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Representations of New York City in Latin Music

Peter Manuel

Urban migrant cultures are now recognized as dynamic, syncretic entities in their own right, rather than derivative, transplanted outposts, miniature replicas of ancestral homeland models, or inherently marginal hybrids. New York City's Latino society is exemplary in this respect; Latin New York, once an isolated enclave, has become the single most important center of urban Spanish-Caribbean culture and of Latin music as well. Meanwhile, the ancestral homelands themselves have in many respects become cultural, economic, and political satellites of the United States and especially of New York. This process has involved demographic factors (the emergence of a critical mass of New York Latinos in the 1960s), economic ones (the dominance of North American capital), and—of greatest interest here—cultural ones, including a new sense of ethnic and socio-geographic identity among New York Latinos.

In recent decades, our understanding of Latin New York has been immeasurably aided by scholarly studies, from the ethnographies of Oscar Lewis (1968) and Ruth Glasser (1995) to the theoretical insights of Juan Flores (1991; 1994). This essay will illustrate how song texts, from the earliest period of migration to the present, constitute emic documents articulating the growth of New York Latin culture, both in its broad stages and in many aspects of its affective nuances. Of course, one must exercise caution in trying to "read off" cultural history and social reality from song lyrics. Word-oriented folkloric genres like Puerto Rican jíbaro music, which constituted a rich oral literature, have declined in recent decades, and in dance musics like salsa and modern merengue, song texts are relatively unimportant elements. Moreover, only a minority of
Latin music song texts produced by the New York community speak explicitly of the urban experience. Finally, the song lyrics that do become accessible beyond the immediate local community (including to relative outsiders like myself) are those that have been mediated and conditioned by the commercial entertainment industry, which exercises its own idiosyncratic influences and pressures.

Nevertheless, a substantial number of song texts do address the New York experience. If they constitute only a minority, it is a significant minority, and their content can be seen to reveal much about popular attitudes and experiences. Moreover, while driving rhythms and brilliant arrangements are of greater importance than lyrics in dance music, many song texts do become memorable, long-cherished, and uniquely influential classics of Latin culture. The most celebrated examples are songs of Rubén Blades like "Pedro Navaja." Crooners in the shower sing lyrics rather than bass lines, and songs are recalled and indicated by evocative, text-derived titles rather than technical criteria (with prosaic exceptions like Pérez Prado's "Mambo #8" proving the rule). Hence, song texts, with certain qualifications, can indeed be taken as significant and heuristic expressions of lived social reality.

Latino scholars and journalists have commented on several features of contemporary song lyrics, and aspects of the New York presence—especially ghetto life and Nuyorican identity—have been tangentially discussed by a few writers, especially César Rendón in his magisterial El libro de la salsa (1980). Here I will focus on the ways that song texts over the decades portray a changing conception of New York in relation to other locations in the sociomusical landscape of the Caribbean Basin. Lyric depictions of New York can be seen to represent stages, viewing the city initially as a lonely outpost, then as a troubled homeland and cultural epicenter, and lastly, in a more subtle fashion, as one of several lodestars in an increasingly diverse, international, and postmodern musical soundscape.

"Island in the City"
New York as an Immigrant Outpost

The Latino community that developed in New York from the turn of the century was overwhelmingly Puerto Rican until the late 1970s, when massive Dominican immigration changed the subculture’s complexion. Accordingly, as Ruth Glasser (1995) and others have shown, by the 1920s New York had come to play a significant role in the evolution of Puerto Rican music, due in part to the presence of the recording industry, the acute sense of ethnic self-consciousness felt by migrants as being simultaneously painful and creatively stimulating (see Flores 1991, 16), and the presence of leading artists, especially composers Rafael Hernández and Pedro Flores, and bolero and plena singer Manuel "Canario" Jiménez.

The commercial recordings of Puerto Rican music that became widespread from the 1920s were mostly produced in New York, whose small but concentrated barrio communities constituted natural markets. As the Nuyorican population grew exponentially from the 1940s, more and more songs dealt directly or indirectly with the experience of migration. Although historically remote, the music of this period is relatively rich in chronicling urban life, since text-oriented folk genres like jibaro (campesino) music and traditional plena (a topical, mostly urban syncretic folksong genre) were still flourishing, and most recordings were conducted in New York rather than on the island (Glasser 1995, 50).

The most salient feature of these songs’ lyrics is their documentation of an initial stage—the migrant stage—in which New York is clearly an outpost, while the island (in this period, Puerto Rico) remains the spiritual and psychological home. In the early decades of the record industry, one indication of this orientation was that the vast majority of songs recorded in New York dealt with island rather than mainland life (Spottswood and Díaz Ayala 1989), whether out of habit or a sense that New York was a soulless place about which little could be sung. Such songs included Hernández’s classic hymn to the impoverished homeland, “Lamento Borinqueño,” written in New York in 1929 (see Glasser 1995, 163ff), portraying the decline of jibaro life and of the island’s fortunes in general. From the late 1920s, however, boleros, plenas, and jibaro songs (seis, aguinaldo) started to address life in the Yankee metropolis. Nevertheless, most of these songs remained oriented toward the island in one way or another, just as Puerto Rican music in New York remained at this point essentially a transplanted island music.

In the 1940s, the New York-based mambó bands of Machito and Antonio Arcaño were invoking the city’s glamour and excitement in titles like "Mambo a la Savoy" and "Conozca a New York" ("Get to Know New York"). For most migrants, however, the quotidian reality of urban life was far from glamorous. As dispossessed peasants poured into New York, they developed an entire subgenre of jibaro songs that chronicled the vicissitudes of life in the metropolis. Their songs speak, often with poignant humor, of brutal winters, of getting lost for days in the subway, or of the difficulties encountered from not speaking English:
Yo vine por Nueva York porque yo me imaginaba que aquí se hablaba el Inglés al igual que el Español pero me dijo un señor: "No, tú estás muy equivocado cuando quieres bacalao tienes que decir co'fi"... en qué apuros me veo cuando llego al restaurante al decirme "Wha' you wan?" les señalo con el dedo.

I came to New York because I thought that they spoke as much Spanish as English; but here they told me: "No you're quite mistaken! When you want bacalao you have to say co'fi" [codfish]... I feel so ridiculous in the restaurant when they ask "Wha' you wan?" and I have to point with my finger.¹

Other songs—especially sentimental boleros—conflate nostalgia for the patria with longing for a beloved left behind, as in Pedro Flores' classic "Bajo un palmar." Several aguinaldos depict the yearning for distant relatives, which became particularly acute at Christmas season, when family gatherings (often with aguinaldo singing) are customary. Some songs portray the adversity of New York life as unbearable, such that the narrator laments selling his plot of land in order to migrate. In Ramito's "Yo me quedo en Puerto Rico," the singer resolves to return to Puerto Rico, even if it means dying in poverty:

¿Quién fue el que me dijo a mí que me fuera a Nueva Yor? el ambiente era mejor y diferente de aquí pero yo que he estado allí si hay que criticar crítico allí solo se ve un pico el del Empire Sta'

Yo no dejo mi batey y yo me quedo en Puerto Rico.

Who was it who told me to go to New York, that it was better there, and different from here? Now that I've been there, if there are things to criticize then I'll say so. All you see is the peak of the Empire State Building. I won't give up my sugar mill, I'm staying in Puerto Rico.

I went for a short visit, during winter. It's hell living there, tramping around in the snow. Who would dare tell me that I should give up my little plot of land and abandon my hand fan of the Puerto Rican lodestar? Living there is not for me, I'm staying in Puerto Rico.

God protect my Borinquén full of love and happiness where you can get yautía, yame and panapén [local foods]. It is like living in a Garden of Eden here. I tell you, I don't harm a soul here,
I eat whatever food is left over.
I don’t care if I die poor; if I stay in Puerto Rico.2

Another classic articulation of the same sentiment is “Yo Vuelvo a mi Bohio,” “I’m Going Back to my Shack,” by El Jibarito de Adjuntas (ca. 1951):

Si yo vine a Nueva York
con el fin de progresar
si allá lo pasaba mal
aquí lo paso peor
Unas veces el calor
y otras el maldito frío
a veces parezco un lio
por la nieve patinando
eso no me está gustando
yo me vuelvo a mi bohío

I came to New York hoping to get ahead,
But if it was bad back home, here it’s worse.
Sometimes it’s hot, and other times freezing cold.
Sometimes I look like a bundle sliding around on the snow.
I don’t like this, I’m going back to my hut.3

In such songs, the portrayal of New York is unambiguously negative, as a cold and harsh outpost to which migrants are driven by poverty. Puerto Rico, although impoverished, remains the warm, lush, spiritually endowed patria, the cristalino manantial (pure mountain spring), the site of the heart and soul, of the beloved, the family, and the traditional culture that provides meaning, coherence, and beauty to life. Thus, while Rafael Hernández’s “Pura Flama” depicts the narrator sampling New York women of various ethnicities, it is only in Puerto Rico that he can find love (see Glasser 1995, 145-46). While not mentioning New York, the innumerable patriotic boleros and jibaro songs of this period that eulogize Puerto Rico’s beauty can be seen as counterpoints to the barrio chronicles, implicitly celebrating the island as an antipode possessing everything that New York lacks. At the same time, the songs dealing with migrant life conflated with another island song category, namely, the many nostalgic songs (such as “Lamento Borincano”) romanticizing the pre-modern, pre-capitalist, rural past, and lamenting the alienation and impersonality of modernity and the decline of jibaro life.4 Similarly, a jibaro song like Chuito’s 1974 “La Mujer en Nueva

New York: The Troubled Homeland

In other songs dealing with life in New York, the narrator portrays a more positive and pragmatic attitude. Such songs can be seen as representing a second stage of the New York Latino experience, in which the migrants adjust to city life and begin to gradually detach themselves emotionally from the island homeland. In his 1936 plena “¿Qué vivio?” (“What a way of life!”), Canario (Manuel Jiménez) celebrates his ability to live off welfare in the city:

No me voy, no me voy, no me voy de Nueva York
Aquí me pagan la casa, me dan ternera con papa
y carne de lata, que es un primor.

I won’t leave, I won’t leave, I won’t leave New York.
Here they pay my rent and give me veal and potato
and canned meat, which is terrific.6

In a similar vein, Ismael Santiago’s 1967 plena, “La Metrópolis,” relates:

En esta metrópolis se critica la vida
pero si nos vamos volvemos en seguida...
soy puertorriqueño y quiero mi isleta
pero yo no critico donde gano la vida
ya no me arrepiento el traer a mi familia
porque mi barrio es mi segunda isleta
como cuchifritos aguacates y china
y una borriqueña es mi mejor vecina

People criticize life in this city,
But if they leave, they come back right away...
I’m Puerto Rican and I love my island
but I don't criticize where I earn my living.
I don't regret bringing my family here anymore
because my barrio is my second little island.
Here I eat cuchifritos, avocados and oranges
and a Puerto Rican woman is my best neighbor.7

A 1929 plena, "En la 116" ("On 116th St.") depicts the narrator
enjoying the movies, learning some English, and having a Puerto
Rican sweetheart next door.8 However, even if these songs portray
their protagonists adjusting to life in their new surroundings, many
of them retain a clear orientation toward the island. "¿Qué Vivió!"
and "La Metrópolis" are unpretentiously worldly in their practical
and material rationalizations for staying in New York, which, in
the latter song, is identified not as home, but merely a place where
the singer earns his living. What makes New York tolerable is not
its intrinsic qualities, but the ways in which it is a miniature Puerto
Rico—"my second little island"—with Puerto Rican foods and neigh-
bors. Meanwhile, "En la 116" concludes by relating how regional
island loyalties continue to condition migrant life:

Pues yo como soy de Ponce y ella es de Mayagüez
su madre a mí no me habla, pues con su hijo yo me casé.

Because I'm from Ponce and she's from Mayagüez
her mother won't talk to me, since I married her daughter.

Since the late 1960s, songs about the Puerto Rican migration
experience have become less numerous and significant. Islanders
have continued to migrate, but what has become more common is
what Juan Flores has described as a circulatory process in which
Puerto Ricans travel back and forth on the "air bus" ("La guagua
da aerea," in the words of Luis Rafael Sánchez) over the "blue pond" of
the Atlantic (Flores 1991, 17). While monolingual islanders still have
difficulty in Anglophone New York, equally common is the phe-
nomenon of Nuyorican or long-time migrants having forgotten their
Spanish—willfully, in some cases—as whimsically dramatized in
Sonora Poncena's "Un jíbaro en Nueva York":

Me refiero a los hispanos
que llegan a [unclear] a Nueva Yo
y al tirarse del avión
se le olvida el castellano

Meanwhile, as the island itself has become more modernized and
Americanized, migration to the mainland has become less traumatic
and jarring.

**The Dominican Invasion**

While Puerto Rican migration has declined in numbers and im-
portance, it has been succeeded by a massive wave of immigrants
(legal and otherwise) from the Dominican Republic. Driven by
ambition, poverty, political repression, and fascination with the "gran
manzana," roughly a half million Dominicans have settled in New
York since the latter 1970s, revitalizing upper Manhattan's Wash-
ington Heights ("Quisqueya Heights") and altering the character of
the city's Latino population. In the process, the Dominican meren-
ge brought by the newcomers has become widely popular among
Nuyoricans and even in Puerto Rico itself.

Several Dominican merengues address the migration experience,
often in terms quite similar to earlier Puerto Rican songs. Some
merengue texts chronicle the hardships of New York barrio life,
with its pervasive crime, drugs, and impersonality. In "Nueva York es
Así" ("That's How New York Is"), La Patrulla 15 sings:

Papá quiero irme a Nueva York para vivir un chiquito mejor
porque con este jornal no puedo sacar a mi novia a bailar.

Father, I want to go to New York to live a bit better
because on this salary I can’t even take my girlfriend out dancing.

After borrowing some verses from a 1950s bolero ("Sin un Amor"), the singer goes on to describe the crime, the cold, the inaccessibility of the city’s beautiful women, the temptation to break the law and the consequences of doing so, and the constant danger (for illegal immigrants) of being apprehended and deported. The chorus warns:

Nueva York no es así, no es como me imagina
quédate en tu país que ahí sí es verdad que hay vida.

New York isn’t like this, not like I imagined.
Stay in your own country,
because it’s true that there’s a life there.10

In a more positive vein, such songs as Ramon Orlando’s “Nueva York No Duerme” (“New York Doesn’t Sleep”) extol the city’s dynamism and excitement. Others present New York as a land of opportunity, from which the enterprising migrant can return “para’o”—in style, well-heeled, well-prepared.

Todos e felicitaron cuando vino del lado
vino con siete maletas...
para’o, el hombre llegó para’o, para’o, para’o...

Everyone congratulated him when he came
from the other side.
He came with seven suitcases, he arrived in style.11

By the mid-1990s, New York has become the first home to so many Dominicans that its vicissitudes, rewards, and fast pace—at once hectic and exhilarating—can be described in a matter-of-fact way, as in the song “Un Día en Nueva York” by Los Hermanos Rosario. The lyrics to this song begin with a by-now familiar lament:

Para yo [sic] vivir aquí no ha sido fácil
en un apartment en pleno Bronx
si no es un tiroteo, la sirena
cuando no es una ganga, es un “hold-up.”

It hasn’t been easy living here
in an apartment in the middle of the Bronx.
If it’s not gunfire outside, it’s a siren,
or if it’s not a gang, it’s a hold-up.12

In characteristic merengue style, however, the subsequent lyrics are light and glib rather than poignant, describing the narrator’s busy and stimulating daily routine, and punctuated by the refrain “¿Qué vacación!”—loosely, “What a party!”

A few merengues, like earlier jíbaro songs, focus on the fate of the displaced campesino—here, the rustic bumpkin from Cibao Valley—in the urban jungle. Wilfrido Vargas’ “El Gringo y el Cibaeneño” is representative, facetiously portraying an argument between a condescending Yankee and a fiercely patriotic Dominican who loves his cassava and chicharrones (fried pork rinds):

Un cibaeneño en Nueva York discutía con emoción
con un trompetista gringo la razón
de su desvelo por su tierra y su región
El gringo nunca se entendía cómo aquel dominicano
quería dejar a Manhattan para regresar a su tierra,
San José de las Matas
Defendía a Nueva York aquel gringo colorado
y oiga que el dominicano defendiendo su Cibao
(G: I live in Santo Domingo, but don’t misunderstand, I depart from this country, I depart from this land)
(C:) To change the Empire State, you’re not going to change the orchestra...
(G: Very upset my good gentleman... in your country hasn’t suffered an Empire State, neither have we)
(C: What am I bringing the Empire State?)
No vaya creer que es demasiado,
Te voy a cambiar en el menúmonumento [monument] que hay en la entrada de Santiago
(G: Viva la Quinta Avenida, viva Rockefeller Center!
if you get on the subway you’ll enjoy the people...
right here, I’m really happy, I feel really good,
cruisin’ in the street, with my favorite girl,
rider through the park, through Central Park...
(C: Que en Nueva York no se goza mucho,
A Cibaen in New York was arguing with a gringo trumpet player, about the Cibaeno's concern for his country and his region. The gringo couldn't understand why the Dominican wanted to leave Manhattan to return to his home, San Jose de las Matas. The pink-skinned gringo defended New York, while the Dominican defended his Cibao. (Gringo) I live in Santo Domingo, tell me now don't compare your country with mine, not even with the Bronx, never with the Bronx. (Cibaeno) Don't talk to me about the Bronx, I'd rather have some cassava. (G:) [I'm] very upset, my good sir, you must understand. In your village they've never even dreamed of having an Empire State Building, never even dreamed of it there. (C:) What do I care about the Empire State Building? Don't think it's so special. I'll trade it for the monument in the entrance to Santiago. (G:) Long live Fifth Avenue! Long live Rockefeller Center! If you go on the subway you'll see people enjoying themselves...right here, I feel happy, I feel really good, cruisin' in the street, with my favorite girl, riding through the park, through Central Park... (C:) In New York you can't really have fun, don't kid yourself. [In Santo Domingo] you can have fun dancing merengue, drinking cherche...  

Such lyrics continue the tradition of songs about the New York experience from the perspective of the Spanish-Caribbean immigrant, although with somewhat distinctive nuances. For one thing, the typical Dominican musical vehicle is the manic and ironic merengue, rather than the wistful bolero or poignant aguinaldo. Further, in these songs, as in the realm of Dominican music as a whole, there is little romanticization of the idyllic homeland; rather, the lack of sentimentality accords with the traditionally weak sense of Dominican nationalism (Black 1986, 7), and also, to some extent, with the prevailing pragmatism and light cynicism of the present era—a topic to which I will return.

Salsa: the Voice of the Barrio

With the emergence of salsa in the mid-1960s, depictions of the New York experience enter a qualitatively new stage. In the salsa of this period, the barrio is the new center of gravity, and the ancestral homeland is remote, imaginary, and in many respects irrelevant. On the most mundane level, this shift in orientation is due to the fact that by the late 1960s, most Nuyorican were second-generation migrants raised in the barrio. Meanwhile, as salsa acquired a character distinct from that of a transplanted island music, New York became a more dynamic and internationally influential center for Latin music than provincial San Juan, or, for that matter, Cuba, which was by now isolated by the United States embargo. Above all, the period 1965-78—the heyday of "classic" salsa—witnessed a dramatic and unprecedented celebration and valorization of Nuyorican identity. In this period, salsa emerged as the voice of barrio youth with all their restless, alienated energy and exuberant optimism. As with the sense of "double consciousness" said to animate much of African-American culture, much of salsa's freshness and vigor derived precisely from the unique Nuyorican self-conception. Although marginalized in the barrio, Latino youth saw themselves as uniquely empowered to lead Latinos throughout the continent toward a new and glorious destiny. It is precisely this animating ideology, rather than stylistic differences, which came to distinguish salsa from what Rondon calls the "ingenious and provincial" Cuban guarachas and sones from which it evolved (Rondon 1980, 64).

With salsa, Latin music became self-consciously rooted in New York as never before. Fania Records' 1971 promotional film Our Latin Thing rendered this identification explicit, juxtaposing concert footage with scenes of barrio street life. Several songs hailed New York as the crucible of Latin music. In "Salsa en Nueva York," Tipica Novel (a charanga group) sang of the city as the "cuna del ritmo y sabor" ("cradle of rhythm and flavor"), and in "La Batalla de los Barrios" ("The Battle of the Barrios"), the group portrayed the city's boroughs vying for the distinction of producing the best salsa. Willie Colon devoted an entire song, "Nueva York," to expressing his ambivalent fascination with the city:

Nueva York, paisaje de acero,
no sé si te odio, no sé si te quiero
Cuando estoy contigo me siento inquieto por largarme
Cuando estoy lejos loko por mirarte
Here, the new sound is identified as the guaguancó (a traditional rumba style), depicted as coming from Puerto Rico (its Cuban origins being at this point essentially irrelevant; see Manuel 1994). Salsa is thus ambiguously linked to tradition, and to Puerto Rico, but it is essentially created in and disseminated from the new center of gravity, New York City, to the rest of the Latin world (excluding Cuba, which would be like bringing coals to Newcastle). And indeed, Venezuela, Colombia, and other regional sites have become new centers for salsa, which, in its classic period, evolved from being the defiant expression of local barrio alienation to the favored dance idiom of all urban classes.

Of particular prominence during this period were the song texts of Rubén Blades and Willie Colon, which examined barrio life in all its vitality and perversity. Although variously dubbed “salsa consciente” or “protest salsa,” many such songs might in retrospect be called “gangster salsa” for their colorful portrayal of the violent and soulful underside of ghetto life. While Blades’ “Número Seis” was a light-hearted complaint about waiting for the subway, more typical were songs like Colon’s “Calle Luna Calle Sol,” which paints a portrait of ghetto malevolence and danger. Similarly, “Juanito Almáñáz” depicts a rapacious and fearless hoodlum; “Juan Pachanga” (1977) exposes the inner emptiness and vapidity of a narcissistic dandy. “Pedro Najava” (1979), the most textually rich and musically innovative of all, presents a sort of existential snapshot of barrio life—one of “eight million New York stories”—in which a guapo and a hooker shoot each other:

...Y creánme gente, que aunque hubo ruido, nadie salió
No hubo curiosos, no hubo preguntas, nadie lloró.
Sólo un borracho con los dos muertos se tropezó
cogió el revólver, el puñal, los pesos y se marchó.

Y tropezando, se fue cantando desafinado
el coro que aquí les traje y da el mensaje de mi canción:
“La vida te da sorpresas, sorpresas te da la vida, ¡Ay Dios!”

And believe me folks, even though there was a noise, nobody came out to look.
There were no curious onlookers, no questions, no one wept, just one drunk, who stumbled over the two corpses, pocketed the revolver, the dagger, their money and walked on.
These lyrics, despite salsa's primary function as dance music, enjoyed extraordinary popularity; "Pedro Navaja" alone inspired a long-running Puerto Rican play, critical essays, and other songs (see Arteaga Rodríguez 1988, 28-29), while "Juan Pachanga" became the name of a Queens salsa club.

Of particular interest is the way that such songs situate New York City as the center of an emergent, international Latino culture. On one level, as Arteaga Rodríguez observes, they could be seen as perpetuating the tradition of machismo and guapería found in old Cuban sones and the 1950s plenas and bombas of Rafael Cortijo (Arteaga Rodríguez 1988, 22-24). The difference in terms of social geography, however, is not merely that salsa songs were set (whether explicitly or implicitly) in New York rather than in Havana or Santurce. Rather, the distinguishing feature of salsa's sabor was the self-consciousness with which it dramatized the urban experience. Although the barrio depicted was on one level marginal, in other respects it was, as Rondón notes, "the fundamental element which served to unite and identify the totality of Latin music in this century" (Rondón 1980, 110). By 1970, most of the population of the Spanish Caribbean Basin had become urban, and lumpen barrio life had become a new sort of international norm, however inherently peripheral to the economic mainstream. Salsa self-consciously captured this sense of marginality and linked it to a spirit of international Latino unity and mobilization. Thus, while Rubén Blades situated his "Pedro Navaja" specifically in New York, he clarified that he intended such songs to be "the folklore of the city—not of one city, but of all the cities in Latin America" (Marre and Charleton 1985, 80).

New York in the Global Soundscape

From the vantage point of the mid-1990s, the heyday of classic salsa looks like a unique period. Today, New York salseros no longer entertain the heady and messianic faith that their music will serve as the voice for a united international Latino renaissance. Accordingly, New York is no longer celebrated as the unique epicenter of Latin music. By the mid-1980s, indeed, the sociomusical configuration that lent such vigor and optimism to barrio attitudes and to salsa had changed dramatically, in ways that are subtly reflected in the presence—or absence—of New York City in Latin music texts.

One aspect of the new situation involves the very success of salsa, which, as predicted in songs like "El Mensaje," did indeed spread throughout the Caribbean Basin. Since Caracas, Cali, and other regional cities have come to host their own lively salsa scenes, New York can no longer claim to be the towering beacon of the salsa world; rather, in terms of market, creativity, and ideology, it is merely one center among several. Given the unprecedentedly international nature of the genre, there are fewer songs devoted to specific sites like New York (aside from merengues narrating the immigrant experience). Those that do exist are as likely to commemorate other cities (e.g., "Cali Pachanguero"), and may be written primarily to boost audiences on the tour circuit (just as the 1940s plena band of César Concepción devoted songs to Puerto Rican towns on its own smaller circuit).

Meanwhile, international popularity notwithstanding, salsa itself no longer enjoys the centrality it formerly held within the New York Latino community. If classic-era salseros envisioned their music as the dominant and integrating medium for Latino identity, the mid-1990s situation is characterized by what Juan Flores calls "an ever-broadening field of expressive practices" (1994, 90). Specifically, this would include the merengue boom, the ongoing attraction of Nuyorican would-be salsa fans to rock and hip hop, and, lastly, the emergence of Latin rap. The last might be in a position to serve as a new voice of the barrio, for its playful delight in Spanglish and urban hybridity place it at the cutting edge of postmodern subcultural expressivity. Latin rap pieces like Latin Empire's "En mi Viejo South Bronx" (sardonically invoking the sentimental mid-century bolero "En mi Viejo San Juan") could provide a fresh musical expression of New York life in music. Similarly, one of the few invocations of New York in contemporary salsa consists of an English-language, rock/rap-style "shout-out" to the boroughs by La India (Linda Caballero) in her "Llegó la India." However, Latin rap remains a marginal genre, with little airplay in New York. Moreover, as Flores has observed, New York Latinos have yet to gain prominence in the field, which instead remains dominated by a remarkably international set of Chicanos, Central American immigrants, and Puerto Rican islanders (Flores 1994, 95-96).

In a subtle, yet ultimately more significant sense, the decline of references to New York City in Latin music since the 1970s reflects a dramatically changed socio-political ambience. The social-realistic songs of Rubén Blades and Willie Colon were expressing more than
a titillating fascination with gangsters. Rather, they were linked, whether explicitly or implicitly, with a sense of political activism and optimism. Within the United States the late 1960s and early 1970s was a period of rising economic expectations, a vigorous youth counterculture, the Civil Rights movement, and successful Nuyorican mobilizations by the Young Lords. Throughout the hemisphere, the left, however ferociously repressed, was actively challenging North American imperialism. Salsa songs chronicling barrio life were intimately connected to this sense of activism, idealism, and optimism. People like poet, salsa lyricist, and Young Lords leader Felipe Luciano envisioned salsa not as escapist entertainment but as an invigorating street music obliging Latinos to confront their social reality and, ultimately, to change it.19

Subsequent decades saw the defeat of the Latin American and Caribbean left, the fizzling of the counterculture and Civil Rights movements, the collapse of international socialism, and the renewed impoverishment of minorities and the lower classes by a triumphant Reaganism which remains undiluted, as of the mid-1990s. Accordingly, the fervent and sanguine idealism and social realism of classic salsa have given way to the glib ribaldry of merengue and what classic-era salseros regard as the slick sentimentality of modern salsa romántica (not to mention the nihilistic machismo so common in hardcore rap). References to New York City, or to lived social reality in general, find little place in modern Latin dance music, whose sole aim seems to be to divert rather than to mobilize or educate. As the morale and standard of living of minorities decline in the New World Order, the barrio and its problems seem to have disappeared both from song texts and from the concerns of the state. It remains to be seen if some new or reinvigorated form of Latin music, in tandem with a revitalized socio-political assertiveness, can again promote a sense of active engagement with the vital issues of contemporary urban life.

NOTES

2. "Yo me Quedo en Puerto Rico," Artillería 1030, recorded by Ramito (Florencio Morales Ramos). This recording appears to be an unauthorized compilation of earlier releases.


4. Cf., e.g., "Besando a Puerto Rico" (Ansonia SALP 1463).

5. Listen to, for example, Ramito's seis "Puerto Rico Cambiado" (Ansonia 1492), the Trío Vegabajero's guajira-style bolero "Ven Jibaro Ven" (Ansonia 1482), and Julito Rodriguez's "Besando a Puerto Rico" (Ansonia 1463).


7. "La Metrópolis," Ansonia SALP 1444, composed and recorded by Ismael Santiago.


al (1976) for further discussion of these songs and their relation to the spirit of the decade. Recordings of Colon's "Juanito Alimaña" and "Calle Luna Calle Sol" are found on "Vigilante," Fania JM 610, 1983, and "Willie Colon: Su Vida Musical," Profono TPL-402, 1982, respectively.

18. "Llegó la India," Soho SHEC 80864, recorded by La India (Linda Caballero).

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