



**Agustin Laos-Montes, Arlene Davila, eds.** *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. xiv + 493 pp. \$25.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-11275-8.



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## Latins in Manhattan

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In the last ten years or so, there has been a veritable explosion of research and writing by Latinos and about Latinos in New York and the United States. A new crop of Latino scholars has resurrected the history of early Latino migrants to New York City, focused on the Latino condition in general, and created new forums for their findings.[1] *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* is the latest addition in this growing new field of “Latino Studies.” It is divided into four sections—loosely defined as the Production of Latinidad, Expressive Cultures, Latino/a Identities, and Latinizing Cityscapes—and is written for a scholarly audience. Its eighteen articles seek to portray the Latino/Hispanic experience in all its complexities, ramifications, and contradictions. These entries are interrelated and interdisciplinary and range in quality from the excellent essay on Latino literature and identity by Juan Flores to the unfocused, meandering account of Latin dance classes by Karen Beckstein.[2]

*Mambo Montage*, editor Agustin Lao-Montes tells us, “is an attempt to situate the historical production of Latino American identities, cultural expressions, and so-

cial movements in the context of New York City” (p. 3). The important concept here is “latinidad,” which is both the unifying theme of the book and “a useful category of historical analysis” (p. 36, n. 9). Latinidad is defined as a common Latino identity for all Latin peoples in the United States, be they Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, or Columbian, from the Caribbean or Latin America. Latinidad is particularly relevant in New York because the city has the most diverse Latino population and is also the “symbolic center of Latin culture” (p.2), hence the “mambo montage” of the title. Such a pan-Latino identity only began developing in the late 1960s, hence my use of the “Latino/Hispanic” label to encompass the time frame covered by the book.

Latinos, however, “remain generally invisible” (p. 366), because their history “has been poorly documented” (p. 366). Luis Aponte-Pares believes “this loss compounds the view that Latinos are all immigrants, [and] that they have not contributed to the development of New York City” (p. 366). *Mambo Montage* will have none of that. Its articles reveal a long history of Latinos in New York, beginning with Puerto Rican and Cuban patriots

plotting to overthrow Spanish rule in their islands and concluding with the Hispanic marketing industry, Spanish language rights, and the development of a pan-Latino identity, that is to say, *latinidad*. Along the way, the articles cover Latino baseball teams in the Jim Crow era, Puerto Rican and Brazilian women in labor unions, and Latino activism and social movements, laced with discourses on Latino art, literature, music, dance, and food. In the process, these entries spell out the differences between New York's Latino/Hispanic groups. Each has arrived at different times, under different conditions, for differing reasons, and from distinct countries that have their own histories, cultures, and racial mix.

How is a common identity possible in this context? The answer lies in another important theme of the book, the centrality of race in the Hispanic/Latino experience. In the words of Lao-Montes, "everyday racism is the most immediate source in the formation of a pan-Latino consciousness" (p. 10). Race is key because Puerto Ricans, the first large Latino group in the city, encountered a rigid black/white racial dichotomy when they arrived. Many were white, but those who were not shared the indignities and exclusion that white America inflicted on American Blacks. Old-stock and Euro-ethnic New Yorkers quickly imposed a non-white "other" status on all Puerto Ricans, whatever their skin color. New to such racial discrimination, Puerto Ricans clung to their culture, their Spanish language, and their neighborhoods, and took solace in their Puerto Rican heritage. Thus, self-identification from below (by Puerto Ricans) and "the practices of othering" (p. 17) from above (to Puerto Ricans) fostered a Latino identity. As Lao-Montes explains, "One of the main racial ideologies of *latinidad* defines Latinos as a third race, as it were, in between black and white" (p. 9).

That "perception of Latinos as a mestizo race" (p. 9), that "so-called browning of America" (p. 9), is at the core of two-thirds of the essays. Articles by Adrian Burgos, Jr., by Ramon Grosfoguel and Chloe S. Georas, and by Jose Itzigsohn and Carlos Dore-Cabral discuss how Latino ball teams stressed "Spanish" to evade the color line; how Dominicans in New York were lumped with Puerto Ricans into that "non-white" category while the mostly white, anti-Castro Cuban refugees were not; how Dominicans chose to identify themselves as Latino rather than white or black; and how Latinos were discriminated against, stigmatized, and finally marginalized by white America.[3] Jocelyn Solis adds Mexican identity and immigration status to the mix, maintaining that Mexicans (the newest and fastest growing segment of Latinos in the

city) were stigmatized because those from Latin America had long been considered "a foreign other" (p. 342) in the United States and undocumented Mexicans even more so by their illegal status.[4] Latinos are not just another ethnic group in this formulation. Grosfoguel and Georas, for one, posit that equating *latinidad* with ethnicity denies racism and blames Latinos for their marginalized condition in the city and the nation, thus refuting earlier depictions of Puerto Ricans, and by extension other Latinos, as the latest wave of immigrants to New York who would in time assimilate into mainstream America.[5]

Other factors also promoted a Latino identity. To improve their lot, Latinos of all stripes engaged in community organizations, electoral politics, and protest groups, which in the context of New York meant Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Columbians, and sundry others had to work together as Latinos, not as disparate nationalities. Six articles outline Puerto Rican and Latino activism and community involvement that stretched from the very early revolutionary clubs composed of Puerto Ricans and Cubans, through the social and political militancy of the Young Lords and the neighborhood action committees, and finally to the current ongoing struggles against police brutality. The activism of the 1960s and 1970s has been explained better and more fully elsewhere,[6] but Luis Aponte-Pares, Liz Sevchenko, Arlene Davila, and joint authors Elsa Cardalda Sanchez and Amilcar Tirado Aviles explore identity politics in the organizing of Latino Gays, latinizing the Lower East Side's name to "Loisaida" to claim the neighborhood and keep gentrification at bay, and creating neighborhood museums and workshops for Puerto Rican and Latino artists.[7] Language is key as well because the Hispanic marketing industry targets Latinos "as a common people and a market" (p. 411).[8] Arlene Davila argues that to earn and stay in business, this industry actively promotes "the permanence of the Spanish language as the basis for Latino/Hispanic identity" (p. 411).

What is apparent in *Mambo Montage* is that Latinos are still marginalized on all sides. Puerto Ricans in New York City (aka Nuyoricans or the more recently coined, DiaspoRicans) are particularly vulnerable here. There is no hyphenated Puerto Rican-American, relates Juan Flores, hence Puerto Ricans live off the hyphen, unrecognized by mainstream society on the mainland or the island.[9] Flores is specifically concerned with Nuyorican writers who are "dismissed and ignored by the Puerto Rican government and literary establishment" (p. 195), unlike other Latino authors in the United States, whose countries of origin provide recognition and con-

sular support and whose novels are often taken as representative of the Latino experience in New York City even though that experience was really a Puerto Rican one.[10] Aponte-Pares asserts that this exclusion also extends to Latino Gays, who are stigmatized by the dominant Macho Latin culture, yet not accepted by the Gay movement in New York.[11]

A similar dynamic is at work elsewhere. Wilson Valentin-Escobar details how the lyrics of Puerto Rican born singer Hector Lavoe expressed the hopes and sorrows of diasporic Puerto Ricans and Latinos living in New York.[12] They in turn made Lavoe's Salsa into a music that "critique[d] Puerto Rican second-class citizenship ... and affirmed their cultural identity" (p. 214). Lavoe died in 1993 and, according to his wishes, was buried in The Bronx, the city's most Latino borough. Island Puerto Ricans, however, demanded that Lavoe's body be re-interred in Puerto Rico, in effect dismissing New York's Puerto Rican community as not really Puerto Rican. Likewise, Raquel Z. Rivera describes how South Bronx Puerto Rican youths who participated with Blacks in the creation of Hip-Hop music found themselves caught between Latino and Black culture.[13] As Hip-Hop became more attuned to the Black ghetto scene in the 1980s and rapping in English took precedence over the Latino rhythmic contribution, Puerto Rican Hip-Hop artists seemed an anomaly, seen as neither Latino nor Black. In the same way, as Davila related, Puerto Rican artists created El Museo Del Barrio only to find themselves subordinated to and virtually ignored by established cultural institutions in New York, the United States, and Latin America.[14] Meanwhile, the Hispanic marketing industry, Davila continues, only employs Latin American professionals (those "not yet 'tainted' with U.S. culture" [p. 415]), never Latinos from the United States.[15] Presenting itself "as the authentic 'spokesman' for the entire U.S. Latino population," the industry contributes to and winds up profiting "from Latinos' marginality in greater society" (p. 416).

On the whole, *latinidad* works well as a unifying theme in *Mambo Montage*, but there are difficulties with the concept in and of itself. For one, it glosses over the differences between Latino groups that despite the growing Latino indentification are real and concrete and are kept alive by continuing inflows of new migrants. Cubans are not Puerto Ricans and vice versa. For another, like the Hispanic marketing industry, *latinidad* assumes the existence of a static Latino community (always there, always Spanish-speaking, and always the "other") and ignores a larger bilingual Latino community that has

moved out of "El Barrio" but not away from its roots. This cohort of Latinos is socially aspiring, increasingly educated, and English-speaking, yet according to Vilma Santiago-Irizarry, insists on bilingualism in city signs, government forms, and education to counter negative images of Latinos, in effect using the Spanish language as a form of empowerment instead of marginalization.[16]

In the final analysis, *Mambo Montage* is an important book. Its articles convey much new information about the Latino/Hispanic community in New York and explore important but long-ignored issues. The inclusion of music, literature, and the arts fills in the Latino/Hispanic experience even more, while the footnotes and bibliographical references alone are invaluable for the latest works in the field. That said, however, some of the entries are not as well researched or as clearly written as they should be. There are too many asides just accepted as given without explanation or footnote references. The otherwise fine article by Grosfoguel and Georas, for example, mentions that white America associates Puerto Rican identity with "laziness, criminality, stupidity, and a tendency toward uncivilized behavior" (p. 98), without showing how such an association came about. Crying racism is not enough. One must have evidence, or at the very least the scholarship on which the assertion is based. Such tidbits are sprinkled throughout the book and point out the need for further research in the field. Similarly, much of the writing is numbingly abstract. The reader has to plow through sections of hermetic prose and theoretical constructs with little factual grounding. This limits the potential audience of *Mambo Montage*. And this is unfortunate because this book is worthwhile and should be read by many.

#### Notes

[1]. See for example, James Jennings, ed., *Blacks, Latinos, and Asians in Urban America* (Westport, Conn. and London: Praeger, 1994); Andres Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic: African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the New York Political Economy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Gabriel Haslip-Viera and Sherrie L. Baver, eds., *Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition* (Notre Dame, Ind. and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); Clara E. Rodriguez, ed., *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997); Andres Torres and Jose E. Velasquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices From the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); and Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York:

Columbia University Press, 2000).

[2]. Chapter 6, Juan Flores, "Life Off the Hyphen: Latino Literature and Nuyorican Tradition"; and chapter 17, Karen Beckstein, "Taking Class Into Account: Dance, the Studio, and Latino Culture."

[3]. Chapter 2, Adrian Burgos, Jr., "The Latins From Manhattan': Confronting Race and Building Community in Jim Crow Baseball, 1906- 1950"; chapter 3, Ramon Grosfoguel and Chloe S. Georas, "Latino Caribbean Diasporas in New York"; and chapter 11, Jose Itzigsohn and Carlos Dore-Cabral, "The Manifold Character of Panethnicity: Latino Identities and Practices Among Dominicans in New York City."

[4]. Chapter 12, Jocelyn Solis, "Immigration Status and Identity: Undocumented Mexicans in New York."

[5]. For Puerto Ricans as an ethnic group, see Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, 2nd ed., (New York and London: The M.I.T. Press, 1970); and Oscar Handlin, *The Newcomers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959).

[6]. See Torres and Velazquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement*.

[7]. Chapter 13, Luis Aponte-Pares, "Outside/In: Crossing Queer and Latino Boundaries"; chapter 10, Liz Sevchenko, "Making Loisaída: Placing Puertorriquenidad in Lower Manhattan"; chapter 5, Arlene Davila, "Culture in the Battlefield: From Nationalist to Pan-Latino

Projects"; and chapter 9, Elsa B. Cardalda Sanchez and Amilcar Tirado Aviles, "Ambiguous Identities! The Affirmation of Puertorriquenidad in the Community Murals of New York City."

[8]. Chapter 15, Arlene Davila, "The Latin Side of Madison Avenue: Marketing and the Language That Makes Us 'Hispanics'."

[9]. Flores, "Life Off the Hyphen."

[10]. Flores is referring to Cuban-American author Oscar Hijuelos, whose novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* won the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1990 and depicted the Latin music scene of 1950s New York as solely Cuban, even though the Cuban exodus from Castro's Cuba began much later.

[11]. Aponte-Pares, "Outside/In."

[12]. Chapter 7, Wilson Valentin-Escobar, "Nothing Connects Us All But Imagined Sounds: Performing Trans-Boricua Memories, Identities, and Nationalisms Through the Death of Hector Lavoe."

[13]. Chapter 8, Raquel Z. Rivera, "Hip-Hop, Puerto Rican, and Ethnoracial Identities in New York."

[14]. Davila, "Culture in the Battlefield."

[15]. Davila, "The Latin Side of Madison Avenue."

[16]. Chapter 18, Vilma Santiago-Irizarry, "Deceptive Solidity: Public Signs, Civic Inclusion, and Language Rights in New York City (and Beyond)."

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