Shakira Mebarak as 'discovered debut artists', implying a hegemonic relationship through which the idea of 'crossover' becomes a 'politically loaded term' as artists transcend from a stigmatized genre of music into the yearned for mainstream (2003: 114, 118). Consequently, Cepeda concludes her article by noting that whilst social visibility does 'encompass certain possibilities for oppositional prose', the power imbalance inherent in the act of 'progressing' from a little known genre into the mainstream makes the 'invasion of pop culture no substitute for real political power' (ibid: 127).

In this way, Theodor Adorno's examination of the culture industry and the ways in which the use value of practices such as music are replaced with an exchange value once they enter into the capitalist mode of production is invaluable. Throughout his various works, Adorno postulates that the ability of the culture industry to manipulate the general public through 'cultivating false needs which are created and satisfied by capitalism' results in the transmogrification of potentially defiant cultural practices such as protest music or poetry into mere commodities which are purchased in an attempt to construct a particular

lifestyle and identity. Consequently, Adorno draws attention to the difference between 'pseudo-individuality and individuality... illusory otherness and non-identical otherness' (1991: 26) in which the real needs and demands of society remain obfuscated by those constructed by the 'universality of production'. Regarding the integration of certain aspects of minority cultures into the mainstream, therefore, it becomes clear that such ethnic commodification offers no redress to the actuality of working class existence for these groups but instead 'leaves intact the underlying structures of class, gender, sexual and racial inequality that inform cultural and political power in the US' (Lao-Montes and Dávila, 2001: 30).

Yet whilst the illusion of cross-ethnic sensitivity – encouraged by the racial project of neoliberalism as well as the political rhetoric of cultural pluralism – is insidious given its dissuasion of further investigation into the realities of the working-class Latino (as well as other racialized groups') existence, perhaps even more detrimental to the possibility of achieving real social change through deconstructing the US racial dictatorship is the emphasis placed on hybrid identities as symptomatic of a postmodern society, itself a construct of Western academic discourse. For whilst the idea of hybridity contained within 'borderland cultures' provides an emancipatory potential restricted in the concept of national belonging, inherent within its employment is the problematic detail that hybridity infers the purity and monolithic nature of the component cultures forming such compound identities (which, as the gradual fusion of disparate European cultures into the category of 'Caucasian' illustrates, is fallacious). In addition, the correlation made between hybridity and postmodernity refutes the centuries of miscegenation and synthesis which have occurred within black and Latino cultures in which the issues currently being addressed by a 'postmodern society' such as bilingualism, the conflation of various ethnic traditions and the fading of a national essence have long been endemic. As a result, the distinction made between Western culture as associated with knowledge and power, and non-Western societies as objects upon which to be acted and incorporated into Occidental ideas of civilization and progress, is substantiated through the introduction of 'hybridity' as a 20th-century phenomenon manifesting a break with nationalism and the underpinnings of modernity as a global epoch.

It is for this reason – that is to say, the ‘need to have Blacks perceived as agents, as people with cognitive capacities and even with an intellectual history’ (1993: 6) - that Paul Gilroy put forward Black Atlantic theory in 1993; a hypothesis concerned with counteracting the propagation of postmodernity in both academic and mainstream circles through the recognition of Black culture as lived through the ‘rhizomorphic fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation of the Black Atlantic’ (ibid: 4). Throughout *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy proposes that the capitalist cornerstone of modernity was only able to subsist through the institution of transatlantic slavery, itself generating a ‘compound culture from disparate sources’ resulting in a ‘black vernacular culture’ which could be considered as ‘capitalism with its clothes off’ (ibid: 15). In this way, Gilroy argues that ‘the patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation that we try and specify through manifestly inadequate theoretical terms like creolisation and syncretism indicate how both ethnicities and political cultures have been made anew in ways that are significant not simply for the peoples of the Caribbean but for Europe, for Africa.... and for Black America’ (ibid). This ‘vernacular’ culture, as synthesized through the numerous African traditions incorporated into transatlantic slavery, is completely aberrant from the modernist construction of nations as premised on a (deceptive) homogenous culture, and instead demonstrative of the pastiche-effect associated with postmodernity. Consequently, Gilroy’s objective to contest the disregard with which Black intellectual traditions have historically been considered is actuated through his implication that ‘the history and expressive culture of the African diaspora, the practice of racial slavery and the narratives of European imperial conquest may require all simple periodisations of the modern and the postmodern to be drastically rethought’ (ibid: 42). For given the persistent conflation of non-white cultures with non-civilized practices and subsequent marginalization from mainstream academic discourse, the acknowledgement that the current postmodern jargon emblematic of Western social sciences was in fact prefigured by Black societies centuries before, could only result in a reversal of the symbolic capital carried by such peoples and the subsequent opportunity to activate real social change.

In this way, Gilroy's hypothesis fits in with the project of post-colonial studies in general as regards the excavation of unheard voices, events and accounts in order to redress the concept of history as written by the victors - even if those victories have only been accomplished through the appropriation of other cultures and traditions which are then re-monikered and 'white-washed' in order to pass for a grand narrative of global history. Consequently, *The Black Atlantic* inherits all of the perplexities and dilemmas associated with post-colonialism, not least being those issues concerning authenticity and entitlement. For not only is the concept of Black representation laden with the standard problems as expounded in Gayatri Spivak's 'Can The Subaltern Speak?', but in addition, questions of cultural rights and privileges emerge as the notion of Black entitlement manifests its obsession with 'cultural insiderism' (1993: 3) with the same degree of enthusiasm as those who would have nations such as Britain and the US perceived as culturally hermetic monoliths into which Blacks, Caribbeans and Latinos are illegitimate intruders. As a result, Gilroy is correct in noting that 'much of the precious intellectual legacy claimed by African American intellectuals as the substance of their particularity is in fact only part of their absolute ethnic property' (ibid: 15), an affirmation which alludes to the ways in which the symbolic capital borne by African Americans - which, whilst in no way approximating that of whites is nonetheless considered to carry substantial weight if only when considered in light of Hutnyk's 'politics of visibility' - is often accrued at the expense of other minority groups whose status in US society has remained unrecognized and under-appreciated.

Nonetheless, the publication of *The Black Atlantic* was intended to address the incorporation of British Black culture into a wider field of analysis, as opposed to counteracting the supremacy of African American culture in the conglomerate of minority groups in general. In this way, laudable though Gilroy's hypothesis is in the postulation of the transatlantic slave trade as a unit of analysis as opposed to the confines of national borders, the theory remains underutilized in the sense that a) colonialism is not discussed despite the obvious comparison between this institution and the slave trade and b) the Hispanic Caribbean and Latin America remain obfuscated as components of the Black Atlantic. For in the same way that the slave trade constitutes one of the

underpinnings of capitalism, so too is colonialism responsible for the rise of Western power and domination throughout the globe, rendering the processes of synthesis and miscegenation which occurred as a result analogous to those considered by Gilroy as a 'black vernacular culture' and flipside to modernity. Amongst the terrains engaged in such transculturation, Puerto Rico posits a unique case study given its translocal position as a Caribbean island, a US territory and a Latin American ethno-nation – and consequently has been forced to confront a myriad of processes and intellectual moves 'now understood under the contemporary rubric of globalization' (Briggs, 2005: 194). Such processes include 'the fundamental instability of racial categories; the importance of US imperial policies; the impotence and ultimately insignificance of the state (at least the Puerto Rican state); the permeability of national cultures; and the prominence of diasporic labor migration' – all of which have 'lasted longer on the island and among its population overseas than in most other places' (ibid: 195). The ideological construction of Puerto Rico as an ethno-nation, in which issues of national borders have been distorted since the earliest days of migration to the US (and elsewhere), results in the concept of translocality informing every aspect of both insular and mainland quotidian existence in terms of language, politics and culture. Subsequently, at a time when the relevance of post-colonial theory to the material reality of global society is being questioned, Puerto Rico could be considered as a repository for a multitude of solutions as to how the US and other multicultural societies can approach the conflicts and tensions which ensue from the 'harvest of empire' (to use Juan Gonzalez's maxim) of diasporic peoples migrating towards the metropolis.

As a result of both the black/white binary which constitutes US racial relations as well as the Eurocentric constructions of *Latinidad*, however, the contributions which Puerto Rico has made in the consolidation of the US empire as well as the answers it could offer regarding intercultural relations have remained largely ignored. Yet it is important to acknowledge that the potential symbolic capital of Puerto Ricans which could be accumulated through a recognition of their role in the cultural, economic and political life of the US has been suppressed not only by the US mainstream and an emphasis on African-American culture as the quintessence of the Black diaspora, but also through the

deliberate efforts of Latin American marketing to compose a specific image of Latino culture in the US. In her article 'The Latin Side of Madison Avenue: Marketing and The Language that Makes Us Hispanics', for example, Arlene Davila explores the complicity of Latin American (particularly Cuban) executives in cultivating a segregated market niche for products and services geared towards a specific Latino market, in which distinct cultural traits such as tradition, spirituality and family values are employed as a means by which to contrast a Latino background with that of a materialistic mainstream America. Davila demonstrates how since the early 1960s when Puerto Rican migrants had begun to form a sizeable presence in New York, the enticement was there for the 'key figures of the well-developed Cuban publicity and marketing industry' arriving in the US following the Cuban revolution in 1959 to 'tap into the marketing opportunities ensuing from the changing demographics in the city' (2001: 413). Consequently, it was a conglomerate of Cuban executives who were responsible for the first advertising agencies aimed at a specific Latin American market such as SAMS (Spanish Advertising and Marketing Services)⁶ as opposed to white corporate incentives. The eagerness with which such agencies have pursued the amalgamation of disparate Latin American national traits and cultural idiosyncrasies into a monolithic Latino identity has subsequently rendered the cleavage between (white) mainstream and Latino society nebulous and indeterminable. At the same time, those traits which do not fall under the predominantly Eurocentric rubric advocated by the Latino media remain isolated from both the mainstream and the imagined Latino community, as well as from the African diaspora in which Latino ethno-racial membership is considered to be tenuous and problematic.

In no other form of artistic production is this discrepancy more accurately illustrated than in the trajectory of hip hop, an appellation used to describe as much a lifestyle as a musical genre which is currently regarded as one of the principal vehicles of youthful cultural expression in the US. As with any form of cultural practice, it is difficult to locate the origins of hip hop although 'old-school masters like Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and Kool Herc generally agree that rap was born in 1974 in the South

⁶ SAMS was founded in 1962 by Luis Diaz Martini who had owned an agency in Cuba before leaving the island (ibid).

Bronx' (Perkins, 1996: 5).⁷ From its nascent stages, hip hop has constituted a form of 'discursive bricolage', which according to Murray Forman is 'enacted through the accumulation of fragments from an array of social discourse and stylistic elements of popular culture' (2002: 11). That is to say, as opposed to a linear style of progression as endorsed by modern Western culture, through its continual recycling, sampling, signifying and resistance hip hop is emblematic of a possible counter culture to mainstream society through its advocacy of fragmentation, lived histories and non-literal meanings. For whilst hip hop began as a form of musical expression amongst Bronx minority youth, who conflated the various cultural practices of Puerto Rican percussion, the Jamaican tradition of 'toast and boast' and the practice of African American signifying (amongst others) as a means to contest the urban desolation around them, the party-style music whose precursors included salsa, Latin jazz, doo-wop and Rhythm and Blues soon became injected with a strong dose of militancy and thus became a weapon through which to critique US society in general. The commodified essentialism of late-20th-century gangsta rap encompassing a triad of violence, misogyny and nihilism was to a large extent a complete aberration from the initial objectives of hip hop music, which for the most part were to offer an alternative ethos to the subordinate position in which minority youth found themselves as opposed to performing to an exoticized mainstream stereotype of blacks hoodlums. In a conference entitled 'The Politics of Bling', coordinated in order to address the contemporary materialism of hip hop, for example, ex-Black Panther and community activist Cleo Silvas affirmed that in the mid/late 1970s hip hop was predominantly concerned with 'using music to arm people with information. It was clean, fun and respectful – there were no negative vibes.' Silvas illustrates this by using the example of the Black Spades, one of the most notorious gangs in the 1970s, who made the transition from practicing a violent street ethos to:

using music to arm people with information like health check-ups. Instead of adding to the fire, they would set up screening. Bringing out the chair

⁷ There is not an overall consensus on this date, however; for example the arrival of Kool Herc in New York from Jamaica in 1967 is also considered as starting point for the birth of hip hop since 'with him came the "toast and boast" tradition of roots reggae, itself the product of the yard culture of West Kingston, and the food on which all of reggae superstardom was fed' (Perkins, 1996: 6).

people of big credit companies to talk to the community as people with bad credit can be denied jobs. There was a transition in the Black Spades from a gang to the Human Nations.⁸

The notion of hip hop as an alternative value system to Western capitalism was later to be compromised by the prominence of material possessions and perceived affluence of many of its luminaries such as P-Diddy and Jay-Z. Yet amongst its pioneers such as Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash, the possibility of counteracting the second-class citizenship in which working-class non-white Americans found themselves was found through the hyperbole, sampling and signifying contained in hip hop which constituted an alternative education to the white supremacist teaching of mainstream society. For not only could hip hop alert its adherents to the richness of black history denied by traditional American education through explicit references to the past, but also offer an alternative philosophy to the empiricist rhetoric promoted by the West with its emphasis on factual evidence and literal meaning. For example, the concept of signifying, an indirect form of communication involving hyperbole, hidden meanings and figurative speech illustrates the esotericism of hip hop in constructing a utopian vision which transcends the lived realities of many of its aficionados.

Such visualization, however, goes beyond mere chimera since the positive ramifications engendered by hip hop activists in translating such a representation into realistic social change (as described above with the Black Spades) results in a working cultural practice encouraged by its fantastic imagery. The emphasis which signifying places on non-literal meaning, however, is currently consumed by the postmodern obsession with pastiche and parody, thereby denying its significance as a precursor to Western time periodization and its ability to countervail the capitalist system responsible for its genesis. Similarly, the practice of sampling in which fragments of former tracks, radio jingles, news clips and other aural pieces interpolate the lyrics of a current rap or song initially through the turntable and later through digital technology, give rap music its self-renewing character. According to William E. Perkins, for example, the ability of producers and DJs to reach

⁸ From 'Politics of Bling' Conference at the Brecht Forum Center, March 23rd 2005.

'farther and farther into the repositories of sound for surprising samples and snippets develops another key element in the hip hop equation; what's old is always new' (1996: 8). Again, however, academic jargon which postulates non-linearity as emblematic of late-20th-century mainstream culture refutes the sampling of MCs as aberrant to the Western-led ethos, and instead lauds the dexterity of hip hop practitioners to recycle and reproduce as illustrative of the unifying powers of the post modern ethos.

The revolutionary potential of hip hop has thus become sanitized through its consumption by the vortex of postmodernism, and therefore rendered as an exotic but validated cultural practice. A further repercussion of the commodification of hip hop as a mainstream cultural phenomenon premised upon an essentialized Black hoodlum or gangsta ethos is its obfuscation of the roles that other minority groups – particularly Caribbeans and Latinos – have played in its trajectory. This refutation has resulted not only from deliberate marketing strategies geared towards a white American tendency to voyeuristically delve into the lives of the underclasses, but also from African American hip hop adherents themselves. For whilst the practice was born in the multicultural streets of the Bronx – home to African Americans, West Indians and Latinos amongst other minority groups - with the interest of mainstream record labels in the late 1980s, those areas of hip hop associated predominantly with non-African American groups such as breaking (largely considered to be a Puerto Rican domain) were expunged from the music's expansion into the mainstream.⁹ Consequently, although the origins of hip hop can be found in the Jamaican tradition of toast and boast, the percussion beats of the *son* and *plena* from Puerto Rico, as well as the call and response tradition of Africa, following the ideological distancing of hip hop from its home of the ghetto to the mainstream studios, the lucrativeness of emphasizing African Americanism as the nucleus of hip hop as opposed to the more precarious option of a Puerto Rican or Latino identification has resulted in the marginalization of the latter within the hip hop nation. In addition, according to Raquel Rivera, the 'explicit voicing of African American concerns

⁹ According to William Perkins, for instance, breakdancing 'did not survive corporate America's raid on hip hop culture, probably because it was truly street art. As hip hop matured, and as it continues to be shaped by the video medium, authentic breakdancers have been replaced by 'video hos', fly girls and fly boys' (1996: 14).

through rhymes, samples and public statements was another one of the factors that contributed to the ethno-racialization of hip hop as exclusively African American' (2003: 79). The proponents of such a 'narrow identification' included Boogie Down Productions, Public Enemy, X-Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers and Brand Nubian (ibid).

In her book *New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone*, Rivera makes a significant contribution to the on-going project of reinscribing the Latino – and specifically Puerto Rican – role into the trajectory of hip hop in order to elevate the symbolic capital borne by those communities. In this way, she follows on from the work of authors such as Juan Flores and Mandalit del Barco in redressing the subsidiary role assigned to Latino rappers and musicians in the face of African American ideological and cultural supremacy in US popular culture. Throughout the book, Rivera affirms the ways in which the ethno-racialization of hip hop as an African American cultural practice has resulted in the construction of Puerto Ricans as 'virtual Blacks', an ethno-racial group who have 'always had their ghetto and non-white credentials up-to-date' but whose relationship to blackness 'has not always been that clear' (ibid: 82). In this way, the role of Puerto Ricans in hip hop is a microcosm of the translocal position which this ethno-national group occupies within US society in general; as a predominantly English-speaking and multiracial Latino people, Puerto Ricans defy the steadfastness of US racial categories and consequently pose an uncomfortable challenge for mainstream, Latino and African America. As a result of the Euro-centric construction of *Latinidad*, a fixation on cultural nationalism as concentrated in roots as opposed to routes (as explored by Gilroy), as well as the mainstream romanticization of African American blackness as a repository of both exhilaration and artistic prowess, the Puerto Rican role in American popular culture has remained marginalized along with its economic, political and social contributions, as explored in previous chapters. In her book *Boricua Pop*, Frances Negrón-Muntaner takes issue with exactly this concept and successfully constructs a genealogy of the Puerto Rican ethno-nation within the US through looking at such cultural icons as Jean Basquiat, the cast of *West Side Story*, Madonna and Ricky Martin. In this way, Negrón-Muntaner provides an important redress to the idea that as a translocal group existing outside of - but not isolated from - traditionally essentialized and circumscribed ethnic groups, Puerto

Ricans as an 'imagined community' have been unable to provide sufficient cohesion to enable an active trajectory of cultural progression within the US.

The idea of Puerto Ricans as a Spanish-speaking appendage to the African American nucleus of hip hop is both insulting to the many Boricuas who have played an integral role in the music's development, as well as misleading to those who wish to excavate an accurate history of the practice in order to assess its potential as a possible vehicle of resistance in 21st-century America. In addition to the Last Poets - considered to be one of the primary influences in the development of message rap and who were composed of both African American and Latino members - the early hip hop pioneers also included DJ Charlie Chase of the cold Crush Brothers, Devastating Tito from the Fearless Four and the Fantastic Five's Rubie Dee and Prince Whipper Whip. Yet given the predominance of Puerto Ricans in those areas of hip hop which did not survive the mainstream commodification of the music in the mid-1980s - that is to say, breaking and graffiti - those Puerto Ricans who have achieved success such as Big Pun and Fat Joe are seen as anomalous to the MC and DJ culture whose roots are seen as based in the African American oral tradition of griots and story tellers. Again, however, such an assumption not only obscures the role of the Puerto Rican *declamadores* in the island's culture as well as the role of poets throughout Latin American history in general, but also encourages the idea that those Puerto Rican and Latino artists who refuse to pepper their lyrics with Spanish - thereby performing to the aforesaid Eurocentric image of *Latinidad* - are in fact 'selling out' by 'acting black' and consequently denying their Hispanic heritage. Consequently, the triadic attack on Puerto Rican artists from the mainstream, Afro-American centrism and *Latinidad* results in the filtering of groups and performers such as Latin Empire and La Bruja into an interstitial no-man's land in which they risk losing local acceptance as authentic street artists without the concomitant reward of widespread exposure.

It must be acknowledged, however, that there is by no means a general consensus amongst Puerto Rican artists as to how they should present themselves in order to provide an accurate representation of their communities and ethnic group. In 'Rap's Latino

Sabor', for example, Mandalit del Barco notes that some Latino hip hoppers are 'upset by what they fear has become the Ricky Ricardoization of other rappers who simply 'e-speak e-Spaneesh' as a gimmick, prompted by record-company execs who have dollar signs in their eyes when looking toward the potential Latino market' (1996: 75). Here, del Barco alludes to the mainstream 'Other-love' (to borrow another of John Hutnyk's idioms) currently bestowed upon (commodified) elements of Latino culture, in which exaggerated stereotypes are generated and even performed to by Latino artists such as Ricky Martin and Jennifer Lopez, ultimately resulting in the suspicion of less parodied performers as non-authentic or culturally bastardized. For artists such as Fat Joe (Joseph Cartagena) and Cypress Hill, both of whom refuse to adhere to commodified representations of Latino artists as predominantly Spanish-speaking, the circumscription of artists such as Latin Empire, Mellow Man Ace and Kid Frost – all of whom 'code-switch between English and Spanish, with topics and references particular to inner-city Latino communities' (Rivera, 2003: 93) - within the label of 'Latin Rap' is a denial both of the shared lived experiences of internally colonized peoples as well as of hip hop's primary function as a vehicle of transculturation. In an interview with Raquel Rivera, for example, Fat Joe notes that 'I never felt I had to rhyme in Spanish, none of that. Up to this day, I don't compromise. I don't come running out with a big flag. Everybody knows we're representing the Boricuas, the Latinos. But I'm just making great music. I don't have to put in every song "we Boricua," "Cubano", "Dominicano"' (ibid: 225). Here, Fat Joe alludes to his over-riding function as a rap artist to produce good music appealing to a wide audience, as opposed to adopting an ethno-centric focus relevant to only one minority group.

Notwithstanding this, the development of Latin rap geared primarily but not exclusively towards a bilingual audience can also be viewed as a welcome counteraction to the African American centrality hitherto defining hip hop's trajectory. For whilst the delineation of Latin Rap can be viewed as deceptive and misleading, it must also be acknowledged that the 'politics of visibility' in which 'the mere fact of appearance counts as political' (Hutnyk: 115) claims the very existence of a Latin genre of hip hop as a social achievement in the face of mainstream and minority exclusion. In addition, as

noted by Juan Flores, the 'explosion of Spanish-language and bilingual rap onto the pop music scene in recent years bears special significance in the face of the stubbornly monolingual tenor in today's public discourse, most evident in the crippling of bilingual programs and services and in the ominous gains in the 'English Only' crusade' (2000: 137). As a result of this, artists choosing to highlight a specific Latino voice in hip hop such as Kid Frost and Latin Empire should not necessarily be denounced as mere caricatures of a stereotyped Latino image, but instead should be considered as a possible 'first point of call' in addressing the invisibility of Latinos in the rap genre. This is not to say that the resulting bifurcation between Afro-American-centred rap and Latin rap is accurate or desirable; however, given the crucial need to raise awareness of Latino issues as both specific and as part of the African diaspora, the co-existence of such distinct performers such as Fat Joe and Latin Empire should be viewed as complimentary to the array of diverse Latino experiences in the US and not as antagonistic.

Furthermore, when considering the experience of Puerto Ricans in hip hop and the marginalization which has ensued from their translocality, it would be a travesty not to consider the ways in which their exclusion from the US ethno-racial nomenclature has resulted in a sense of autonomy from the rigid boundaries of ethno-racial essentialism which restricts the creative potential of other minority and mainstream groups. This has allowed at least some of the higher profile Boricua stars – most notably Bronx-born Jennifer Lopez – to navigate a cross-section of musical genres according to the vicissitudes of the mainstream market, capitalizing on whichever style or commodified ethnicity is in vogue at the time. To a large extent, such ethnic manipulation has been made possible by the gravitation of the hip hop scene towards a ghetto-centric focus towards the end of the 1990s; that is to say, whilst the nucleus of hip hop is still considered to be African-American, at the turn of the 21st century an emphasis on the lived experience of the ghetto – heightened by the media popularity of white artists such as Eminem – has resulted in the broadening of hip hop's boundaries to at least tacitly acknowledge the entitlement of non-Black performers to a place in the hip hop nation. For Latino artists, this increasing sense of authenticity is enhanced by the Latino-craze of the late 1990s, considered to have been solidified by Ricky Martin's performance at the

1999 Grammy Awards Ceremony (Cepeda, 2003: 116) and illustrated through the increasing flirtation of mainstream artists with Spanish and other aspects of Latino culture. For example, in 2003 the breakout album *Elephunk* was released by The Black Eyed Peas, a highly successful mainstream hip hop group fronted by Jamaican American will.i.am (William James Adam Jr.), who recorded as one of the album's track records the single 'Latin Girls'.¹⁰ Here, will.i.am intersperses his lyrics with Spanish in order to stress an appreciation for Latin culture or at least for Latin women, including lines such as:

yo quiero en I'm sincero/ if you never had an ichi let me be your primero/
we can hit the channel we can dance the bolero/ have a shopping spree you
can spend my dinero.

Notwithstanding the obvious power dynamic inherent within the track regarding the sexualized image of Latina women, the song nonetheless emphasizes a renewed admiration and acceptance of Latin culture within mainstream hip hop, which has been adopted by an assortment of other high profile stars such as Wyclef Jean and Will Smith.

Yet whilst such transcultural dalliances are commendable in so much as they raise the visibility of Latin culture and hence make some headway into eroding the black/white binary characterizing US society, it must be acknowledged that these Hispanic-tinged olive branches have been largely extended towards Latina women as an exclusive and exoticized segment of mainstream hip hop. In this way, whilst the profile of Latino culture has been raised through the ethnic inclusivity promoted by the genre's ghetto-centric stance, the supremacy of an African American/ Caribbean-centered Blackness within the genre is nonetheless perpetuated by the fact that such cultural fusions are enacted through the unequal terrain of gender relations. A recent example of this can be seen in the 2006 hit 'Hips Don't Lie', a musical collaboration featuring Colombian-Lebanese Shakira Mebarak and Haitian rapper Wyclef Jean. For whilst such a partnership

¹⁰ Other members are Taboo (Mexican American), apl.de.ap (Filipino) and Stacey Ferguson (of Brazilian descent).

could be lauded for its promotion of cross-cultural fertilization, illustrated through such lyrics as:

she's so sexy every man's fantasy/ a refugee like me back with the Fugees
from a third world country.... Colombians and Haitians/ I ain't guilty, it's
a musical transaction/ no more do we snatch ropes/ Refugees run the seas
cos we own our own boats -

the fact that Shakira is still playing the role of an exoticized mami performing for the eyes of a male spectator is evident. With such lines as:

oh baby when you talk like that/you make a woman go mad/ so be wise
and keep on/reading the signs of my body -

with the concomitant tantalizing dance moves emphasizing the sexualized nature of her performance, Shakira is actively engaging in a process of linguistic and musical transculturation (given the song's fusion of salsa, cumbia and reggaeton rhythms) at the same time as acknowledging the significance of her status as a sexualized Latina in doing so. Such a performance begs the question – would the duet have worked so well had it have been a Latino male and an African American female singing about the possibilities of musical transculturation? Or would such a pairing fail from the outset given that if, as Paul Gilroy postulates 'gender is the modality through which race is lived'¹¹ (1993: 85), the implied reversal of Afro-American-centred hegemony through a Latino male / African American female coupling would simply be antithetical to hip hop's marketability as premised upon the Black male hoodlum?

It is for these reasons that the iconic persona of Jennifer Lopez is a crucial figure to consider when exploring the possibilities of Puerto Rican agency within hip hop and mainstream culture in general. As one of the highest paid actresses in Hollywood as well as the highest paid Latin actress in Hollywood history, Lopez epitomizes Frances

¹¹ Gilroy acknowledges that this is an analogy to Stuart Hall's remark that 'race is the modality through which class is lived' (1993: 85).

Negron-Muntaner's concept of the Puerto Rican 'self-commodity' as a means through which to 'attenuate shame, negotiate colonial subjugation and acquire self worth' (2004: 26). According to Negron-Muntaner, the fact that 'boricua stars in American pop culture now stand as the most visible paradigm of Puerto Rican value' results in the critical need to 'study specifically commodified transculture for any understanding of contemporary Puerto Rican ethno-national identifications', despite their dismissal as 'consumer ethnicities' by scholars more concerned with grass-roots based cultural productions (2004: 29-30). In this way, whilst the actions and choices of celebrities such as Lopez must be seen within the context of the capitalist market by which they are subsumed, this is not to deny their significance in illustrating the deployment of strategies specific to a translocal, non-essentialized group and consequently the raising of that group's agency and symbolic capital within US society.

Lopez' resourcefulness and ability to maneuver the capitalist market has resulted in an accumulated wealth of approximately \$110 billion, which according to *Forbes* magazine, ranks her 9th in the 20th Richest Women in Entertainment (January 18th 2007). The perceived entitlement of the Boricua megastar to oscillate between musical performances in salsa, hip hop and mainstream pop music illustrates both her own versatility as a performer, as well as the flexibility of a Puerto Rican identity in meandering through the various categories comprising the US racial lexicon. For unlike certain African American artists- whose philandering with Spanish lyrics is less to be considered as a cross-cultural affiliation and more as an acknowledgement that Latina women are (at least in mainstream hip hop) desirable as 'ghetto-tropical, lighter-skinned variations on black femininity' (Rivera, 2003:128) – Puerto Ricans such as Lopez can claim identification with Black, White and pan-Latino culture on the grounds that they are denied full access from all three, and are consequently at liberty to utilize each as required. For example, the constant re-naming of her public persona is emblematic of Lopez's aspiration to attract a wide-scale fan base and forge links of identification with each ethnic group. In 1995, for example, the actress played the title role of the late Mexican American and Tejana singer Selena Quintanilla in *Selena*, thereby demonstrating her attachment to the US Latino community as a whole despite being inundated with criticism that the part should not

have gone to a Puerto Rican (Negron-Muntaner, 2004: 230).¹² In 1999, Lopez released her debut solo album *On the 6*, a title symbolizing her self ascribed status as a Bronx home girl (an identity to be unforgettably solidified in her hit single 'Jenny From The Block', taken from her album *This is me.....Then* in 2002) since the 6 refers to the subway line she took from her home in the Bronx to her auditions in Manhattan (Rodriguez, 2004: 223). It was in 2001, however, that the moniker of J-Lo was coined, allegedly by 'the fans' (ibid: 224) in order to demonstrate the singer's growing affiliation with the hip hop community. This connection was further augmented by the notorious incident in which Lopez and her erstwhile boyfriend, hip hop mogul Sean 'Puffy' Combs were taken into custody following a shooting which took place in a Times Square nightclub.¹³ Yet for all of Lopez' mounting gangster credentials, her self-endorsed prerogative to claim a stake in the African American community was challenged through her infamous use of the 'n-word' in a remix of her 2002 hit 'I'm Real' with African American rapper Ja-Rule and singer Ashanti. Whilst considered by large segments of the African American community as a grossly disparaging term, the n-word has nonetheless been sanctioned by a number of hip hop luminaries as a means to invoke a sense of solidarity and cohesion amongst Black people.¹⁴ Such camaraderie, however, was clearly not extended to Lopez - thereby illustrating the tenuous ground upon which she was strutting her Afro-diasporic permit by virtue of her Bronx upbringing and Puerto Rican

¹² Frances R. Aparicio gives a positive analysis of the casting of Lopez as Selena in her article 'Jennifer as Selena: Rethinking Latinidad in Media and Popular Culture'. Here, she argues that 'the Jennifer/Selena dyad reveals that US Latinas will continue to explore their commonalities as colonized subjects, as historical minorities that continue to engage in struggles of discourse and power with dominant institutions' (2003: 103). Thus 'the case study of Jennifer Lopez and Selena Quintanilla proposes itself as a model for using Latinidad as an approach that unveils the affinities between and among historical minorities such as Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans' (ibid).

¹³ Whilst taken into custody, however, Lopez was not charged. Coombs was indicted for illegal hand gun possession and bribery but was acquitted of all charges in March 2001 (Rodriguez, 2004: 223).

¹⁴ In her article 'The Use of the N-Word: We're Talking Out of Both Sides of Our Mouth,' Yvonne Bynoe notes the irony in the 'dismay, if not outrage, expressed by the majority of black Americans over the use of the N-word by non-black public officials whilst being relatively silent about the rampant use of the N-word by black entertainers, particularly rap artists and comedians'. Bynoe states that given the familiarity of non-black audiences with black celebrities such as Chris Rock or DMX, a 'global audience is increasingly under the impression that the N-word is a content neutral, equal opportunity term'. Whilst making the distinction between 'nigger' as a slur and 'nigga' as a familial term used amongst young black hip hop aficionados, she asserts that 'in the public sphere the N-word can have no such duality: either it is a flatly forbidden racial insult or else it is just another word because its pejorative meaning has disappeared'. Consequently, black Americans 'have to decide publicly whether they have indeed become 'niggers' and have no reason to restrict use of the word, or whether they are human beings who demand that their history and their pain be respected around the world by rejecting this slur' (2001: 1-2).

heritage. Despite the diatribes which followed, however, the very fact that Lopez herself saw no incongruence in simultaneously identifying as a (pan) Latina, a Bronx Boricua and a member of the African diaspora – all performed in front of the public eye – illustrates the freedom which has afforded her to become the highest paid Latina in the entertainment industry through her constant manipulation of ethno-racial categories.

Consequently, despite the fact that Lopez is relentlessly criticized as a hard-faced materialist and capitalist monster, the fact that a female Boricua has been able to successfully control her own musical trajectory and exploit the fallacy of essentialized ethnic identities is an important redress to the general subordination with which non-white women find themselves within the music industry. In fact, the contention surrounding Lopez is not so much concerned with her media image and flagrant affluence, but more related to the fact that she appears to do little to give back to those living the working-class reality of the image which she purports to represent. As noted by writer and hip hop activist Sofia Quintero, such blatant exploitation results in artists such as Lopez managing to achieve their own escapism at ‘the expense of those who are unable to reach such lofty places’ (2004: 1). Yet this is not an issue specific to Lopez, for the lavish displays of material wealth as illustrated through designer clothes, jewelry and other luxurious items (colloquially termed as ‘bling’) is endemic within the music industry - particularly amongst its Black and Puerto Rican aficionados. The reasons for this are often cited as related to the disenfranchisement of both communities; in the aforementioned conference, ‘The Politics of Bling,’ for example, a British Jamaican member of the audience noted that all the material wealth displayed by minority communities is ‘theirs in the first place as it was initially from Africa. They were our resources and they were stolen from us. We’re taking it back.’ Such comments could be read in multiple ways, for whilst it would be erroneous to presume that the principal objective of hip hop is to reclaim the material wealth of Western society – thereby adopting an aggressive, confrontational stance pitting White against Black and encouraging a disparity in racial relations – the allusion which the audience member makes to material wealth as a display of success or achievement is prevalent amongst those communities lacking in symbolic or economic capital through high-powered jobs or

education. In this way, the exhibition of 'bling' can be read as an attempted construction of self worth in the face of political and economic subordination to white mainstream society.

Such illusions of achievement, however challenging and conciliatory they may appear, are nonetheless compromised by the fact that they perpetuate a capitalist ethos through:

encouraging people to think that they're worth as much as the chain around their neck; this is tied to the whole idea of white supremacy and colonialism, which teaches us that we're not worth anything or we're worth as much as we can afford' (Quintero, 2003: 1).

In this way, Keith Negus is correct in affirming that hip hop demonstrates how 'consumption can become production,' with the very need to rise against capitalism becoming complicit in its continuation and prosperity. Images generated through hip hop celebrities in which material wealth supersedes any element of integrity or activist stance are percolated back to the communities whence the original art form was born, thereby capitalizing on the ostensible shared background between the idols and their public whilst at the same time tacitly condoning the bedrock of Western society to accumulate profit through whichever gimmick is popular with the audiences holding the largest purchasing power at the time.

However, despite the fact that artists and moguls such as Damon Dash and Jay-Z¹⁵ must be held at least partly reprehensible for the capitalist u-turn of hip hop at the dawn of the 21st century, the exploitation of 'race music' emanating from minority communities is a longstanding trait in American cultural history which has resulted in the accentuation of those elements most yearned for by white society at the expense of its revolutionary potential. In this way, Adorno's theorem that the culture industry cultivates false needs

¹⁵ In 1996, for example, Roc-A-Fella Records was co-founded by Damon 'Dame' Dash, Kareem 'Biggs' Burke and Shawn 'Jay-Z' Carter. The Rocawear clothing line associated with the label announced annual sales of over \$700 million and was sold to Iconix Brand Group for \$204 million in March 2007. Also affiliated with the label are Roc-A-Fella films, distribution rights for Armadale vodka and Roc La Familia sub label, which promotes reggaeton and Latino music.

which can then be satisfied by the capitalist production of commodified ethnicities proves apt; the sense of anomie felt by many white hip hop enthusiasts in an increasingly rootless and fragmented society can be mitigated through their involvement in a genre which prioritizes 'the real', local terrains, brotherhood – as well as a sense of thrill and excitement through their temporary escape into the underworld of Black hustlers. Consequently, despite the deliberate efforts of many hip hop personalities to construct a gangster identity based upon illicit means of survival and therefore existence outside the dominant ethos of society, their conscious attempts to mould themselves into the very stereotypes which gratify the tastes of capitalist white society – which often disintegrate if their real life backgrounds are traced and investigated – is a clear manifestation that rap has 'evolved to become a very particular US business' (Negus, 1999: 88).

In this way, it can be argued that hip hop has become subsumed by the very forces of cultural and economic imperialism which it was initially encouraged to fight against. For whilst it is true that the glamorization of the ghetto and poverty has resulted in a few successful 'rags to riches' tales, the deliberate manipulation of a stereotyped Black criminal has done very little to improve the situation for working-class Black communities. For whilst it is they who provide the source and the inspiration for hip hop, the financial remunerations afforded to these neighborhoods and activists are minimal, with the wealth generated through record sales and so on being channeled towards the predominantly white executive corpus who control the distribution of resources. According to Negus, for example, the evidence that no real boundaries are broken through the widespread popularity of Black culture amongst white society is provided in the fact that there are 'very few senior black executives within the corporate hierarchy beyond the "black division"' (1999: 89). Such wresting of Black musical practices by white corporations is by no means anomalous in US history, as demonstrated through the numerous examples of 20th-century minstrelsy in which Black stereotypes have been inflated and commodified for a mainstream audience.¹⁶ With the popularization of hip

¹⁶ The epitome of such stereotyping can be seen through Jimi Hendrix, who according to Paul Gilroy was 'a seasoned, if ill-disciplined, rhythm and blues sideman' who became 'reinvented as the essential image of what English audiences felt a black American performer should be: wild, sexual, hedonistic and dangerous' (1993: 93). He was subsequently denounced by some Black Power activists as a 'white nigger' for his

hop, however, the incongruence of extracting a Black cultural form for white voyeuristic purposes is accentuated by the fact that much of what is considered within the Black community as metaphor and parody – that is to say, not to be taken in a literal context – is lost in translation within a white community. As a result, the signifying gestures which often use violence, nihilism and misogyny as means through which to express the disenfranchisement of minority communities are often taken at face value by the mainstream; subsequently, they provide further justification to vilify Blacks and Latinos as pathologically deficient. This is not to say, however, that Black and Latino artists who encourage the perpetuation of such images can be exonerated from the about face of hip hop in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and the blame must go beyond the record labels and TV. The persistent underperformance of minority students in mainstream education as well as professional success results in a heightened desire to emulate rap stars and hip hop moguls, who have ostensibly made their fortune through the acquisition of gangster credentials. If such qualities are then consciously adopted by influential and credulous youths who see no feasible alternative to a life of destitution, the adoption of such characteristics should be considered not as the genetic predisposition of such groups to gravitate towards deviance, but instead as a ‘realistic’ attempt to escape from the quagmire of the ghetto. The fact that Black and Latino stars in a position to manipulate white voyeurism do so with little concern for the impact which their self-commodification has on the communities which they purport to represent renders them as complicit in the transmogrification of hip hop from a revolutionary vehicle into a capitalist medium as white corporate America.

Thus the status of hip hop in the first decade of the 21st century is almost a complete reversal of its initial intention as a vehicle to critique the capitalist ethos of the US, as well as cultivate cross-cultural relations amongst internally colonized ethnic groups. With regards to the latter, one of the most notorious incidents which illustrates the degeneration of hip hop into a purely entertainment-orientated industry was Hot 97’s public response to the Tsunami disaster in March 2005. As the number 1 radio station in

apparent choice in ‘cultivating an almost exclusively white, pop audience that found the minstrel stance a positive inducement to engage with his transgressive persona if not his music’ (ibid).

the New York City's 18-34 demographic, Hot 97 – owned by Emmis Communications and its 100% Caucasian board of directors¹⁷ - prides itself on being the locale 'where hip hop lives,' consequently accepting responsibility for its representation of the genre as paradigmatic for the 21st century. Yet rather than demonstrating a passion for intercultural relations and cross-ethnic solidarity, in recent years the radio station has been assailed on numerous occasions for racism and ignorance – the most disreputable of which being its airing of 'The Tsunami Song' following the natural disaster in January 2005.¹⁸ The spoof-song, a parody which 'set tasteless jokes about Asians and Africans drowning and being sold into child slavery to the tune of 'We Are the World' (ibid), provoked a scathing backlash from a broad spectrum of the city including listeners, politicians and civil rights groups. As a result of the Tsunami song controversy, morning show personality Todd Lynn and producer Rick Delgado were fired from the station, with further members of staff receiving two-week suspensions. Yet nefarious as such actions from individual personalities may appear to be, comments such as those put forward by former Hot 97 DJ Star must be taken on board; according to Star, for example, he was 'not only encouraged to be reckless at Hot 97, but management completely turned their back for the sake of ratings. I was a hired gun. I was hired to take the show over the top, to push the boundaries'.¹⁹ Clearly, incidents such as these demonstrate how capitalist avarice has superseded the original objective of hip hop²⁰ to the extent that when a bifurcation is presented between promoting interethnic solidarity and lucrative ratings, the latter option is considered more advantageous.

In the first decade of the 21st century, therefore, the exigency to redirect the consumerism and capitalist ethos which has come to control the evolution of hip hop is increasingly obvious through surging nativist movements reinforced through denigrating stereotypes of Blacks and Latinos; the complicity of celebrities and icons in perpetuating such images and therefore distortion of reality for many working class people of color; the continued

¹⁷ As quoted in Mark Hatch-Miller's article in TheNation.com, 16th March 2005.

¹⁸ Other incidents include mocking the death of r&b singer Aaliyah when the sounds of planes crashing and blood curdling screams were played on air.

¹⁹ In *New York Times* article (7th February 2005) 'An Arbiter of Hip Hop Finds Itself as the Target' (Lola Ogunnaike and Jeff Leeds).

²⁰ Hot 97 earns an estimated \$40m annually (ibid).

obfuscation of the Puerto Rican contribution to hip hop as a reflection of their general invisibility in US culture; the persistent underperformance of Blacks and Latinos in mainstream schools and colleges, highlighting the need for an alternative educative system hitherto provided by hip hop; and the acknowledgement that postmodernity as a circumscribed time epoch is a fallacy constructed by Western society in order to retain their hold on global intellectual history. Such admissions are widely documented by hip hop scholars, activists and academics such as David Toop and Tricia Rose – what is less clear, however, are the ways in which such a colossal assignment can be achieved. Suggestions abound regarding ‘alternative media’ and diffusion of resources; in New York, for example, substitutes for mainstream broadcasting can be found through such stations as WBAI, a member of The Pacifica Foundation whose mission calls for ‘radio that fosters understanding among nations and individuals, encourages creativity and promotes innovative, uncensored distribution of news’. As an independent radio station with no corporate funding, WBAI harbors a strong contingent of community listeners – but unfortunately provides little challenge for the 5 million audiences of stations such as Hot 97. Thus as an audience member at ‘The Politics of Bling’ conference correctly affirmed:

people always talk about alternatives but when the alternatives are there, people don't want the work. We can't claim an easy victory. These are billion dollar budgets as opposed to a couple of thousands.

Similarly, groups and artists such as Immortal Technique and The Welfare Poets also attempt to divert the focus of hip hop from commodification and cultural ignorance towards an egalitarian stance on socialism and interethnic relations. At the Union Square rally organized in retaliation to the aforesaid ‘Tsunami Song’, for example, Harlem based rapper Immortal Technique advocated ‘burning music off the Internet and bumping it outside’ as a method of economic resistance against conglomerates such as Emmis Communications. The concept of the Internet as an alternative means to disseminate music and information is becoming increasingly popular amongst hip hop aficionados, as substantiated by its criticism by record companies who lose out on profits as a result.

Immortal Technique's thematic style includes issues such as the continuing involvement of the CIA in the South American cocaine economy, thereby obliterating any chance which his material may have of reaching a widespread audience through its disavowal from mainstream audiences tied to the capitalist rhetoric of corporate America, and subsequent need to find an alternative vehicle by which to disseminate his music.

In the same way, The Welfare Poets – composed of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Haitian and Cuban members – are a community based collective of educators, organizers and artists who define their sound as 'the flavor content of words with the sounds of rhythms of the cultures we're talking about.'²¹ Their music conflates influences from hip hop, *plena*, *bomba*, Afro-Cuban jazz, funk and blues – in this way illustrating their visual and sonorous representation of the African diaspora, which according to Hec Rivera (one of the group's founding members) 'creates more cultural solidarity than competition.' In a personal interview carried out in January 2005, Hec explained how the symbol of the band is particularly representative of this reaffirmation of brotherhood with its combination of the African and Puerto Rican flags. All of the material produced by the group is connected to political consciousness and societal change; in the track *Sa Pa Se* (taken from the album *Rhymes For Treason*), for instance, the current situation in Haiti is elucidated through the use of traditional Haitian creole mixed with hip hop and the Cuban Son. *The Media*, also taken from the same album, was written as a 'response to the multimedia backlash that followed September 11th in order to examine the role of the media and its relationship to multinational corporations' and was first performed at 'The World Says No to War' Rally in New York City on February 15th 2003 in front of more than 500,000 protestors against the war in Iraq. In addition to performing, The Welfare Poets also work towards 'educating and organizing' through workshops and community based events, an attribute also shared by groups such as Ricanstruction, a Nuyorican punk band whose goal is to 'give voice to the social, political and cultural issues and struggles of disenfranchised barrio communities through the use of radical, political music, graffiti and film' (Arevalo Matos, 2004: 251). Both The Welfare Poets and Ricanstruction demonstrate the vibrancy of grassroots organizations to avert attention away from the

²¹ Personal interview with Hec Rivera (Interview – H.R.) 11th January 2005.

socially destructive mainstream status of hip hop, and instead towards those issues such as alternative education and political consciousness which are more reflective of hip hop as remedial for societal ills.

Yet whilst the efforts of such groups are clearly laudable in their eschewing of profits and the politics of visibility, their intransigence in avoiding any form of collusion with capitalism renders their appeal to a very select audience which often does not go beyond other community activists and collectives. Whilst such obduracy is useful in setting the polar opposite to the sanitized radicalism promoted by the mainstream, in terms of galvanizing the widespread support necessary to make any realistic inroads into the overturning of commodified hip hop, the 'preaching to the converted' nature of such performers limits their success in doing so. As a result, hip hop enthusiasts such as Sofia Quintero are correct in recognizing that whilst (white) performers commonplace in the capitalist market, such as Eminem, may 'require something of a political education and a social conscience that includes a deeper analysis of how class and race intersect in the US' (Quintero, 2004: 2), their ability to:

wield an influence that performers such as Tupac Amaru Shakur²² never did because of their skin privilege and class background incites millions across differences to examine and perhaps even cross divides that enable the top 10% of the population to command 71% of private wealth.

The point which Quintero makes here is crucial; whilst in an ideal world a complete rejection of capitalist forces would be sufficient to construct and promote an utopist society, the ultimate pervasion of society with the psychological mechanisms used to ensure the naturalization of such forces results in such a hypothesis as idealistic, naïve – and ultimately impossible. This is not to say that an about face of the radical counterculture that hip hop once purported to provide is not possible. However, just as the Civil Rights Movement only became possible when solidarity was generated on a

²² Also known by his stage names 2Pac, Makaveli or Pac, Tupac Amaru Shakur (1971-1996) was a rapper and actor whose work was acclaimed for its socially activist and educative content.

mass level, so too can a revolution in cross-cultural relations and socio-political consciousness be accomplished only when support for such a u-turn extends beyond those existing in the interstices of society to those who have the economic and cultural capital to instigate such changes.

The percolation of such consciousness into society at large involves more than simply standing one's ground in an anti-mainstream rebellion, and will instead require the dexterous handling and manipulation of those vehicles currently embroiled in capitalist machinations. In this task, the tactics historically applied by Puerto Ricans as a people and as individuals will prove particularly useful as a guide, since the *jaibería*²³ strategies which have been employed in order to avoid the same fate which has befallen those Caribbean islands around them who have disdained the infiltration of US support – whilst at the same time retaining their independence as a culturally independent ethno-nation – can be used as an analogy for the ways in which capitalist vehicles should be negotiated with rather than disavowed altogether. According to Grosfoguel, Negron-Muntaner and Georas, for example, the Puerto Rican usage of *jaibería* refers to those practices of 'non-confrontation and evasion, of taking dominant discourse literally in order to subvert it for one's purpose, of doing whatever one sees fit not as a head-on collision but a bit under the table, that is, through other means' (1997: 30-31). This stance – which, as discussed in previous chapters has been subject to diatribes from both mainland and insular writers lamenting such a lack of virility – is re-considered by the aforesaid authors as 'useful resources in negotiating colonialism and subordination' that 'favors endurance over physical strength and privileges ambiguity over clarity' (ibid: 31). Consequently, the application of *jaibería* is an 'active, low-intensity strategy to obtain the maximum benefits of a situation with the minimum blood spilled upon acknowledging the 'contemporary (worldwide) political defeat of alternative political and cultural propositions "outside capitalism" that are potentially more egalitarian' (ibid: 32).

²³ The origins of this term come from the *jaiba* – or mountain crab - which 'in going forward moves sideways' (Grosfoguel et al., 1997: 30).

In a similar vein, the outright repudiation of capitalism as advocated by The Welfare Poets and Ricanstruction can achieve little beyond slight indentures into mainstream society. The workshops, film screenings and performances by such groups are certainly useful in their contributions to a mainstream counterculture; however, in order to incite sufficient numbers of people, compunctious actions must extend beyond the interstitial locales in which activist collectives are currently situated. As with Puerto Rican strategies of national defense, the only way in which this can be achieved is through the infiltration of those establishments which are consciously geared towards a mainstream audience, and are therefore complicit in the capitalist hegemonic project. For whilst this may seem something of a contradiction – that is to say, endorsing a revolutionary standpoint whilst using capitalist institutions from which to do so – an alternative interpretation could be that such strategies are akin to appropriating the tools of the master with a view to subverting the system from within. In this way, those artists, performers and activists using these spaces are not necessarily ‘selling out’ and succumbing to a profit-making mentality – but are instead recognizing that an aggressive militancy is inexpedient in generating widespread fervor for an alternative social ethos. Suspicions of racial separatism, a disdain towards belligerent attitudes (given the general apathy from which mainstream society suffers) and a fear of the unknown demand that a reversal in the ‘common sense’ notions instilled in the general public be achieved through more subtle means than obvious rebellion. Instead, tactics must be adopted which permeate individual consciousness as opposed to those which possibly intimidate people into the adoption of an alternative mindset; such strategies would be tantamount to utilizing the same illicit psychological mechanisms as those assumed by the capitalist mainstream and therefore simply substituting one form of supremacy for another.

Yet the problem lies in maintaining a physical and ideological distance from the enticement of capitalism with the exposure and revenue that mainstream publicity generates. In order to do this, strong ties and roots must be maintained with the communities to whom the experiences of the artists are particularly relevant – such an affiliation can be preserved through continued performances in grassroots locales (poetry clubs, community centres and so on) as well as workshops in schools, prisons and other

such institutions. In addition, the formation of a counterculture to a patriarchal, white supremacist mainstream must contain at least a preliminary rhetoric which will enable the fulfillment of its emancipatory objective without this becoming oxymoronic. This is to say that whilst some form of 'dogma' should be at least tacitly acknowledged and adhered to so as to provide a basic countercultural structure, the objective of this should be a deconstruction of the mainstream ethos as opposed to an explicit code for an alternative style of thought – for as aforesaid, this would simply be akin to the replacement of one hegemonic mindset with another. This unpacking and subsequent re-assembly of racial, gender and ethnic relations can only be achieved once the contemporary problems and issues saturating mainstream culture – currently fuelled by the status of contemporary hip hop as discussed above – are acknowledged as concomitant to the capitalist project and accurately documented in ways emotionally intelligible to the diverse echelons of society.

In this way, an active deconstruction of society which would eventually result in the liberation of all peoples from those repressive forces designed to perpetuate the WASP ethos should be instigated and led by those denizens of society who have suffered the most iniquitous effects of US capitalism, that is to say, those situated within the triad of racism, misogyny and economic deprivation. The vehicle through which such a project should be actuated must be one which can remain free from commodification and the transition from 'a use to an exchange value' at the same time that it can innovate capitalist establishments through transforming itself into a palatable product for mainstream tastes. The malleability of such a cultural practice is contingent upon its ability to remain close to its root source, thereby constantly rejuvenating itself with authentic material (the politics of authenticity will be discussed in subsequent chapters) at the same time as weaving in and out of cultural locales positioned on a mainstream circuit, adapting its shape and guise for general consumption if necessary. Such a cultural practice must remain as far away from esotericism as possible in order to be accessible to all tiers of society, an attribute also strengthened through its openness to diverging interpretations without fear of reprisal as well as economic practicality. In this way, the popularity of performance poetry over the last ten years as a means through which to

construct an alternative consciousness to mainstream society can be readily explained by its fulfillment of the above criteria. For whilst the oral tradition within African American, Caribbean and Latino cultures elucidates the great number of performance poets rising from these ethnic groups, the cross-over into mainstream (youth) culture of the genre has also resulted in as many white artists achieving respect and acclaim. Furthermore, given that unlike with mainstream hip hop where white and Latino artists are seen as aberrations from a privileged African-American nucleus, performance poetry as premised on both written/oral traditions is able to claim a cross cultural genealogy and therefore adopt a multiethnic appeal.

The trajectory of performance poetry as one of the primary cultural mediums of expression in the US will be discussed in the following chapter; however, for the moment it suffices to note that the Puerto Rican contribution to the performance poetry movement in New York is immense yet insufficiently acknowledged. The body of Nuyorican poetry produced in the 1960s and 1970s, whilst synthesizing with elements from the Beats and Black Arts movements, also set individual precedents for code-switching and narratives of an ethno-racial experience which defied the black and white racial binary. Such experiences have become increasingly prevalent in the 21st century with the array of Latino/Asian diasporas and inter-racial marriages rendering the concept of a fixed ethnic group as obsolete. As a result, the body of work currently being produced by such diasporic writers can trace its origins to, amongst others, the early corpus of Nuyorican poetry. Nowhere else, however, is the role of Nuyorican poetry in the construction of a 'radical postmodernism' or 'politics of transfiguration' more aptly demonstrated than through the success and visibility of the Nuyorican Poets Café, which reopened in 1989 following the death of Miguel Pinero. Since then, the Café has gone on to play a key role in the performance poetry field on both a local and national level, an achievement which should result in an increased awareness of the Puerto Rican involvement in and cultural contributions to US society but which to date has not translated into any significant redress for the subordinate status in which the community finds itself. Consequently, the following chapter will explore the potential of the Café and the spoken word movement in general for providing such re-evaluations of the communities whence they originated,

in the process affirming that not only are they contributing to the socially activist legacy of the poets and performers of earlier generations, but also devising new ways to negotiate with mainstream aficionados without succumbing to a capitalist ethos.

CHAPTER 6

THE SPOKEN WORD MOVEMENT AND THE NUYORICAN POETS CAFÉ

In August 2007, the annual US National Slam contest took place in Austin (Texas), which consisted of 76 slam teams from all over the continent competing in a five-day verbal joust with the objective of raising the prestige of their individual performance venues to the premier locale on the poetry circuit. Each team was comprised of between three and five members, with a collection of individual and group pieces rehearsed for months beforehand, attesting to the ways in which despite its obvious competitive nature, the popularization of slam poetry has resulted in the construction of a national community intent on utilizing the spoken word as a means to create solidarity and foster intra-state connections. Inherent in such a collective is the idea that divisions of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are re-evaluated on the democratic terrain of performance poetry in which, quite literally, 'anything goes'. The emancipatory potential of performance poetry, given its ability to alternate between deep introspection and militant inculcation – conjoined with its economic expedience and therefore suitability for all sectors of society – is lived out in the practical and ideological nexus of the spoken word 'community', in which alternative visions for society are vocally expounded and critiqued through artists, audiences and judges.

The concept of poetry as a vehicle through which to harness the aggressive spirit of (predominantly) angry youths - as well as provide an effective tool for disseminating socio-political issues of the day – gained increasing prominence throughout the 1990s following the introduction of the 'slam,' in 1986, by poet Marc Smith at the Green Mill (Chicago). For whilst prior to this date the idea of performance poetry as a means through

which to create community and alleviate the individual angst exacerbated by an increasingly fragmented society was toyed with through poets such as Allen Ginsberg and John Giorno, such readings rarely went beyond a selected audience and specific venue and were consequently limited in the effects they produced on mainstream society. According to Marc Smith, such was the literary atmosphere at the beginning of the 1980s that poets were 'scoffed at if they performed their poems.... Critics said it cheapened the art of poetry' (2003: 117). Smith's desire to increase the audience for his reading series at the Green Mill, however, led him and the Chicago Poetry Ensemble to instigate the first poetry slam in 1986 – an event described by the author as 'a three-hour train ride of supposedly organized anarchy', which eventually led to the establishment of a rhetoric underlining what was to become a national vehicle for cultural expression. Included in this dogma was the idea that the slam would above all be a show, providing entertainment as opposed to didacticism, a concept which was accentuated by the regulation that each poem was limited to five minutes with the audience encouraged to express their reactions to a piece by 'booing, hissing, groaning and snapping them off stage' if necessary (ibid: 118). Smith affirms that:

the idea of the competition was an afterthought. Our ensemble pieces were running too short and it was an impossible feat to come up with new sketches every week. So one night we tried the competition and bingo! – everyone, even the barflies listened. Competition is a natural drama and is an exciting way of ending an evening's entertainment (ibid).

Smith is also keen to emphasize that with a slam performance:

from the moment you walk in the door to the moment you're back out on the street, it's a show, and you and everything that happens are part of the action. The main character is the audience; the antagonists are the poets (ibid: 119).

In this way, the activity differs from previous poetry readings such as those carried out in cafés and book stores in that the audience becomes as integral a feature of the slam format as the poets themselves, thereby engaging in an active process of dialogue heightening the links between the spectators and the performers. The pedagogical techniques advocated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which teachers and students are not involved in a power dynamic where 'education becomes an act of depositing where the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor' (1996: 53) are consequently reflected in the alternative education system provided through performance poetry. Such a connection accentuates the egalitarianism intrinsic to the creation of a community constructed upon breaking down borders and transcending divisions. As a result, those performing become more than mere entertainers – they develop into embodiments of those around them as the audience exercises its agency in channeling the trajectory of the performance through the verbal gestures as described above. For given the competitive nature of slam poetry, whilst the thematic material should be at the discretion of the individual performer, the objective to score a high result with the judges naturally steers a good number of poets into concentrating on those issues or performance styles which will resonate with the audience, thereby increasing their reputation as accomplished artists. Such a desire is often seen as a compromise to artistic integrity and as will be discussed later, is regularly cited as a criticism of the slam format. What is often overlooked, however, is the ways in which the influence of the audience in maneuvering the poet's performance towards topics and concepts which they can understand (given the prerequisite of an arcane linguistic knowledge for the deciphering of much literary/academic poetry) emphasizes the primary functions of performance poetry in a) creating an alternative network of socio-political information accessible to more than the erudite and b) fostering a democratic community in which representatives (that is, the performers) do not engage in the hegemonic relationships typical of commodified personalities in mainstream culture who remain divorced from the communities whence they originated.

In this way, the emphasis which performance poetry places on audience participation bears strong similarities to Latino theatre in general. For instance, Jon Rossini notes that:

the world is not a pale double of the Platonic intensity of the theatrical. Rather the theatrical is a space in which the Real can be transformed and understood in a dialectical fashion that neither denies personal experience as acting, nor reduces acting to the replication, instead insisting that acting, or collective action, is the very moment in which self-transformation can occur (1996: 26).

Here, Rossini refers to the ways in which the 'dialectics of identity' explored in Latino theatre do not result in an 'analogic space for self-construction but a real space in which a different form of communal consciousness can be formed' (ibid). Similarly, the closeness or 'fusion of intimacies' (Tedlock, 1983: 11) which occurs between spoken-word artists – both physically (given the proximity of bodies since the venues are generally small) and emotionally – results in the performances moving beyond mere spectacle and instead into a viable movement for practical social change. The concept of a visible performance which moves beyond entertainment is particularly significant for many African-American and Latino performers given the historical linkage between non-Western cultures and physicality. In her article 'Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies', for example, Jane Desmond remarks:

that dancing - in a Euro-American context at least – is regarded as a past-time or entertainment, or when elevated to the status of an art form, is often performed mainly by women (ballet) or by 'folk' dancers or non-whites [which] are surely contributing factors to the position of dance scholarship (1997: 35).

In making reference to the marginalization of dance within academia as a whole, given its generalized representation as a non-white practice or else form of amusement, Desmond alludes to the implicit divisions of 'mind/body; thinking/moving' in which the former in both binaries are considered the terrain of Western culture, with the latter resulting in stereotypes of racialized individuals as sportspeople or entertainers (ibid: 48). The

subsequent exigency of dispelling such notions results in the 'politics of visibility' (to use John Hutnyk's term [2000]) extending beyond mainstream acceptance to the physical presence of an ethno-racialized performer. For given the equation of the non-Western with the non-intellectual, the sophisticated critiques of social, political and economic issues prevalent amongst New York's spoken word artists subvert this ideological hierarchy and take the first step towards visibility.¹

The 2007 National Slam saw two of the top five placements being awarded to teams hailing from New York; the Louder Arts collective finished in 3rd place with the slam team from the Nuyorican Poets Café finishing 5th. As the birthplace of hip hop, New York is a natural locale for the proliferation of performance poets given the natural ties between the genre and the spoken word movement. For as noted by Jeff Quickley, 'all hip hop is poetry - hip hop embodies a form of poetry just like sonnets, villanelles, litanies, renga and other forms.' Consequently, it should 'come as no surprise that as more poets grew up in the hip hop generation and have come into the world of slam poetry, we see hip hop's innovative aesthetic interconnect and create new forms.' (2003: 40). Quickley alludes to the 'seismic shift' which took place in 1996 when three of the four members of Team Nuyorican were young black artists who:

brought the full hip hop style into their work using human beat box sounds, simulating and miming DJ techniques and weaving hardware verbiage and rhyme schemes into poems that pondered the irony of wanting to overcome a painful history (ibid).

This is not to say, however, that performance poetry and hip hop are synonymous; Quickley postulates that 'to actually represent hip hop flavor and styles within poetry, you must be able to represent, or rap, straight hip hop.' That is to say, the ability must be shown to coalesce 'straight up hip hop and straight up poetry (free verse, haiku, sonnets etc)' as opposed to 'throwing in some timely ghetto colloquialism and vaguely clever but

¹ Whilst slightly dated, the anthology *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, provides a comprehensive and illuminating overview of the performance poetry emanating from the locale and illustrates the predominance of political and racial issues explored by the poets.

ultimately overtly self-conscious end rhymes' (ibid: 41). The point which Quickley makes is an important one, particularly given the current romanticism surrounding the ghetto and its concomitant verbal lexicon; the cross over between hip hop and performance poetry is related to the signifying format and linguistic dexterity employed by poets/rappers and not to the self-tropicalizations comparable to 'modern day minstrelsy' which can ensue from the employment of random ghetto jargon.

The connection between the two mediums of expression has resulted in a predominance of artists from ethnic minority communities for whom the oral tradition bears particular relevance. In a conversation with Marty McConnell, for example, the Louder Arts member noted that:

if you're a white man, you can say what you want when you want; some poets have more of an academic twist which is very white. There's not so much connection with the oral tradition.²

As a historical means of providing an outlet for cultural expression when other avenues have been closed, however, performance arts and the oral tradition bear strong weight amongst those poets of colour who continue the legacy of African griots and Latino *declamadores* in providing alternatives to mainstream propagation of socio-political events. For this reason, whilst slam poetry does seem to attract a strong youth component, the relationship between the genre and traditional forms of Afro-diasporic communication results in a cross-section of age groups utilizing performance venues to showcase their talents. Amongst the numerous poets whom I spoke to throughout my time in New York, for example, the general consensus seemed to be that practical reasons such as having no offspring or other family members to support accounted for the prevalence of those under 30 partaking in poetry slams, as opposed to any ideological or aesthetic explanation. Having said this, the resentment characteristically generated amongst minority youth due to discrimination, a failing education system and lack of employment opportunities produces a gravitational pull towards a resource of expression

² Personal Interview with Marty McConnell (Interview – M.Mc) 14th June 2005.

which offers an outlet for hostility and pain through the aggressive movements and verbal style traditionally associated with hip hop. Because of this, the principal danger associated with spoken word poetry is its circumscription as a 'youth' movement and subsequent dismissal as an interim cultural practice to be outgrown once the 'reality' of adult life sets in.

Yet the denominator of maturity must be seen beyond the context of age, particularly when referring to cultural forms which are predominantly practiced by ethnic minority youth. For as discussed in Chapter 2, the historic conflation of non-Western societies with the idea of non-civilized behaviour and subsequent need for guidance has resulted in the perception of Latino and African American cultures in general as immature and retrograde. The fixation of Western societies with intellectual prowess and knowledge results in those cultural forms which are not only considered to be premised on Afro-diasporic traditions, but are also fashionable amongst society's youth, confronting a double attack in their attempts to indent the hegemony of mainstream culture since the discrimination encountered by the non-white participants is augmented through the categorization of 'youth culture' as a preliminary epoch to adulthood. The very category of 'youth' implies a linear progression towards maturity, a designation which not only results in the repudiation of such cultural expressions as hip hop as 'deviant' or mere entertainment, but also in the concept that as with the West/Non-West asymmetrical power imbalance, the subordination of 'youth' to 'non-youth' (that is, adults) implies the prerogative of the latter to mould the former into its own vision of society. That is to say, studies of 'youth culture' are distorted from the outset given the axiom of 'youth' as a temporary, physical classification which is therefore considered malleable and open to 'pigeon-holing' from those mature social scientists who are perceived as having outgrown this stage. Consequently, whilst the capacity of 'youth' to act independently as social agents is becoming increasingly recognized in academia (primarily on account of the ease through which their cultural practices such as dance, music and fashion can move across national borders and are therefore crucial in the fostering of a global community), the voyeuristic gaze of those carrying out research into their cultural

expressions results in their findings presenting less an accurate portrayal of youth experience than a 'history of adult preoccupations and panics' (Griffiths, 1993: 23).

The conflation of non-Western culture with the social category of youth thereby substantiates the idea that the nexus of corporate America – which both are largely considered to reside outside – is synonymous with an adult identification and the zenith of individual progression. In this way, the category of youth must be regarded as less of an age-based category and more of an ideological grouping based upon a 'state of mind' or repudiation of those values connected with a capitalist mentality. This concept has been tentatively explored by authors such as Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris who affirm that 'this quality of "youth" has been more noticeable in recent years as subsequent generations of "youth" have reached adulthood yet refused to "grow up", using music, style and various forms of memorabilia as a means of retaining "youthfulness" even as they approach middle age' (2004: 11). Yet such subcultural theorizations, whilst acknowledging that the concept of 'youth' or 'youthful' does not necessarily terminate with the onset of 'middle age' (itself a nebulous category) do not contain sufficient analysis of the concept of youth as external to a WASP identity. The middle-class values and concomitant absorption into a capitalist mindset at the basis of mainstream WASP culture naturally dismiss any alternative ethos as undeveloped or as exercises in childish rebellion, a concept reinforced by the proliferation of mainstream ideals of economic and institutionalized educative achievements as the yardstick of success and maturity. As a ramification of this, the concept of youth cultures is often perceived as tantamount to 'subculture', that is to say, as offering a twist or aberration from mainstream culture but ultimately attached to the same attitudes and objectives. With regards to hip hop, for example, the emphasis placed on self-adornment and economic affluence is often considered to be illustrative of the genre's complicity within, as opposed to outside of, the capitalist project and is therefore to be jettisoned once more appropriate means (that is, mainstream employment) of achieving financial success are adopted. In this way, Michael Brake is correct in pointing out that whilst subordinate groups may offer resistance or alternatives, these are always negotiated within a cultural context which emerges from ruling class ideals (1985: 5). Consequently, subcultures can

be conceptualized as subsets of the larger cultural configurations, sharing similar elements with the main class-based cultural system yet remaining distinct (ibid: 6).

Yet the concept of 'subculture' itself as a collective based on a shared (generally class-based) experience and attitude has become increasingly problematic with the fragmentation of society and subsequent re-evaluation of group boundaries and affiliations. Paul Sweetman, for instance, notes that the idea of subcultures as developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies is increasingly obsolete as 'consumption and related practices have become more individualized and are dedicated increasingly towards constructing an individual sense of identity' (2004: 79). At the same time, however, Sweetman affirms that the concept of neo-tribal sociality as expounded by authors such as Michel Maffesoli and Zygmunt Bauman, in which previous communal bonds were premised upon 'rational, contractual social relationships', is not eroded but replaced by 'an empathetic form of sociality, where what is important is not some abstract, idealized goal, but rather the feeling of togetherness engendered by one's direct involvement with the social group' (ibid: 84). That is to say, the very idea of group involvement and participation has superseded the idea of a particular ideology or common interest, to the extent that 'feelings' or 'non-instrumental, apolitical allegiances' lie at the heart of the 21st-century 'neo-tribes', which are increasingly fostered in the face of an accelerated globalization and its concomitant anxieties.

In this way, the appeal of performance poetry as both an alternative pedagogy and a means to forge a local/national community can be understood as a reaction to the persistence of inequality and anomie generated in a late capitalist society. The breakdown of the nation-state - together with the added fears of ideological warfare in both ethnic and religious domains - has resulted in a heightened need for a re-evaluation of humanity and those commonalities of experience as lived across divisions hitherto employed as a means to foster local solidarities. That is to say, whereas previous subcultures were delineated according to local interests/principles and affiliations, in the 21st century such links have not only been undermined through the global homogenization of culture, but are also being replaced by intra/inter-national forms of cohesion capable of providing a

notion of belonging as well as an alternative ethos to the divisions and marginalization encouraged by white mainstream culture. To a large extent such unity is only made possible through the late 20th-century development of the Internet and its ensuing cyberspatial communities. For just as Benedict Anderson cites print capitalism as instrumental in the formation of the nation-state, so too does the concept of cyberspace create new possibilities for the formation of intra/international communities which dispense with the idea that geographical proximity is necessary to know what members are doing at any one time. The use of websites to advertise venues, promotions and competitions, as well as the introduction of social facilities such as myspace.com, youtube.com and facebook.com in which poets (as well as aficionados) are able to post individual profiles, blogs, videos and new works, is at the core of the formation of linkages which transcend geographic space and cultural diversity. From a personal point of view, I found the Internet an invaluable tool of research whilst conducting my fieldwork in New York, for not only did the individual profile pages as found on myspace.com and so on allow me to familiarize myself with a poet's background and work before conducting an interview, but also enabled me to become part of the city's poetry circuit without the need for gatekeepers who may have channeled me in a certain direction according to their own predilections. In this way, from a researcher's point of view the use of the Internet instills a sense of freedom and independence hitherto unimaginable in a pre-digital age. In addition, the utilization of websites such as migente.com is imperative in ascertaining those issues pertinent to the Latino community at large whether these be specific to an incident or event at the time (such as comments made from a particular spokesperson or celebrity) or long-standing issues such as intra-Latino racism, the African diaspora and Latin American history. Consequently, any researcher embarking on a project will be able to at least have a basic idea of some of the contemporary issues of interest to whichever area of the Latino community they are researching, as opposed to focusing on topics which may not be as significant.

The importance of the Internet is therefore paramount not only in the creation of a international community in which members from across the world are connected in both time and space, but also on a local level - in this way illustrating the fundamental paradox

of globalization that at the same time as local traditions are being subsumed and homogenized by global trends, attachments and affiliations to local venues and cultural hubs are increasingly strengthened. The Nuyorican Poets Café provides a perfect illustration of the way in which a Lower East Side venue has been able to conflate the contradictory forces of globalization through its insertion into an intra-national poetry circuit whilst still remaining true to its community-based objectives of social change and providing a voice for the voiceless. The Café, which had been closed in 1974 due to the overall economic stagnation of the city at the time, was re-opened in 1989 following the death of Miguel Pinero and the realization that slam poetry was fast becoming one of the most popular and lucrative vehicles of cultural expression in the US. According to Ed Morales, for example, the Café founder and owner Miguel Algarín recognized the rapid gentrification of the Lower East Side as 'an opportunity to turn a profit from his dues-paying residence in the area' (2002: 115); to this extent, the entrepreneurial prowess of poet Bob Holman was welcomed on board and the leap between an ethno-centric venue playing host to a Puerto Rican voice and a commercially orientated site tied to the New York poetry circuit was instigated. In this way, the role of the Café in providing a local terrain for the array of marginalized Puerto Rican voices was compromised through its new-found emphasis on inclusivity and multiculturalism; for whilst it is true that the coalescence of slam poetry and a venue constructed on ethno-racial foundations conflated nicely with the commodified cultural pluralism of the 1990s, the price paid was the detraction from a Puerto Rican centrality which has generated ambivalent reactions from diverse sectors of those self ascribed as 'Nuyoricans'.

In the introduction to *Aloud: Voices From the Nuyorican Poets Café*, the objective of the locale is described by Algarín and Holman as the dissolution of 'the social, cultural and political boundaries that generalize the human experience and make it meaningless', a target to be achieved through 'the changing of so-called black/white dialogue that has been the breeding ground for conflict in the US' (1994: 9). The intent on extirpating ignorance through a promotion of commonalities and shared experiences is advocated by the Café as both a paradigm of 21st-century multiculturalism as well as a justification for its increasing detachment from the Nuyorican community at large. In the 2007 Slam

Team, for example, none of the poets were of Puerto Rican descent – a fact laying testimony to the ethno-inclusivity of the Café, yet nonetheless underscoring the unmerited Puerto Rican contribution in the popularization of performance poetry. For if as noted by Patricia Volk, the Café is ‘New York’s arena for the spoken word, the poetic counterpart to the second floor of the Whitney Biennial,’³ the esteem in which spoken word is currently held by mainstream US Society - as attested to by the popularity of Russell Simons’ ‘Def Poetry’ series as well as the numerous corporate sponsorships bestowed upon those spoken word poets considered to be profit-wielding spokespeople for Nike or Coca-Cola – renders the origins of this media-loving enterprise as a Puerto Rican based locale in serious need of excavation. For just as the glamorization of hip hop has resulted in a renewed evaluation of the symbolic capital borne by the African American community - if only in its role as a first point of call for those experiencing sufficient compunction on hearing commercial ghetto spiel to investigate and analyze further – the mainstream acceptance of spoken word and the role which New York as the home of hip hop has played in this demands that as one of the leading venues in the city, the Nuyorican Poets Café be explicitly explored from its origins upwards as a means of authenticating the intellectual history of the Puerto Rican community. As one of the few locales with high-profile mainstream exposure, the representational potency of the Café in subverting or at least indenting the persistent negative light in which Puerto Ricans are portrayed assigns the institution with a particular responsibility which many are loathe to acknowledge is adequately fulfilled. For whilst the success of the Café in demonstrating how ‘a Spanglish-based institution could serve as a staging ground for one of New York’s most viable multicultural happenings’ (Morales, 2002: 114) is exemplary for 21st-century vehicles of (multi)cultural expression, the urgent need to raise the status of Puerto Rican culture in the eyes of mainstream society somewhat tarnishes this achievement if it has been accomplished at the expense of those responsible for its creation. For such is the degree to which the concept of ‘Nuyorican’ has become a commodified term for a style of poetry as embodied by those poets emanating from the Café – that is to say, redolent of hip hop and street connotations – that in 1999 Bob Holman issued the contentious

³ This quote appeared in an article printed in *New York Newsday* and is cited in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café* (1994: 9)

statement that 'anyone could be a Nuyorican'.⁴ Again, whilst this could be seen as an impressive feat for the Nuyorican community given the capability of its moniker to address all sectors of society on account of its own translocality and diversity of racial/linguistic/political membership, the fact that this has not translated into any significant redress for the community at large could also be seen as emblematic of the term's superficiality and employment as little more than a profit-making gimmick.

Moreover, the fact that the affirmation was made by Holman, a non-Puerto Rican, evokes political issues of authenticity and entitlement which are unresolved by the increasingly apparent distinction between Nuyorican as an affiliation to the Café and Nuyorican as an ethno-racial classification. In order to make any headway in resolving this tension, however, it must be remembered that at the time when the label was first appropriated by Algarín and Pinero, the Puerto Rican experience was for the most part unique in New York as regards the bilingual and ethno-racial classification which the early community faced. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, diasporas not only from the rest of Latin America but from all parts of the world were collecting in the city – all of whom had followed a similar (neo-) colonial trajectory as regards their relationship to the US, and therefore adopted a similar stance in their refusal to conform to mainstream standards. As a result, the concept of Nuyorican as an ethno-specific designation intended to denote a particular experience and promote those voices connected to that familiarity would appear somewhat anachronistic in a city in which Puerto Ricans currently make up only 36.5% of the Latino population (Rivera-Batiz, 2004: 111). Consequently, as with mainstream hip hop, perhaps the issue is not so much who is entitled to claim the Nuyorican experience as one with which they identify, but is instead concerned with the degree to which such expansiveness is achieved at the expense of the community who it initially purported to represent. For given that even on the island itself, where Hispanic ancestry is privileged, Puerto Rican culture is expounded as a compound of indigenous, African and European heritages, by nature of its own existence Puerto Rican – and by extension Nuyorican – culture intertwines with a myriad of other ethno-racial groups. As

⁴ According to Ed Morales (2002: 109), Holman's trademark motto 'Everyone can be a Nuyorican' was a paraphrase of 'the Irish-American claim uttered every St. Patrick's Day.'

a result, to circumscribe one element – that is, a kindred connection to Puerto Rico which for many 2nd-, 3rd- and 4th- generation Puerto Ricans remains unknown territory – under a neologism coined to counteract the discrimination caused by traditionalism, cultural hegemony and racism through its celebration of interstitial translocality – would be somewhat oxymoronic. Particularly when that classification is invoked as much to refer to elusive concepts of identity formation and mindset (as expressed through poetry) as to denote a quotidian reality of working-class poverty and suffering, it seems paradoxical to place a geographical entity (that is, the island) at the centre of an aesthetic and esoteric nexus. In this way, it appears as though the ethno-specific connotations implied by the moniker of Nuyorican must adapt to a 21st- century reality if the meaning is to bear any relevance to contemporary intercultural relations.

On the other hand, it could be argued that as a venue, the Nuyorican Poets Café is adopting such an approach by the fact that whilst it is the Friday night slam competition which draws the largest crowds and is responsible for the Café's national reputation, events taking place throughout the week are often connected to Puerto Rican and Latino culture. A typical calendrical week, for example, will consist of Latin jazz nights, hip hop open mics hosted by Nuyorican poet and personality Flaco Navaja, story slams, creative writing classes and theatrical productions – most of which are actuated by Puerto Rican performers or instructors. In addition, the interior of the Café itself is adorned with paintings of Nuyorican poets as well as the bathroom, which is decorated wall to wall with articles, pictures and other archival material surrounding Nuyorican culture. Perhaps most telling, however, is the visible presence of Miguel Algarín, who continues to vigilate the slams as well as the numerous tribute nights to the Reverend Pedro Pietri, who passed away in November 2004. Consequently, whilst the national face of the Nuyorican Poets Café may be premised upon multiculturalism and inter-ethnic relations, the physical space of the locale itself is a visible reminder of the Nuyorican legacy and the contribution which the early poets have made to the US poetic community at large.

Yet perhaps of more concern to those poets interested in contributing to that body of work which challenges the concept of the US canon as the only representation of

American literature is the fact that much of the poetry produced at the Café is not only detrimental to a true Nuyorican voice, but is also lacking in quality, given the emphasis which is placed on performance as the yardstick by which slam poetry is measured. Here, one of the fissions in this apparently paradisiacal community rears its head as the distinction is made between 'real' and 'performance-orientated' poetry, the former being associated with 'what would stand up on a page' and the latter with what will produce the highest score in a slam competition. For clearly, whilst both have valuable functions in the dissemination of information and the (de)construction of an alternative consciousness to that encouraged by the mainstream, the conflict between written and oral traditions is manifest through the disdain with which slam poetry is viewed by some of those active on the scene. Yet the most caustic criticism is not necessarily leveled at those poets who choose to perform rather than write their poetry, given the Afro-diasporic connection with the oral tradition as well as the economic expediency attached to performance, but instead at those who conscientiously play up to those issues which are guaranteed to evoke an emotional or enthusiastic response from the audience – often becoming self-commodities in the process. For despite the connectivity implied between audience and performer when the latter is deliberately focusing on those issues intelligible to his or her spectators, for poets such as Rich Villar, the purposeful employment of street slang and other commercial gimmicks is akin to 'modern-day minstrelsy' and should subsequently be viewed as entertainment rather than educative. The competitive nature inherent in slam poetry can also be viewed as antithetical to the community-building process promoted by the spoken word community. According to Ove, a poet with whom I spoke for example, the 'community is full of back biters and haters. People are jealous of others' success and don't like to see them doing well'.⁵ The interjection of antagonism inherent in comments such as these is illustrative that slam competitions can often go beyond friendly rivalry and instead into scathing diatribes. The poet in question, for example – a particularly attractive and charismatic Dominican performer - laments the fact that his integrity in the genre is often questioned despite the fact that he initially began performing in order to honor the name of his late brother. Yet such has been Ove's success on the spoken word circuit – which currently involves him traveling around the

⁵ Personal interview with Oveous ('Ove') Maximus (Interview -- O.M) 30th January 2005.

US performing poetry and tracks from his latest album – that he is often subject to criticism regarding both the quality of his work as well as disparagement that he has become a ‘sell-out’. This last criticism Ove finds particularly offensive especially since he purposefully tries to uphold the connection between himself and the Latino communities thorough:

inflecting Spanish into my rhymes so people know where I’m from and can identify with me. It is a way of appealing to the masses, like in one of my poems I talk about my mother raising two kids. Whoever cannot identify with a mother’s love is denying their own parent.⁶

In this way, Ove could be considered as employing strategies of self-tropicalization in order to ‘appeal to the masses’ and therefore make indentures in mainstream society. Clearly, as explicated in the preceding chapter, such tactics are often perceived as evidence of the consumption of an artist within the capitalist ethos; however, in view of the fact that those groups and performers who choose to advocate a purely adversarial stance towards the mainstream fail to gain sufficient exposure to instigate any change in ‘common sense’ notions of multiculturalism and ethnic relations, methods of inculcation which teach a new mentality in the language to which mainstream society is accustomed and therefore not threatened by are inevitably going to be more impressionable upon their audience. In this way, analogies can be made with Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry in which subjugated colonial peoples imitate the colonizers in terms of language, dress and lifestyle to the extent that they are considered as prototypical ‘yes-men’ and are therefore afforded a degree of trust and naturalization. Yet these same subjects subsequently become ‘invested with the power to menace the colonizers because they threaten to disclose the ambivalence of the discourse of colonialism which the use of stereotypes anxiously tries to conceal’ (in McLeod, 2000: 54). That is to say, the ensuing resemblance between the colonizers and the subjects - despite the pervasion of negative stereotypes which are necessary for the colonial project to work – affords the latter with

⁶ Interview – O.M.

opportunities to utilize the colonizer's own language to instill an alternative ethos and mentality in those listening. Whilst Bhabha is referring to colonizer/colonized in a traditional sense, the analogy between his hypothesis and those spoken word performers advocating similar strategies of mimicry and self-parody is salient. A performer such as Ove, for example, who is non-threatening to mainstream culture both physically and verbally (since most of his rhymes are concerned with love, family and self-worth) is in a prime position to 'appeal to the masses' in ways which more activist groups such as The Welfare Poets are not. In this way, whilst the content of Ove's work may not contain as much potential for providing a rhetoric for mainstream deconstruction as the documented legacy of those poets more concerned with 'work that stands up on a page', his potential as a clarion for mainstream adherents hitherto unexposed to the realities of racism, discrimination and working-class realities is sufficient for his self-acknowledged desire for widespread exposure to be commended rather than repudiated as 'selling out'.

Similarly, the role which the Nuyorican Poets Café currently occupies on the mainstream spoken word circuit could be perceived as confirmation that it has 'sold out' from its initial community-orientated objectives, as well as distanced itself from Puerto Rican voices. The fact that the Café continues to advertise itself as a 'non-profit organization' aiming to provide 'cultural programming for the whole of our community' yet clearly has commercial interests at its core (as evinced through the \$10 entrance fee for the Friday night slams as well as its proclamation that 'corporate donations are welcomed') generates an ambiguous self-representation in which the line between capitalism and community is blurred.⁷ Instead, what seems to emerge is a nebulous space in which the Café's purpose to 'provide a stage for the artists traditionally under-represented in mainstream media and culture' is in cahoots with the very system which works towards the marginalization of those same artists seeking to annihilate the capitalist offshoots of poverty and discrimination. Rather than being perceived as an interim stage between radical activism and capitalism, however, perhaps this indefinable terrain should be seen as a space for dialogue between the two opposing mindsets which, whilst not being necessarily conciliatory, can nonetheless provide an arena in which those poets

⁷ As quoted on the Café's official website www.nuyorican.org as accessed on 14th December 2007.

addressing social change can temporarily philander with a mainstream audience with a view to subverting their outlook from within. That is to say, since a drastically militant stance is unlikely to appeal to the majority of the US mainstream, given the successful indoctrination of neo-liberalism and racial equality, more subtle tactics are required which require nothing less than a tacit appropriation of 'the tools of the master' in order to produce a gradual implosion of the system at large.

Lest there should be any fear of those sojourning in this nexus of temptation becoming subsumed by the economic benefits promised by the adoption of a capitalist mindset, the evidence that the majority of artists performing at the Café are in no danger of removing themselves from their community-based objectives can be seen through the fact that a great number of them are teachers, social workers or otherwise engaged in community welfare programs and workshops. Before each slam poet begins their piece, for example, they are introduced by the slam master/mistress in terms of their performance history, occupation and interests. Having frequented the Café on a regular basis whilst carrying out my research in New York, it became apparent that there was a predominance of poets connected to community-based work who chose to perform at the slams by way of extending their 9 to 5 day jobs as opposed to seeing the two as distinct. The first time I visited the Café, for example, I was introduced to Anthony Morales, the feature poet for that particular evening who was performing his signature poem 'Where Are My Boricuas?' In this piece, Morales pays homage to the legacy of Nuyorican artists and activists such as Hector Lavoe, Miguel Pinero and the Young Lords – attesting to his self-identification as a Nuyorican in both a poetic and an ethno-racial understanding. According to Morales, his desire to write and perform was instigated after reading Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* and the recognition that his experience as a Puerto Rican in New York was one which should be preserved and disseminated as a means to help others. As a full-time English teacher, Morales is faced with the challenge of instilling not only an education but a sense of self-worth into students, an assignment which he sees as a duty which conflates with performance poetry as:

lots of kids just aren't exposed to poetry, I want to give them the opportunity to see that if I can do it, they can do it. Especially in NY, young people of colour see their options as being basket ball or base ball players, drug dealers or MCs like 50 Cent. But where's the middle ground? How do they achieve their aspirations? Negative images are constantly dangled in front of them; if they don't become rich, they're a failure. They don't go to college so they suck. I try to introduce these kids as a means to express their reality, the struggles and pressures around them. It's a case of using words to organize and make sense of reality. To say something real.⁸

Here, Morales alludes to the fact that as with performance poetry, teaching is a 'being an activist since you are dealing with strife everyday.'⁹ In this way, the approach which poets such as him adopt in creating definite social changes on a grassroots level, whilst at the same time maximizing the opportunities of exposure provided by mainstream venues such as the Nuyorican Poets Café, attest to the integrity of the artists in refusing to 'sell out' on account of their presence in a particular locale. Consequently, rather than jeopardizing the formation of resistant counterculture to mainstream society through the utilization of capitalist spaces, thereby reducing the status of this 'alternative consciousness' to a subculture containing the same objectives and principles as the ethos which it claims to counteract, artists such as Morales transitorily employ such locales as a means to arrest (white) attention and garner interest from sectors of society which would otherwise remain unexposed to the issues about which they write. The Nuyorican Poets Café, for example, is well advertised – even to the extent of appearing in New York City guide books – an attribute not afforded to smaller venues less geared towards entertainment and performance. From a personal point of view, upon arriving in New York City sheer expediency led me to visit the Café amongst the first of the locales which I came to know. From here, I was able to meet contacts such as Ove, Anthony Morales

⁸ Personal Interview with Anthony Morales (Interview - A.M) 12th February 2005.

⁹ Interview – A.M.

and several others who put me in touch with Fish Vargas, Rich Villar and the rest of the Acentos team, who shall be considered in the next chapter. To a degree, these poets stand truer to the Nuyorican legacy of inclusivity, didacticism, identity searching and reflexivity than those poets concerned primarily with performance – thereby placing them closer to Gramsci’s notion of ‘organic intellectuals’ than ‘spoken word artists’. Such recognition, however, should not repudiate the role which venues such as the Café can play in constructing and disseminating an alternative mainstream consciousness.

CHAPTER 7

ACENTOS, ALTERNATIVE SPACES AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF NUYORICAN IDENTITIES

The association between the moniker of Nuyorican and the commercial success of the Nuyorican Poets Café has brought to light an important tension existing within the Puerto Rican community regarding the application of this hitherto ethno-racial designation; that is to say, as with any form of classification, the very act of labeling a culture or practice implies a dogma or criterion which must be adhered to in order for the label to be afforded. With regards to the mainstream visibility of the Café, the association between the title of Nuyorican and a hip hop style of performance poetry has overshadowed not only the origins of the term as they pertain to a particular counteraction of marginality, but also the array of diverse interpretations of the Nuyorican experience as they are lived out within the city.

Such an obfuscation, however, is not a recent occurrence and has in fact been an integral quandary of the Nuyorican 'movement' since the neologism was coined in the mid-1970s. According to poet Jose Angel Figueroa, for example, his reasoning for distancing himself from the Café in recent years is connected to:

its negative connotations. They just want ghetto and 'getting off the boat' style material. We have to give credit to the Taller Boricua and El Museo del Barrio as they were there before the Café. The whole movement started in El Barrio and the Bronx first and then drifted downtown towards the Lower East Side. Like with Eddie Figueroa's Nuyorican Village.¹

¹ Interview – J.A.F.

Here, Jose Angel makes explicit reference to the fact that the Café has traditionally been perceived as the only face of the Nuyorican movement, despite the fact that there are a multitude of other venues and interpretations of the designation which have remained under-researched and subsequently unacknowledged. Numerous poets and authors with whom I spoke, for example, cited Tanya Torres as a critical figure in providing a forum for marginalized artists and writers in El Barrio at a time when there were no alternative spaces available. In an interview with Tanya, the poet and visual artist affirmed that Mixta Gallery was opened in 1999:

when El Barrio isn't chic like it is now. At least 50 to 100 people used to come, many to see their friends. Lots of people felt nostalgic and although it was predominantly Puerto Rican, our doors were open to everybody. There was nothing else in the area at that time which didn't charge commission.... The people who came to Mixta Gallery had no money and couldn't pay for resources – it was a totally free space and all people had to do was ask to exhibit their stuff.²

The Gallery offered a diversity of activities including *bomba* performances, art exhibitions and children's workshops, all of which afforded local Latino artists the opportunity to explore their cultural heritage and express themselves in Spanish. Mixta was also frequented by such Nuyorican luminaries as Tato Laviera, Ernesto Quinones, Pedro Pietri and Sandra Maria Esteves, all of whom took advantage of the creative space offered by the gallery for poetry readings as well as 'just hanging out'. Consequently, the Gallery provided an important locale in El Barrio for galvanizing both creative expression as well as the sense of community needed by any marginalized community, and in this way closely followed the traditions set out by the early Nuyorican poets in the 1970s.

Yet the marketable image of the Nuyorican Poets Café has rendered the efforts of such grassroots forums as the Mixta Gallery invisible, alluding to the ways in which the concept of Nuyorican carries the danger of becoming as hegemonic as top-down strategies of *latinidad*. This

² Personal Interview with Tanya Torres (Interview – T.T) 7th June 2005.

idea will be explored in more detail throughout this chapter; for the moment, however, it is significant to note that the Nuyorican Poets Café is by no means the only – nor the most important – venue to be examined when considering the role model which Nuyorican culture could provide in 21st-century US ethnic relations. Similarly, as noted in the previous chapter, the terrain which the Café provides as a possible exploration ground between activism and capitalism is one which is also discernible in organizations such as AHA (Association of Hispanic Arts) and Puerto Rican Dreams, both of which attempt to foster integration between the corporate sector of the city and the arts through a volte-face in the distribution of wealth. At the Latino Arts Organizations Panel which took place at the Caribbean Cultural Centre on 20th July 2005, for example, speaker Luis Cancel noted that ‘arts and civic leadership could get strong and a link between arts and business is key to survival. We need to create a political and social organization... after all, the money is there’. It is for this reason that AHA was founded in 1975 with a view to providing technical and financial support for Latino artists, most of whom are ‘working class with regular 9 to 5 jobs and fighting day to day issues’.³ In a personal interview with Nicholas Arture, the director of AHA noted that it was his desire to ‘bridge the gap between corporate America and non-profits’ that initially inspired him to become involved with the organization. In this way, Arture alludes to the role of organizations such as AHA in providing an intermediary between poetry, dance and visual art which is often activist in nature and dedicated to reinscribing the Latino experience into US history, and businesses/corporations such as JPMorgan Chase whose ‘philanthropic giving’ is necessary for the survival of those practices.

Yet whilst in a practical sense institutions such as AHA provide a significant service - particularly when it is considered that the lack of funding given to Latino artists may not necessarily be connected to structural racism but instead to the fact that ‘these communities may not know how to plug into it’⁴ - when placed in an ideological context the marrying of the two becomes more problematic. For given the fact that such global conglomerates as JPMorgan Chase could be regarded as complicit in those very forces of globalization and neo-imperialism which have traditionally obfuscated the contributions of Latinos and other internally colonized groups in the US empire in the first place, surely the conjunction of the two seems at best naively

³ Personal Interview with Nicholas Arture (Interview – N.A) 1st July 2005.

⁴ Interview – N.A.

quixotic and at worst, a complete paradox. For just as Paulo Freire affirms that a critical pedagogy cannot stem from dominant educative institutions since 'it would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education' (1996: 36), an acknowledgement from either Multinational Corporations (MNCs) or Latino activists of the legitimacy of the other is tantamount to repudiating the ethos upon which they are based. That is to say, for an artist to proclaim the iniquities of internal colonialism and US capitalism (as founded upon institutionalized racism and ghettoization) whilst at the same time accepting remunerations from funding bodies engaging in such processes could seem a compromise on the integrity of their work. That is to say, the assumed capitulation to corporate America would appear to tacitly acknowledge the ineluctable hegemony of the capitalist approach and therefore the futility in fighting against it.⁵

Subsequently, the reconciliation of this illogicality evokes further issues than those explored in the preceding chapter, for not only is the question of mainstream communication brought to the surface, but also the idea of accepting the disparity between the participants in this dialogue, given the authority implied through the act of giving and accepting. Given the role which Latin American workers, artists and activists have historically played in both the material success as well as the cultural makeup of US society, however, it would perhaps seem less of a soliciting of wealth and more of an accumulated remuneration of resources which is being requested. This is particularly applicable when it is considered (as will be explored later in this chapter) that the contentious issue of fighting against US imperialism whilst remaining US citizens as opposed to returning 'home' is disentangled through the evoking of the neo-colonial trajectory which characterizes most Latin American diasporas in the US. As a result, the idea of reclaiming a share of the economic wealth to which both their labor as well as the resources from their (ancestral) home countries have substantially contributed, from work in the cigar and garment industries to world wars and overseas excursions, is an important corrective to the idea of succumbing to a mainstream mentality thereby admitting 'defeat'.

⁵ Naturally such a hypothesis is contingent upon the recognition of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) such as JPMorgan Chase as the institutions of de-territorialized capitalist imperialism, as elucidated in the Introduction to this thesis.

Similarly, as with the idea that those artists occupying the ambiguous terrain between activism and capitalism need not necessarily become 'sell outs', for community venues concerned with engaging businesses and corporations, the soliciting of funds generated by a system which many purport to stand against can be less self-contradictory than an alternative utilitarian structure for the allocation of resources. In the aforementioned Latino Organizations Panel, for example, Judith Escalona, the founder of on-line resource and forum Puerto Rican Dream,⁶ noted that:

there is an infrastructure connected to the Latino community but this is not tied to the arts. Business people and politicians should see the arts as something meaningful; we pay taxes so that's our money.⁷

Echoing this, at the same event Luis Cancel noted that the issue of wealth was not so much concerned with there being a lack of funds available since:

80% of philanthropic giving comes from individuals to the not-for-profit sector. Most goes to churches and church-related activities. So the pattern is to give but we need to direct this in another way; it's about getting wealth distributed properly.

Cancel cited the example of the Brazilian film *Favela Rising* (2005), which traces the origins of Grupo Afro-Reggae as an example of how art can be 'recorded, sold and the money ploughed back into the community, this is a tremendous lesson for us all regarding economic power.'⁸ In this way, the marrying of the corporate and activist sectors can be seen as an alternative allocation of already existing funds as opposed to the yielding of the latter to a profit-generating mindset.

⁶ See www.prdream.com . Accessed 14th December 2007.

⁷ From 'Defining the Role of Latino Art Organizations in Today's Cultural Scene', paper delivered at the Caribbean Cultural Center (hereafter referred to as Latino Org. Panel) on 29th July 2007.

⁸ Ibid.

Perhaps one of the most striking illustrations of this can be seen in Ernesto Quiñones's 2000 novel *Bodega Dreams*, which is set in Spanish Harlem and tells the story of Willie Bodega, described by the narrating voice of the text as:

a representation of all the ugliness in Spanish Harlem and also all the good it was capable of. Bodega placed a mirror in front of the neighbourhood and in front of himself. He was street nobility incarnated in someone who still believed in dreams (2000: 14).

Throughout the book, the character of Bodega is unearthed as an elusive but ubiquitous presence in El Barrio whose lucrative profession as a drug dealer enabled him to:

take pride in helping someone who had just arrived from Puerto Rico or Nicaragua or Mexico. He'd get them jobs, make them supers or plumbers or *dishwasheros* at his pizzerias or anything. If someone wanted to set up a small business, be it a bodega or a fruit stand, but only had half the money and couldn't get a bank loan, that person would get in touch with someone who knew someone who knew this Willie Bodega... Depending on what he had heard (whether this person was 'good people' being honorable or trustworthy or some cheap-ass who would rip off the neighbourhood), Bodega would offer or deny him support. All Bodega asked in return was loyalty.

Bodega's complicity in the drugs trade can be likened to a collusion with capitalism since both are destructive yet endemic forces within US society. However, Bodega's insistence that the profits generated be percolated through to the least affluent members of the community likens him more to a modern-day Vito Marcantonio personality, advocating an socialist structure of distribution, as opposed to a prototypical drug baron. In interview Quiñones noted that the idea of Willie Bodega was inspired by the *Great Gatsby*, a 'criminal with a heart of gold', although here he alludes to a fundamental tension between the American literary canon and contemporary Nuyoricán writings, the collision of which results in an increased marginalization for

Nuyorican/Latino writers. With regards to mainstream literature within which *The Great Gatsby* is placed, for example, Quiñones notes that his work:

doesn't measure up as it isn't lyrical, it contains curses and so on. The majority of purchasing power in the US is white and we're writing about Latino subjects. Most publishing houses are too snobby to take on writers like us. Our work is often considered non-literary because of the subject matter.⁹

Yet the idea of Nuyorican writing as consciously performing to 'street' or 'ghetto' rhetoric alluded to by Quiñones was regularly cited to me by poets and authors as marginalizing in itself, given its undermining of works exploring other styles and genres which are still produced by Nuyorican writers. Consequently, whilst those works such as *Bodega Dreams* and Abraham Rodriguez' *Spider Town* (which also focuses on the urban decay of El Barrio although it presents a more depressing picture as opposed to the community benevolence which characterizes *Bodega Dreams*) may not occupy canonical status due to their subject 'matter' and the 'fact that lots of the characters tag "and shit" on to the end of every sentence, making it ghetto', the fact that they conform to a street ethic following on from Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* means that they are afforded a degree of visibility as Nuyorican literature when other works may not. According to poet Americo Casiano, for instance:

in the 1950s and 1960s, the term Nuyorican was derogatory and consequently is linked with lots of disparaging connotations. It's important to highlight that to be Nuyorican is not just a negative thing, we are not just about the underclass; that is a very small percentage.¹⁰

Here, Americo refers to the ways in which the perspective of those poets and authors with an experience of urban street life is important and valuable, but this is not the reality for all those who are connected with the legacy. It was for this reason, for example, that sisters Angela

⁹ Personal Interview with Ernesto Quinones (Interview – E.Q) 4th August 2007.

¹⁰ Personal Interview with Americo Casiano (Interview – A.C) 3rd July 2005.

Anselmo and Alma Rubal-Lopez co-wrote their book *On Becoming Nuyoricans*, that is to say, they were anxious to produce a work which showed an alternative yet still authentic Nuyorican experience which focuses more on school and college life as well as issues of race, ethnicity and bilingualism inherent within the street poetry of many Nuyorican poets. Similarly, acclaimed poet Willie Perdomo affirms that whilst for him 'Nuyorican has connotations of urbanism, sampling music, electrics. It's always been about street and language,' there is a need to 'move beyond this and recognize that problems which Puerto Ricans have are not unique to us.'¹¹ Here, Perdomo – who cites Langston Hughes amongst his main influences – alludes to the potential danger of the term Nuyorican in not only becoming associated with a particular venue (Nuyorican Poets Café) or style (street argot), but also in claiming a space and experience which is no longer limited to the Puerto Rican community. Consequently, as the moniker Nuyorican becomes increasingly commodified with the mainstream success of the Nuyorican Poets Café and the ghetto-centric hip hop style characterizing both its spoken word and literary performances, there is a heightened need for a re-evaluation of the term Nuyorican regarding the extent to which it has highlighted one experience of urban street life at the expense of others.

For many of the Latino poets with whom I spoke, the term Nuyorican is still considered to contain specific ethno-racial connotations although a distinction must be made between Nuyorican as a sociological designation and Nuyorican poetry as a cultural movement. According to author and journalist Ed Morales, for example, the term Nuyorican denotes:

someone who has grown up in New York with an understanding of bicultural identity and hybridization; who identifies with being a New Yorker and urban. So I think the term strictly refers to someone of Puerto Rican descent with the cultural and linguistic influence of New York.¹²

Morales' reference to the social and political ideologies of New York is of particular relevance when considering the contentious issue with which many Latinos are faced as regards their choice to reside in the US, whilst clearly adopting an adversarial stance towards its mainstream

¹¹ Personal Interview with Willie Perdomo (Interview – W.P) 21st February 2005.

¹² Personal Interview with Ed Morales (Interview – E.M) 12th April 2005.

ethos. As a cosmopolitan and predominantly left-wing city, New York City can be considered to epitomize processes of cross-cultural awareness which characterize major cities in the international circuit, thereby self-ascribing less to an identity as a US urban jungle and more to a global 'contact zone' (to borrow Mary-Louise Pratt's maxim). In their introductory chapter to *New York: City as Text*, for instance, Christopher Mulvey et al. note that:

New York City has long faced both towards America and towards Europe. This provides it with an ambiguous status, so that New York can represent both a spiritual antithesis to the middle America that would repudiate it and an American epitome to the rest of the world that would embrace or repudiate it (1990: 1).

Consequently, by appealing to their residency in New York as an international locale as opposed to the US as a nation, Nuyoricans are removing themselves from addressing the paradox which would see them as identifying with and yet disdaining their US citizenship whilst at the same time employing this as opposed to moving back to their countries of origin. According to Emmanuel Xavier, for example:

what is unique about New York is the fact that so many different cultures are connected by the subway system. Being Nuyorican is not so much Puerto Rican as New York and having that mindset. If you're from Chicago or the West Coast you can't say you're Nuyorican.¹³

The significance of New York in the outlook of many Nuyorican poets is captured in Bonafide Rojas' poem *When The City Sleeps*:

we run wild until our feet bleed
we bomb your streets
we grow up quickly to survive
we ride trains from the Bronx to Coney Island

¹³ Personal Interview with Emmanuel Xavier (Interview – E.X) 24th June 2005.

*we wax poetic drunk on our own innocence
we lock the rhythm of New York in our bones
we look at ourselves in the Hudson river
we smoke life on the Brooklyn Bridge*

*we feel more comfortable until dusk calls us
we wait for the city to erupt in laughter
we watch her buildings stretch into the sky
we take notes of her beauty and tell the people*

Here, Bonafide uses powerful anthropomorphic imagery to illustrate the central role of New York in his identity as a third-generation Puerto Rican in the city. In his poem *Dreaming Nuyorican*, Bonafide makes explicit the fact that he can combine his love for New York with his Puerto Rican soul, even though he is aware that as a geographic space his affinity with Puerto Rico has long disappeared:

*on New York soil
a soul bleeds South Bronx
rice and beans with
an aesthetic of banderas
y bomba y plenas*

*the rhythms of New York
inject themselves into his body
seated nude by three dancers
who whisper flashing lights
of metropolis manifestos in his ear*

*his love for an island
that has disappeared slowly*

*in shallow water
exiled over a decade
knowing the island will never call him
growing in a puppeteer's strings tangled*

Elsewhere, Bonafide makes clear his dissatisfaction with the American way of life in general and the suffering which its imperialistic forces have brought upon Latinos:

*we who were
fed images of false equal opportunities
and non-green carded citizenship
capitalism and congressman
put us all in the arms of big brother
the stranglehold of IRS taxes*

*we who are
cursed by machismo
love salsa and merengue
battled for self respect and our independence
considered second-class citizens*¹⁴

(‘Invisible Ones’ for Pedro Pietri)

Yet he sees no contradiction in combining a love for New York with his Puerto Rican ancestry and constructing an identity upon this. The United States and New York are consequently seen as distinct entities and spaces; therefore references to the city and its idiosyncrasies should not necessarily be read as indicative of assimilation into Anglo-American culture. As a hotbed for left-wing politics and social movements, New York affords a middle ground for those Puerto

¹⁴ Taken from *A Day in the Life of a Nuyorican Poet*.

Ricans and other diasporic groups who neither identify completely with the national traditions and cultures of either the mainland or their original countries of origin – subsequently relieving them of having to choose between either and conforming to an essentialist national identity.

The centrality of New York in the Nuyorican mindset, however, means that whilst as a social classification Nuyorican by definition can only apply to those with a connection to New York (the Dominican community have also begun a similar process of self-ascription with the neologism ‘Dominican-York’), as an ‘American cultural movement concerned with the poetics of the US, there appears to be a general consensus that the movement should be more inclusive and pan-Latino. According to Puerto Rican/Cuban poet Rich Villar, for example, whilst the school of Nuyorican poetry ‘defines itself in relation to movements such as the Black Arts’ and is therefore to be considered as a branch or alternative to mainstream US poetry,¹⁵ it is also ‘tied to a whole lineage from Latin America. The experience of a Peruvian-American here, for example, will be similar to mine’. In this way, Rich illustrates his affirmation that:

Nuyorican is a negotiation; for the first generation of Nuyoricans it was a state of being, for the second and third it’s a state of mind. Nuyorican consciousness is a negotiation between what you’re fed and what you discover.¹⁶

The proposition of a Nuyorican identity as a mindset as opposed to an ethnic designation naturally invites the possibility of expanding the boundaries of this designation to other ethnic groups who have also suffered similar predicaments concerning bilingualism, racial discrimination and rejection from both mainstream and their homeland societies resulting in a cultural ‘no-man’s land.’ In the February 2005 edition of Hunter College’s *El Centro* journal, for example, librarian Jorge Matos and Professor Juan Flores compiled a selection of writings from poets entitled ‘New Rican Voices’ whom they considered to be emblematic of the contemporary

¹⁵ For example, work by poets Miguel Algarín, Miguel Pinero, Pedro Pietri and Victor Hernandez Cruz appear in *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*. The introduction to the book describes the authors of the contributing poems as those ‘who don’t get caught in American poetry 101, yet hold the literary future in their tattooed hands’ with ‘a new American poetry premised upon uncompromised integrity and the naked power of visionary words’ (1999: xxv).

¹⁶ Personal Interview with Rich Villar (Interview – R.V) 13th April 2005.

Nuyorican poetry scene.¹⁷ Included in this were not only Puerto Rican poets whose experiences were based outside of New York, such as Johanna Bermudez from the Virgin Islands, but also Dominican writers, thus 'showing that the term Nuyorican does not necessarily connote strict origins in terms of place and thematics.' Jorge asserted that the premise of the article was to 'show that the First Nuyorican Generation had influenced other voices throughout the country, all of whom are part of the diaspora', thereby demonstrating how 'identity is fluid and it's very difficult to adhere to a strict definition of Nuyorican nowadays.'¹⁸ When asked to elucidate the criteria upon which the selection was based, Jorge noted that the writers were selected because 'we liked their work, they provided a new angle on the Nuyorican experience or because they played a major role in the Nuyorican community like the Welfare Poets.' In this way, the conflation of geographic roots with the routes of lived experiences as advocated by Paul Gilroy is analogous to the representations of Nuyorican identities put forward by contemporary Puerto Rican academics, particularly as they are extended beyond traditional social and political restrictions.

In this way, whilst clearly the article compiled by Jorge and Professor Flores was something of a milestone for the representation of Nuyorican literature – particularly when conjoined with the Hostos Review Event, which took place in April 2005 and was also orchestrated by Professor Flores - a salient issue emerging from its publication was the extent to which academia can be used as a vehicle through which to explore the concept of Nuyorican identity. A brief overview of the contemporary literature which focuses on Puerto Rican identity in and around New York City illustrates this point; from Juan Flores *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, Raquel Rivera's *New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone* and Ed Morales' *Living in Spanglish*, most attention is focused on one or two select performers who have made names for themselves in the hip hop circuit such as Latin Empire, La Bruja and Mariposa. All three advocate a very ethno-specific stance in their work and therefore are self-ascribed as Nuyoricans in the 'traditional' sense of a Spanglish-speaking Puerto Rican in New York with roots in both Puerto Rico and the US. Yet what of

¹⁷ El Centro or the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunters College is a university-based research institute which defines its mission as twofold: firstly, to 'collect, preserve and provide access to archival and library resources documenting the history and culture of Puerto Ricans' and secondly, to 'produce, facilitate and disseminate interdisciplinary research about the diasporic experiences of Puerto Ricans and to link this research to social action and policy debates.' (<http://www.centropr.org/mission.html>). Accessed 7th December 2007.

¹⁸ Interview – J.Mts

those 'Nuyoricans' who do not fit the conventional Nuyorican mould in terms of thematics or even nationality; given the high level of intermarriage amongst the various 'Latino' groups, for instance, an increasing number of Nuyoricans have ties not only to Puerto Rican ancestry but also to Peruvian, Ecuadorian or Dominican. The issue of self-ascription to a particular Latin American nationality is examined in Emmanuel Xavier's *Coño! Carajo! Puñeta! Caray!:*

*I'm tired of being hispanically indeterminate
A little bit of Ecuador and a little bit of Puerto Rico
Makes me look a little bit Mexican
Therefore, never considered a true Nuyorican
100% of nothing, except Maricón
Displaced and dismissed for being an openly gay writer
In English and Spanish, the word 'homosexual' is spelled the same*¹⁹

Here, Emmanuel Xavier not only refers to the misrepresentation of Nuyorican as an ethno-specific designation given the thousands of Latinos who, like himself are 'a little bit of Ecuador and a little bit of Puerto Rico' but also to the fact that as an 'openly gay writer', the marginalization that he experiences is first and foremost due to his sexuality and not to his ethnic group. Hence, if the category of Nuyorican is to contain any relevance for contemporary society, it must contain an emancipatory potential which goes beyond the transcending of ethno-racial classification towards the deconstruction of other categories which have also resulted in the ostracizing of Puerto Ricans without these pertaining directly to a national discrimination. Such groupings as based upon gender, sexuality and race are naturally not limited to Puerto Ricans or even to Latinos, as a result of which the deconstruction of Nuyorican identities as they exist as an experience, mindset or 'negotiation' could provide a powerful exemplar for subjugated communities in general.

It is for these reasons that a good deal of my research in New York was based around the Acentos Poetry Reading Series, which continues to take place every other Tuesday at the Bruckner Bar in the South Bronx. As a branch-off from the Louder Arts Program, Acentos

¹⁹ Taken from the *Hostos Review* (Issue 2).

advocates a specific Latino voice without confining its membership and open mic section to those of Latin American origin. The series was started in March 2003 by curator Oscar Bermeo, a poet of Ecuadorian origin who became interested in constructing a series for Latino voices around 2001. According to Oscar, around that time:

you could count on one hand the number of players who were Latino and actively featuring in poetry bars; I remember going to African-American and Asian-American nights but there was no Latino reading series. When I went to the Nuyorican I thought I'd be embraced as a young, curious mind yet there were no Latinos there either.²⁰

Following Oscar's disillusionment with the Nuyorican Poets Café, which he found to be 'more concerned with entertainment than with showcasing Latinos', his experience at Bar 13 and the Louder Arts Series encouraged him to put together a reading series specifically to highlight the array of marginalized Latino poets who were concerned more with writing as a craft than as a performance vehicle. In a personal interview, Oscar explained that whilst the main feature poets at Acentos are always Latino, there 'are no rules to the open mic section and anyone can perform their own material.' In this way, the series differs from other ethno-centric reading collectives in which those participating must be of a certain ethnic origin or else be reading the work of a poet who is. For Oscar, however, such series 'do not celebrate diversity and help create more lines than break borders'. At Acentos, the open mic section takes place throughout the first part of the evening, with one of the members passing round a bucket at the interval to collect \$5.00 'donations.' The donations are a necessary part of the evening not only to cover administrative costs for the series, but also to pay the feature poets who are given \$50.00 per appearance. According to Oscar, however, many poets who have featured at Acentos, including Miguel Algarín, can 'often charge much more for an appearance; some can even charge up to \$5000. However, we get lots of support from acclaimed Latino poets such as Magdalena Gomez and Miguel Algarín, who will accept less because of the work that we're doing.'

²⁰ Personal Interview with Oscar Bermeo (Interview – O.B) 7th January 2005.

The esteem with which the Acentos Reading Series is held by other Latino poets was evident from the comments given in the series of interviews which I conducted throughout my time in New York. According to language poet Edwin Torres, for example, whose poetry is influenced as much by the Futurists as by his Puerto Rican heritage, the collective is particularly significant given that the 'scene is so splintered; I don't know if there's a healthy Nuyorican scene and that leads me to ask "how collected are we?"'²¹ Having never approached poetry from an ethnic perspective, Edwin's self-ascribed dubious claim to a placement within the Nuyorican circumscription is evident from his poem entitled *I Wanted to Say Hello to the Salseros but my Hair was a Mess*. Throughout the poem, Edwin presents the reader with the paradox of how he, 'the first to not want to fit in... anywhere!' feels uncomfortable at the thought of not being compatible with:

*Traditional Puerto Rican Men,
from 20 years of age to 60 – very well groomed
with gold watches and wisecracks.
Here was I, feeling out-of-place as my
very non-Puerto Rican glasses kept slipping....
I was having thoughts of fitting in or not.
Even if you have thoughts
Of fitting in or not, you don't.*

Edwin uses the example of his hair, represented as a 'non-barrio dryness, unkempt...almost hippie-like', as a metaphor for his interstitial identity as a whole and the demonstration that he simply does not 'fit in.' He ends the poem with the words:

*I'm here
as a Puerto Rican Man of New York Soul....
representing my people
by being who I am, confused
and alienated by my own soul – which has now*

²¹ Personal Interview with Edwin Torres (Interview – E.T) 3rd February 2005.

become
my
*hair.*²²

Edwin's uncertainty at his own identity as a New York Puerto Rican who does not follow the legacy of prototypical US Puerto Ricans as personified by the *salseros* to whom he refers can also be viewed as analogous to the criteria set forth by the First Generation Nuyorican rhetoric. In an interview with Edwin, he pointed out that whilst poets associated with the Café made great strides in moving beyond the pejorative social conditions with which they were associated:

the older poets have stayed in a certain bubble... they haven't really evolved. You have to respect those who came before you and I see no need for feuds... I think what they do is interesting but I don't want to be part of it. I'm not asking other Boricuas to have me represent something, I don't write that way; I'm more interested in myself as a human than as a Puerto Rican. Yes that's what I am but what I really am is human.²³

It is Edwin's emphasis on humanism and transcending performances of identity and divisions that leads him towards Futurism as a major influence upon his work given its analogy with the concept of Nuyorican through:

a call to action against the past. Now is now and it's timeless. It's not interested in politics. Nuyorican is the same, it's about being now.

The direction in which Edwin takes the idea of Nuyorican identity – that is to say, away from a nucleus of ethno-racialism and towards an emphasis on the 'here and now' leads him to proclaim:

²² Taken from the *Hostos Review* (Issue 2).

²³ Interview – E.T.

thank God for Acentos! It's a vital part of the poetry circuit when the slam scene is like a dysfunctional family. There's too much infighting and the whole family dynamic is gonna fuck us up.

The significance of Acentos in providing a venue away from the commodified aspects of Nuyorican and its emphasis upon street language and chauvinism is echoed by Carlos Andrés Gómez, a successful performance poet, writer and actor who recently performed his one-man show – a deconstruction of Latino masculinity – at The Fringe in Edinburgh (August 2007). Carlos's affirmation that Acentos is 'extremely important as it reflects the diversity of Latino identity' is emblematic of his own relationship to the Nuyorican movement given that he is 'often introduced as a Nuyorican poet because he was the slam champion at the Café,'²⁴ despite the fact that he is of Colombian descent. Carlos nonetheless claims both the Nuyorican legacy and the Puerto Rican experience as of crucial influence in his career as a spoken word poet. In a personal interview, he expressed that the 'long history of Puerto Ricans in New York in terms of surveillance and harassment, segregation and suppression' marks the 'Nuyorican literature of Miguel Algarín and Miguel Pinero which is very much connected to all of this' as pivotal in the New York Latino experience. Carlos lauds the achievement of Acentos in being 'far more representative of voices than the Nuyorican Poets Café and the slam scene in general', which is 'more concerned with aesthetics and if people don't have that, they're not valued or welcomed.' The connection which Carlos makes between his own experience as a Colombian in the US and the Nuyorican legacy is largely based upon the fact that 'Latinos in the US are like the African diaspora, we're not here by choice but through colonization.' Whilst he notes that the idea of a diaspora is somewhat fallacious as concerns Latinos since 'we're so mixed anyway through miscegenation', the colonial trajectory which most Latino communities have followed along with their shared experiences through bilingualism and racial discrimination does allow for an affiliation which might otherwise be refuted as superficial and hegemonic. For instance, in his poem *Columbian-American*, Carlos makes reference to the colonial history of Colombia which has resulted in both the continued perplexity surrounding his own identity and the relationship between himself and those with roots elsewhere in Latin America, on account of a similar heritage:

²⁴ Personal Interview with Carlos Andrés Gómez (Interview – C.A.G) 3rd May 2005.

*And yeah, I might be Colombiano
and the Español may stem from conquistadores
pero I'm not gonna stuff my life
in some neat government box to keep you happy
and stick a hyphen between Columbus and Amerigo
to see if two greedy motherfuckers
can take a break
from washing killings out of textbooks and
raping black and indigenous slaves
long enough
to maybe fuck each other*

*I am not 'Columbian-Amerikan'
I am not hyphenated
I am not multi-ethnic
Or half Hispanic*

*I am
Latino
Living in the United States
my name is three words that can't be abbreviated
yeah I want you to 'remember all three'
yeah, I want you to 'say them like me'
and
yeah
remember both
fucking accent marks.²⁵*

²⁵ Taken from *Shades of Silence* (chap book – Copyright 2004, Carlos Andrés Gómez).

By focusing on the moniker of 'Latino' as his primary source of identity as opposed to 'Columbian American' or 'half-Hispanic', Carlos is both refuting a connection with the idea of US citizenship – a status which he sees as deceptive since it does not mitigate the racial discrimination which he encounters as a Latino in the US and is therefore negligible – and invoking an attachment to other Latin American groups as a means of solidarity based upon their shared experience as colonized/internally colonized peoples. Elsewhere in the poem, for instance, he states that:

*I'm tired of these force-fed, post 9/11 identity
politics on NBC Thursday night T.V.
watching some P.S.A.
of some 'well-spoken'
Latina saying she's
'proud to be a Puerto Rican-American' –
coming from an island that's still
colonized and target practice
for the U.S. of America²⁶*

Here, Carlos's reference to Puerto Rico and his disdain for those from the island who consider themselves to be 'American' despite the continued abuse of their homeland through colonial practices illustrates his empathy with the experience of those who recognize their subordinate status in the US as second-class citizens, and thus demonstrates how the concept of *Latinidad* as a pan-ethnic term can be used as both a grassroots strategy of empowerment as well as a taxonomical device for control. In this way, affiliations forged amongst those in the pan-Latino communities transcend divisions from their ancestral home countries, as well as subvert the homogenizing proclivities of the US ethno-racial lexicon. The moniker of Latino in this sense subsequently serves less as a constricting designation and more as a means of cohesion and solidarity. The role which Nuyorican culture can specifically play in such a tactic is paramount, given that the construction of a typical New York Latino prototype has been largely based upon the Puerto Rican experience. This factor is acknowledged not only by Nuyoricans but also by

²⁶ Ibid.

other Latinos, as illustrated in Oscar Bermeo's poem *Sorta Rican* in which the Ecuadorian poet makes the distinction between Nuyorican as an ethnic classification and the Nuyorican experience which he equates with hardship and street-life. The title of his poem *Sorta Rican* acknowledges the fact that his experience as an Ecuadorian in New York is intimately connected to that of Puerto Ricans who, as the first Latino group to establish themselves in the city, are considered the prototypical model by which all other Latino experiences are compared:

Walking the streets of Nueva Yol to shouts of

'Que va, primo!'

'Cómo sigue la cosa?'

All get the head nod and the quick palm from me,

Luchando, bruhder, siempre luchando....

We are all together in this struggle

with no need to explain how we arrived here.

Juan, the bodega owner that claims to remember

when we were all free asks,

'What part of the island are you from?'

Nah, man, I'm not from the island.

Every second Sunday of June,

I line up along 5th Avenue

and dedicate my devotion

to a lost city of la isla del encanto.

The city they stamped on our green cards

when we first arrived at customs –

because you weren't Nuyorican

when you got off the plane

*but you better believe
you are Nuyorican
once you hit those streets.²⁷*

Here, Oscar refers to the fact that such is the history of the Puerto Rican community in New York City that even in the 21st century where the number of Puerto Rican denizens has dropped to approximately 37% of the total Latino population, the Nuyorican heritage is one which continues to influence both external representations of New York Latinos as well as the experience of the diverse communities themselves. In an interview with Oscar, the poet noted that for him Nuyorican poetry is particularly significant since it is:

the truest voice of the American Dream. It epitomizes the immigrant experience and the reality of disillusionment. It's like your parents bring you over here and everyone at home's thinking that you're gonna be living in a mansion with gold everywhere. And yes there are advantages to living here but there are fences too. You can only go so far.²⁸

Whilst acknowledging the Nuyorican legacy as the paradigm which succeeding Latino diasporas have followed, however, Oscar is also cognizant that contemporary Nuyorican poetry goes beyond the exclusivity of Puerto Rican experiences particularly when it is considered that 'Nuyorican identity is more about heritage and lineage; it's a political statement more than anything else.' In noting that 'Puerto Rico today is just a vacation spot and that's just bullshit; I hear lots of people talking about a free Puerto Rico but I don't hear people talking about Congress and voting', Oscar also draws attention to the paradox which exists in placing a geopolitical entity (Puerto Rico) at the centre of an aesthetic practice when the reality of US-Puerto Rico relations is that:

you're part of the consumer market or you're not. If Puerto Rico were independent, I'd dare the motherfuckers to move back. It's like I'm

²⁷ Taken from *Sorta Rican: Poems and Prose by Oscar Bermeo*, (chap book, copyright 2004 – Oscar Bermeo).

²⁸ Interview – O.B.

Ecuadorian but I ain't going back to Ecuador, I like McDonalds and running water!' (ibid).

As previously discussed, for many New York Latinos the contradiction which exists between their disdain for US society yet their desire to stay there as citizens is resolved by an allegiance to New York as a global city. However, in the case of Puerto Ricans, the issue is problematized by the fact that unlike the rest of Latin America, Puerto Rico's continued colonial status results in an activist stance being advocated without this affecting issues of citizenship.

As members of a US territory, Puerto Ricans are able to claim a right to US residency in ways which become more dubious for those Latin Americans who can simply be told to 'return home' if they are not happy with their lives in the US. Such a privilege often results in their place within the pan-Latino conglomerate being regarded with suspicion and animosity, as the aforesaid prototypical Nuyorican experience is, as illustrated by Oscar, considered to typecast all Latinos when the differences between them can be as vast as the similarities. For these reasons, Dominican poet Eliel Lucero states that:

to me, the term Latino has no substance outside of the US. I mean, how many Africans call each other African? To me it's just another way for the US government to classify and control people. There's a very definite Latino stereotype, as a thug or gangster, and it's hard to move away from this.²⁹

As the oldest Latino enclave in New York City, Puerto Ricans occupy the ambivalent position of being regarded synonymously as the 'gatekeepers' to Latino representation in terms of politics and social achievements (as discussed in previous chapters), yet also provide the sustenance for the pejorative stereotypes of the 'thug or gangster' stereotype to which Eliel refers. Consequently, their interstitial status between the Latino, African-American and mainstream communities is further solidified by the resentment and antipathy with which other Latino groups can harbor towards them. For example, whilst Eliel was anxious to clarify that he in no way

²⁹ Personal Interview with Eliel Lucero (Interview – E.L) 5th November 2004.

discriminates against Puerto Ricans as individuals, as evinced by the many personal friendships which he has with Nuyoricans, he also notes that:

Puerto Ricans don't have the hardships that we have. Like the problems of illegal visas, unemployment, having to get married for papers etc. They try and distance themselves from other Latinos. For example, my ex-girlfriend who was Puerto Rican was always saying about how 'fucking Mexicans should get back to their own country....' Puerto Ricans are privileged because they're American citizens, other Latinos such as Dominicans and Mexicans will succeed because they have a hunger. This makes them stronger as a group because they have to fight more.

The impression which many other Latino groups have of Puerto Ricans as 'trying to pass for white' or as succumbing to a welfare-mentality with the concomitant attributes of indolence and apathy was evident to me throughout the numerous interviews and informal chats which I had with people throughout my time in New York. Victor Araujo, for example, who has lived in the city for 20 years and is of Peruvian descent stated that:

there's two things about Puerto Ricans that I notice; one, they're Latinos in blood and heritage but they try to act Anglo. They deny that they can speak Spanish – I see this happen a lot. It's as though Puerto Ricans want to be better than other Latinos, they also try and be different through other visible means like wearing gold chains. I also find them lazy. I think this is an inherent thing to do with welfare. They know the government will give them money and housing. They know how to work the system here.³⁰

Victor's allusion to the 'visible displays' of affluence and high level of consumerism exhibited by Puerto Ricans has been referred to by scholars such as Frances Negrón-Muntaner as a strategy through which to offset colonial shame, and as such can be viewed less as an affirmation of

³⁰ Personal Interview with Victor Araujo (Interview – V.Aj) 14th October 2004.

superiority amongst other Latinos and more as a means through which to contest their political disenfranchisement. Negron-Muntaner notes, for example, that:

many Puerto Ricans have relied on consumption and self-commodification as two of several means to attenuate shame, negotiate colonial subjugation and acquire self-worth... The economic instability and extreme forms of labour exploitation that have characterized modern Puerto Rican participation in the labour market, as well as the constant comparison between Puerto Rico and the geographically much larger and wealthier metropolis, have made the ability to consume – purchase commodities – a sign of ‘value’ for Puerto Ricans (2004: 26-27).

Similarly, Victor’s idea that Puerto Ricans ‘deny that they can speak Spanish’ can be related to the fact that for many 2nd- and 3rd- generation Puerto Ricans, the Spanish language has simply not played a part in their day to day lifestyle and therefore they are unfamiliar with its usage. Yet the hypothesis that this equates to a denial of their Latino heritage is unfounded, particularly when it is considered that for many English-speaking Puerto Ricans their lack of Spanish can result in as much umbrage as the use of Spanish in a mainstream environment. Marcus Gonzalez, for example, a 36-year-old English-speaking ‘American of Puerto Rican descent’ states that he has been ‘very put off from learning Spanish due to my experience of living here.’ He asserts that due to his Latino appearance in terms of skin colour and facial features, other Latinos:

will speak to me in Spanish and when I answer in English or tell them I don’t speak Spanish, they resent me for it. I’m made to feel like I’m a traitor or something yet they know nothing of me or my upbringing or the reasons why I don’t speak Spanish. I am discouraged from identifying as Latino because I have been rejected so often.³¹

Marcus’s experience of feeling rejected by a pan-Latino collective through a lack of competency in Spanish is echoed by poet and musician Ray Medina, who recognizes that ‘the fact I don’t

³¹ Personal Interview with Marcus Gonzalez (Interview – M.Gz) 5th December 2004.

speaking Spanish or know the history of Puerto Rico means that many people won't recognize me as a Nuyorican.'³² Yet in terms of his self-identification, Ray notes that 'the Nuyorican movement is based in both time and space; you're the embodiment of a social culmination – the connection is with New York.' By recognizing language as a marker of a Latino or Nuyorican identity, however, Ray alludes to the same practices of circumscription and subsequent exclusivity that affect those Puerto Ricans who do not employ Spanish as part of their everyday lifestyle.

Consequently, the idea of a Latino collective as construed from both a top-down perspective (that is to say, as a hegemonic strategy from corporate America to 'divide and control') and as a grassroots strategy of resistance is not only contentious in itself in terms of who belongs and to what degree some groups belong more than others, but also as regards the extent to which the evoking of such a pan-ethnic community obfuscates more concrete solidarities which are not based upon ethnicity, language or nationality. Much has been written as regards the extent to which corporate strategies of 'Latinization' serve to invite a selected few Latinos into mainstream US society, as discussed in Chapter 5. However, less research has been undertaken into the ways working-class usage of the term may be just as marginalizing and superficial. The 'Latino imaginary' as expounded by Juan Flores in *From Bomba to Hip Hop* has proven to be a powerful source of cohesion as regards issues on a national scale, as evinced through the May 2006 national boycott in which hundreds of thousands of Latinos took to the streets from Los Angeles to Chicago in order to protest against sweeping immigration reforms.³³ The protestors were descended from all parts of Latin America, including Puerto Rico, whose population would clearly remain unaffected by the laws given their citizenship status. Such 'strategic essentialising', to borrow the expression applied by Gayatri Spivak to justify the employment of any form of 'nucleus' – however tenuous its substance may prove to be – as a means through which to resist, is emblematic of the ways in which the idea of *Latinidad* is subjective and can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on a given situation. The concept of an imagined Latino community as based upon language, for example, can be both empowering and exclusive as the

³² Focus group with Ray Medina, Matthew Charles Siegel and Eliel Lucero (Interview – R.M/M.C.S/E.L) 8th September 2005.

³³ Statistics were reported as 400,000 protestors in Chicago, 300,000 in LA, 10,000 in NY, 15,000 in Houston and 300,000 in Florida.

profile of Latino culture is raised at the same time as certain of its 'members' as English-speaking Puerto Ricans and Portuguese-speaking Brazilians are marginalized. An emphasis on the working-class status of many Latinos naturally excludes those Latina/os who lead a more affluent lifestyle, whilst a requirement of birthplace eliminates the millions of Latinos who have been born and brought up in the US.

For these reasons, a comment made by poet Maria Nieves appears to be particularly poignant as she states:

No-one will give you a Latino pass and say 'you're qualified'. What would be the criteria for a typical Latino upbringing or heritage? At least one person who's a drug user or an alcoholic? Being raised by a single mother? There are so many things people lend to their validity of being Latino but in reality, they're stereotypes.³⁴

In this way, the emphasis which the Acentos Reading Series places upon the specific showcasing of Latino voices could be initially read as either divisive and excluding, or as 'strategically essentialist.' That is to say, through its emphasis on the deconstruction of Latino identities as a means through which to relate to the experiences of others, particularly those who have suffered through ethnic or racial discrimination, the exclusivity implied by Latino is removed and affiliations are formed across an array of ethnic groups. In relation to her own project of excavating Puerto Rican historical narratives, for example, Judith Escalana insists that:

when we talk about community, we know our suffering is not unique. The more I know of the suffering of my own people, the more I appreciate others. It's not sectarian to say you're a Puerto Rican, it's bridging and leads you to identify with others.³⁵

³⁴ Focus Group with Maria Nieves and Jessica Torres (Interview – M.N/J.T) 6th July 2005.

³⁵ Latino Org. Panel.

Here, Judith's reference to the exploration of a cultural identity which by necessity includes the deconstruction of those performative aspects which could be restricting or detrimental to its evolution and promotion of social change is applicable to the ethos promoted by Acentos. According to one of the four founders of the group, Fish Vargas, for example, whilst Latino voices are privileged since 'at the time when the series was started there wasn't much of a Latino representation on the mainstream poetry scene; there was nowhere where Latino poets could go and be embraced', the feeling amongst the poets at Acentos is that 'it is very much for the whole community, particularly the South Bronx. You can be black, white or blue and still go along and enjoy everything.'³⁶ Fish also emphasizes how the location of the Series in the Bronx is significant since 'most Nuyorican poetry is concentrated around El Barrio or the Lower East Side. When we started the series no-one was really talking about poets in the Bronx.' In this way, Acentos demonstrates the 'local' flipside to the globalization processes which enable the series to become part of the larger national poetic community; Fish's ideal vision for the Series, for instance is 'to be the premier academic and performance venue in the US. I want us to be embraced by the academic community and as a performance venue.'

The processes of deconstruction which take place through both the poetry and the community-building strategies at Acentos invite the analogy with Paul Gilroy's 'politics of transfiguration'. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy uses this concept to describe:

the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance and between that group and its erstwhile oppressors... It points specifically to the formation of a community of needs and solidarity which is made palpable in the social relations of its cultural utility and reproduction (1993: 37).

The inference of a 'utopia,' itself made possible through the revelation of 'the hidden fissures of modernity' is epitomized through those cultural practices which seek to 'transcend modernity, constructing both an imaginary anti-modern past and a postmodern yet-to-come'(ibid). From the

³⁶ Personal Interview with Fish Vargas (Interview – F.V) 10th July 2005.

time which I spent frequenting the poetry gatherings at Acentos, it is my view that the poets performing there actively engage in such a practice through the deconstruction of such degenerative forces as cultural, political and economic imperialism, ethnic discrimination, chauvinism and sexual harassment – as well as through the vigorous encouragement of self-reflexivity and introspection necessary to recognize the impact of these forces upon oneself and, by extension, upon others. By focusing primarily but not exclusively upon the Latino experience - the term Latino being liberally employed to the extent that Regie Cabico of Filipino descent performed as the feature poet at one of the events – the poets attending Acentos are able to examine their individual and collective subjectivities as internally colonized people, as women, as homosexuals and as people of colour, with a view to transcending these categories and providing an alternative ethos to that encouraged by mainstream society, which perpetuates such divisions. Through dissecting the various components of their translocality, including those which are subconsciously adopted yet are complicit in the upholding of intra-group discrimination (such as Latino chauvinism), the Acentos poets are creating a paradigm for an alternative consciousness, a ‘radical postmodernism’ and a new ‘AmeRican’ (to use Tato Laviera’s neologism) freed from the constraints of taxonomical boundaries and superficial divisions. The process of self-odyssey which is undertaken by poets such as Oscar Bermeo, Rich Villar and Jessica Torres is elucidated in Fish Vargas’ poem *I am.....*:

*Misguided spirits guide my steps in hallowed shoes, several
sizes too big*

A writer who is his harshest critic

A writer questioning his worth

A writer lost.

A simmering madness in life

Optimism tugging on the chains of Pessimism

Pessimism gaining strength through the brethren of 7 deadly sins in my borough

crack

dope

heroin

guns

alcohol
poverty
violence

Anger for wasting years of my life
Misery for the depression revolving through the cavernous
query known as my mind.
*Hurt and sadness stepping a jovial jog to tell me who I am*³⁷

Throughout the poem, Fish refers to his personal experiences of growing up in the South Bronx which resulted in his own incarceration and subsequent discovery of poetry as a meditative vehicle. In a personal interview with Fish, the Acentos co-organizer states that:

whilst I was in jail I found poetry, it helped me through it. When I do workshops I bring a poem to class and tell them how poetry changed my life; I talk to 5th graders, juniors, inmates and senior citizens. Lots of my work is confessional, it's about life's lessons and raw reality – it's truth based. I want people to realize it's not easy growing up in the South Bronx.³⁸

Through scrutinizing the impact which external circumstances (i.e. an urban neighbourhood) have played on his own actions and experiences, Fish is able to distinguish between himself as a human being and himself as a product of his environment, thereby emancipating his identity from the negativity of the South Bronx and teaching others how to engage in the same processes. In this way, Fish affirms that 'poetry is both a means of conveying a message and of receiving an alternative education. Lots of poems deal with everyday life so it becomes an educational experience' (ibid).

The processes of deconstruction undertaken in the poetry emanating from Acentos are also concerned in not only dissecting the constraints imposed by the mainstream taxonomy, but in

³⁷ In *Poems and Prose by Fish Vargas* (chap book – copyright 2004, Fish Vargas).

³⁸ Interview F.V.

highlighting and promoting those connections which have been obfuscated through such 'divide and conquer' systems of control. In endorsing particular Euro-centric aspects of Latino culture, both mainstream US society, as well as those Latino advertising firms aforementioned in Chapter 6, conceal the role of the African diaspora in Latino culture, in this way fostering a separation between the African American and Latino communities when in reality their quotidian experiences have been historically intertwined. The centrality of the African diaspora and its ability to incite a recognition of internal colonialism as based upon the 'colour line' and institutionalized racism is a crucial redress for those divisions which continue to permeate the array of ethnic groups in US society. For this reason, many poets choose to follow the exemplar of Willie Perdomo's signature poem *Nigga Reecan Blues*:

Hey, Willie. What are you, man? Boricua? Moreno? Qué?

I am.

No, silly. You know what I mean: What are you?

I am you. You are me. We are the same. Can't you feel our veins drinking the same blood?

- But who said you was a Porta Reecan?

- Tu no eres Puerto Riqueño, brother.

- Maybe Indian like Gandhi Indian.

- I thought you was a Black man.

- Is one of your parents white?

- You sure you ain't a mixture of something like

- Portuguese and Chinese?

- Naaaaah.... You ain't no Porta Reecan.

- I keep telling you: The boy is a Black man with an accent.

By drawing attention to the somatic affirmation of the African within Puerto Rico, Willie bears witness to the identical experiences of both communities in terms of ethnic discrimination and therefore the futility of making superficial distinctions between them. The poem ends in a somewhat pungent tone as the author implies his dejection at taking on 'the black man's plight' despite the fact 'I ain't even black' – in this way echoing the sentiments expressed by Piri

Thomas in *Down These Mean Streets* as he searches to find his own identity, which is neither Black nor White:

Damn! I ain't even Black and here I am sufferin' from the young Black man's plight/the old white man's burden/and I ain't even Black, man/a Black man/I am not/Boricua I am/ain't never really was/Black/like me...

- *Leave that boy alone. He got the Nigger-Reecan Blues*

I'm a Spic!

I'm a Nigger!

Spic! Spic! No different than a Nigger!

Neglected, rejected, oppressed and depressed

From banana boats to tenements

Street gangs to regiments...

Spic! Spic! I ain't noooo different than a Nigger.³⁹

Thus whilst the caustic tone adopted by Willie illustrates his dejection at the identity crisis engendered by being both Black and a Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican, the image he depicts of the pointlessness of distinguishing between the two 'communities' leaves the reader with the possibility of their unification as a means through which to contest their subordination.⁴⁰ At the numerous poetry readings and events organized through Acentos, for example, the attendees included African Americans, Asian Americans and also disenfranchised whites – all of whom were able to identify with the community-building strategies and deconstruction processes taking place at the venue. When asked how they defined themselves in terms of both their poetry and as a social designation, almost every poet with whom I spoke gave an answer similar to that provided by Eliel Lucero:

³⁹ Taken from *Where A Nickel Costs A Dime*.

⁴⁰ Other Nuyorican poets who address the African role within Puerto Rican culture include Tato Laviera, Martin Espada and Louis Reyes Rivera.

I write about everything and anything. My thoughts and perceptions. I don't have a burning desire to spread the Latino voice or anything, I want to spread all voices. That's what Acentos is about, providing a voice for the voiceless.⁴¹

In this way, the poets at Acentos could be described as the new generation of Nuyoricans if the term is to be understood as it was initially used in the 1960s/1970s. The next chapter will analyze the complications of this representation – particularly in view of the commodification of the term which has afforded such poets as Migual Algarín and Miguel Pinero a lionized status – however, if the original objectives of the designation 'Nuyorican' were a) the construction of a community based upon the emancipation of national constraints as illustrated in Chapter 4, b) the encouragement of bilingualism as a means through which to liberate one's expression from two colonizing languages, c) the employment of strategic essentializing to highlight (but not remain limited to) a particular experience, d) the repudiation of derogatory stereotypes and e) the validation of an interstitial 'no-man's land' in which classifications based upon an ethno-racial designation are considered to be futile and misleading, particularly as they efface other more meaningful affiliations, then Fish Vargas is correct to affirm that 'we're building on top of the foundation that the first generation poets laid down.' He also states, however, that whilst the connection between the Acentos poets and the first-generation Nuyoricans is manifest through Miguel Algarín's declaration that 'we're starting a second revolution like what they did 30 years ago,' today's movement is 'embracing a bigger community than the original Nuyorican poets. We embrace anyone who comes to Acentos – we're all just poets. There's no label which defines anyone or prevents their involvement.'⁴²

Nonetheless, the weight which Acentos gives to showcasing the New York Latino experience as a subjugated community illustrates the cognizance on the part of its members of the forces of internal colonialism which renders their (trans)locality within society as marginal. In this way, whilst the community-building strategies which they employ may seek to encourage solidarities with other internally colonized groups, such as African Americans, gay and lesbian writers and

⁴¹ Interview – E.L.

⁴² Interview – F.V.

all other groups writing from a marginalized perspective, if the 'alternative vision' or utopia promoted by the collective is to bear any significance within US society, the visualization must be open to those people who may not technically fall within a suppressed minority. That is to say, there must be room for whites of whichever class, nationality and sexuality they may hail from to participate in this ethos if it is not to prove as ostracizing as the paradigm promoted by the mainstream. In this way, the utopia must differ from that initially promoted by the first-generation Nuyoricans (who wrote from a predominantly working-class perspective and were specifically concerned with accentuating the Puerto Rican voice) and instead, remain closer to Paulo Freire's postulation that in 'regaining their own humanity, the oppressed must not become oppressors of the oppressors. They must be the restorers of the humanity of both' (1996: 26). In this way, Matthew Charles Siegel, a self-ascribed Caucasian of Irish and German descent, states that whilst he claims the Nuyorican tradition as one of his influences, the fact is that:

the issue of race is inextricably bound up in the definition of Nuyorican; as a result it's like I'm very much connected to the movement but I'm white and therefore disconnected.⁴³

Yet whilst Matthew's reluctance to assert a prerogative of participation in the Nuyorican tradition illustrates his stance that 'the Nuyorican tradition has always been a tenacious balance of class, race or ethnicity', the thematic material of his own poetry shares a similar outlook in terms of US neo-imperial strategies and subsequent processes of marginalization. In *American Dream*, he writes:

*I am the American Dream
The morning it fell out of bed
And broke its worn hip on the sharp contradiction
Of gated minds and communities coexisting with ghettos*

*In the land of movies, where the curtain call of downtown
Sounds something like: lights, camera, incarceration*

⁴³ Interview R.M/M.C.S/E.L.

*Because police raid kills them dead and the innocent casualties
Of undeclared civil wars are considered cockroaches.*⁴⁴

Here, Matthew expresses a very similar style and outlook to many contemporary Latino poets and as such, demonstrates a connection with them which would be overlooked in any analysis of Nuyorican poetry privileging ethnic origins or national affiliation. Yet his regular participation in Acentos and high level of awareness regarding the Nuyorican tradition enables him to share in the deconstruction processes which are generally associated with subjugated ethnic or racial minorities. Consequently, it is necessary to briefly analyze the ways in which despite the persistent and pervasive 'colour line', as postulated by W.E.B. Du Bois, the idea of neo-colonialism can be expanded to go beyond the issue of race and instead towards those (psychological) strategies employed by mainstream society in order to ensure the perpetuation of a post-Fordist consumer society. For as noted by Ernesto Quiñones in a conversation regarding the gentrification of New York City, the:

whole thing with NYC is that it's no longer about class or race, it's about money. Look at factory owners – they won't close the door on anyone if they know they're gonna make money. Greed has overtaken race.⁴⁵

Ernesto's comment leads to the insinuation that whereas previously, the physical condition of whiteness was sufficient to be a 'wage' which automatically led to a privileged status both politically and economically, in contemporary society the emphasis currently placed on profits and consumerism renders divisions based on race, class or ethnic origin as negligible when faced with the notion of a capitalist ethos. For given that in order for the capitalist venture to succeed, society at large must voluntarily buy into a system which is both culturally and economically stifling, Gramsci's concept of coercion and consent must function in such a way so that each individual is made to feel like they are exercising their own 'free will' when they are buying into the products and services providing the sustenance for capitalism.

⁴⁴ Taken from *Scars Like Rosaries* (chap book – copyright 2005, Matthew Charles Siegel).

⁴⁵ Interview – E.Q.

In this way, Theodor Adorno's analysis of the culture industry which 'prevails as a canon of synthetically produced modes of behaviour in which anyone who fails to propagate the established guidelines is forced to remain outside the pale' is a valuable template for the ways in which 'free will' within society is channeled towards the profit-making margins. Adorno's recognition that:

today anyone who is incapable of talking in the prescribed fashion, that is of effortlessly reproducing the formulas, conventions and judgments of mass culture as if they were his own, is threatened in his very existence, suspected of being an idiot or an intellectual (1991: 92)

is illustrative of how hegemonic forces percolate through vehicles of mass culture such as magazines, bill boards, television and so on in order that 'people give their approval as they know or suspect that this is where they are taught the mores they will surely need as their papers in a monopolized life'. He verifies this by noting that 'this passport is only valid if paid for in blood, with the surrender of life as a whole and the impassioned obedience to a hated compulsion', leading to 'the renunciation of resistance as the masses draw the correct conclusion from their complete social powerlessness over and against the monopoly which represents their misery today' (ibid). Notwithstanding the various degrees of 'misery' which can impact on different social groups in different ways, Adorno's detection that the function of the mass culture industry ultimately is to coerce individuals into renouncing their free will whilst at the same time living under the illusion of a pseudo-individual consciousness provokes an analogy with the state of 'double consciousness' elucidated by such post-colonial writers as Frantz Fanon.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, for example, Fanon paints a powerful depiction of the bewilderment and anxiety incited by the division imposed by a white society in which

every colonized people finds itself face to face with an inferiority complex.... Society derives stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation (1986: 100).

Here, Fanon's work as a psycho-analyst exploring the inferiority complex brought about by racial subjugation leads him to assert that his need to 'help the patient become conscious of his unconscious and abandon his attempts at (the) hallucinatory whitening' should be headed towards 'taking cognizance of a possibility of existence'. Fanon describes his own experience in feeling an existence outside of his own colonized body as he asserts:

I was expected to behave like a black man – or at least a nigger. I shouted a greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back to where I belonged (ibid).

In short, Fanon makes the distinction between himself as a human being and himself as a black body which brings him rejection from white society; his existence in white eyes is contingent upon the approval bestowed upon him despite his pigmentation:

when people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my colour. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my colour. Either way I am locked in my infernal circle (ibid: 116).

Here, the analogy which can be made between Adorno and Fanon is rooted in the anomie and ostracization which both allude to on account of an existence 'outside' of mainstream society. Adorno infers that by the fact 'mass culture only recognizes refined people', anyone refusing to buy into the culture advocated by mainstream society is subsequently left on the margins and made to feel 'like an idiot or an intellectual'. In this way, the development of a consumer culture in which 'people increasingly see themselves in relation to what they consume as opposed to their relation to production' (Hollows, 2000: 114) has led not only to the growth of new forms of psychological oppression, in order that people feel compelled into buying goods and services that they do not actually need, but also to the gradual perceived erosion of a class-based society and its replacement with one based upon other forms of symbolic capital, that is to say, the commodities which people own, the way they look, the amount that they consume etc. In addition, such a false consciousness has led to 'greed overtaking race' (as noted by Ernesto

Quiñones), whereas in the past race has historically interjected class relations given the pervasiveness of W.E.B Du Bois's 'colour line.' As a result, the feelings of subjugation and inferiority as expounded by Fanon are no longer limited to those of non-Caucasian descent, but instead can be applied to all those individuals who are made to feel an existence outside of 'white' society due to their inability or refusal to 'buy' into the norms and standards advanced by mainstream culture. Consequently, not only are many white US denizens seeking to establish new forms of community, such as those explored in the previous chapter, but are also becoming not only appreciative of but empathetic with the identity struggles and crises which have historically been scrutinized by ethnic minority collectives or those belonging to traditionally marginalized groups such as homosexuals.

In this way, the paradigm offered by the Acentos Poetry Series as an utopic vision or 'alternative consciousness' to the mainstream ethos can be considered as inclusive for all members of society. The emphasis placed on showcasing predominantly Latino voices, whilst considered by some to be divisive, cannot only be read as strategic essentializing but also as providing an exemplar for the possibilities of inter-ethnic and cross-cultural understanding in 21st-century US society since, as noted by Ed Morales:

Latin America has 500 years of intense multiracial mixing. I see us as senior advisors in the US multicultural experiment. Our racial mixing can unify us.⁴⁶

In embracing the idea of 'solidarity through difference', Morales alludes to the ways in which Latinos – with a cultural history spanning all racial groups and classes – can offer a model through which cohesion can be fostered without a specific ethnic criterion having to be met. As previously discussed, however, the idea of a 'Latino' community – and a Nuyorican collective if the term is to be understood as representative of New York's Latino community – is not without its own internal fissions and accusations of hegemonic superiority, not least through the idea of 'passing on the baton' which has left some poets on the margins whilst others have been lauded as the 'next generation of Nuyoricans'. The following chapter will discuss some of the divisions

⁴⁶ In *Embracing Our Diversity* panel (Caribbean Cultural Center) - 15th July 2005.

within the community as based on gender, generation and geographics and the ways in which solutions to these are being explored. In particular, the role which a feminist approach to Nuyorican poetry can play in reconciling a post-colonial standpoint with the traditionally subordinate role of the Puerto Rican woman (particularly in the face of the hyper-masculinity of a Nuyorican ethos) is paramount when considering the future trajectory of Nuyorican culture.

CHAPTER 8

GENDER, GENERATIONS AND GEOGRAPHICS

The previous two chapters have focused on the ways in which Nuyorican poetry has become dichotomized into both a mainstream artistic commodity and a nucleus or vehicle of cultural solidarity. With regards to the latter, the building of a community amongst (predominantly) Latino groups who can relate to the experience of New York Puerto Ricans, as it has been informed by a conflation of racism, low economic/symbolic capital and poor educational attainment, is made possible through the deconstruction of superficial mainstream categories which have served to obscure more concrete connections amongst internally colonized groups. I argued that the idea of colonization can be employed not only in an explicitly socio-political sense but also to categorize those psychological mechanisms utilized by corporate America to entrap ostensibly 'free-thinking individuals' into a capitalist mentality. In this way, the alternative ethos envisaged by the members of Acentos (at least some of whom are self-ascribed as the New Nuyorican Generation) is both understood and adopted by an array of individuals, all of whom recognize the significance yet ultimately the fallaciousness of the mainstream ethnic nomenclature in defining a person's identity.

Yet whilst such a utopian vision is to be lauded and appreciated as both an alternative outlook to contemporary US ethnic relations as well as a positive expansion of the Nuyorican poetry of the 1970s, the concept of authenticity and representation remains inherently problematic within a body of work premised upon (New York) Puerto Rican ideas of masculinity, class and national affiliation. For instance, whilst the concept of Nuyorican has been expanded to the extent that it can be viewed as an all-embracing moniker capable of absorbing an assortment of New York's ethno-racial factions, the

innate binary of *machismo* and *marianismo* pervasive within Latin America has resulted in specific constructions of masculinity and femininity in the stylistics and narratives of Nuyorican poetry which have traditionally been lived out to the detriment of the latter. That is to say, as a predominantly street-based, drug-fuelled and politically charged cultural weapon, the poems and community ethos expounded by poets such as Miguel Piñero and Pedro Pietri naturally lay outside of the domestic realm within which women were purportedly confined by the restrictions of *marianismo*. In her article 'Degrees of Puertoricanness: A Gendered Look at Esmerelda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*', for instance, Elizabeth Garcia describes the phenomenon of *marianismo* as an explanation for 'the virgin/whore dichotomy which stipulates women's roles in relation to men's roles and desires as dictated by machista ideologies' (2004: 385). In her endeavor to demonstrate how the ambivalence which Negi, the protagonist of the novel, feels towards both her abused mother and the free-spirited *putas* Rita and her Auntie Generosa is illustrative of the contradictions and failings within the *marianismo* ideology, Garcia affirms that 'marianas are to be submissive wives who take care of their home, husband and children. They must accept their husband's extra-marital affairs as a natural aspect of married life. Women are then divided between those who are wives and those who are lovers (i.e. the virgin versus the whore). To suffer and be a martyr is also a characteristic of a 'good woman'.

Substantiating the idea of womanhood as confined to the private domain and family affairs were the interviews which I carried out with Sandra Esteves and Maria Aponte, both of whom were active poets in the Nuyorican circle in the mid to late 1970s. For instance, whilst Maria admits that her membership at the Café was a positive element in her artistic career in that 'it allowed me to write in two languages; nowhere else allowed me to do this yet the Café demonstrated that there was nothing wrong with it - it was like being with family', she also stresses that the difference between herself and the male poets was made obvious through the fact that she 'was never encouraged to take part in bigger events. The male poets told me I was good and I should keep writing - it was never a case of "you're the woman" but I was excluded in other ways.'¹ In this way,

¹ Personal Interview with Maria Aponte (Interview - M.Ap) - 3rd April 2005.

whilst the promotion of a Nuyorican aesthetic as a means to counteract both island and US prejudices insisted upon a repudiation of the outright misogyny which can be found in the salsa lyrics of the same period, the patriarchy inherent within both Puerto Rican and mainstream US culture rendered the opportunities for female poets as lesser than for their male compatriots. Similarly, whilst Sandra Esteves has received substantial approbation for her work and is widely revered as one of the few audible female Nuyorican voices of the 1970s, her acknowledgement that 'I was constantly surrounded by male writers... I was learning the tools of the craft and I emulated them because they were empowered. I was determined not to fit the role which society wanted, I was going to follow my own drama' demonstrates how at least initially, her success as a poet was contingent on her adopting a masculine style of writing which inadvertently substantiated the fact that 'there was no place for Latina women of colour to be artists and painters. Women are always assigned a submissive role.'²

Yet whilst it is important to acknowledge that the concepts of *machismo* and *marianismo* has traditionally shaped gender relations amongst Puerto Rican communities both on the island and the mainland, to disavow the extent to which the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the US has distorted the power imbalance implicit in this ideology would be to fall into the 'third-world woman trap' as admonished by Chandra Mohanty. In *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonialist Discourses*, Mohanty is anxious to make explicit the difference between the categories of 'Woman' and 'women' in so much as the former refers to a discursive category constructed through Western academia which rarely translates with more than a slight degree of accuracy to the latter. Feminist theories which cite Woman as an ideological category 'produced by hegemonic discourses' infer that 'what binds women together is a sociological notion of the sameness of their oppression' and 'the assumption that women are an always-already harassed group, one which is labeled "powerless," "exploited", "sexually harassed" by

² Personal Interview with Sandra Maria Esteves (Interview – S.M.E) – 12th August 2005. Sandra later discussed how this was a transient stage in her poetic career; not long afterwards she went through a transitional phase and asked 'what are my own themes?' In addition, the submissive role referred to by Sandra is not to disavow the long tradition of female activism within New York's community, as evinced through such such figures as Luisa Capetillo (a labour organizer and writer) and Dr. Antonia Pantoja (the founder of ASPIRA, the Puerto Rican Forum, Boricua College and *Producir*).

feminist discourse.' Consequently, Mohanty affirms that 'the focus is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a group of women as "powerless" in a particular context' (1993: 200). The points which Mohanty raises are imperative in seeking to construct a feminism which not only recognizes the ubiquitous incongruity between the defense of a native culture and the various forms of oppression which that culture often inflicts on different sectors of its populace (more about which will be said later), but which also acknowledges the complicity of Western feminist theory in condemning the women of the nations whom they purport to defend to the realms of literary silence by 'speaking for them' and homogenizing their experiences. For this reason, Gayatri Spivak's critical essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak' has become a key text in postcolonial discourse given her discussion of the implicit paradox of an intellectual 'affording' a degree of agency to the subaltern by speaking for him/her; in this way involuntarily (at best) corroborating the idea that the only valid means of making unheard voices audible is through the vehicle of Western academia, thereby contributing to their subjugation and minor status. Spivak's argument is particularly pertinent as regards the position of female voices given their marginalization on account of both their political status (as colonial citizens) and their gender, with her postulation that even the post-structuralist approach advocated by Foucault and Deleuze fails to reconcile the tension within 'the politics of the oppressed which can hide a privileging of the intellectual and of the "concrete" subject of oppression that compounds the appeal' (1993: 87).

The case of Puerto Rican Suffragettes in the 1920s and 1930s, in which the assistance of white US intellectuals was solicited in order to help them gain the vote, illustrates not only how feminism has traditionally been constructed from a Western standpoint which is often completely irrelevant to the societies which it benevolently however impractically seeks to assist, but also how the ideological category of 'Woman' differs not only from nation to nation but also from within a nation itself. For whilst the Suffragettes were predominantly composed of middle-class professionals and were primarily concerned with obtaining the vote, members of the working-class women's movement in Puerto Rico were far more preoccupied with practical issues such as higher wages and better child care. In her article "'So We Decided to Come and Ask You Ourselves": The 1928

US Congressional Hearings on Women's Suffrage in Puerto Rico', Gladys M. Jimenez-Munoz illustrates the class differences amongst Puerto Rican women, which saw suffrage advocates such as Dr Marta Robert de Romeu consider themselves to be 'representative of womanhood itself on the island' without specifying the class-based situation of those women who could 'spend long hours working outside the home and yet have children and homes which were well taken care of' (1997: 148). In this way, the 'question remains: who exactly carried out the concrete labor left behind? Where were the people that performed the corresponding motherly tasks of taking care of the children and homes of the children who could "go every day and spend long hours working outside?"' In other words, the social division of labor as based on the class position of the 'women' whom the Suffragette leaders purported to represent rendered the feminist argument as it was framed around materialist and political concerns as inherently contradictory. In speaking for Puerto Rican 'women', white feminist leaders were in fact speaking only from their own positions and material affluence, and therefore could in no way claim representational authority for the working-class women from whom their lives were distinct.

The case of the Puerto Rican Suffragettes also highlights an additional predicament as regards the marriage of national liberation and postcolonial theory, namely the fact that under many pre-colonial regimes, oppression took place in an array of guises which were lived out in the experiences of people regarding class, gender and political orientation. As regards Puerto Rico, the antipathy felt towards the Spanish creoles by the working masses towards the end of the 19th century resulted in the welcoming of the American victors following the Spanish American War of 1898 and the subsequent emasculated representation of Puerto Rican men as lacking virility and courage. Similarly, the subjugated role of Puerto Rican women as attested to by their political disenfranchisement up until 1929³ effected their eventual imploring of white US feminists for assistance in their bid to gain the vote, their arguments premised upon the fact that as US citizens, they should receive the same benefits as American women. In

³ In 1929 women were given the right to vote, however this was only applicable to those women who were able to read and write.

this way, the incongruity highlighted by Jenny Sharpe in her analysis of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*⁴ between a restoration/excavation of national culture advocated by post colonial theory and the repression evoked by such an achievement is demonstrated by the Suffragettes' benefit from their political status as American citizens to the detriment of Puerto Rican masculinity as it had traditionally been constructed under the Spanish regime. For example, in her article 'Ideology and Images of Women in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature', Edna Acosta Belen discusses how depictions of women in '*la Generación del 50*' by writers such as Rene Márquez and José Luis González were enmeshed in the industrialization of the island and the increasing incorporation of women into the work force. In this way, given that 'the defense of traditional and patriarchal values associated with the agrarian world of the past as well as the rejection of US values became the way of expressing the writers' ideological commitment to the national liberation of Puerto Rico from its colonial bond' (1986: 128), the undermining of traditional Hispanic patriarchy through the proletarianization of women became a smokescreen for vilifying women as emblematic of the treachery and betrayal of high national ideals.⁵

Such a juxtaposition between men as the hapless victims of US power forced to resort to government welfare and broken dreams, and women as the callous and selfish collaborators with US imperialism has remained endemic in the portrayal of Puerto Rican and Nuyorican gender relations. In the classic Hollywood film *West Side Story*, for instance, the notorious song 'I Like To Be In America' corroborates this illusion as Anita, the fiancée of Puerto Rican gang leader Bernardo, leads a female chorus extolling the virtues of New York, leaving her male compatriots to defend the virtues of 'the enchanted island.'⁶ Similarly, the lyrics of 1960s and 1970s salsa musicians such as

⁴ In 'The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency' in *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory*.

⁵ Examples of such works include Rene Márquez' 'Un Niño Azul Para Esa Sombra', Pedro Juan Soto's 'Temporada de Duendes' and Emilio Díaz Valcarcel's 'Figuraciones en el mes de Marzo'.

⁶ In his article 'West Side Story: A Puerto Rican Reading of "America"', Alberto Sandoval Sanchez notes that Anita later changes her pro-assimilationist stance towards Anglo America once she discovers her fiancée Bernardo is dead. He concluded that the scene in which she tells the Jets to 'stick to their own kind' and thereby advocates ethnic segregation is demonstrative of the way in which 'the system of power does not experience any guilt feelings for its racial discrimination – provided that Puerto Ricans will always be Puerto Ricans, and in instances of crisis, no matter how assimilated, they will always join their own people'

Willie Colon and Hector Lavoe accentuate the *bandolera* or 'gold digger' image of women as they fall under the Puerto Rican 'male gaze'. In her article 'La Lupe, La India, and Celia: Toward a Feminist Genealogy of Salsa Music', for instance, Frances R. Aparicio states that 'musical historiography has not only rendered the agency of women invisible in Afro-Caribbean music' but also that their central role has been 'as the object of male desire, as unrequited love; women abandon men, so they are constructed as physical absence and emotional distance, as ungrateful beings who cannot love the men who sing to their desire' (Aparicio, 2002: 137). Aparicio also draws attention to the fact that the 'political feminization' which was being experienced by New York's Puerto Ricans throughout this period accentuated the 'oppositional voice' expressed through both salsa and Nuyorican poetry, in this way substantiating Paul Gilroy's claim that 'gender is the modality in which race is lived' (1993: 85). The idea of socio-political emasculation laying at the core of female subjugation in salsa and Nuyorican poetry is further intensified by the fact that Puerto Rican culture in general has been theorized as effeminate, thereby heightening the need for specific constructions of masculinity – often framed in nationalist and patriotic terms – in order to belie the portrayal of the Puerto Rican 'queer nation' as represented through discourses of shame and embarrassment.⁷ A recent example of this can be found in Abraham Rodriguez' short story 'A Boy Without a Flag' in which the narrator of the tale, a high school student of around 11 years, refuses to salute the American flag in order to comply with his father's nationalist sympathies. After being repudiated by his father for reading books on Hitler instead of Puerto Rican revolutionaries Juan Bosch and Albizu Campos, the boy is so desperate to prove himself in the eyes of his father that a visible demonstration of his revolutionary spirit by refusing to salute the American flag at school is sufficient to prevent him from sleep the night before his father is called in by his teacher to discuss a suitable punishment. In his nightly images, the boy:

(1997: 175). Thus Anita appears vilified in both Puerto Rican eyes for having initially 'sold out' to US assimilation, as well as by Anglo Americans through eventually encouraging the maintenance of her traditional culture.

⁷ The concept of Puerto Rico as a 'queer nation' is explored by Frances Negron-Muntaner in her chapter 'Weighing in Theory' from *Boricua Pop*. Here, Negron-Muntaner uses the term queer in the sense of both 'odd (nonnormative) and effeminate (weak, cowardly),' a national identity projected onto Puerto Rico beginning with the American colonial administrators and policy makers following the 1898 invasion when '*boricuas* were found to be lacking' (2004: 13).

sees his father, the Nationalist hero, screaming from his podium, his great oration stirring everyone around him to acts of bravery (1992: 23).

Thus the specific representation of masculinity which the boy is encouraged to assume by his father is shaped in political terms which work against the colonial subjugation of Puerto Rico and subsequent disenfranchisement of the populace. Yet when such an image is lived up to by the boy through his refusal to be a 'Yankee flag-waver', the depiction of a patriotic masculinity is proven to be at best quixotic and at worst illusionary as the father refuses to stand by his son's actions and instead joins in with the teacher's chastisement by reiterating 'you have to obey the rules. You can't do this. It's wrong' (ibid: 27). As a result, the boy acknowledges that his father had:

already navigated the treacherous waters and now couldn't have me rock the boat.... I still had to learn that he had made peace with The Enemy, that The Enemy was already in us. Yet his compromise made me feel ashamed and defeated (ibid: 29-30).

That is to say, whilst his father's concern for his son's academic success in a US mainstream school prevents him from supporting the boy's patriotic spirit, the contradiction between this and his own constructions of masculinity, which he encourages his son to adopt at home, suggests the ultimate futility of Puerto Rican nationalism when placed in a practical context. Consequently, the 'feminized' strategies of subversion and manipulation as discussed in the *jaibería* tactics explored by Ramon Grosfoguel et al. in the introduction to *Puerto Rican Jam* seem a more feasible option in obtaining a degree of agency for a subjugated people – yet accentuate the degree to which representations of a Puerto Rican hyper-masculinity are employed in 'negotiations of power between racialized subjectivities and dominant institutions' as a gendered identity becomes questioned (Aparicio, 2002: 138).

The ideological demand for an exaggerated masculinity amongst disenfranchised males is by no means limited to a Puerto Rican national ethos, as illustrated through the convoluted discussions which have taken place in relation to the misogyny contained within hip hop lyrics which are largely associated with African American culture. The projection of the insecurities and frustration encountered through socio-political subordination onto an alternative canvas of representation has resulted in the sexualization of the female body not only from a Western male gaze, but also from within marginalized communities themselves, in which masculine ideologies require female subjugation in order to express their own dissatisfaction. Notwithstanding Mohanty's aforesaid admonishment of generalizing the category of women to the extent that all female experiences are regarded as unanimous, with regards to the sexualization of the Puerto Rican female body, the conflation of their social marginalization with current mainstream popularity surrounding Latina/o culture, as well as the need for a male-centred construction of gender differences in order to emphasize their own distance from a feminized identity, has meant that feminist resistance amongst Nuyorican women is manifest in an array of oppositional strategies. In many cases, the invocation of the body itself as a site of resistance has proven to be strategic – particularly given the double impact which this can have not only against the idea of gendered identities as fixed and immutable, as evinced by Judith Butler's queer theory, but also in counteracting traditional notions of beauty and aesthetics as diffused amongst insular Puerto Rican culture. In this way, Nuyorican female resistance works within the diasporic objectives of the mainland Puerto Rican community in exposing the follies of traditional island culture at the same time that it works against the hyper-masculinity generated by socio-political disenfranchisement which has resulted in their double marginalization.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler makes reference to those feminists such as Simone Beauvoir for whom 'women are designated as the Other, the negative of men, the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself' (1990: 9). Thus:

the feminine gender is marked, the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood (ibid).

A cursory glance at the work produced in *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* is emblematic of this point, for whilst the self-reflexive approach characteristic of the early Nuyorican poets is evident through the numerous poems dealing with the interstitial hybrid identity of being marginalized from both insular and mainland traditions,⁸ a deconstruction of masculinity is nowhere to be found. Instead, it is left to the reader to discern the performances of a masculine identity as they are related to the public domain of drugs, unemployment and all the negative ramifications that stem from being a disenfranchised community through their juxtaposition with constructions of femininity. These are expressed through two central female figures: the revered mother and the *bandolera* or 'sell-out'. In numerous poems, for instance, the mother figure is equated with inner strength, love and warmth, which contrast with the harsh realities of urban life. Consequently, she is venerated as the embodiment of ideal feminine characteristics:

I admire and love you mother

Rose necklace

lilac rose beloved

mother

today in front of you

I show my love

without hesitation

without fear

⁸ In *A Mongo Affair*, for example, Miguel Algarín notes that '...there are no more Puerto Ricans/in Borinquen/ I am the minority everywhere/ I am among the few in all societies/ I belong to a tribe of nomads/ that roam the world without/ a place to call home/ there is no place that is ALL MINE/ there is no place that I can/ call mi casa' (1975: 55).

*on the road
the rain and its cold drops
and the wind without the will
to caress
the sky winds
sky, soul heart
I wait for my day of struggle
today I think of you
my mother
sick but always with a smile
Mother underneath that smile
I know the pain
but today will be the memory of tomorrows*

Lucky Cienfuegos

(from *Dedicated to Maria Rodriguez Martinez February 24, 1975*)⁹

The strength evinced by the suffering of the poet's mother throughout her sickness is safely located in the realms of the domestic, that is to say, it is not a virile might which would threaten a male identity, but instead a resilience and toughness that accentuates the appropriateness of a female character taking charge of the home. Similarly, in *When was the last time you saw your mami smile?* Americo Casiano refers to the idealized figure of the mother as he states:

*An old friend greeted her one day,
told her how good of a woman she was
for raising such a fine family
and she smiled.*

⁹ Taken from *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975).

*the old man didn't know
she sacrificed her life
to make it happen.
sixteen years for it to happen.
sixteen years, sixteen long years,
working in the garment district,
all to see it happen.*

*To see her daughters become putas y tecatas
on simpson street and southern boulevard,
putas on university levels to americanized dreams
and her sons strung out on the Holy Bible¹⁰*

The *putas y tecatas* to whom Casiano refers demonstrate the contrasting female image of the woman as a sexualized object – capable of ‘selling out’ for the acquisition of material goods as referred to in T.C.Garcia’s *Puerto Rican Epitaph*:

NEED

need....

I NEED... YOU NEED

PEOPLE KEEP RAPPING ABOUT WHAT THEY NEED/

They lie, steal. FUCK TO GET WHAT THEY NEED/

MARIO NEEDS A NEW TIRE FOR HIS GRAND PRIX/

ELENA NEEDS A NEW DRESS TO RIDE IN MARIO'S NEW CAR

CARLOS NEEDS TO FUCK ELENA/

ELENA NEEDS CARLOS TO BUY HER THE NEW DRESS SHE NEEDS/

MARIO NEEDS CARLOS' LOOKS TO GET ELENA/

CARLOS NEEDS TO ROB TO GET ELENA THE NEW DRESS/

ELENA NEEDS TO PLAY ON CARLOS FOR THE NEW DRESS

¹⁰ Ibid.

*MARIO NEEDS TO BORROW FOR A NEW TIRE TO RIDE ELENA AROUND/
 MARIO ELENA N CARLOS NEED
 THEY ALL NEED... WE ALL NEED/
 MARIO NEEDS TO DIE IN BIG CAR ACCIDENT LIKE PAUL NEWMAN/
 ELENA NEEDS BLOND WIG TO WALK AROUND 42nd STREET
 CARLOS NEEDS TO GET FIX 'CAUSE HE COULDN'T GET ELENA/¹¹*

Here, whilst T.C. Garcia refers to both the 'needs' of both genders, the male desire is equated with conquest ('*Carlos needs to fuck Elena*') and hustling ('*Carlos needs to rob*') whilst the female desire is linked to material trivialities, appearance and 'selling out' to Western notions of feminized performance ('*Elena needs blond wig to walk around 42nd street*'). The contrast between the two demonstrates a prevalent feature of early Nuyoricán poetry – the location of masculinity within the public domain of street life, which results in men bearing the brunt of all the negative ramifications of surviving in a marginalized community. In *La Metadona Esta Cabróna*, for example, Miguel Piñero provides a vivid description of the outer strength (as opposed to the inner strength associated with the mother figure) required to survive such hardships:

*Constipated-mind castrated-
 Feelin' frustrated - bein' invaded
 by pain
 another date el doctor is late
 bones ache
 got to go downtown underground
 no
 metadona around
 me siento solo y loco Socorro
 la metadona esta cabrona
 ain't no snitch methadone is a bitch¹²*

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Here, Piñero demonstrates that such is the destitution faced by the men of a marginalized community such as Puerto Ricans, resorting to alcohol and drugs is often the only way in which this can be dealt with. This is still preferable, however, to the idea of performing to US mainstream ideals and 'selling out' as associated with women; hence the need for a constant reaffirmation of the female *bandolera* as a reminder that no matter how harsh his life may be, masculine performances are at least demonstrative of the Nuyorican man's refusal to perform.

The identity imbued onto women is becoming increasingly challenged, as evinced through the plethora of feminist writings which emanates from the Nuyorican community. Any discussion of Puerto Rican gendered performances must include poet and activist Julia De Burgos, who moved from Puerto Rico to New York in 1939 and wrote extensively on the chauvinism and racism inherent within Puerto Rican culture. Her recognition of the superficiality of conventional femininity is marked in her poem *To Julia De Burgos*:

*Already people whisper that I am your enemy
because they say in poetry I give you to the world*

*They lie, Julia De Burgos. They lie, Julia De Burgos.
The voice that rises up in my poems is not yours. It's my voice
because you are the garment and I am the essence
and between us stretches the deepest chasm.*

*You are the cold doll of social deceit
and I, the vivacious spark of human truth.*

*You, the syrup of courtly hypocrisies, not I.
In all my poems I simply bare my heart.*

You are all greed and ego like your world, not I.

I gamble everything to be what I am.

You are just a proper grande dame.

*Not I. I am life. I am strength. I am woman.*¹³

In making the distinction between the *garment* and *essence*, De Burgos illustrates how the *courtly hypocrisies* and *social deceit* practiced by the 'cold dolls' of Puerto Rican women are incongruous with the 'real' her which is *life, strength* and *woman*. Here, De Burgos is congruent with Judith Butler's queer theory, in which she postulates that performances of gendered identities should not be read as indicative of a pre-discursive, biological essence but instead as the ramifications of a patriarchal system of power. The sentiment expounded by De Burgos which negates the traditional obligation of women to remain in the private domain as wives and mothers is echoed by a myriad of both mainland and island-based female Puerto Rican writers who succeed her, such as Ana Lydia Vega, Rosario Ferre and Mayra de Santos, all of whom use poetry and prose as a vehicle to expose the contradictions within Puerto Rican society as well as hitherto taboo issues such as female sexuality. In her short story *The Youngest Doll*, for instance, Rosario Ferre – a prolific though controversial authoress on account of her insistence in writing in both Spanish and English thereby rendering herself a 'national traitor' (Negron- Muntaner, 2004: 183), - explores both the hypocrisy of the Puerto Rican class system as well as the ways in which women are used as objects and forced to assume a subjugated identity.

The employment of literature as an alternative vehicle of expression for female poets to spoken word and hip hop was widely acknowledged amongst numerous people with whom I spoke throughout my time in New York. The reasons for this were cited as being both in connection with the publishing infrastructure (according to author Ernesto Quinones, for instance, it was 'the women who started writing first.... They started selling and the boys came afterwards, there was more of a market for them) as well as the fact that for the majority of female poets to gain recognition, they must resort to a degree

¹³ As taken from *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings: An Anthology*.

of self-tropicalization in which an eroticized identity is assumed, or, they must adhere to the aggressive and militant gesticulations and stylistics which typically characterize the most popular of spoken word performances. In an interview with Fish Vargas, for instance, it was affirmed that:

slam poets have to be performance savvy... they scream at the top of their lungs and some of the females are more emotional and introspective. You can get a guy screaming at the top of his lungs – and then you can get a woman performing a really beautiful poem and the performance of the first one will get a higher score. But in years to come it'll be the women who are published.¹⁴

The alternative strategy to adopting such a stereotypical masculine stance (as illustrated through the early work of Sandra Maria Esteves, for example) is to take advantage of the sexualized identity associated with Latina bodies, particularly within hip hop. In *New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone*, for example, Raquel Rivera devotes two chapters to the current media interest in 'Butter Pecan Mamis' as she states that:

the commercial hip hop image of the Latin mami is most often based on a tropicalized (virtual) blackness. The mami is taken to be an exotic (and lighter) variation on black womanhood whose exoticism is stamped by the US ghetto experience sliced with images of south-of-the-border tropicalism (2003: 120-121).

Typical 'mamis' can be seen through contemporary hip hop luminaries Jennifer Lopez and Stacey 'Fergie' Ferguson, both of whom play up to a hyper-inflated Latina tropicalized identity through their brash but titillating dance moves, sartorial street style and ultimately the emphasis they place on their bodies as emblematic of their racially sexualized identities. Such self-stereotyping crosses over from the hip hop realm into the vehicle of performance poetry, as evinced through such poets as Mayra de Valle, the

¹⁴ Interview – F.V.

Nuyorican Poets Café Slam Champion from 2004, and Caridad de la Luz – colloquially known as La Bruja, a poet and actress hailing from the ‘Boogie Down Bronx’ whose poetry espouses Puerto Rican pride and the experience of growing up in one of the poorest areas of the city. Both performers, whilst lauded by other poets and spoken word artists for representing a Latina voice in a predominantly male-dominated cultural arena, are largely recognized for having partially ‘sold-out’ to an eroticized identity in order to achieve visibility and commercial success. Carlos Andrés Gómez, for instance, lamented that:

the situation for women in spoken word is horrible. Look at Mayra, there’s so much politics surrounding her popularity. She has some incredible stuff and is both very beautiful and very powerful. And it hurts when I see one of the few strong, powerful Latina voices dressed up in push-up attire because it’s not what she’s about. Yes she’s sexual but that’s not all she is. I hear lots of poems that don’t challenge or attempt to dismantle the system and just conform to how ladies are supposed to act.¹⁵

Carlos, who recently performed a one-man show at the Edinburgh Festival exploring the deconstruction of Latino masculinity, is particularly vocal amongst young male poets regarding the need for a more militant feminist approach in both performance poetry and within Latina/o communities in general. In his poem *Daddy’s girl*, Carlos states:

*....a wise man named Freire told me that it wasn’t the women
that the oppressor within them craves the oppression –
that dominant father figures watching
over all of us, wouldn’t see it another way*

*so men will keep making girls’ asses billboards of their dominance
will keep fetishizing epicanthic eyes as inherently kinky*

¹⁵ Interview – C.A.G.

*will leave women's mouths slightly open, to connote sexual submission
will always rape women of color first,
since they've been raped for so long...
what difference does it make?*

*men need to look at themselves and re-evaluate how we live
and what's been created*

*I need to look at myself and re-evaluate this world I've created
... and that world I maintain
with either a smile or a shudder*

*it's time to reflect and cultivate from within
because change needs to start
with men and not women.*¹⁶

In recognizing the exigency for a feminism which includes as much a male evaluation of both US mainstream culture as well as Latino machismo, Carlos goes further than most in the attempt to reconcile a postcolonial standpoint with the oppression which that encompasses. That is to say, whilst he is extremely vocal regarding the neo-colonial status of many non-white communities in the US, as discussed in the previous chapter, his identification of the fact that in order for 'the system' to be 'dismantled' so as to allow for the inscription of internally colonized peoples, a deconstruction of gendered oppression must be an integral facet of such an 'alternative vision'. In this way, whilst he still acknowledges his own complicity as a male performer in the appropriation of the symbolic capital attached to the Latina female body, Carlos acts upon Frances Aparicio's argument that 'the logic which defines gender exclusively as "women" leaves masculinity – as a gendered ideology and social construct – almost always untouched by analysis' (1997: 135).

¹⁶ Taken from *Shades of Silence*.

Yet in acknowledging the need for a male re-evaluation of gendered performances, it would be wrong to exonerate females entirely from their complicity in the perpetuation of tropicalized stereotypes which reinforce a homogenized image of Puerto Rican women as eroticized sexual objects. With regard to a performer such as La Bruja, for instance, whilst to a degree it could be argued that her physical appearance, as it conforms to a sexually attractive representation palatable to an array of cultural tastes, draws attention to her militant, barrio-based poetry, the fact that her mainstream popularity has been achieved through her image renders her complicit in those chauvinistic forces which other feminist poets – both male and female – actively fight against. As a result, many poets are ambivalent towards La Bruja as an artist and a role model; Oscar Bermeo, for instance, states that he finds her work:

very over-rated... Her stuff is very simple, very cliché but she's made it a lot bigger than most people because she's a stereotypical Latina female and she plays on that image. There's a dearth of Latina poets and she has the ability to market herself – it's an insult to other Latina poets. She uses sexuality and stereotypes to her advantage.¹⁷

In contrast, another Bronx-born artist, Linda Caballero - also known as La India - again uses her body as a vehicle of expression; however, in this case with a view to subverting prototypical images and gestures, thereby exposing their lack of substance and ultimate illusoriness. In her aforementioned article Frances Aparicio notes the 'performative excesses' of La India through which she 'transgresses the class and gender codes of conduct imposed on women in public' such as smoking a cigar and singing in a 'nasal style characterized by growls and screams that evoke an androgynous style rather than a soft, melodious tone.'¹⁸ Both artists – La Bruja and La India – employ their bodies as weapons of resistance against the US mainstream in one sense or another. With La Bruja, however, this is done in such a way that her raising of the Puerto Rican experience is at

¹⁷ Interview – O.B.

¹⁸ Aparicio also notes that such strategies can be traced back to Cuban *salsera* La Lupe, to whom she refers as a 'foundational figure for younger *salseras* such as La India' (2002: 147).

the expense of a dismantling of dominant sexual stereotypes, whilst La India – who may not be as vociferous in terms of Puerto Rican nationalism – nonetheless achieves more in the feminist plight through her refusal to conform to traditional notions of Latina femininity.

Also implicit in the strategic use of the female body as a vehicle of resistance towards conventional notions of Puerto Rican womanhood is the pride shown in skin color, features and hair texture which are traditionally repudiated as unappealing in insular society due to their connection with Africa. Almost all of the female poets with whom I spoke whilst in New York commented that not only were they considered as Americanized gringas by their family on the island, but also would be regarded at best unattractive at worst shameful on account of their darker skin and hair texture. According to poet Jessica Torres, for example, ‘beauty in Puerto Rico is all about turquoise eyes and blonde hair. All of my family has straight hair and mine is naturally curly. I’m looked at as the brown one’.¹⁹ Jessica’s comment points to one of the fundamental contractions in Puerto Rican society, which she considers in her poem *Puerto Rican Confessions #1*; the fact that whilst mainland Puerto Ricans are still disparaged as Americanized gringos, the quotidian existence of insular Puerto Rican culture is very much geared towards a US ethos in terms of materialism, aesthetics and political orientation:

ay mama ines

ay mama ines

en Puerto Rico tomamos café

visiting at 7 years old and my island cousins

offered afternoon coffee for a snack

in new york, mom never taught me to drink coffee because it was for people

that didn’t have to cover their eyes and fast forward the naked parts in movies

¹⁹ Interview – M.N/J.T.

*even stealing chugs from her coors light at house parties
had the excitement of a swindle, but this cup confused me*

*not knowing what to do with such an adult drink
I acted the part and declined,
Confessing that I had had two cups that morning,
enough to last me the day*

I never before felt so American

Here, Jessica's poem makes explicit the fact that whilst Puerto Rico may provide the geographic locale and therefore the nucleus of at least much of the early Nuyorican poetry, contemporary insular culture is far more Americanized in some instances than that advocated by mainland Puerto Rican communities. In a focus group carried out with Jessica and several other Latina poets, Maria Nieves, also Puerto Rican, echoed this sentiment by stating:

from what I've seen Puerto Rican culture is all about status, your job, your car, how you dress and social acceptance. In Puerto Rico people would be worried about how the neighbours would comment as my hair is big and curly. If I'd have been born there, I would have been looked down on because of this and my darker skin. My sisters are lighter skinned and would have been regarded as much more beautiful. Here people identify with their Puerto Rican heritage but they don't know what life is like over there. Because of this I sometimes think that for me to claim being Puerto Rican is not fair to people who live that reality everyday; the reality of acceptance, high materialism and unemployment.²⁰

²⁰ Interview – M.N/J.T.

Here, the connection which Maria makes between her lack of acceptance in Puerto Rico based on her physical characteristics and her reluctance to claim insular culture in her identity despite having family there illustrates why styles of dress and hair have become increasingly symbolic amongst mainland Puerto Rican women as visual displays of resistance to their being regarded as 'less than real'. In her signature poem *Ode to the DiaspoRican*, Bronx-based performance artist Mariposa states the following:

Mira a mi cara Puertorriqueña

Mi pelo vivo

Mis manos morenas

Mira a mi corazon que se llena de orgullo

Y di me que no soy Boricua

Some people say that I'm not the real thing

Boricua, that is

cause I wasn't born on the island

cause I was born on the mainland

north of Spanish Harlem

cause I was born in the Bronx...

some people think that I'm not bonafide

cause my playground was a concrete jungle

cause my Rio Grande de Loiza was the Bronx River

cause my Fajardo was City Island

my Luquillo, Orchard Beach

and summer nights were filled with city noises

instead of coquis

and Puerto Rico

was just some paradise

that we only saw in pictures.

What does it mean to live in between

*What does it take to realize
that being Boricua
is a state of mind
a state of heart
a state of soul...
Mira!
No nací en Puerto Rico
Puerto Rico nació en mí!*

*Mira a mi cara Puertorriqueña
Mi pelo vivo
Mis manos morenas
Mira a mi Corazon que se llena de orgullo
Y di me que no soy Boricua.²¹*

Here, Mariposa derides traditional insular culture for its restrictive national, racial and aesthetic conventions through several means. Firstly, by writing in both Spanish and English, she transcends the idea that in order to be considered as ‘authentic’ Puerto Rican, a poet must write in Spanish. In an interview with Mariposa, she recalled the first time she traveled to Puerto Rico in order to read her poetry there in 1997:

When I read, I read in English and was the only one who did so. I didn’t feel embraced by the other poets. I was completely unprepared for the classism and elitism which I found when I got there. In Puerto Rico you have to be published and academic to be a poet worthy of respect.²²

Secondly, in referring specifically to her *pelo vivo* (wild hair) and *manos morenas* (dark skinned hands), Mariposa offers a direct confrontation to the persistent subjugation of the African component of Puerto Rican culture and the prominence given to European standards of beauty. The emphasis placed on the island’s Taino ancestry as a culturally

²¹ From *Born Bronxña* (chap book – copyright 2004, Mariposa).

²² Personal Interview with Mariposa (Interview – M.) 6th August 2005.

romantic juxtaposition with US materialism, as well as European standards and norms as evinced through the emphasis on *turquoise eyes and blond hair* obfuscates the African role in the island's culture; as a result, it is left to the mainland Puerto Ricans with their affiliations and subsequent easiness with African American communities to raise awareness of this denial. Subsequently, by using her poetry as a vehicle to counteract notions of Puerto Rican 'authenticity' as premised upon birthplace, race, language and aesthetics, Mariposa is marrying a postcolonial perspective with a feminist style in which her position as a woman of color is reinscribed into the Puerto Rican nation as it is extended to the diaspora. Similarly, by affirming that *no naci en Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico nació en mí*, Mariposa is staking her claim to a Puerto Rican identity which has traditionally excluded mainland Boricuas from national traditions on account of their having become too Americanized and 'selling out'. Aside from the fact that as noted by journalist and writer Ed Morales:

the whole Puerto Rican way of life is a contradiction. You'll see more Albizu Campos t-shirts on 116th street than in a whole year in San Juan; the New Yorkers want Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans want to be Americanized – people always want what they don't have.

Mariposa's claim to a *puertorriquenidad* despite her first negative experience on the island attests to a cultural independence afforded by her generation's exclusion from both insular and mainland traditions. For as noted by singer and poet Sandra Garcia Rivera, 'who is gonna tell you what's in your heart? There's pride involved and it's not right for anyone to take ownership of this.'²³

Thus the contrast between La Bruja and Mariposa, who are often bracketed together as prominent Nuyorican female voices, is apparent through the way in which each uses their body as a means of resistance. As aforesaid, for La Bruja her adherence to US mainstream tastes with her slight physique and long straightened hair is employed in order to garner attention for the Puerto Rican cause; for Mariposa, however, the flaunting

²³ Personal Interview with Sandra Garcia Rivera (Interview – S.G.R) 18th May 2005.

of her 'pelo vivo' and 'manos morenas' results in her body becoming a vehicle of resistance in itself towards both US and island standards of femininity. Such differences are emblematic of the need to avoid a generalization of Puerto Rican female poets as admonished by Mohanty, particularly since often the cleavages amongst them are greater than between themselves and their male compatriots. In an interview with Nicole Cecile Delgado, for example, the island born and raised student and poet affirmed that:

I've shared stages with poets from New York. But we are not friends. I hang out in different places. I would love it to develop but stupid prejudices are keeping it from happening. There's a strong class prejudice in New York, they think we're rich kids who can afford to move here. I've also heard from gossip that people think we're yuppies and there's also the difference in language.²⁴

Here, Nicole - who at the time of the interview had been residing in New York for almost a year - alludes to an event which took place at the Hostos Community College in April 2005. Organized by Professor Juan Flores and Mayra Santos, the review invited contemporary poets from both the island and the mainland were to 'share a stage' in order to promote relations between the two. The event was lauded as pivotal in building bridges and promoting a Puerto Rican solidarity between island and mainland poets - an increasingly popular ethos amongst members of the 'new generation' such as Nicole, who notes that 'we can't find jobs in Puerto Rico that suit our preparation which is why I'm here; I'm aware that I'm part of a new migration process'. Similarly, island-born poet Tomas Noel affirms that 'there's only one Nuyo-Puerto Rican literature. Being Puerto Rican is a highly porous territory riddled with contradictions but the gaps are closing'. Tomas cites various reasons for the narrowing of cultural and ideological distance between the two, as he states:

both Puerto Rican and Nuyorican literature are studied in the universities. There's more contact through poetry readings. There's

²⁴ Personal Interview with Nicole Cecile Delgado (Interview - N.C.D) 1st September 2005.

a Nuyorican Poets Café in Puerto Rico. There's the issue of Vieques and political work. The patterns of exchange reinforce and compliment the everyday experience of many Puerto Ricans in their patterns of circular migration and development of a translocal consciousness.²⁵

Yet whilst both Tomas and Nicole are aware that the affinity between island and mainland culture is becoming increasingly apparent – particularly given the global popularity of hip hop, the market and exposure afforded by New York as opposed to the small publishing infrastructure available in Puerto Rico as well as the growing similarities of inner city urban experiences, they also recognize that the class difference is crucial to any analysis of Nuyorican poetry and cannot be overlooked. Nicole, for example, cited her anxiety over the gentrification process and her own complicity in this as a white student as evidence of the class distinction between herself and other Bronx or Barrio born poets, whose families may have been forced to leave their homes as a result of white money. In the same vein, Tomas asserts that given the prototypical island poet as 'white and privileged,' he feels that he 'could never claim to be a Nuyorican in the way that some people could. My experience is completely different and it might seem presumptuous.' Yet he immediately follows this with an assertion that the 'Nuyo-Cosmo-Rican identity' as advocated by Pedro Pietri was:

something that everyone could relate to, his idea was just to be yourself. I claim the Nuyorican tradition as central and I'm working within it – but the class difference is complicated especially since the idea of Nuyorican has become such a commodity (ibid).

Subsequently, the issue of an authentic Nuyorican experience and identity once again becomes problematic as not only do gendered differences prevent female poets from playing as active a role as they might in the construction of a Nuyorican legacy, but the

²⁵ Personal Interview with Tomas Noel (Interview – T.N) 22nd August 2005.

class differences inherent in mainland and insular poets residing in New York also discourage the promotion of cross-cultural solidarity necessary for the Nuyorican ethos (as explored in Chapter 8) to fulfill its objectives of offering an alternative vision to mainstream US culture.

The role which Puerto Rico as a geographic entity plays in 21st-century Nuyorican poetry is both a contentious and subjective issue, contingent upon both an individual's experience upon the island (if they have visited there at all) as well as their views on its political status. Emmanuel Xavier, for instance, noted that 'Nuyorican poetry today is more about New York and less about Puerto Rico. It's very much tied in with the multiculturalism of New York and that mindset.'²⁶ Similarly, Ray Medina also defines himself as Nuyorican, but questions if others would do the same since 'I don't speak Spanish, I don't know the history of Puerto Rico – but I feel I'm as much a representative of it as they are! The connection is with the experience of Nuyorican life in New York.'²⁷ In this way, just as island-based poets currently resident in New York such as Nicole and Tomas feel uneasy about 'claiming' a role in the Nuyorican tradition, so too do Nuyorican poets such as Maria Nieves and Rich Villar feel ambivalent towards the significance which Puerto Rico as an ideological locale has for them. For whilst much of the early Nuyorican poetry refers to the independence of Puerto Rico, in the 21st century it is largely recognized that such a concept is idealistic at best. According to Ed Morales, for instance:

on a cultural level of course I'd like to see independence, for national dignity. But my parents are there, what would they do if there was an economic crisis? Independence could be very destructive for Puerto Rico – the island would be exposed to the globalization of wages; they'd go down – at the moment Puerto

²⁶ Interview – E.X.

²⁷ Interview – R.M/M.C.S/E.L.

Rico has the protection of US laws, without them entrepreneurs could rape the land.²⁸

Poets such as Nancy Mercado showed similar hesitance towards the political status of the island:

the consequences of independence could be devastating; people have got used to a certain way of living. I ask myself, if Puerto Rico was free, would I go to help? Half of me is here in the States, the other half is in Puerto Rico. People are gonna need guts.²⁹

Other poets, however, continue to claim Puerto Rico as a key element in their body of work. Sandra Garcia Rivera, for example, notes that of all Nuyorican artists 'poets are the most vocal regarding the colonial status of Puerto Rico. This was perhaps more prominent in the early 1960s and 1970s but Mariposa, myself and others are still talking about it. For instance, we all have a poem on Vieques³⁰ as a symbol. On a personal level, colonialism is a state of mind.'³¹ Sandra's first visit to Puerto Rico took place after she lived in San Francisco for a few years in order to 'discover what it meant to be Puerto Rican.' Once there she felt:

a real savage brutality; the fact that you can't vote for a President but he'll send you to war. Puerto Rico has luxuries but we're second-class citizens. In Puerto Rico, you feel it – you go nuts!³²

Consequently, whilst Sandra is very much connected to the pluralism of New York and is aware of:

²⁸ Interview – E.M.

²⁹ Personal Interview with Nancy Mercado (Interview – N.M) 27th June 2005.

³⁰ Vieques, a small island off the east coast of Puerto Rico was used as a US Navy base until the US withdrawal in May 2003. The residents of the island have a 30% higher cancer rate than Puerto Ricans do, a 381% higher rate of hypertension and a 95% chance of cirrhosis of the liver (Gold, 2006: 1). As taken from the article 'In Vieques, Puerto Rico' in *Dollars and Sense; The Magazine for Economic Justice*.

³¹ Interview – S.G.R.

³² Ibid.

the social, political and aesthetic connotations attached to the term Nuyorican.... It's used to express a union, both conflict and love towards Puerto Rico and it's specific to the New York experience³³

she is also anxious to remain connected to the 'Puerto Rico within' through forging affiliations with traditional practices which are in some cases extinct on the island itself. When speaking with Nicole Delgado, for example, she expressed her surprise at discovering that the *bomba* and *plena* were not only practiced in New York (as they no longer are in Puerto Rico) but that they were also being popularized by young poets and musicians such as Sandra as opposed to older musicians who might have a personal connection. When I asked Sandra about this, she noted that Yerba Buena (the *bomba y plena* group with whom she sings) is:

very much in touch with our Puerto Rican roots. Principally, it's about rejecting what others want us to be and about being who we are on our own terms, like respecting our ancestors and having our own flavor. It's transporting the past to the present.

In addition, not only is Sandra anxious to express her Puerto Rican roots through her music – but she is also aware of the gender implications in such traditional practices and as such is a member of the Ya Ya sisters, an all-female drumming band which seeks to emphasize the hitherto obfuscated women's role in Afro-based musical traditions. According to Yerba Buena dancer Julia Rodriguez, for instance, with the *bomba*:

the drums have a conversation with the dancer, the drummer is supposed to interpret the dancer's moves, it's a challenge. The percussion instruments have traditionally been left to men and whilst women do now

³³ Interview – S.G.R.

play, they still haven't reached the hierarchy of drum playing. There are very gender specific roles.³⁴

Consequently, a group such as Ya Ya is instrumental in not only reviving and maintaining traditional musical forms no longer practiced in the places of their origin, but also in allowing for a subversion of gender roles which have historically subordinated the female role in these to a secondary position.

The level at which individual Nuyorican poets feel connected to or influenced by the ideology of Puerto Rico consequently varies according to their own personal experiences of the culture and people there, as well as their views on the political status of the island. Yet the degree to which they are affiliated with a 'traditional' Nuyorican perspective (if traditional is used in terms of the principles set out by the 1960s and 1970s poetic corpus) introduces an additional complication to the concept of Nuyorican authenticity, namely the extent to which they are 'welcomed' or embraced by the First Generation poets whose symbolic capital appears to afford them an artistic license to 'pass on the baton' to certain younger poets whilst excluding others. In the numerous interviews I carried out amongst the 'next generation' of Nuyorican poets, this catch phrase was used on several occasions to infer the action of inheriting and contributing to a cultural legacy which, due to the popularity of spoken word, is becoming increasingly accepted by the US mainstream. Yet whilst the idea of bestowing a title of 'neo-Nuyoricans' upon a new generation may appear both benevolent and accepting, the criterion upon which such a 'selection' is made is largely tied up with the themes and stylistics of the poetry in question. That is to say, the extent to which a poet pursues a similar ideological trajectory to that set out by the Nuyorican ethos in the 1960s and 1970s appears to be highly influential in the degree of acceptance which they are afforded by the lionized early Nuyorican poets. In the focus group carried out with Jessica Torres, for instance, the 27 year old was quick to remark that:

³⁴ Personal Interview with Julia Rodriguez (Interview – J.R.) 17th July 2005.

lots of the original Nuyorican founders are dead. And those who are alive who try to pass on the baton to the next generation choose a select few. They don't want to accept others. When I first started learning about Nuyorican poetry, I found something I identified with. As I was exposed to it, I wanted them to know I existed. But I was turned off by the reality. They don't want to know about anyone else. At Acentos, we haven't been christened as the neo-Nuyoricans. I mean I don't just wanna write another Puerto Rican poem – I'm like it's been done for 40 years, let's do something different! But does this still mean that I'll be embraced too?³⁵

This sentiment was echoed by Maria Nieves, who noted that:

people think if you break away from a certain vein, you're committing a crime. You can compare it to an immigrant poet raising a first-generation American. You want the child to be a good Caribbean etc. And then the child says 'I want to be who I am. I want to be this or that'. And the parent doesn't always know how to deal with that – that's kind of how it is with Nuyorican. It's very self-interested and some of the older poets want to say 'I taught you that'. And the ones they choose are chosen because they are willing to sit at the altar. It's very restrictive.³⁶

Both Jessica and Maria are amongst the founding members of Acentos which, as discussed in the previous chapter, promotes an ethos concerned with building on and expanding the concept of Nuyorican as it relates to a particular experience and understanding of deconstructing a colonized mentality. Their feelings of rejection or at least dismissal from the older poets whom they respect but regard as linear and unilateral suggests a tacitly condoned hegemony within the Nuyorican community, itself composed

³⁵ Interview – M.N/J.T.

³⁶ Interview – M.N/J.T.

of an array of different voices and interpretations which in some cases implore recognition, in others defy any kind of classification. Edwin Torres, for example, concurs with Jessica and Maria as he notes that:

people like Papo (Jesus Papoleto Melendez) are so valuable in the lineage but they haven't evolved. You have to respect those who came before you and I see no need for feuds. I think what they do is interesting but I don't want to be a part of it. For me my poetry is about humanity and possibility.³⁷

Similarly, Willie Perdomo asserts that:

I don't really class myself as anything. If someone says I'm a Nuyorican poet that's fine but I don't just fit into one box. Poetry can't be blocked like that. The problem with some Nuyorican writers is that what they gained in pride, they lost in repetition. Culturally they're heavily invested but this is a smokescreen. The problems which Puerto Ricans in New York and Puerto Rico have are not unique to us.³⁸

What can be extrapolated from the opinions gathered from my interviews is consequently a generational friction, which in some cases is eased through the fact that a younger poet may appear to be following in the footsteps of the First Generation such as The Welfare Poets and La Bruja (both of whom are staunch advocates of an ethno-centric Puerto Rican pride), but in others is manifest through a different interpretation of how a 21st-century Nuyorican ethos should be expressed. This is not to say, however, that all of the younger poets are unanimous in their opinions regarding their relationships with the older poets; even within the Acentos group there was some discordance connected to how their affiliation was interpreted. According to Fish Vargas, for instance:

³⁷ Interview – E.T.

³⁸ Interview – W.P.

we know what the poets of the '60s did and respect and embrace them for that. And they respect us for having that attitude; we're about the same thing. We have a very good relationship with the older poets. Miguel Algarín featured for us at our first Anniversary show and the others – like Tato, Sandra Maria Esteves and Piri Thomas also know and love what we do. Miguel told us that we're starting a second revolution and that we're doing what they did 30 years earlier.³⁹

Interestingly, it was the female contingent of Acentos who were most vocal concerning their lack of endorsement as 'neo-Nuyoricans' which indicates that the issue may continue to be gender related. Another female poet connected to Acentos also noted that there was 'plenty of sleaze contained within the whole idea of Nuyorican' and recalls that whilst she was a student at Hunters College, one of the older poets:

came and performed, it was an annual thing. He asked for any poets to come and perform at the Nuyorican Poets Café. One of the first times I performed, he spoke to me just because I was a woman and he asked for my number. I thought that was the only reason he spoke to me.⁴⁰

Yet other bones of contention between the older and younger poets go beyond issues of sexism and poetic style, and by no means emanate solely from the new generation. Amongst the older poets with whom I spoke, for example, there was a general consensus that for them, the newer poets are not only embroiled in the capitalist system through their enthusiasm for MTV, Def Poetry and commercial prowess, but are also ignorant of the hardships undertaken by Puerto Ricans in the 1960s and 1970s which have resulted in the opportunities available today. According to Jesus 'Papo' Papoleto Melendez, for instance, the cross over with contemporary Nuyorican poetry and the hip hop scene results in its complicity in 'the system':

³⁹ Interview – F.V.

⁴⁰ Interview – M.N/J.T.

traditionally, the poet looks at 'I' in the vast, humanitarian sense whereas the rapper places 'I' at the centre. When I hear 50-cent, I just hear 'me.' It's Copernicus backwards!! Many rap artists now become actors like Ice-T. This guy spoke about 'Kill a Cop' yet now he features on a police television show!! This generation is completely opportunistic. it has embraced the system, it's bodacious and unafraid of the system. Look at the difference between 'record deals' and 'book deals'. The youth of today are already in the train of thought of capitalism; capitalizing on images which we never were. They see themselves as being able to achieve stardom through self-expression. People are using creative writing to become stars through another genre and are therefore piggy-backing off another underappreciated art form.⁴¹

Here, Papoleto makes reference to the capitalist mentality of today's poets and rappers as evinced through the slam poetry scene which for him is a complete contradiction of the objectives set out by the original Nuyorican movement. For him, the leap between poetry as a vehicle of human expression and the 'achievement of stardom' is oxymoronic as the community spirit conveyed through poetry becomes lost in the transferal from 'I' as humanitarian to 'I' as centre. Similarly, poet and story-teller Bobby Gonzalez is of the same mindset as he states:

young folks don't know how committed we were back in the 1970s. Back then artists took years to master fame. This generation can't play or read anything. I don't relate to hip hop at all – although I can't deny its significance in contemporary society. I ask young poets, "have you read Walt Whitman or Neruda?" They say no!⁴²

⁴¹ Interview – J.P.M.

⁴² Interview – B.Gz.

Notwithstanding the commercialism attached to the performance poetry scene as discussed in Chapter 7, both Bobby and Papo demonstrate what I consider to be one of the major problems with the contemporary Nuyorican 'scene'; that is to say, there is a lack of communication amongst the various blocs comprising the Nuyorican community which seems somewhat paradoxical when it is considered that the term was initially coined as a reaction to the restrictions set out by US and insular national traditions. For whilst the Nuyorican ethos as championed by the Acentos team is willingly extended to include other ethnic groups, there are clearly still barriers which need to be broken as regards gender, class and generation. Both Rich and Oscar, for example – two of the four founding members of Acentos – cited several of the younger poets who were embraced by the older generation as 'antagonistic activists'. According to Oscar, for example, poems connected with the issue of Vieques are obsolete and futile since:

that issue was resolved years ago. So now they say '5 years ago I was one of the few that stood up'. I think lots of the material used by artists and performers like the Welfare Poets is outdated, it's like one of their poems has to do with Clinton – but that was a Presidency ago!

The divisions which occur amongst today's Nuyorican factions seem to be as much related to spatial as ideological issues; that is to say, in many cases, poets tend to 'hang out' at the locales with which they are familiar and are connected as opposed to building more with those groups situated elsewhere in the city. This is not to say that their paths do not cross at all – Acentos, for example, has provided the venue for feature poets such as Miguel Algarín, Mariposa and Mayra de Santos – however, in terms of regular interaction, the array of groups are fixed to particular locales which can exacerbate the lack of communication and subsequent ignorance between them. A number of interviewees with whom I spoke, for example, referred to poets in terms of their local or area such as El Barrio or the Nuyorican Poets Café, as opposed to their ideological or stylistic orientation. This suggests that in many cases, issues of time, money or resources which would enable more events like the Hostos Community College event to take place

as well as facilitate traveling around the city would resolve many of the tensions and misunderstandings which occur amongst the different blocs. For example, the idea which Papo and Bobby put forward regarding the younger generation as capitalist and ignorant of the US poetic tradition is a major reason for the formation of Acentos, since these members are also disdainful of the commodification of poetry and its employment as a 'stepping stone' towards other more lucrative art forms. Similarly, the criticisms put forward by numerous New York-based poets as regards performers from Puerto Rico in terms of class and privilege are by no means overlooked by the Puerto Rican poets themselves; in fact, poets such as Nicole Delgado and Tomas Noel are as reluctant to stake a claim in the Nuyorican tradition for this reason as Nuyorican poets are to invoke Puerto Rico in their own personal identity. Yet in reality, their attitudes and outlook appear to be far more similar than either would expect, particularly since to some extent a reversal has taken place between the preeminence of one geographic location over the other. For as noted by Tomas, given both the exposure afforded by the US as well as the current vogue of Latina/o culture and the commodification of Nuyorican poetry (which has even resulted in the establishment of a Nuyorican Poets Café in San Juan), 'Puerto Rico needs New York more than New York needs Puerto Rico'⁴³ – as a result of which, the promotion of relations between the two might serve to accelerate the deconstruction process responsible for perpetuating divisions within the Boricua community in general.

⁴³ Interview – T.N.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis has been to demonstrate how the contemporary Nuyorican community residing in the interstices of New York City is gradually percolating the mainstream of US culture to present a post-colonial challenge to its social ethos. The designation of Nuyorican, initially coined with specific ethno-racial connotations, has modified so as to allow for the incorporation of a number of diverse ethnic groups with shared or similar experiences of discrimination, in this way bearing a strong analogy to Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic theory in which routes in time and space take precedence over idealized roots in a nation-state or geographic entity. Amongst those who identify with the concept of Nuyorican identity, the term is understood as both a nuanced social designation with implications of internal colonialism, as well as a commodified moniker connected to a hip hop style of performance poetry and the specific locale of the Nuyorican Poets Café. A conflation of the two – as illustrated through the comparison of the performance-orientated poetry of the Café and the more literary and reflexive based self-odysseys witnessed at the Acentos reading series – substantiates my original hypothesis that the Nuyorican poetic 'community' achieves what few other cultural vehicles so closely associated with contemporary 'youth' practices are able to envisage, that is, the fusing of a discursive post-colonialism in which nationalist traditions of both the US and Puerto Rico are literally challenged (above all through the employment of Spanglish) with a socially activist project resulting in practical change for the communities the poets purport to represent.

Through their exploration of alternative means to incite a widespread compunction beyond those individuals already exposed to the ideas of 'imperialism', 'internal colonialism', 'feminism' and other such concepts not readily elucidated by conventional cultural vehicles (predominantly by taking advantage of those urban spaces and locales considered to be palatable and desirable for mainstream consumption), 21st-century Nuyorican poets are expounding the possibilities of negotiation between the ostensibly irreconcilable standpoints of capitalism and activism. In this way, the increasing

commodification of performance poetry – through which the practice enters into a mainstream dialogue thereby bringing the oral tradition out of the innocuous realms of folklore and into the centre stage of contemporary culture – should be seen less as a co-optation of a capitalist mentality, and instead as a form of subversion from within. For whilst to a degree any level of commercialism involves compromise and a dilution of revolutionary content, the concept of ‘commodifying consciousness’ embedded in spoken word performances is emblematic of its potential to raise awareness and galvanize support amongst social groups who would otherwise remain ignorant of its existence. For author Sofia Quintero, for example, the notion of ‘commercializing consciousness’ is the premise of her activist group Chica Luna, which she regards as a form of ‘cultural activism’ that ‘supplements not replaces things like civil disobedience and community organizing.’¹

In the process of such cultural activism, not only are the ‘invented traditions’ of the US civil and racial democracy being excoriated to reveal their untenable foundations and inherent contradictions, but so too are the cultural norms and practices of Puerto Rico revealed as inherently discriminating as an ethno-nationalism is evoked at the expense of non-Hispanic racialized groups. Subsequently, the notion of displacement implied with the concept of Nuyoricán becomes relieved of its stigmatic undertones as a cultural ‘no-man’s land’ once its potential to address those incongruities of both the ancestral homeland and the host nation are recognized. In this way, an analysis of the diverse ways in which Nuyoricán identities are formulated and explored can provide a powerful exemplar of the emancipatory capabilities of diasporic communities in general, particularly for those able to oscillate between an array of ethno-racial groups reinventing notions of nationalism and essentialism in the process.

The irony of the US being challenged by post-colonial communities is inherent in the fact that, as stated by Amy Kaplan, ‘the struggle for independence from British colonialism makes American culture anti-imperial’ (Kaplan, 1993: 12). In *The Empire Writes Back*,

¹ Taken from an interview with *Gothamist* on April 17th, 2006.

for instance, Bill Ashcroft et al. note that the US was 'the first post-colonial society to develop a national literature' with:

the emergence of a distinctive American literature in the late eighteenth century raising inevitable questions about the relationship between literature and place, between literature and nationality and particularly about the suitability of inherited literary forms (1989: 15).

Yet as explored in Chapters 1 and 2, the concept of the US as empire became increasingly apparent through both territorial acquisition and economic domination in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly as regards Latin American nations who subsequently witnessed the mass migration of huge numbers of their native populations to the US. The colonial trajectory of the diverse Latin American peoples who, upon entering the States are transmogrified into Latinos – thus bears strong analogies to the histories and experiences of other racialized groups, most notably African Americans, with whom affiliations of solidarity are thereby fostered and encouraged. Under the guise of globalization, however, Western supremacy remains a natural part of the international landscape which denies the experiences of such groups as both internally colonized, as well as possessing any intellectual capacity for contributing to national traditions. This is not to say that such an idea is not embraced on a superficial level, as seen in contemporary discourses of multiculturalism and commodified ethnicities as well as the symbolic capital afforded to the cultural traditions at least of the African American community. Yet the extent to which such ostensible cultural handshakes translate into social and economic change for those living (predominantly but not exclusively) the working-class realities of US internal colonialism has been minimal. Consequently, it has been left to the communities themselves to construct an alternative means of redress, beginning with Paulo Freire's notion of a critical pedagogy which deconstructs as opposed to replicates the ideologies of mainstream society. In this way, the recognition that decolonization goes beyond political independence to those psychological mechanisms of control which ensure the 'consent' of the 'oppressed masses' is acted

upon through a deconstruction of mainstream categories which serve to keep people divided and disempowered.

In no other arena is this more greatly emphasized than with Puerto Rico, since despite the ongoing cultural independence exerted by both mainland and insular *boricuas*, support for political independence remains low. The vicarious knowledge acquired through the trajectories of 'independent' nations such as Cuba and Haiti ensures that the majority of Puerto Ricans stay content with an ethno-nationalized identity, with the political and economic benefits which US protection and citizenship affords them constituting ample reason for the island to remain a Commonwealth. The low symbolic capital which has accompanied the political dependence of Puerto Ricans on US assistance, however, has resulted in the persistent vilification of particularly those communities residing in the US as welfare dependent, indolent and void of any cultural history. The diverse range of strategies employed to contest such ideas are evinced through the Nuyorican legacy of authors and poets such as Bernardo Vega, Piri Thomas, Miguel Algarin, Miguel Pinero, Sandra Esteves, Maria Aponte and Pedro Pietri, all of whom have refused to succumb to the negative identities instilled upon them by dominant society. The genealogy which can subsequently be constructed to incorporate these authors as much as prominent Nuyorican poets and artists in contemporary culture is pivotal in addressing the fact that the successes of the latter are not linked to current notions of a 'Latino boom', but are instead part of a historical legacy refuting the claim that the community does not possess an intellectual tradition.

The concept of 'solidarity through difference' evoked by contemporary Nuyorican culture is demonstrated through its multifaceted character and ability to incorporate an increasingly broad array of ethnicities, styles, thematics and social experiences. This is not to imply, however, that all the poets who could be represented as Nuyorican would choose to do so; the fact that to identify as Nuyorican is as much a political identity as well as a cultural identity can result in controversy surrounding its somewhat vortex-like nature. The frustration which results from the idea of one particular ethnic experience being emphasized at the expense of others is a sensitive and contentious subject, as

evinced through Sandra Garcia Rivera's poem *Ode to a Disillusioned Chicana*. Here, Sandra – who wrote the poem whilst residing in San Francisco – makes reference to the anger she felt at those Chicanas who attempted to subsume her own experience as a Puerto Rican in California within their own politicized rubric:

Chicana, I am not Chicana.

Is this flavor reminiscent of mariachis or enchiladas?

Do you see the Virgin of Guadalupe tattooed on my breasts?

Assumptions you make about me as if my pride were a jest;

just another disgraceful attempt to label my experience in the US.

You impose your placa without due respect

and I return with a fight.

Can you stand the test?

Label:

A fortified construction created just to Be.

Shouldn't you know better Chicana?

Haven't you fought to be free?

Ain't you been dis-placed, dis-graced in your own land,

living on the border between sea and sand?

You are 'Other' everywhere you go.

Shouldn't you know better?

I guess the answer is 'No.'

'Who are you?' 'What may I call you?'

I never got those requests,

Just shrouded with your umbrella

to claim my people are like your rest.

Let's talk about shelter from the cold, cruel, world;

don't stick me in your box

*making me livid enough to hurl
angry words and resistance in the face of an ally.
Our union must be consistent
cause we ain't ready to die.*

Yet whilst the tone of Sandra's poem is illustrative of her anger at being labeled a Chicana given the predominance of Mexican-American culture in San Francisco amongst the Latino aggregate, she also makes analogies between the two groups in order to highlight why the Chicana to whom the poem is addressed 'should know better'. That is to say, whilst Sandra is anxious to affirm the differences between them, she also alludes to their shared fight as she writes:

*A tool of the oppressor,
these labels that divide us,
keeping warriors from uniting and confiding and reciting,
to fight against injustice
in a system that just don't trust us,
to stand together sin fronteras.
You know it's true, de veras.*

*Choose to let go of borders,
Comadre, lend a hand.
Let's become one Raza,
But be conscious, understand.
To be sisters in struggle on common ground
you can't put yourself up while keeping me down.
It's a mutual endeavor, living parallel lives,
conscious of our roots,
on this journey we strive
to embrace all scents, colours and flavors*

*that God has created without prejudice or favour.*²

In this way, whilst Sandra is anxious to draw attention to the dangers inherent in using one ethnic experience to denote others, she also refers to the *struggle on common ground* which must be approached *sin fronteras* whilst being *conscious of our roots*. Thus the concept of 'solidarity through difference' which characterizes contemporary Nuyorican identities can still apply – provided it does not fall into the hegemonic trap of extolling one aspect of an ethnic experience to the detriment of others. Given the association between Nuyorican and the marketable style of hip hop inflected poetry emanating from the Nuyorican Poets Café, however, in the eyes of both mainstream and minority audiences, the potential for the Nuyorican experience to consume and obfuscate those of other diasporic groups is heightened. Yet whilst the Café has become something of a trump card in the construction of Nuyorican identities and is gaining mainstream access, the emphasis placed on transcending boundaries and reflexivity as advocated by other groups such as Acentos demonstrates that an exploration of Puerto Rican identities in New York can constitute a form of strategic essentialism through which an empathy with others can be fostered, as opposed to a homogenizing catch-phrase through which the Latino experience should be defined.

Neither would it be accurate to imply that there is a clear-cut binary between the US mainstream and minority communities, for often the terms are employed for linguistic expediency as opposed to delineating a rigid dichotomy. That is to say, in order to designate the poles through which the success of a cultural practice or artist can be defined and measured, terms must be employed which indicate the adherents involved, the nature of the practice or the financial gains generated. In between the two extremities, however, is a murky space in which boundaries are crossed, negotiations take place and concessions are made. For instance, Latino marketing campaigns which actively promote the concept of a pan-Latino identity for which the 'mainstream' is repeatedly chastised by those falling under its rubric, addresses itself to minorities - yet is entrenched within the mainstream taxonomy of corporate America. In addition, the idea of 'cross-over' implicit

² Taken from *Hostos Review* (Issue 2).

with the division between mainstream/minority gives the deceptive impression that cultures and communities are monolithic; a fallacy which refutes the ways in which (predominantly white) mainstream culture has traditionally appropriated forms and practices from marginalized groups, depriving them of any symbolic capital which might improve representations for the communities of their founders. For this reason, throughout my thesis I have employed expressions such as 'alternative consciousness' or 'deconstruction' as a means through which dominant ideologies and practices can be subverted, as opposed to advocating the replacement of one hegemonic mindset with another. The fact that such ideas are associated with predominantly ethnic minority groups does not reflect a deliberate exclusion of white participation, but instead results from their historic oppression as racialized peoples. As noted in Chapter 7, however, as the ethos of the US moves increasingly towards avarice and materialism, the superseding of race by greed results in an exacerbation of anomie felt by whites which accounts for their growing involvement in projects and cultural productions hitherto associated with African-Americans and Latinos.

How, then, can we view the future for the Nuyorican movement and its relevance for 21st century ethnic relations in the US? To begin with, I am happy to note that since the time of my research, some of the problems to which I referred in the preceding chapters have been acknowledged and addressed. For example, several of the older poets who had cited the 'ignorance of youth' as one of their principal bones of contention with the younger generations are now regular participants at Acentos, whose success and visibility continue to grow as attested to through the forthcoming event 'Acentos: A Gathering of Latino and Latina Poets'. The event, scheduled to take place on 1st February 2008 at the School of Social Work in Hunters College, also demonstrates the growing affiliations between grassroots forums and academic institutions, an important corrective to the erstwhile problem of an intellectual fixation with a number of select, ethno-centric artists as opposed to those focused on inclusivity, transcending divisions and ultimately taking the concept of Nuyorican in new directions. The national and international success of spoken words artists Oveous Maximus and Carlos Andrés Gómez confirms the ability of performance poetry to negotiate with a variety of audiences through working in

conjunction with – without being subsumed by - a capitalist mentality. At the time when my fieldwork was carried out, Oveous was just beginning his career as a spoken word poet; a few years later, he is set to appear on the cover of *DTM* magazine (February 2008) with his latest album being released a month later. Carlos, whose one-man show at the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh 2007 scored a 5 star review with UK magazine *Hairline*, has to date performed at over 100 universities and colleges and toured across the US, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa. He is set to take part in the Individual World Poetry Slam Championship later on this year, and appeared on the cover of *Brass* magazine in February 2007. The achievements of these two poets alone – both of whom are associated with a Nuyorican identity by virtue of their affiliation with the Café as well as their shared historical trajectories as New York Latinos – illustrate how protest through performance can be carried out on a global scale, without succumbing to the dominant ideologies of a capitalist ethos.

With regards to the paradigm which the concept of Nuyorican can set for US cultural relations, naturally it must be recognized that ethnic harmony within US society is never going to be other than a convoluted and emotionally charged minefield. Having said this, too often an emphasis is placed on the discordance and antagonism amongst North America's diverse ethnic groups, with the fallacy of commodified multiculturalism becoming regarded with increasing distrust. That is to say, displays of ethnic harmony are viewed with suspicion given their complicity in the synthetic construction of multiculturalist discourse which discourages further investigation into the realities of ethno-racial subjugation. Alternative structures of solidarity which are being explored on the premise of shared experiences of marginalization are not given the attention or visibility which they warrant, and as such have until recently survived in the interstices of society in cultural hubs such as Mixta Gallery, Acentos and the Nuyorican Poets Café. With the increasing popularity of the spoken word movement, however, the mainstream is gradually being imbued with elements of real social consciousness which accelerates the possibility of altering 'common sense' notions of race and ethnicity, both of which continue to be seen as 'natural' constructs as opposed to the products of hegemonic systems of power. In this way, as the various performances of Nuyorican identity are

explored, analyzed and deconstructed in the commercially viable terrain of spoken word poetry, the 'politics of transfiguration' envisaged by Paul Gilroy take a tangible form in the grassroots pedagogy and practical community building strategies engendered by the artists. Consequently, the recognition that solidarity through difference can be achieved without ultimately evoking claims of essentialism - instead seeking recourse in claims to humanity - could eventually result in a new trajectory of ethnic relations in the US, within which Nuyoricans will continue to play a pioneering role. With this in mind, it seems appropriate to close my thesis with an extract from Ed Morales' *Rebirth of New Rican*:

*Only a multicultural pueblo can understand
El adentro y the outside of the dynamic
Culturally, we possess ritmos and sueños que no se
Pueden sacar de our essences
They are reflected in our speech and our manner
No matter what language or banner we choose
Freeing us from being aquí o allá, here, there, everywhere
Mixed race is the place
It feels good to be neither
It's a relief to deny racial purity
We're amused as America slowly comes to see
The beauty of negritude and the Native American attitude
We've been living it day-to-day since 1492.*

- Ed Morales, *Rebirth of New Rican*.³

³ Morales (2002: 101).

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

The data compiled in my thesis consists of the information gathered throughout my fieldwork in New York City where I was resident from October 2004 until September 2005. My interest in the Puerto Rican community was sparked from the research I carried out for my Master's dissertation, which focused on the origins of salsa music in the 1970s. Despite the somewhat scant information available to me from my University library – Puerto Rico not occupying one of the higher echelons of research interest – I managed to put together a proposal for a research project focusing on hip hop as the successor to salsa in terms of a contemporary vehicle of expression for New York's Puerto Rican youth. This was with a view to constructing a cultural history of the community by which contemporary expressions of youth culture would be linked with those of previous decades. Uncomfortable with the degree to which I would be able to provide an accurate representation for this given my position as a British academic, I attempted to address those issues connected to the predicaments of Westernized scholarship in a post-colonial framework prior to my arrival in the field. That is to say, the complicity of my very presence amongst a marginalized US group in perpetuating those forces of Western imperialism which I was attempting to deconstruct resulted in me taking great note of Paulo Freire's hypothesis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Here, Freire's reference to the 'banking' method of education in which students are seen as vacant depositories for the knowledge of their teachers, thereby denying them personal agency and interaction, was useful to me in that whilst I did not view myself in any way as a 'teacher' (if anything, the reverse would be true), Freire's acknowledgement of the power dynamic inherent in the teacher/student binary of mainstream education and his suggestions to overcome this were useful. For instance, Freire notes that:

attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects

which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated (1996: 47).

The analogy made between this affirmation and my impending fieldwork related to my determination in ensuring that any conclusions drawn or hypotheses made were extrapolated from the people with whom I spoke; that is to say, I was aware of the need to adopt a grounded theory approach in which the issues and topics of relevance would be taken from what I discovered, and not from what I surmised before I left.¹ For given that theoretically, I was aware that my research would be placed within a post-colonial framework, the dangers of allowing myself as a Western scholar to 'represent' a subjugated community would only substantiate the ostensible supremacy of Western academia which I was intent on repudiating through the exploration of other vehicles of knowledge and performance. In this way, I echoed Gayatri Spivak's pivotal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in which the author takes issue with Foucault and Derrida's postulation that 'the oppressed, if given the chance, can speak and know their conditions' since 'for the "true" subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subject that can know and speak itself' (1995: 25-26). For despite attempts to do this, Spivak concludes that ultimately any acts of agency on the part of the oppressed will fall foul of their status as a fictitious effect of Western discourse. In this way, John McLeod notes that:

to retrieve the unruly voice of a 'subaltern subject' from the colonial archives is to risk complicity in an essentialist, Western model of centered subjectivity in which concrete experience is preserved (2000: 192).

¹ In his article 'Generating Grounded Theory', Clive Seale defines Grounded Theory as 'the set of techniques which emphasizes the creation of theoretical statements from the inspection of data' which holds its central tenet as 'a commitment to a continual re-examination of data in the light of developing arguments.' That is to say, grounded theory is not a framework into which data can be fitted, but rather the 'collection of data in episodes punctuated by periods of data analysis' (1997: 241).

Yet whilst I was cognizant of Spivak's admonitions, once I had embarked on my fieldwork and applied her hypothesis to those whom I interviewed, her concept of the mute subaltern became problematized. Firstly, whilst I was aware of my own complicity in sustaining notions of Western supremacy ('how many Puerto Rican researchers had I seen at Liverpool University that year?' I asked myself), to imply that those individuals with whom I worked were incapable of voicing their socio-political views given the heterogeneity of discourses which 'speak through them' would be not only incredibly patronizing but also completely fictitious. Evincing an extremely high level of reflexivity, introspection and political awareness, to infer that the performers with whom I worked required any form of representation beyond their own would be viewed as completely insulting by both themselves and their audiences, by whom they are regarded as teachers and spokespeople. Moreover, on a couple of occasions I realized that I had 'over-stepped the mark' in attempting to 'speak' for a community of people whom I had lived amongst for just a few months. For example, one particular incident occurred when I gave my opinion on a performer whose work I didn't find exceptional to the consternation of another artist who was an avid admirer. The recognition that whilst I was embraced by the community as a researcher, there were limits as to how much I was considered to be 'entitled' to a personal view point was at times difficult to reconcile, since this inferred a reversed power dynamic between myself and those with whom I worked. This often came across in social situations where the lines became blurred between researcher/friend/English/academic; a good number of poets, for example, used the opportunity of informal chats to hyper-inflate conversations and flaunt their masculinity and knowledge.

The issue of gender was possibly the greatest if only problem which I encountered in my fieldwork, for my position as a female researcher investigating a male-dominated practice naturally resulted in the hegemony implied by Nuyorican patriarchy translating into a power dynamic between myself and some of my research informants. In several interviews, for example, it was apparent that an interviewee was attempting to manipulate the trajectory of the interview towards their own interest of asking for my number or a date. In this way, I was forced to ask myself if my project would have received the same

amount of interest and eager participants if I had been either male or American, the latter being related to the degree of exoticism or novelty value associated with me being English. Finding myself in the peculiar situation of the Other, however, I confess to occasionally performing myself to those strategies associated with self-tropicalization and stereo-typical notions of how an English woman would be (favourably) perceived - purely as a means to garner interest and attract research participants. Such strategies would include talking in a slightly exaggerated English accent (given the fact that after a few months of living in New York I had already begun to acquire a New York tone) and keeping my hair blonde in order to stand out in a crowd as opposed to dying it back to its natural dark colour as I had originally planned. Whilst at the time such spurious performances seemed somewhat trivial and insignificant, in retrospect my appropriation of concepts of the Other which I worked to my advantage allowed me to feel more respect and empathy with those artists such as La Bruja who also employ such strategic essentialism to draw attention to their socially activist work. For whilst on the one hand, artists such as La Bruja do little for representations of Latina women given her conformity to mainstream aesthetic tastes and exoticized images, having been somewhat guilty of employing such strategies myself I could not fail to relate to her reasons behind doing so and thereby feel a sense of understanding. Despite the problems experienced on account of my gender and nationality, however, for the most part the genuine enthusiasm shown towards my research was almost overwhelming and greatly facilitated the networking strategies I used in order to meet contacts and gain admission into new social circles.

As aforesaid, initially my plan had been to study hip hop with a focus on music. Whilst I tried not to form any preconceptions of the people or places I would discover in the field, inevitably this was futile and upon my arrival in New York I fully expected to frequent small enclaves replete with Pedro Albizu Campos t-shirts, one-star flags and text-book style displays of Spanglish. That is to say, I was anticipating a strong ethno-centric focus given the impression which I had received from the literature available at my University library. Some months before my departure, I had contacted El Centro (or the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunters College) in order to enquire about resources, as well as

carried out an Internet based research for possible venues and locales which might be useful. This led me to the discovery of the Nuyorican Poets Café along with AHA (Association for Hispanic Arts) and the Julia de Burgos Cultural Centre. It was the Nuyorican Poets Café, however, which was the first place I visited once I entered the field, where the fortuitous performance of Anthony Morales on the night of my arrival (I use fortuitous since Anthony was one of the few Puerto Rican feature poets I saw all year at the Café), along with the slam performance of Dominican poet Oveous Maximus, convinced me that here was where the real scope for my thesis would be found. That is to say, I would still place my focus within the hip hop and performance field, but with an emphasis on poetry and literature as opposed to music. Having never witnessed a spoken word performance or slam competition in my life, I was astounded at the level of verbal talent and intellectual content of the poetry performed. Subsequently I approached both poets after the performance who kindly offered to give me interviews and put me in touch with others who would show equal benevolence.

Throughout my time in New York, I never ceased to be amazed by the generosity shown to me by people in terms of time and resources. My research was carried out by the method of the snowball technique; that is to say, each poet I met would introduce me to another two or three potential interviewees, thereby allowing me to construct a wide social network of informants. Given my anxiety to integrate into a cross section of the Nuyorican scene – particularly given the fractured nature of the ‘community’ in terms of generations and locales – I used a select number of settings in each of which I found a suitable gatekeeper² who could introduce me to other members of that locale. This was done either by email or by simply turning up at a venue when a performance or event was taking place. Such venues and groups included El Centro, the Nuyorican Poets Café, the ProLibertad activist group, Acentos, and the Louder Arts Collective at Bar 13. I also attended a wide selection of individual events such as workshops, neighbourhood tours, charity auctions, tribute evenings, album release parties, film screenings, marches and concerts in order to both make contacts and carry out participant observation. In this

² According to David Walsh, gatekeepers are defined as ‘the sponsors, officials and significant others who have the power to grant or block access to and within a setting’ (1997: 229).

respect, the use of websites such as www.virtualboricua.com and www.nuyorico.org were invaluable, since it was through the information found here that I was able to keep in touch with the events of the city.

The success of my fieldwork was greatly facilitated by the layout of New York City and the ease with which I was able to travel on account of the metro system. In this way, I was able to conduct interviews and focus groups all over the city; often these took place in informal settings such as Cafes and bars although some were carried out in Universities or in grassroots forums such as the AHA (Association for the Hispanic Arts). The interviews tended to be semi-structured chats with a view towards allowing the conversations to flow towards whichever topics the interviewee felt were of relevance. In this way, I was staying true to my original premise that the issues investigated would be those of relevance to the poets involved and not those seen as important by myself. For instance, prior to my arrival, I inferred from the literature available that the politics and independence of Puerto Rico would feature prominently in the works and attitudes of those Nuyoricans whom I interviewed. Consequently I had planned to afford this topic much greater space than I have done in the write-up of my thesis. Once I had spent substantial time in New York, however, it became apparent that whilst the issue is of relevance to certain poets – mainly those who are closely affiliated with the ProLibertad activist group – for others, given that they had never been to Puerto Rico or showed little interest in insular politics, the independence question was of minor importance in comparison to other topics such as generational differences between themselves and older poets and the importance of the African American historical connection. As a result, these issues were given much greater prominence in my thesis than I had previously anticipated.

For the most part, interviews were carried out individually although occasionally focus groups took place which involved the participation of two or three poets. The advantage of these was the fact that the participants were able to bounce off each other, bringing up issues which they may not have thought of or discussed had the other interviewees not

been present.³ In addition, issues of power dynamics were less likely to apply since this could be mitigated by the presence of a third or fourth party. For the most part my focus groups were planned and semi-structured; occasionally, however, focus groups occurred sporadically with participants either hearing an interview taking place and asking to join in, or through informal chats in group environments. Given the predominance of males in spoken word poetry, approximately 70% of my informants were male, the majority of whom had 9 to 5 jobs as social workers, teachers, and other community-based professions. Similarly, amongst the females I interviewed, almost all were occupied in vocational careers. As a result, most of my interviews and focus groups were carried out in the evening as I was anxious not to interfere with any of my informants' daily lifestyles. This also worked well for me since during the day I was able to conduct literary research at El Centro in Hunters College, where I took full advantage of the theses, books and journals dedicated to the Puerto Rican experience(s) in New York but also extending to other Caribbean diasporas as well as the Chicano/a movement.

In short, the fieldwork carried out in New York was invaluable for my own academic trajectory, not only in terms of the research gathered pertaining to the Nuyorican community, but also as regards the lessons which I learned relating to my own translocality as a Western academic, a British woman, a white individual in a predominantly Latino area (and therefore complicit in the gentrification process) and as a student, learning as readily from the performances I heard as any other member of the audience. The reconciliation of all the above was greatly facilitated through taking note of the ways in which such negotiations of individual identities were carried out by the poets with whom I worked. As a result, my gratitude towards the Nuyorican community in assisting with the deconstruction of my own identity through an empathy with theirs is paramount. The production of this thesis is subsequently a collaborative attempt to construct a cultural genealogy of those authors and poets who have contributed to the Nuyorican legacy throughout the history of New York. I in no way attempt to speak 'for

³ In addition, Fran Tonkiss states that 'the difference between focus groups and individual interviews is not simply a question of openness versus confidentiality or generality versus detail' since 'focus group research does not seek to access individual opinions or even individual accounts, but is concerned with accounts that emerge through interaction' (1997: 197).

them' or wish for them to speak through me; instead, I prefer to view our work together as an ongoing cultural project in which my position as 'involved yet removed' allows for a fresh theoretical perspective to intertwine with the voices providing an alternative pedagogy on the New York spoken word circuit.

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