

Juan Flores. *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 265 pp. \$49.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-11077-8.



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Memories Mended and Imagined

Contrary to what the title suggests, Juan Flores' *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* does not fall squarely within the boundaries of ethnomusicology. Or, rather, this disciplinary label is only one of several that could be applied with fairness. This provocative collection of ten essays, six of which were published previously and subsequently revised for this volume, explores music alongside the Latino "ethnoscape," architecture, literature, migration, social movements, and the university. [1] And yet, in spite of its expansive range, the book has an elegant consistency and a discernible sense of direction. Flores confronts throughout scholarly and commonsense views of "Latino" as a category of analysis and policymaking and as an emerging anchoring point of identity with the experiences of those who live "off the hyphen," namely Puerto Ricans in the United States. Without stridency, he denounces the habitual exclusion of Puerto Ricans in the US from American memory and also from the memories of Puerto Ricans from the island. In his examination of Puerto Rican popular culture, Flores aims to find ways of

repairing broken memories and to lay a foundation for a politics capable of contesting colonialism and dispossession in its various incarnations.

With an emphasis on the Puerto Rican counterpoint, Flores puts forth several general arguments. First, he makes a persuasive case for the need to abandon the term "Latino" when deployed without modifiers. As he puts it, "'Latino' or 'Hispanic' only holds up when qualified by the national-group angle or optic from which it is uttered: there is a 'Chicano/Latino' perspective or 'Cuban/Latino' perspective, but no meaningful one that is simply 'Latino'" (p. 8). As Flores (among others) warns, this increasingly dominant designation has a homogenizing impact that may thwart scholarship and that makes for pernicious politics. "Latino," Flores maintains, tends to obfuscate the fact that the various peoples who would constitute such a group occupy markedly different positions in US hierarchies of power and privilege. Most Puerto Ricans, as is well known, face life near the bottom of the usual scales of social welfare. Their experiences and often their cultural idioms too, resemble those of African Ameri-

cans more closely than those of many of their Latino kin. In many quarters, Puerto Ricans are still portrayed as a true "under-class," with all of its culture-of-poverty implications harking back to Oscar Lewis. They are exceptions to the trends that reportedly characterize the careers of more paradigmatically "Latino" immigrants. In short, they have undergone what Flores calls an internal *othering*, a process related to the amnesia he denounces.

It should be pointed out that Flores does not explain here nor any place else in the volume that the national qualifier can be no more than a starting point for the sort of project he proposes. After all, many of the objections he raises in regard to the use of "Latino" could be applied to the "Chicano/Latino" or Puerto Rican perspectives as well. Nonetheless, whether he states it here or not, it is obvious that Flores recognizes all too well that national experiences are also variegated and fragmentary.

A second and related theme in Flores' book takes the form of an exhortation to transcend the resilient boundary that still separates the study of Latin America from the study of Latinos. He points out sensibly that an effort to understand how an immigrant group came to occupy a particular location in the social order must begin with an understanding of the circumstances that conditioned their departures and arrivals. His is not the instrumentalist suggestion that Latin American history should be mined for background data. Instead, he wants to call attention to the persistence of forces and bonds that reach beyond the borders of nation states. Rather than promoting a version of Latino pan-ethnicity, Flores wants to offer a pointed critique of toothless multiculturalism. In an essay titled "Pan Latino/Trans-Latino," Flores writes: "Pan-ethnicity only stands up as a reliable group category if it is recognized that each group making up the aggregate is at the same time participating in a transnational community, the example of the Puerto Ricans, as colo-

nial Latino immigrants, being the most salient case in point" (p.157).

The adjective colonial is of the essence for Flores, whose aim is to connect what some call ethnic politics to an understanding of power dynamics on a global scale. The insistence on the qualifier "colonial" also alerts us to Flores misgivings about talk of a post-colonial Latino subject. In the essays titled "The Lite Colonial" and "Broken English Memories," Flores makes clear that his objection to the use of the prefix "post" is not simply that it is deceptive and premature in political and chronological terms, especially in the case of Puerto Rico. He also wants to argue that in an era of globalization, post-colonialism has proven to be little more than a retooling of colonizing strategies. "Colonialism," he writes, "has been taking on a new face as its economic and political legitimations become so thoroughly veiled by cultural and commercial ones, and the colonial subject is mostly visibly so as a consumer" (p. 12). Far from becoming exceptions by virtue of the status of the island, Flores suggests elsewhere that the Puerto Rican emigrant experience pre-figured the transnational quality of the Latino presence in New York, which also has been shaped by globalization and what he calls "lite colonialism," an exercise of power that creates its subjects as they consume.

Although its tone is measured and Flores never gets side-tracked by the considerable number of issues that he means to address, there is no denying that *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* takes part in long-standing conversations that are best described as polemics. While space does not permit a summation of all of these, it is germane to highlight something of Flores' take on recent revisionist Puerto Rican histories. Even as he praises Arcadio Diaz-Quinones pathbreaking work for recognizing that diaspora, migration and exile have shaped the history of Puerto Rico, Flores finds in his colleague's essays an insufficient remedy to the habit of Puerto Ricans from the island to forget and elide the experience of half of those with

a claim to Puerto Rican identity. Flores argues that the memories that Diaz-Quinones aims to mend and "record" render Puerto Ricans in the United States as appendages to the island's history.[2] As one can see in his efforts to re-examine popular culture, Flores calls for a more complete recall and a more inventive re-imagining of Puerto Rican and Latino experience.

From Bomba to Hip-Hop is concerned primarily with expressive culture and Flores is at his very best in essays like "Cha Cha with a backbeat," where he tackles the boogaloo dance craze that preceded the rise of salsa. He also writes of the development of hip-hop in New York, the nostalgic "casitas" and their cultural work in Puerto Rican *barrios*, and of the uses and politics of language among Latinos. Without going into specifics, it is relevant to note that Flores's effort is something of a recovery mission. He aims to salvage the analytical value of the rubric "popular culture" without resorting to pluralizations, spatial metaphors, or essentialisms; that is, to re-assert "popular culture" in lieu of "peoples," "cultures," "mass culture" or analyses that limit the possibilities for vernacular production to the differential consumption of the offerings of mass culture. Following Stuart Hall and Edgardo Rodriguez Julia, the author defends the value of seeming tautologies like "pueblo, pueblo" and "popular vernacular," which put forth the now quaint-sounding "people" as creative subjects but demand "specification in historical time and social position" (p.25). With Fabian, Flores emphasizes the temporal and focuses on differentiation along lines of social power. And, again like Fabian, Flores wants to recover a role for the chronicler of popular culture as a mediator who capitalizes on those "moments of freedom" when popular culture breaks free of the usual mass culture fare, in order to "catch" them.

In a passage crowded with speakers -- Rodriguez Julia, Fabian and Appadurai are named -- and there are also off-stage voices --Arcadio Diaz-

Quinones's among them -- Flores argues that popular culture is best apprehended through "the work of imagination," which is for him connected to historical memory (p. 23). By way of explication, he cites a passage from *El entierro de Cortijo*, a musician of long-standing interest to Flores and others.[3] But the example Flores offers is simultaneously illustrative and puzzling. What precisely is entailed in this imagining and how it is to be carried out remain as unsettled questions. Rodriguez Julia's recovery of the "pueblo, pueblo" through a black matron is historical in the sense that it reanimates the past as it is found criss-crossing the present at a moment of freedom unleashed by the burial of a towering musical figure. The sweat on the woman's brow recalls the perspiration on black domestics on their way to church in the 1950s and even the lyrics of a famous song, a *plena* of the sort Cortijo was known for. But one is also tempted to see in the mnemonic device something of the impulse behind Foucault's anti-histories. In this particular instance, Rodriguez Julia's imagination eschews causal linkages in favor of other kinds of associations that do not seem entirely free of essentialism. He also dances with alterity and his own subject-position, evoking the reflexive turn in ethnography.

Contrary to what these remarks might suggest, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* is not only a meditation on 'social theory' capped with the programmatic recommendations of a distinguished scholar. The volume has the rare virtue of being both profound and accessible. Specialists will find assertions that must be pondered, pried, and sometimes challenged. The essays on Latino identity and migration to the United States, Latino literature, and expressive arts should find ready places in United States and Latin American history and literature courses. Latino students in particular will profit from readings that address their concerns squarely and rigorously but without detachment, with critical acuity and also an intimate knowledge of today's popular culture.

Notes

[1]. Several of these essays have also appeared in Spanish translation in Juan Flores, *La venganza de Cortijo y otros ensayos* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracan, 1997).

[2]. Arcadio Diaz-Quinones, *La memoria rota: Ensayos sobre cultura y politica* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracan, 1993).

[3]. Edgardo Rodriguez Julia, *El entierro de Cortijo: (6 de octubre de 1982)* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracan, 1983).

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