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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
available at the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Letra Libre, Inc.

First edition: February 2003
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed in the United States of America.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

New York Puerto Ricans have been an integral part of hip hop culture since the creative movement's first stirrings in New York City during the early 1970s. They have been key players in the evolution of hip hop art forms—among them MCing or rapping, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti—from the beginning of the movement. Furthermore, hip hop is as vernacular (or "native") to a great many New York Puerto Ricans as the culture of their parents and grandparents; in journalist Edward Sunez Rodriguez's words, hip hop is as much a part of their lives "as salsa and colonialism."

The late Big Punisher, Christopher Rios, described hip hop creative practices as being among his most ordinary childhood experiences: "For me, growing up in the Bronx, . . . I was surrounded by hip-hop. It was all around me. I was living hip-hop before I knew it was hip-hop. 'Cause graffiti, and dancing and music . . . that was just 'playing outside' to me . . . But that was hip-hop culture. And that was my natural life, so I lived it . . . naturally." His experience is far from exceptional. Having been the first Latino solo rap artist to achieve platinum sales, he is only the most famous among those New York Ricans whom journalist Clyde Valentin describes as having "grown up on Hip Hop like kids grow up on Similac."

Yet much too often the participation and contributions of New York Puerto Ricans to hip hop have been downplayed and even completely ignored. And when their presence has been acknowledged, frequently it has
been misinterpreted as a deflection from Puerto Rican culture and identity, into the African American camp.

On one hand, accounts of Puerto Rican (and, more generally, Latino) cultural expressions sidestep New York Puerto Ricans in hip hop. This occurs because their hip hop stories challenge some of the prevailing assumptions regarding Puerto Rican creative practices and identities. The reigning assumption is that if Puerto Ricans participate in hip hop culture, they must be making some identifiable “Puerto Rican” or “Latino” version of it by, for example, injecting Spanish or Spanglish words into their rhymes or sampling so-called Latin music. If they don’t, the assumption is that they have assimilated into “African Americanness.” In reality, however, New York Puerto Rican artistic expressions often have been virtually indistinguishable from their African American counterparts, particularly for untrained eyes and ears. The reason has not been assimilation but the reconfiguration of cultural practices and identities so that Puerto Ricans and African Americans share common terrain.5

But that is only half of the story regarding the misinterpretation of New York Puerto Rican participation in hip hop. Whether mass-mediated or academic, accounts of hip hop’s history tend to explore it either as an exclusively African American phenomenon or to mention Puerto Rican and/or Latino participation in passing but still end up focusing their analysis on African Americans. Puerto Rican stories and specificities are marginalized from these narratives because the cultural similarities and intersections between both groups are not sufficiently understood. African heritage or “blackness” in the United States is understood primarily through the African American experience. Therefore, although Puerto Rican culture is part of the African diaspora in the Americas, it is not usually imagined as being black. In sum, New York Puerto Rican hip hop artists have been shunted aside by others for not being “too” African Americanized, and they have been shoved aside by others for not being black “enough.”

Hip hop is part of a century-old history of cultural parallels, adaptations, and joint production between African Americans and Caribbean people—among them, Puerto Ricans—in New York City. This history is rooted in their interactions and shared experiences in New York since the early years of the twentieth century. However, this history also is intimately connected to dynamics beyond New York borders. Between African Americans and common African source days of slavery in the Americas and between the after the dawn of the nineteenth century. Afro-diasporic cultures Carlos “Tato” Torres and "common cultural threads" and that are manifest to through those common threads, African diaspora Robert Falties as the "Kongo culture" American and Caribbean jazz, funk, samba, mambo, mambo, mambo, mambo.

This book is built on the breaking essays by Juan Flórez surrounding the role of Puerto Rico's words—written, rapped, acted. I argue in these pages that though not abandoned, puertorriqueñidad (Puerto Rican blackness) is understood primarily through the African American experience. Therefore, although Puerto Rican culture is part of the African diaspora in the Americas, it is not usually imagined as being black. In sum, New York Puerto Rican hip hop artists have been shunted aside by others for not being “too” African Americanized, and they have been shoved aside by others for not being black “enough.”
mately connected to dynamics that extend even farther back in time and beyond New York borders. This history of shared cultural expression between African Americans and Caribbean people in New York is related to common African sources and creolization processes dating to the early days of slavery in the Americas as well as to heavy migration within the Caribbean and between the Caribbean and the United States, particularly after the dawn of the nineteenth century.

Afro-diasporic cultures of the Americas exhibit, in the words of Carlos “Tato” Torres and Ti-Jan Francisco Mbumba Loango, striking “common cultural threads” that date back to the early colonial period and that are manifest to this day. Hip hop is a pattern woven out of some of those common threads, according to art historian and scholar of the African diaspora Robert Farris Thompson. He refers to these commonalities as the “Kongo qualities of sound and motion” present in African American and Caribbean cultural formations. Among his examples are jazz, funk, samba, mambo, bomba and—of course—hip hop.

This book is built on the foundation laid by Thompson, the groundbreaking essays by Juan Flores devoted to dispelling some of the myths surrounding the role of Puerto Ricans in hip hop and, most important, the words—written, rapped and spoken—of hip hop artists and enthusiasts. I argue in these pages that New York Rican hip hoppers have certainly not abandoned but simply stretched the boundaries of puertorriqueñidad (Puerto Ricanness) and latinidad (Latinness) and questioned the assumption that these categories do not intersect with blackness. During a conversation I had years ago with DJ Tony Touch—a.k.a. Tony Toca, a.k.a. the Taino Turntable Terrorist—he insightfully expressed that internalized racism and its conjunction with class bias have accounted for much of the aversion to hip hop exhibited by many Latinos of Afro-diasporic cultures: “You got some Puerto Ricans who think they white and they ain’t even trying to hear hip hop. They wanna be on some proper shit or etiquette. To them, hip hop is ghetto, street, it’s oppression. They don’t associate with that. You got a lot of Hispanics and Puerto Ricans who think they’ve got too much of the European blood in them and not enough of the African.”

New York Puerto Ricans have long been battling the omissions and misconceptions surrounding their historical contributions and current
role in hip hop culture. The following accounts of hip hop history highlight some of the issues involved.

"A GHETTO THING"

Q-Unique (Anthony Quiles) is a South Bronx–raised MC and b-boy who is a member of the rap group Arsonists and the Rock Steady Crew, a world-famous hip hop organization founded in 1977 and particularly recognized for its contributions to breaking. Committed to nourishing a historically grounded hip hop creativity, Q-Unique deeply resents being segregated, as a Puerto Rican, from a hip hop cultural core that often is assumed to be African American. That is one of his sources of artistic frustration today, just as it was the first time we met in 1995, thanks to DJ Tony Touch and D-Stroy, who brought him to my home in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. During that initial conversation, which given his gift for words and passion for the subject lasted for many hours, Q-Unique explained: “Word Up magazine did an article where they mentioned me and it was called ‘The Latinos in Hip-Hop.’ What’s wack about that is that they have to separate us [Puerto Ricans and Blacks]. And I hated that. I was in the same article as Kid Frost, you know, [who did the song] ‘La Raza.’ And I was like, come on man, what do I have to do with Kid Frost? It’s just totally different things and they’re trying to funnel us all together. You never hear an article called ‘The Blacks in Hip-Hop.’"

The problem that Q-Unique describes is twofold. First, hip hop is ahistorically taken to be an exclusively African American expressive culture. Puerto Ricans thus are excluded from the hip hop core on the basis of their being Latino. Second, as Latino population numbers and visibility increase in the United States, a variety of national-origins groups with different experiences of colonization, annexation and/or immigration as well as varied histories of socioeconomic incorporation and racialization are lumped under the Latino pan-ethnic banner with little or no acknowledgment of their differences. This wider social phenomenon manifests itself within the hip hop realm when Latinos are grouped together on the hip hop margins under the presumed commonalities shared by Latino hip hop artists and enthusiasts.
What does a New York Puerto Rican MC like Q-Unique have in common with a West Coast Chicano rap artist like Kid Frost? Not necessarily more than what he shares with an African American MC from New York City, according to Q-Unique. The ethnic “funnelling” that he criticizes relies on the assumption that Latinos will necessarily share certain experiences and/or artistic characteristics. Simplistic and questionable pan-ethnic connections are thus drawn—in this case, between Puerto Ricans and Chicanos on opposite coasts—that actually may serve to erase other more concrete, historically based, interethnic connections, such as those between Puerto Ricans and African Americans in New York.

Q-Unique also explained during our conversation: “We’ve discussed this in Rock Steady and when we’ve become approached with this situation we don’t like doing the ‘Latinos in hip hop’ subject. I think that’s tacky because we believe it’s a ghetto thing. From the start it’s separating us from the rest. Looking at us like we’re the kids in the bubble. It feels wack.”

But just as he resists being funneled into the “Latino hip hop artist” category, Q-Unique also opposes being subsumed under the African American “umbrella.” He is not one to deny that Puerto Ricans are part of the African diaspora. What he objects to is the presumption that the black experience, defined primarily in terms of African Americans, can properly address the specificities of Puerto Rican life in the United States. Behind inclusion lies the specter of subsumption and dismissal. In Q-Unique’s opinion: “The majority of [African Americans] don’t even know who we [Puerto Ricans] are, what we are. They want to consider us Black. I beg to differ. I’m not ready to go under anybody’s umbrella. I know we are our own kind. I know we are of many races, but so is every other nation.”

Q-Unique also refutes the notion that ethnic and racial affiliation have or should have a bearing on an individual’s participation in hip hop culture. Instead, he invokes hip hop’s multiethnic and multiracial South Bronx origins to describe hip hop art forms as grounded in the creativity of young people from U.S. inner-city communities, primarily African American and Puerto Rican but inclusive of other groups as well: “We [Rock Steady Crew] just wanna keep it as a hip hop thing, as a ghetto thing, ‘cause there’s whites as well.”

Edward Sunez Rodríguez, journalist, shares the class proclaims hip hop to be p. in low-income communities at racial component to Rod way of life. Hip hop cultu: Latinos... It is easily presented as one or all of the not have the same claim on it. For example, a white p. of hip hop (i.e., graffiti, graffiti, Bronx. Is he hip hop? Yes,

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thing, 'cause there's whites and there's Japanese and there's other cultures as well."

Edward Sunez Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican hip hop enthusiast and journalist, shares the class dimension of Q-Unique's argument. He also proclaims hip hop to be primarily the creative expression of urban youth in low-income communities. However, there is an important ethnoracial component to Rodriguez's formulation: "Culture is a peoples' [sic] way of life. Hip hop culture thus is the way of life of urban Blacks and Latinos... It is easily possible for anyone to contribute worthwhile and represent one or all of the aspects of hip hop culture. However, they cannot have the same claim on the culture that an urban Black or Latino has on it. For example, a white person may contribute enormously to an aspect of hip hop (i.e., graffiti, DJ-ing, MC-ing, etc.), and live in the South Bronx. Is he hip hop? Yes, but only to a certain extent."

Whereas Rodriguez claims that hip hop "really is a black thing and that includes Latinos and all African peoples," Q-Unique has no interest in defining hip hop's ethnoracial scope. Rodriguez bases his argument not only on these groups' joint hip hop involvement but on a shared history among people of the African diaspora, which he defines as including African Americans as well as Latinos. This shared history encompasses socioeconomic exploitation and marginalization as well as cultural formations. In an article that criticizes what he perceives as the deepening wedges driven between African American and Latinos, he remarks: "Hip hop once united urban Blacks and Latinos through a common culture. It helped them realize that they had much more in common than hip hop. Latinos and Blacks learned they both suffer from oppression, poverty, and share common history and roots."

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

Q-Unique and Edward Sunez Rodriguez express only two of many divergent opinions regarding the relationship between ethnoracial affiliation and participation in hip hop art forms. The bearing of ethnoracial identity on emic or "insider" perceptions regarding "belonging," "entitlement" and
“authenticity” has been a site of contention within hip hop culture since its very beginnings in the early 1970s. As the chapters that follow illustrate, these perceptions have shifted along hip hop’s three-decade history. These changes, in turn, have had an impact on Puerto Rican participation and representation in hip hop culture. Conversely, through their involvement in hip hop, young New York Puerto Ricans have influenced the way in which belonging, entitlement and authenticity have been defined within this cultural zone.

BETWEEN BLACKNESS AND LATINIDAD

This book is devoted to exploring the history of New York Puerto Rican participation and representation in hip hop culture, focusing on its musical dimension and paying particular attention to the role played by ethno-racial identities. How have New York Puerto Ricans navigated the murky waters of ethno-racial identification within the hip hop realm? How have they thought of their identity as Puerto Ricans vis-à-vis the larger pan-ethnic Latino label? Have they constructed Puerto Ricanness as in association with or in contradiction to African Americanness? How has Puerto Ricanness been thought to be related to racial identity?

Puerto Ricans who have taken part in New York’s hip hop culture have constructed their identities, participated and created art through a process of negotiation with the dominant notions of blackness and latinidad. The way in which Puerto Ricans have been represented through commercial hip hop culture also indicates a tension between blackness and latinidad in the construction of Puerto Rican images.

Puerto Ricans in the United States are commonly thought of as being part of this country’s Hispanic or Latino population. But Puerto Ricans are also considered an exception among Latinos. Their exceptionality is based on a history that diverges from what has been construed as the Latino norm and that bears much in common with the experience of African Americans. Furthermore, Puerto Ricans share common ground with African Americans not only because of their similar socioeconomic experiences as racialized ethnic minorities in the United States but also because Puerto Rican culture is as Spanish as it is African, thus making it part of the myriad in the Americas. How blackness, since in the terms of African American Puerto Ricans may fit.

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part of the myriad group experiences that make up the African diaspora in the Americas. However, Puerto Ricans also are cast out of narratives of blackness, since in the United States blackness often is thought of only in terms of African Americans. Caught between *latinidad* and blackness, Puerto Ricans may fit in both categories and yet also in neither.

Given the varied meanings that blackness can have—in some cases referring only to African Americans and in other cases to all Afro-diasporic people—I will be using “black” and “Black” as two distinct concepts: “black” as the “racial” or sociocultural category that refers to people of the African diaspora and “Black” as the U.S.-based ethno-racial category that refers specifically to African Americans. Although the terminology used varies, this conceptual distinction between African American (Black) and Afro-diasporic (black) is used by many hip hop participants as well as by some students of the culture, and it is key in understanding the history of Puerto Rican participation in hip hop.

I believe that the meanings given to blackness and *latinidad* by the young New Yorkers involved in hip hop have had a complex relationship with those meanings common among the older Puerto Rican and African American generations as well as with media and academic representations of these ethno-racial identity fields. Through hip hop's creative expressions, young Puerto Ricans and African Americans, among others, have partly deconstructed and reconstructed “official” ethnic and racial categories. Simultaneously, they have been deeply influenced by the dominant formulations, by which they abide at times.

The bulk of this book consists of an exploration of various stages in hip hop's nearly thirty-year history. I aim to discuss how social constructions and experiences of ethnicity and race intersect with class and gender and affect the creative participation and representations of Puerto Ricans in hip hop culture.

This introduction establishes two basic ideas that underlie my exploration of Puerto Rican participation in hip hop's musical realm: rap music's relationship to hip hop culture and hip hop's simultaneous existence as a vernacular, community-based and mass-mediated expressive realm. This chapter also identifies the specific subzone of Puerto Rican participation within the larger hip hop zone that makes up this book's central focus of inquiry.
Chapter 2 serves as an introductory counterpoint to chapter 1, for it contextualizes hip hop culture within the history of Puerto Ricans in New York and their placement in the city's cultural history and its ethno-racial and socioeconomic hierarchies.

Part I, which includes chapters 3 through 5, is an exploration of hip hop history as seen through the lens of New York Puerto Rican participation. The history of New York Puerto Ricans within the hip hop zone serves as a way to illustrate how their identities are negotiated through negotiations between *latinidad* and blackness—identity categories that themselves are constantly being redefined. This history is also a vehicle through which to explore how African American–Puerto Rican interethic dynamics and identities manifest themselves within hip hop.

Chapter 3 discusses hip hop’s early times as an Afro-diasporic community-based culture in the 1970s South Bronx. This chapter centers on issues of “authenticity” and cultural “entitlement” and the changes in those notions that ensued after the commercial recording of rap music in 1979 and the mass-mediated popularity of so-called breakdancing during the first half of the 1980s.

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

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

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Chapter 7 delves further into the participation and commercial relations are premised on and tropical (i.e., Latin) the convergence of.

Chapter 8 discusses used by New York’s blackness. This chapter use of Spanish language, ethno-racial identity, and young Puerto Ricans. York- raised Puerto R rhyme that privilege poric ghetto-based lin.

Chapter 9 is dedicated to the participation of Rican rap legend Big L and linked to the way in which the epilogue examines the main arguments. The epilogue examines key issues and
on the participation and perceived entitlement of Puerto Ricans involved in hip hop.

Part II, which includes chapters 6 through 9, centers around four themes that at the turn of the millennium have provided vivid examples of the ways in which Puerto Rican participation in hip hop can be described as a navigation between *latinidad* and blackness.

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

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

Chapter 8 discusses language use and wordplay in rap rhymes as tools used by New York Puerto Ricans to navigate between *latinidad* and blackness. This chapter questions the common association between the use of Spanish language (and even so-called Spanglish) and Puerto Rican ethno-racial identity through the musical production and experiences of young Puerto Ricans. It illustrates how the ethno-racial identity of New York–raised Puerto Rican youth has been expressed most often through rhymes that privilege English and connect them with wider Afro-diasporic ghetto-based linguistic practices.

Chapter 9 is dedicated to exploring the legacy of deceased Puerto Rican rap legend Big Punisher as someone whose commercial success was linked to the way in which he navigated the treacherous waters where *latinidad* and blackness meet.

Chapter 10 is a brief overview of the book's historical narrative, while the epilogue examines some recent trends in hip hop music in light of my main arguments. The Appendix consists of interviews and articles focusing on key issues and artists.
This book is, on one hand, an inquiry into the creative expressions of New York Puerto Rican youth. It is also a contribution to the understanding of how African American–Puerto Rican relations and identities have affected the realm of cultural production. I offer hip hop culture as an example of how youth artistic expressions sometimes challenge and sometimes reinforce traditional categories of ethno-racial affiliation. The result is that the cultural boundaries among Puerto Ricanness, African Americanness, Latinidad, and blackness are in many cases fluid and cannot always be properly established. To ignore the way in which Puerto Rican and African American identities and artistic expressions have intersected is to neglect a crucial aspect of cultural history.

HIP HOP CULTURE AND RAP MUSIC

Rap music is largely considered by its participants to be part of hip hop culture, a broader phenomenon that includes other artistic expressions such as graffiti (originally simply known as writing) and the dance form known as b-boying/b-girling, breaking or “breakdancing.” Rap music may be described as the “aural” dimension of hip hop; graffiti and breaking, respectively, being part of its “visual” and “kinetic” expressions. This aural dimension of hip hop involves two primary expressive elements: MCing—also referred to as rapping or rhyming—and DJing.

Although my focus is rap music, I have studied it as a component of hip hop culture. After the short-lived existence of breaking and graffiti as mainstream fads during the first half of the 1980s, rap has been the most visible, popular and profitable of hip hop art forms. Situating rap within hip hop culture allows for the construction of a more rounded and complex analysis that takes close account of rap’s sociohistorical context.

Rap is today one of the most popular and profitable musical genres. It is the most rapidly growing segment of the music industry. The Recording Industry Association of America announced that in 1999, rap music sales accounted for 10.1 percent of the market share; of the top 40 albums of the year, 10 were rap recordings. At the same time, rap is a musical expression whose history, success and discourses are tied to poor Afro-diasporic urban communities in the United States. Rap, therefore, must be understood through the recognition of its intense technological and industrial media-
expression of the understandings of culture as challenge and filiation. The contex, African and Caribbean, which Puerto Ricans have in

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Rap music and breakdancing. This component of rap within the context of other genres. It is recording music sales, albums of the expression of urban understandings of media.

... its international popularity, its historical context and its continued rootedness in poor communities of color across the United States.

New York inner-city neighborhoods were the cradle of what we know today as rap, and its first exponents date from the early 1970s. It is a music rooted in Afro-North American culture. But in spite of being firmly situated in this cultural tradition, rap—like other genres such as jazz, rhythm and blues (R & B) and soul—has been fundamentally influenced by Caribbean cultures. Like other hip hop art forms, rap is a testimony to the cultural interaction among African Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean immigrants and their descendants in New York City since the early twentieth century. Rap is also evidence of the cultural parallels that exist among the various ethnic cultures that are all part of the African diaspora in the Americas. For example, in a New York Times article, Daisann McLane noted how rap's lyrical style recalls that of Trinidadian calypso, while Juan Flores in his essay "Rappin', Writin' & Breakin" noted rap's resemblance to Puerto Rican plena and aguinaldos, and Robert Farris Thompson in "Hip Hop 101" related the importance of drum breaks and scratching records in hip hop to the role of drum breaks and certain percussion techniques in Caribbean music. Some of these parallels are explained in Chapter 2.

Rap music has evolved from a local musical style of New York City to being one of the strongest contenders in the international music market. This intense process of commercialization has had a profound effect on rap music, which began as an art form nourished and developed primarily through everyday experience. Initially it depended on the participants' physical presence at house parties, outdoor jams and neighborhood rhyme cyphers. As time passed, that community-based everyday experience came to be complemented—and in many cases replaced—by the sounds and images of mass media.

HIP HOP AS VERNACULAR AND MASS-MEDIATED CULTURAL EXPRESSION

The process of mass mediation often occurs with no regard for the historical context, roots, function or "meanings," of the form being mediated, and hip hop has been no exception. Its mass mediation has been
accompanied by the distancing of localized, neighborhood-based hip hop experiences and creativity from its commercial expressions. Hip hop's multiethnic New York history and its artistic expressions that include music, dance and visual art have often been omitted in movies as well as television, radio and press coverage that limit hip hop culture to rap music and a commercially appealing slice of the African American experience.

Popular perspectives are profoundly informed by the reach and influence of these mass-mediated accounts, which at times prove more influential than community-based or vernacular knowledge. Thus, versions of hip hop history that have excised Puerto Ricans are sometimes accepted in the very New York neighborhoods that gave rise to hip hop, particularly by those who did not witness its early development firsthand. A good example is Gotti, whom I met in 1998 right after his performance at the 116th Street Carnival in East Harlem (El Barrio), Manhattan. During one of our later conversations, this New York–raised and English–dominant 18-year-old Puerto Rican rapper explained his preference for Island-based underground music—rap and reggae in Spanish—in terms of ethnic property: "Hip hop [rap] belongs to the morenos [African Americans], but underground is ours."

Veteran b-boy and Rock Steady Crew president Crazy Legs (R. Colón) remarks, regarding the gaps in historical memory in the same New York neighborhoods where hip hop first developed: "The only thing you could get back in the day was ghetto celebrity status, and that's all most people wanted. That was our media. . . . Nowadays though, I know so many white people that know much more about Hip-Hop history than the average 'ghetto' person."  

Localized historical memories are influenced, and occasionally even usurped, by mass-mediated ones that tend to dehistoricize, oversimplify, romanticize and/or sensationalize. However, influence does not just run in one direction. Mass-mediated representations draw from New York native historical memories as well as from its thriving "underground" or "extra-commercial" scene, particularly in the commercial race to remain connected to hip hop's street-based "authenticity."

For example, since the latter half of the 1990s, there has been a growing media recognition of hip hop as a "Black and Latino" form of cultural expression. Self-described "hip hop" or "urban music and culture" magazines of wide circulation made a visible effort to envision networks BET (Music Television) have tion of Latinos as partne to the marginalization c certainly points to an o hop. This shift may not, ican exclusivity but just :

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zines of wide circulation such as Vibe, The Source and Rap Pages, have made a visible effort to expand hip hop "entitlement" to Latinos. Television networks BET (Black Entertainment Television) and MTV (Music Television) have followed the same trend. This growing recognition of Latinos as partners in the hip hop project has not signaled an end to the marginalization of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, but it most certainly points to an opening in the ethnically exclusive vision of hip hop. This shift may not, however, be a lasting one out of African American exclusivity but just a passing trend.

The recent phenomenon of greater inclusion of Latinos is one example, among many, of a cross-fertilization between the commercially successful (or "mainstream") end of the hip hop spectrum and its more vernacular, street-based, grassroots, localized or underground expressions. In an unending quest for the cutting edge that will boost sales—which in the case of hip hop translates into a perceived street "credibility," "legitimacy" or "authenticity"—record labels, magazines and television stations are constantly drawing from vernacular experience and creativity. After ignoring Latinos for decades, mass media outlets have taken their cue regarding inclusiveness from hip hop’s more street-based expressions.

It is within this context of cross-fertilization between vernacular cultural expressions and mass-mediated ones that I place my discussion of Puerto Ricans and rap music.

THE HIP HOP ZONE

Hip hop is a fluid cultural space, a zone whose boundaries are an internal and external matter of debate. A profoundly diverse, translocal, multiethnic and multiracial cultural phenomenon, hip hop expressions also can present themselves as exclusionary, for aesthetic, regional, gender, sexual-orientation, national, ethnic, racial, class or myriad other reasons. The dynamic tensions within hip hop and its constant drawing and crossing of borders are better addressed by the somewhat ambiguous concept of a "hip hop zone" than by frequently adopted but more limiting (and, in my opinion, questionable) terms like "hip hop community" and "hip hop nation."
Within the larger hip hop zone exist a great many subzones, most of which are interconnected and/or overlap. There is a Boricua/Latinocentric rap scene in New York, which has been closely affiliated with the rap and reggaetón music of Puerto Rico (at times also called underground). Its most popular exponents, among them El Mexicano, Daddy Yankee, Chezina, Glori and Ivy Queen, tend to have been raised in Puerto Rico and be based there. Nevertheless, New York-based Puerto Rican (and, increasingly, Dominican) artists also abound in this sector of the hip hop zone: Mafa, a Dominican DJ, has released two albums; Enemigo, a Bronx-based Puerto Rican rapper, released his debut album in December 2000; Don Gato traveled to Puerto Rico to appear as a guest artist in albums by DJ Adams and Coo-Kee; and innumerable professionally aspiring artists and crews like BWP (Boricuas With Pride), Patota and Gotti are struggling for commercial recognition. Most of the New York-based artists who participate in the Island-style rap or reggaetón circuit are Spanish-dominant and either have been raised primarily in Puerto Rico or have spent substantial periods of their lives there.

In terms of musical and verbal aesthetics, these artists are much more closely tied to the rap and reggaetón music of Puerto Rico than to the “core” New York hip hop music subzone. Establishing the “core” and “fringes” of New York hip hop is a subjective and potentially sticky endeavor. However, an argument can be made (for this book’s purposes) for the existence of a core New York hip hop music scene in which African Americans are the most commercially visible group but in which West Indians and Caribbean Latinos (particularly Puerto Ricans) have participated to a substantial extent. This core is regarded as such within most hip hop “insider” discourses, given its importance and its impact on the larger, translocal or international hip hop zone.33

The Puerto Ricans who have participated in this core New York hip hop music scene have been largely English-dominant youth. Among the better-known are DJ Charlie Chase of the Cold Crush Brothers, Master OC and Devastating Tito of the Fearless Four and Rubie Dee and Prince Whipper Whip of The Fantastic Five. All three of these music groups were popular in the early 1980s and are widely acknowledged as pioneers of rap music’s early commercial era. The Fat Boy’s Prince Markie Dee Morales and The Real Roxanne are two New York Puerto Ricans who attained commercial popularity; has been a key music producer behind the popular son BDP’s Criminal Minded and classic hip hop albums. Am 1990s and the early years of ricane G, PowerRule, Latin I late Big Punisher, Thirstin’ F La Bruja, Angie Martinez a like Frankie Cutlass, DJ Ton R, Lazy K, DJ Enuff and B. This “core” New York hip hop participate in it are the topics of

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The borders between the New York hip hop “core” and the Island-style subzones are porous. DJ Tony Touch, for example, is one of the few hip hop artists who comfortably weave in and out of these two subzones. His mixed tapes are popular among both audiences. Although Brooklyn-based, he travels frequently to Puerto Rico to spin records at rap and reggaetón events and clubs. He also works regularly at New York clubs that feature hip hop music, at times for mostly Latino audiences, at times for mostly African American audiences, at times for mixed audiences. His album The Piece Maker, released in 2000 by Tommy Boy Music, featured popular African American and U.S. Latino rappers like the Flipmode Squad, Wu-Tang Clan, KRS-One, Cypress Hill, Beatnuts and Big Pun. It also included the Spanish-language reggaetón track “P.R. All-Stars,” featuring some of the Island’s favorites such as Mexican, Chezina, Rey Pirin, Yankee and Ivy Queen.

The collaborative album Boricua Guerrero (1997)—“Boricua” is another term from “Puerto Rican,” derived from “Borikén,” the Taíno name for the island—is another example of the porosity of these two hip hop subzones. As one of the album’s executive producers, Stan “Cash” Stephenson, explained to me, this commercially successful album was directed largely toward a Spanish-speaking audience. However, the producers also sought to bridge the gap between these subzones by pairing popular rappers from the New York “core” scene with popular artists from the Island. The album included collaborations between Nas and Daddy
Yankee, Q-Tip and Chezzi and Jahvia. Its executive pa African American, and Eli Rico who relocated to New

Although Boricua Guer share the bond of Puerto R parts, their creative produ “core” hip hop music scene amid gunfire in the “Intro,” guages, one race,” Fat Joe at the New York African Am and reggae singers.

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New York hip hop culture spaces, which have include
INTRODUCTION

Yankee, Q-Tip and Chezina, Fat Joe and Mexicano, and Big Punisher and Jahvia. Its executive producers were Cash Stephenson, a New York African American, and Elías de León, a Puerto Rican raised in Puerto Rico who relocated to New York.

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

For the Puerto Ricans who participate in “core” New York hip hop music, ethnic identity is not necessarily foregrounded in their hip hop-related activities. Neighborhood, borough, city, coast, gender, and sexual and class identity often take precedence as categories of affiliation within the hip hop zone. One reason for this is that Puerto Ricans who stress their Puerto Rican identity too intensely can be left out of the hip hop common territory shared with African Americans. (This idea is developed in later chapters.)

Some Puerto Rican hip hop enthusiasts do highlight their ethnic identity, but others do not. Some mention it in their lyrics, while others do not. Some incorporate *salsa, plena, merengue* and other Latino-identified genres into their hip hop beats; others choose not to. Some hang out, dance and/or make music mainly with Puerto Ricans or other Latinos; others may be the only Puerto Rican in an otherwise all-African American crew.

Unlike the Island-inspired rap and *reggaetón* scenes in New York where the participants are mostly Puerto Rican and almost exclusively Latino, the physical spaces where Puerto Ricans participate in “core” hip hop for the most part include other groups. At times, most participants in these spaces are African American. Other times, Latinos and African Americans comprise the majority of the participants, with smaller proportions of “whites” and Asians; sometimes these proportions are inverted.

New York hip hop culture has thrived during the last decade in diverse spaces, which have included streetcorner rhyme cyphers; “open-mic”
events like those hosted by Bobbito the Barber, Fareed Abdallah and Flaco Navaja at the Nuyorican Poets Café; community centers like The Point in the South Bronx where hip hop art forms are a central component of the classes, workshops and special events offered; schools like El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn that have incorporated hip hop into their curriculum; small record stores like Fat Beats in the West Village (originally located in the East Village) and Bobbito’s Footwork in the East Village (now closed); annual competitions like the DMC DJ battles; rap shows at the Apollo Theater in Harlem or clubs like Wetlands and SOB’s in Lower Manhattan; Zulu Nation and Rock Steady Crew anniversaries that feature concerts, panel discussions and competitions; Internet radio shows like 88-Hip Hop and Queendom, which for years transmitted from a loft in SoHo; and traveling multimedia hip hop gatherings like Elevated and The Spot.

Hip hop has been one of the most vibrant products of youth culture at the turn of the millennium. This book is a contribution to the history of Puerto Rican hip hop artists in New York as well as a necessary—and largely neglected—angle from which the construction of Puerto Rican identities and artistic expressions must be explored.

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