“QUÉ ASSIMILATED, BROTHER, 
YO SOY ASIMILAO”: 
THE STRUCTURING OF 
PUERTO RICAN 
IDENTITY IN THE U.S.

Juan Flores

I carry my roots with me all the time rolled up I use them as my pillow

mis raíces las cargo siempre conmigo enrolladas me serven de almohada

—Francisco Alarcón

A young Chicano friend, on a recent first visit to New York City, shared with me some interesting impressions of the Puerto Ricans there and made comparisons with his own people in the Southwest. Of course he was reeling with the similarities between the huge Spanish-speaking neighborhoods of New York and Los Angeles where all your senses inform you that you are in Latin America, or that some section of Latin America has been transplanted to the urban United States where it maintains itself energetically, while interacting directly and in intricate ways with the surrounding cultures. Chicanos and Puerto Ricans in the U.S., the present pillars of the so-called “Hispanic” minority, stand at the same juncture, straddling North and South America and embodying the unequal, oppressive relation between them. And Francisco, a sensitive student of Chicano culture, suddenly became even more aware of the remarkable cultural convergence and correspondences that accompany such shared historical experiences. “¡Somos Raza! ¡Somos Latinos!” he would say, thinking of El Barrio and the Lower East Side, and of East Los and La Misión. We are bilingual and bicultural, and for both Chicanos and Nuyoricans those terms signal a complex duality of transcendence and denial, harmony and imposition, solidarity and disadvantage.
Yet, along with this suddenly heightened sense of Hispanic unity and cultural complementarity, Francisco also began to make note of differences, ways in which the Nuyorican position in the U.S. society diverges from that of his fellow Chicanos. The most obvious of these, in his view, was the closeness between Puerto Ricans and Blacks. Of course Chicanos and African Americans have long shared a common cause as victims of racism and exploitation and comprise natural allies in political and social movements. Culturally, too, there has been ample interaction, but nothing resembling the intensity and extent of influence between Black and Puerto Rican cultures in New York. El Barrio flows off imperceptibly into Harlem, Williamsburgh into Bedford-Stuyvesant, while, by contrast, sharper lines seem to separate East Los Angeles from Watts and other Southwest barrios from their adjacent black neighborhoods. Wherever he looked and listened, Francisco witnessed young Puerto Ricans and New York Blacks talking and walking in the same manner, singing and dancing with the same style, and often seeming indistinguishable in appearance and action. He heard Nuyorican poetry and salsa and detected more Afro-American language and rhythms than anything familiar to him in Chicano expression. He saw the Guardian Angels in the subways and Black and Puerto Rican families cohabiting the tenements and housing projects. He heard about the Black and Puerto Rican legislative caucus in Albany and the programs in Black and Puerto Rican studies in the colleges. He even took in the movie “Wild Style” and was amazed at the integral participation of both groups in forms of contemporary street art and performance like graffiti, rap music and break dancing.

You just don’t see as much of that out West, he concluded, his fascination at the phenomenon betraying both admiration and perplexity. Together we groped for explanations, recognizing that it was important to account for this notable divergence between two groups—Nuyoricans and Chicanos—otherwise so compatible and constituent of a common “Latino” identity. We realized that underlying all the other reasons having to do with factors of social history, geographical placement, migratory patterns, and even racial characteristics, the Nuyoricans’ relatively closer cultural proximity to U.S. Blacks is based on their Caribbean origins and, even beyond that, with Africa. We couldn’t carry the point much further, but were confident that the Afro-Caribbean traditions borne by Nuyoricans in the new setting, even light-skinned Puerto Ricans and the many who might even look like Chicanos, made for a more fluid, reciprocal relation with the culture of Black Americans. Maybe African Americans are to Puerto Ricans, Francisco suggested, what Native Americans are to Chicanos—a kind of cultural tap root, a latent bond to ethnic sources indigenous to the United States, yet radically challenging to the prevailing cultural hierarchy.

This probing of differences led us back to a sense of the parallels between our two groups, but this time the convergences were of a deeper, more subtle kind than those indicated by our common label as “Hispanics.” Beneath and beyond that officially promoted category of Spanish language minority, Chicanos and Nuyoricans are caught up in a similar spiritual dynamic, one which, in each case, meshes “outside” and “inside,” Latin American background and the internal U.S. cultural context. The close, long-standing interaction between Puerto Ricans and Blacks, and between Chicanos and Native Americans, exposes the superficiality and divisiveness of the term “Hispanic” in its current bureaucratic usage. It became clear that for either group to accept that rubric at face value would mean to agree to relegating and ultimately severing a crucial nexus in its quest for collective identity. This, we felt, was an important lesson to absorb at a time when loudly
publicized projections of "Hispanics" as the "fastest growing minority" are setting off waves of Anglo hysteria and some defensive jitters among leaders of the oppressed.

What the Chicano observer could only dimly appreciate on his brief visit, though, was that the striking affinity between Puerto Ricans and Blacks in New York is but one thread in a complex fabric of Third-World cultures cohabiting the inner city neighborhoods and institutions. Emigrants and refugees from many of the Caribbean and Latin American countries are now entering their second and even third generation of presence there, with Dominicans, Jamaicans and Haitians adding most substantially to the Caribbeanization of New York begun by Puerto Ricans and Cubans before them. Add the sizeable numbers of Asian and Arab peoples, and the non-European complexion of the city's multi-ethnic composite becomes still more prominent. As each group and regional culture manifests itself in the new setting, and as they increasingly coalesce and interact in everyday life, New York is visibly becoming the source of a forceful, variegated alternative to mainstream North American culture.

For this crossing and blending of transmitted colonial cultures is not to be confused with the proverbial "melting pot" of Anglo-American fantasy, nor is it a belated example of "cultural pluralism" as that phrase is commonly used in U.S. social science and public discourse. Though characterized by the plurality and integration of diverse cultures, the process here is not headed toward assimilation with the dominant "core" culture, nor even toward respectful coexistence with it. Rather, the individual and interweaving cultures involved are expressions of histories of conquest, enslavement and forced incorporation at the hands of the prevalent surrounding society. As such, the main thrust in each case is toward self-affirmation and association with other cultures caught up in comparable processes of historical recovery and strategic resistance.

The path of "assimilation in American life" has been amply charted in U.S. social science and codified in paradigmatic terms by Milton Gordon. The guiding model rests firmly on analogies to the experiences of European immigrant groups. The attempts at modification, and even rejoinders to this approach pronounced with a view toward cases complicated by racial stigmatization and prolonged economic and social disadvantage, have largely gone to reinforce that familiar image of cultural shedding, adjustment and reincorporation. The theory of "internal colonialism," no doubt the most consistent rejection of the reigning ethnic ideology, nevertheless retains the vision of each minority group forming its sense of identity in its relation to, and self-differentiation from, the dominant Anglo culture. Colonial minority resistance to assimilation is still presented as occurring within the pluralist field of options and with its sight set, however resentfully, on that very ethnic mosaic from which it is being excluded. Each group manifests itself singularly in its own terms and primarily as an effort at cultural maintenance over against that which negates it.

The interaction among popular colonial cultures in New York suggests a markedly different process, one which is indeed pluralist and confluent in nature and perhaps for that reason even more challenging to established thinking on ethnic relations. But if the transformation of Puerto Rican culture in the U.S. setting is something other than assimilation, what is it? How is it to be defined in terms other than loss of the old and acquisition of the new, or as the fateful confrontation between two unequal and mutually exclusive cultural monoliths? The problem is clearly more than a terminological one, for it has to do with detecting a developmental pattern leading neither to eventual accommodation nor to "cultural genocide." Beyond these two options, characteristic respectively of North American
and Island-based Puerto Rican commentary on the Nuyorican experience, a more intricate structuring of ethnicity is evident.

In the following I will seek to trace some contours of this alternative dynamic. Though focussing on Nuyorican culture as expressed in its poetry, my observations may be readily generalized to apply to other colonial minorities, with samples of poetic discourse simply serving as distilled representations of other aspects of cultural life. A further qualification is that I have in mind primarily the contemporary generation of Puerto Ricans living in New York City; again it is hoped that my comments also help to clarify, with a minimum of distortion, the cultural experience of earlier generations and of Puerto Ricans in other parts of the U.S. Finally, any interpretation of cultural process presupposes a coherent analysis of the conditioning political and economic reality, in this case colonialism, labor migration, patriarchy and racial inequality. Such an analysis, as it is being advanced by fellow researchers at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies and elsewhere, forms the basis of my present reflections. 

One can see four definitive moments in the awakening of Nuyorican cultural consciousness which are linked by three transitional phases from one field to the other. The moments are not necessarily stages in a chronological sense, nor do the transitions follow one another in any set order. I will present them as a sequence for hypothetical purposes, understanding that what I am describing is really more a range of constantly intersecting possibilities and responses arising simultaneously at the individual and collective levels.

The first moment is the here and now, the Puerto Rican's immediate perception of the New York that surrounds the person. Prior to any cultural associations or orientations, there are the abandoned buildings, the welfare lines, the run-down streets, the frigid winter nights with no heat, in short, the conditions of hostility, disadvantage and exclusion that confront the Puerto Rican in day-to-day reality. Corresponding to the absence of economic and political opportunity is the lack of cultural access and direction of any kind: the doors to the prevailing culture are closed. One young writer aptly refers to this sense of emptiness as the "state of abandon," and another, thinking of his own boyhood, characterizes it in the following lines:

papote sat on the stoop
miseducated misinformed
a blown-up belly of malnutrition
papote sat on the stoop
of an abandoned building
he decided to go nowhere.

It is this very moment of the Puerto Rican experience in New York that is typically isolated and sensationalized by the dominant culture, as in entertainment packages from "West Side Story" to "Fort Apache" and in social pathologies like Oscar Lewis's La Vida. The mass public is made to delight in this drama of sheer desperation and brutality, particularly when it is also comforted with the thought that such "subcultural" misery is, after all, self-inflicted. And, indeed, for many Puerto Ricans themselves the only recourse in the face of this estranging here and now often involves damage and jeopardy and, of course, disproportionate social recrimination.

But for a variety of reasons, often having little to do with the existing educational system, awareness turns in the direction of the second moment: Puerto Rico. The passage
from the immediacy of New York to the Puerto Rican cultural background is generally less geographical than spiritual and psychological, its impetus deriving from the intimacy of family life with nostalgic reminiscences of parents and grandparents. It tends to present a romanticized, idealized image of Puerto Rico, and is only rarely informed by any political account of the migration and the colonial conditions that propelled it. A memorable example of this transition from ghetto to garden, from infernal New York to edenic Puerto Rico, may be found in the opening chapters of Piri Thomas's autobiographical novel *Down These Mean Streets*. Piri remembers that as a child during the Depression years, his mother used to warm the frigid winter nights with her soothing words about the "quiet of the greenlands and the golden color of the morning sky, the grass wet from the lluvia." And that other Nuyorican "classic," Pedro Pietri's *Puerto Rican Obituary*, illustrates the same type of contrast; the famous title poem, in fact, is structured as a gradual passage from the deathly tedium, hopelessness and "colonial mentality" of Puerto Rican life in New York to a forceful exhortation to rise from the dead and be transported to a "beautiful place," "where beautiful people sing and dance and work together / where the wind is a stranger / to miserable weather conditions." If the first moment is the state of abandon, the second is the state of enchantment, an almost dream-like trance at the striking contrast between the cultural barrenness of New York and the imagined luxuriance of the Island culture. This contrast, often expressed in physical terms as one of cold and warmth, darkness and light, grey and bright green, runs through the literature of the migration, one familiar example being the refrain to the popular song: "Mamá, Borinquen me llama, / este país no es el mío, / Puerto Rico es pura flama, / y aquí me muero de frío." This Puerto Rico, of course, cannot be tested for its historical or even geographical authenticity, since it is initially conjured for metaphorical, emblematic reasons.

While making no claim to realism, the evocation of Puerto Rico cannot be dismissed early as mere archaism, for even the opposition of physical environments implies an ecological and esthetic rejection of the imposed New York conditions. The "rediscovery" of Puerto Rico, however utopian, is thus a constituent in the active search for cultural guidance and meaning in a social context bereft of accessible human bearings. Sandra María Esteves, another of the young New York poets, traces this passage from disorientation to dream to reawakening in her poem entitled "Here":

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I am two parts / a person
boricua / spic
past and present
alive and oppressed
given a cultural beauty
... and robbed of a cultural identity
I speak the alien tongue
in sweet borinqueño thoughts
know love mixed with pain
have tasted spit on ghetto stairways
... here, it must be changed
we must change it
I may never overcome
the theft of my isla heritage
dulce palmas de coco on Luqillo
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sway in windy recesses I can only imagine
and remember how it was
But that reality now a dream
teaches me to see, and will
bring me back to me.9

Clearly, it is not only swaying palm-trees and sunny beaches that the New York Puerto Ricans find in their invoked homeland, as important as that ecological vision may be in the construction of a new identity. It is also "my isla heritage," by which is meant, first of all, a different, more human way of living and relating to people. Beneath the more beautiful landscape the Nuyoricans gain sight of a more appealing culture, one in which they feel included and able to participate. The validation of Spanish is an important initial impetus, even if that means, as in the phrase "my isla heritage," the inclusion of a Spanish word in an English-language context.

More than language, however, the main content of this second moment is the recovered African and indigenous foundation of Puerto Rican culture. Along with increased political awareness comes a more critical relation to the "heritage," and a growing distinction between the official, dominant version of the national culture and its popular base. The racism encountered in the U.S. impels the Nuyorican even more resolutely toward the Taíno and Afro-Caribbean background, which constitutes the major thematic reference point and expressive resource in Puerto Rican culture in the U.S. It is the colonized within the colony whom the Nuyoricans identify as their real forebears in the national tradition, a continuity which is readily evident in much of the music, poetry and art, and in many aspects of daily life.

The continuum is popular culture, the culture of poor and working-class Puerto Ricans spanning the centuries and the process of emigration and resettlement. For at the popular level, the formation of the national culture exemplifies the very transculturation and interaction of diverse racial and language cultures which is so systematically obstructed and feared in the familiar U.S. setting. It is possible for new cultures to emerge without loss or abandonment of the old, certainly a vital lesson for young Puerto Ricans being pressed into a foreign mold. Recognizing that this so-called "syncretism" has occurred in Puerto Rico under conditions of colonial domination and racial and social inequality further deepens the Nuyorican's understanding of the social dynamic and points to the class dimension of cultural change.

That which begins as and appears on the surface to be no more than the nostalgic, metaphorical evocation typical of an immigrant sensibility is in the Puerto Rican case an apprenticeship in social consciousness, the reconstructed "patria" serving as the relevant locus of cultural interaction and contention. Identification with the popular traditions within the colonial culture not only exposes the racial and class hierarchy which during the first moment, in the New York here and now, the Nuyorican could only confront at an immediate, experiential level. Popular culture also represents the current of resistance and opposition to that system and, in larger terms, a mode and function of cultural production different from that of both the dominant elite culture and the commercially packaged mass culture. In this sense, the legacy of oral traditions and artisan craft finds a direct extension in Nuyorican artistic expression. The reliance on improvisation and performance, and the abiding conception of expressive resources as tools, help counteract the
pressure toward standardization and the estrangement of culture from its personal and social origins.

The third moment is located back in New York, but the passage there, the return and reentry, is infused with those new perspectives gathered in the course of cultural recovery. While previously, during the first moment, life was sheer hostility and exclusion, the New York scene now includes the Puerto Ricans, if only by force of their own deliberate self-insertion into the urban landscape. Looking at New York, the Nuyorican sees Puerto Rico, or at least the glimmering imprint of another world to which vital connections have been struck. This transposition of the cultural background finds cogent expression in the poetry of Victor Hernández Cruz, who ends his poem “Los New Yorks” with the stanza, “I am going home now / I am settled there with my fruits / Everything tastes good today / Even the ones that are grown here / Taste like they’re from outer space / Walk y suena / Do it strange / Lo New Yorks.” And in a short poem entitled “BronxOmania,” the poet discovers Puerto Rico while riding in the subway:

snake horse stops at bronx clouds
end of lines and tall windowed cement
comes to unpaved roads and wilderness
where the city is far
and spanish bakeries sell hot bread
the roar of the iron snake
plunges at closing doorways
down fifty blocks
is the island of Puerto Rico.

This atmospheric, visionary presence of the homeland, so pervasive in the literature of the migration, is again the outward indication of an awakened cultural consciousness. The spiritual orientation gained through recapturing the Puerto Rican background conditions this renewed encounter with New York, lending meaning and historical perspective to what had been a scene of sheer abandonment and disorientation. The predicament of bilingualism, for example, which confronted the Nuyorican in the first moment as a confining and prejudicial dilemma with no visible resolution, now becomes an issue of social contention and beyond that, a sign of potential enrichment and advantage. Though not a socially recognized asset, bilingual discourse and continued access to Spanish have been a major element in the reinforcement of Puerto Rican cultural identity and in the self-definition of a group demonstrating the full range of Spanish-English language contact.

The racial situation is also altered as a result of the imaginative passage to and from the site of cultural origins. The divisions, confusions and inescapable degradations suffered by Puerto Ricans because of the Black versus White polarities of U.S. racial classification give way to a proud identification with Afro-Caribbean cultural traditions. The influence of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements were, of course, of direct importance to the Nuyorican revival of the late 1960s, but recognizing a similar thrust in the re-interpretation of their own cultural heritage contributed greatly to this active affirmation of African roots. Furthermore, the multi-racial composition of the Puerto Rican people and the elaborate process of mixing evident in the formation of the national culture suggest a more dynamic, historically differentiated relation between race and culture than was conceivable to the Puerto Ricans in their direct, unreflected subjection to U.S. racism.
The Nuyorican also reenters New York with a heightened sense of the duality of cultural life and expression, the differences and interrelationships between official and commercially produced culture on the one hand and popular culture on the other. Thus, in addition to the cultivation of indigenous and Afro-Puerto Rican sources such as *la bomba* and *la plena* in the music and the Afro-Antillean rhythm and language of Luis Páls Matos in the poetry, Nuyorican expression responds to and articulates the creative experience of the people. Instead of the cultural vacuum characteristic of the state of abandon, the feeling that there is and can be no culture where the only concern is survival and coping, there is now a recognition that the life of poor people is a legitimate and abundant source of cultural energy. This validation of popular culture is present in the conversational and colloquial qualities of Nuyorican poetic language and in the common emphasis on public performance and delivery. Exposure to traditional Puerto Rican forms like the *decima*, *controversia* and *plena* makes clear to the Nuyorican that the cultural life of his people is one of improvisation, communal participation and commentary on topical local events.

All of these horizons of the re-encounter with New York through Puerto Rican eyes comprise what can most aptly be considered an awakened national consciousness, or consciousness of nationality. For taken together and brought to bear on the U.S. context, such new and otherwise concealed perspectives on language, race and cultural dynamics constitute an assertion of national origins. “En el fondo del nuyorican hay un Puertorriqueño,” one of the poets has said, paraphrasing the title of a well-known short story by José Luis González. Despite the endless endeavor to reduce Puerto Rican cultural identity to more manageable terms of language group, race or ethnicity, and thus to insert it into some larger aggregate, the third moment of Nuyorican awareness actually involves an introduction of the national dimension to U.S. ethnic relations. For it is on that basis, as a lingually, racially and culturally distinctive national group, that Nuyoricans define their identity in the U.S. And it is on that basis that they constitute their position in the society and their relation to other cultures.

The fourth moment is this branching out, the selective connection to and interaction with the surrounding North American society. Generally, of course, this experience is considered in isolation, with the overriding concern being the issue of Puerto Rican assimilation. The advantage of tracing the various moments surrounding and conditioning that controversial point of intersection is to suggest that there is a complex process involved, which is by no means unreflected, unidirectional or limited to the options of incorporation or self-exclusion. When account is taken of the fully trajectory and shifting geography of Nuyorican identification, it becomes clear that something other than assimilation or cultural separation is at work.

The first path of Puerto Rican interaction with North American culture is toward those groups to whom they stand in closest proximity, not only spatially but also because of congruent cultural experience. For Puerto Ricans in New York, this means, first of all, Black Americans and other migrants from the Caribbean and Latin America. With such groups, a strong process of cultural convergence and fusion occurs, what one commentator, J.M. Blaut, has called “the partial growing-together of the cultures of ghettoized communities.” This “growing-together” is often mistaken for assimilation, but the difference is obvious in that it is not directed toward incorporation into the dominant culture. For that reason, the “pluralism” that results does not involve the dissolution of national backgrounds and cultural histories but their continued affirmation and enforcement even as
they are transformed. Given the basis of social parity among groups with a common cultural trajectory, the very relation between unity and diversity contrasts with that operative in the established scheme of ethnic pluralism.

It is from the vantage of this coalescence with the cultures of other colonial minorities that Puerto Ricans assume collective interaction with the Anglo-American society at large. The branching-out is selective, with a gravitation toward other popular cultures with a background of social disadvantage: the Chinese, the Arabs and, more cautiously, the Irish, Italians and Jews. It is a fusion, significantly, at the popular level of shared working-class reality, and one expressive of recognized marginalization and exclusion. And because it involves the retention and extension of the inherited cultures rather than their abandonment, the process has remarkable cultural consequences, described by Blaut as “the healthy interfertilization of cultures, the efflorescence of new creative forms in painting, poetry, music, and the like, and the linking up of struggles.”

Even at that point, as Nuyorican modes of expression come to intermingle with others and thus distinguish themselves from those of the Island legacy, it is not accurate to speak of assimilation. Rather than being subsumed and repressed, Puerto Rican culture contributes, on its own terms and as an extension of its own traditions, to a new amalgam of human expression. It is the existing racial, national and class divisions in U.S. society which allow for, indeed necessitate, this alternative course of cultural change.

Such, then, are four moments of Nuyorican cultural interaction with U.S. society, briefly summarized as the here-and-now, Puerto Rican background, reentry and branching out. Again, they are not necessarily to be taken as sequential stages in the manner in which I have presented them but as fields of experience joined by transitional phases of cultural awareness. How and to what extent these moments of sensibility relate to the advance of political consciousness is even another, more complicated matter. It is clear, in any case, that Puerto Rico not only serves as an imaginary realm of cultural self-discovery, but must also be recognized as a nation whose political status looms large on the agenda of international relations. The quest for Puerto Rican identity in the United States thus remains integrally tied to the prospects of national independence or continued colonial subordination to or, as the official euphemism would have it, “association” with the United States. Generally speaking, the gathering of cultural consciousness on the part of the Nuyoricans inclines them toward the first of these options.

It will also be necessary, with further study, to elaborate the correspondences between the cultural geography outlined here and the multiple spatial directions of the Puerto Rican migration. I would only suggest that the spiritual movement back and forth between New York and Puerto Rico bears some significant correlation to the migratory circulation of Puerto Ricans in the ongoing exchange of workers for capital under colonial conditions. In the Puerto Rican case, neither the migration itself nor the cultural encounter with U.S. society is a one-way, either/or, monolithic event. Rather, it is one marked by further movement and the constant interplay of two familiar yet contrasting zones of collective experience.

I would conclude by acknowledging that the structure of the Puerto Rican’s coming-to-consciousness which I present here as my own invention actually dawned on me as I read the work of another poet friend, Tato Laviera. For Laviera’s three books of poems to date, when read in succession, take us through the entire journey, each volume giving voice to one of the passages from one moment to the next. The first, *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* focuses on the contrast between the New York here-and-now and the Puerto Rico of
enchantment and cultural richness. The second book, entitled *En Clave or Enclave*, trans­ports that meaning gathered from the national culture and establishes a distinctive place for it in the reencountered New York setting. And the third, most recent volume, *AmeRikan*, is the branching out, the striking of sympathetic chords with other cultural groups on the basis of expansive Puerto Rican sounds and rhythms. The poet ranges widely in his "ethnic tributes," as he entitles a substantial part of the book, addressing and embracing many of the adjacent peoples in the crowded New York environs. One of the heartiest of these embraces is called "jamaican":

reaches their guts into the Caribbean
the second africa, divided by yemaya
reaches their guts into the third world,
marley-manley emerging people
reaches their guts into urban america,
reggae-reggae, modern english,
reaches their guts into ethiopia,
rastafarian celebrated deities.
reaches their guts into washington sq. park,
jamaican english, folkloric blackness,
reaches their guts into puerto ricans,
where we shared everything for free,
yeah, brother, very good, very, very
good, yeah, real good!!

Here is the young Puerto Rican refashioning New York City along Caribbean, Third World lines, or voicing resonantly his awareness that history is doing so.

Yet as is clear from the neologistic title "AmeRikan," Laviera is intent on reaching beyond the New York enclave. He seeks to stake a claim for Puerto Rican recognition before the whole U.S. society, especially as Puerto Ricans are by now clustered in many cities other than New York. He is goading the society to come to terms with the "Rican" in its midst, arguing thorough puns and ironic challenges that he will not be an American until he can say "Am-e-Rican" ("I'm a Rican") and be proud of it. He even diagnoses, in similar playful terms, the problem of assimilation. "Asimilated?" he begins one poem, "qué asimilated, brother, yo so asimilao," and ends with a confident reference to the Black base of Puerto Rican popular culture, "delen gracias a los prietos / que cambiaron asimilado al popular asimilado."

And in reaching across the U.S., not assimilating but growing together with neighboring and concordant cultures, how could the Nuyorican poet fail to embrace the *Chicano*? Getting to Chicago, Houston and Los Angeles, Tato Laviera surely sensed what Francisco felt during his days in New York. *Chicano*s and Nuyoricans, concentrated at opposite ends of the country, branching out in different cultural directions, still exemplify a close cultural affinity.

As a final note, listen to Tato Laviera, the Nuyorican, rapping to his *Chicano* brothers. Here again, in "Vaya carnal," it is the poet affirming a new language mix, "Chicano-riqueño," and at the same time forging those deeper cultural links which unite Mexican and Puerto Ricans beneath the "Hispanic" surface:
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Vaya, carnal
sabes, pinche, que me visto
estilo zoot suit marca de
pachuco royal chicano air
force montoyado en rojo
azul verde marrón nuevo
callejero chicano carnales
eseándome como si el ese ese
echón que se lanza en las
avenidas del inglés con
treinta millones de batos
locos hablando en secreto
con el chale-ese-no-la chingues
vacilón a los gringos americanos,
¿sabes?, simón, el sonido del este
el vaya, clave, por la maceta
que forma parte de un fuerto
linguismo, raza, pana, borinquen,
azteca, macho, hombre, pulmones
de taíno, de indios, somos
chicano-riqueños, que curado.
simón, qué quemada mi pana,
la esperanza de un futuro
totalmente nuestro,
tú sabes, tú hueles,
el sabor, el fervor del
vaya, carnal. 18

NOTES


7. A discussion of this mythical imagery in Nuyorican poetry may be found in: Efrain Barradas, "‘De lejos en suetos vería...’; Visión mística de Puerto Rico en la poesía neoyorrican," Revista Chicano-Riquiña, 7 (1979), 46-56. For a more critical approach, see Felix Cortés, Joe Falcón and Juan Flores, "The Cultural Expression of Puerto Ricans in New York," Latin American Perspectives, 3 (1976), 117-150.


13. Ibid.

14. Though the argument presented here concurs in general with that in Blaut, 1983, I would object to the term “ghettoization” as a way of characterizing the alternative to assimilation. Blaut’s account of the convergence of Black and Puerto Rican cultures tends to reduce that process to impinging socioeconomic and geographical factors, with no emphasis on cultural historical compatibilities and parallels.


18. Ibid.