Latin Soul Brothers: Puerto Rican Writers in the African American Grain

It should come as no surprise to scholars in African American or Latino studies, that during 1960s and 1970s Blacks and Puerto Ricans collaborated artistically and politically. In particular, Juan Flores and Genvieve Fabre point to the shared “affinities” of Black and Puerto Rican writers during the Black Arts Movement and the Nuyorican (New York Puerto Rican) literary movement. Note the specificity with which Cortes, Falcon and Flores describe the similar aesthetic and political values in African American and Puerto Rican poetry:

Such elements include the militant tone of anger and struggle, the declamatory and musical quality of the presentation, the street imagery of Black youth and culture, the basically democratic themes in the condemnation of the ruling “white establishment” and its repressive, chauvinist institutions, the call to fight back and to mold national unity and pride, the denunciation of exploiters and opportunists within the ranks of the Black community. (144)

U.S. Puerto Rican poetry displays these traits, not simply as literary influence but as a result of the similarity in authorial experiences. Cortes, Falcon and Flores trace they identify as “clearly drawn” (144) line from African American political and aesthetic expression to U.S. Puerto Rican poetry; however, they are equally instructive about the “Spanish origins” of the declamatory style that provided Puerto Rican peasants with “a primary means of voicing their outlook as a class and their opinions on social, political, aesthetic, religious and other matters” (141). While documenting and protesting –
primary functions of Puerto Rican poetry as suggested by Martin Espada – the literary movement builds on its own folk traditions and borrows from other cultural models.

The poetry of Felipe Luciano and Victor Hernandez Cruz exemplify the intercultural model and the overlapping and intersecting expressions of an Afro-Latino consciousness. Our knowledge of Hernandez Cruz and Luciano as part of an arts movement begins with their contributions to organizations, anthologies and recordings from the Black Arts Movement, a movement that peaks between 1966-1971. Both poets were able to infuse the content of their poetry with the specificity of their Puerto Rican identity, while conforming to certain formal characteristics that defined the new black poetry. In myriad ways, the poetry of Victor Hernandez Cruz and Felipe Luciano suggests the diversity within a Black Arts Movement that has often been characterized as narrowly ideological and culturally separatist. A member of predominantly black Umbra Writer’s Workshop during its demise on the New York’s Lower East Side and its reincarnation in the Bay Area, Hernandez Cruz co-edited, with David Henderson, the group’s 1974 volume Umbra: Latin Soul. Similarly, Luciano, a member the predominantly African American performance-oriented poetry troupe The Last Poets, reads with African Americans poets Gylan Kain and David Nelson in 1968’s Right On! The Original Last Poets – a film on the African American and Afro-Puerto Rican trio. Luciano’s tenure with The Last Poets lasted less than one year, from 1968-1969, but leads into his more directly political work as co-founder and Deputy Chairman of the New York’s Young Lords Organization (later the Young Lords Party), a Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalist organization modeled after the Black Panther Party.
Luciano, who self identifies as Black Puerto Rican, and Hernandez Cruz, who claims a mixed racial heritage, were both regularly included in anthologies of “blackpoetry.” Here I use Don L. Lee’s terminology to specify a generic difference between black poetry (any poetry by black people) and “blackpoetry,” a poetry focused on “the idea”; that is, according to Lee, a poetry disconnected from the aesthetic expectations of a “white literary mainstream” but fulfilling the need for social and racial consciousness (Don’t Cry, Scream 15). The poetry of Luciano and Hernandez Cruz introduce Puerto Rican identity as a matrix of cultural, linguistic and geographic demarcation, not solely a fact of social and racial determination. Although never collected in a single volume, Luciano’s 1960s poems appear scattered throughout anthologies and recordings categorized as black poetry. And Hernandez Cruz, whose poetry was championed and published by the mainstream literati, sparked his career with contributions to now canonical black arts movement texts.

Luciano’s poems identify his Puerto Rican heritage and confirm his connection to movements in both Black and Latino consciousness. For example, Luciano’s “You’re Nothing but a Spanish Colored Kid” highlights the parallel lives of Puerto Ricans and Blacks in the U.S. In a telling historical portrait, Puerto Ricans in New York are depicted as a displaced group, similar to the Africans who suffered a forced migration to the New World. Luciano begins:

I see them

Puerto Ricans/Spanish niggers

Bronzed farmers look silly being doormen

Their fingers are more honest than their eyes.
The poem imagines the jibaro transplanted to the island of Manhattan from the island of Puerto Rico. As if depicting the ridiculous, Luciano continues: “Brown people look so funny in the snow.” Contrasting the farmers’ sun-bronzed bodies to their pale gray surroundings, Luciano suggests that migration has caused a physical and visual incongruity. Moreover, psychic disruption ensues when having “lost their land” the migrants begin “losing their minds.” Luciano’s poem works in contrasts to illustrate the juxtaposition of the migrated subject to his/her new context.

Luciano ends “You’re Nothing but a Spanish Colored Kid” by issuing an ultimatum and challenging the title’s presumption of second-class citizenship for Puerto Ricans:

C’mon spic.
Learn to tell time.
Your daddy was a peasant
And you’re nothing but a Spanish colored kid
unless you
Get real nigger
And stop making gestures.

The lines “Learn to tell time” and “stop making gestures” directed internally at the Puerto Rican audience whom Luciano wants to motivate, recall the internal address of poems by Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez. Similarly, Luciano finds fault with the current generation of “Spanish niggers,” demanding that they “get real.” Using a form of direct address, Luciano contrasts the archetypal position of the elders (“your daddy was a peasant”) and the stereotypical position of the youth (“c’mon spic’). Only the words
“unless you / get real” offer a way out for the addressed persona, who has been “nothing but a Spanish colored kid” since the beginning of the poem. At the very end, therefore, the way out leads the way into an atypical, self-defined identity that we have yet to witness.

In "You're Nothing but a Spanish Colored Kid" and other poems (such as "Jibaro/My Pretty Nigger") Luciano employs the term “nigger” as a symbolic code. Although pejorative and hateful when used by those not identified as “in-group,” terms such as “nigger” have been and continue to be used by those who share a racially or socially constructed identity to denote intimacy between speaker and listener, author and audience. Elaborating on Luciano's use of the word, literary scholar William Luis writes:

the word nigger points to the intermingling of Latino and African American cultures, already reflected in the political cooperation between the Young Lords and the Black Panthers and other African American organizations. It also represents the common ground shared by the Last Poets. The articulation of the word nigger by Puerto Ricans and Latinos suggests that even though this and other words particular to African American speech had a specific historical origin, the use of such words also became an acceptable method of expression when sharing a common inner-city experience. (56)

The title of Luciano’s signature poem “Jibaro/My Pretty Nigger” exemplifies Luis’ argument. Using “jibaro” and “nigger” as alternating terms – one a reclaimed term of national identity for Puerto Ricans and the other a term in the process of reclamation by African Americans – Luciano establishes the power of words to demean as well as the
power of the community to transform and restore meaning. Moreover, as a result of Luciano’s possessive usage, “my pretty nigger,” the sting of the word “nigger” is offset by his personalization of the impersonal term. Thus, the otherwise ugly, impersonal term “nigger” is placed in a personal (“my”) and approving (“pretty”) context. Similarly, the juxtaposition of the English words “my pretty nigger” with the Spanish word “jibaro” obviates any linguistic or cultural tension, and instead fosters the integration of Black and Puerto Rican perspectives. Often composed in a dialogic form, Luciano’s poems not only recognize the interstices of Black and Puerto Rican experiences, but their introspective focus honors Puerto Rican blackness.

The work of Victor Hernandez Cruz evokes the Afro-Latino sensibility from a primarily poetic, as opposed to Luciano’s primarily political perspective. With his 1966 chapbook Papo Got His Gun and his first collection with a major publisher, 1968’s Snaps, Hernandez Cruz created a literary identity by sculpting new images, sounding new vocabularies and sampling new musics. The early poetry of Hernandez Cruz provides a transcript of the years in which the first full generation of Puerto Ricans raised in the U.S. came of age. Espada calls the poetry of Hernandez Cruz “surreal, insistently musical, and bilingual” (258). Indeed, Hernandez Cruz’s insistence on music predominates with invocations to “descarga” (a jam session), “ritmo” (rhythm), congas, trombones. Poems are dedicated to musicians Ray Barreto (“Free Spirit”), Joe Bataan (“Latin & Soul”), and Eddie Palmieri (“/MOVING/”). Whereas references to “black speech” and “black music” abound in the “new black poetry,” the orality and rhythms of Latino-Caribbean expressive culture dominate in the verses of Hernandez Cruz. iv Specifically, the use of untranslated Spanish words and idioms in an English-language text allowed for linguistic
virtuosity, aptly reflecting the intercultural activity of the period’s Black and Latino musicians.

In Hernandez Cruz’s poems, music carries Puerto Rican nationalist sentiment but also bridges the cultural gaps between Puerto Ricans and other Americans. A number of pieces specifically refer to boogaloo music, a hybrid form fusing Latin and funk rhythms wildly popular during the late 1960s. If Larry Neal’s poem “Black Boogaloo” offered the poetic prescription for black unity, then Latin boogaloo sound offered the musical cure for unity between black and Latino communities. Writing about the Latin Boogaloo period in From Bomba to Hip-Hop, sociologist and cultural historian Juan Flores explains that “the defining theme and musical feature of boogaloo is precisely this intercultural togetherness, the solidarity engendered by living and loving in unison beyond obvious differences” (82). Thus, 1960s Latin boogaloo music brought Blacks and Latinos together on the same dance floor and often in the same bands, increasing the social interaction among the two groups in a way only anticipated by the Latin jazz and mambo crazes of previous decades.

Of Hernandez Cruz’ poems using boogaloo as a recurring trope, “The Eye / Uptown & Downtown / (three days)” introduces the music as a structural and thematic element. In two of the poems 32 numbered stanzas, boogaloo song titles or lyrics appear in capitals as the only text. Stanza 13 quotes song lyrics:

CURA CURA CURA
BAILA BOOGALOO.

And stanza 25, again in all capitals, cites the title Joe Cuba’s famous 1966 boogaloo:

BANG BANG
These two insertions, roughly centered throughout the poem’s 32 stanzas, provide doses of musicality in a poem not specifically about music. Indeed, the “eye” of the poem roams uptown and downtown observing the scene. For example, stanza 18 reports “the lexington train broke down” and stanza 23 warns, “the stairs are full of holes.” In a color-by-number style, the poem’s composite parts unify to create a surreal portrait of the city. However, in choosing to use only capital letters in the sections quoting boogaloo lyrics, Hernandez Cruz highlights the important role of Latin music as the soundtrack in the communities his poetic eye surveys. The boogaloo is the background rhythm which Hernandez Cruz grants solo status for two of his 32 bars of verse.

Appearing in a host of anthologies including Black Fire, the landmark "anthology of Afro-American writing," edited by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, and The New Black Poetry, edited by Clarence Major, poems by Hernandez Cruz also reflect the militant posture of 1960s works. The power of poetry itself, a power Baraka’s poem “Black Art” envisions, is most directly treated in Hernandez Cruz’ “today is a day of great joy”:

When they stop poems
in the mail & clap
their hands & dance to
them
[…]
when poems start to
knock down walls to
choke politicians
when poems scream &
begin to break the air

that is the time of
true poets that is
the time of greatness

a true poet aiming
poems & watching things
fall to the ground

Frequently anthologized, “today is a day of great joy,” captures the fun and function of poetry – it is both entertainment and armament. Positioning the poet as assassin, Hernandez Cruz gives new meaning to the words “BANG BANG” in “The Eye” – they now evoke the lines of a popular song as well as the line of fire. In “today,” Hernandez Cruz combines the present moment (“today is a great day of joy”) with the immediate future (“when poems start to…”), thereby creating a poetic reality that demands fulfillment of the present’s potential. He emphasizes that each new day is an opportunity for “great joy” if we allow the transforming power of poetry into our lives.

Hernandez Cruz’s inclusion in anthologies of black writing continued through the 1970s, with poems published in black poetry journals as well as in Dices or Black Bones: Black Voices of the Seventies (1970), 3000 Years of Black Poetry (1970), and New Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature (1972). In 3000 Years of Black Poetry, “today” is the final contribution, suggesting at once the fluidity of
Hernandez Cruz’s writing and the aesthetic flexibility of the term “black poetry.” That is, the anthology’s 3000 year trajectory of “black poetry,” beginning with the praise songs of the Gabon Pygmy and ending with the poem of “a young Puerto Rican” (195), attempts to record the stylistic elements unifying the “varied poetry of the African peoples” (xx). In the other anthologies, where the focus is clearly on the writing of U.S. Blacks, the poetry of Hernandez Cruz is both representative and innovative. His style and syntax correspond to that of fellow Umbra writers, yet the habitual references to “congas,” “boogaloo” and “puerto rico” confirm what Abraham Chapman calls the “individual way” Hernandez Cruz depicts Black and Puerto Rican experiences in the United States (New Black Voices 237).

Having been included in anthologies of “black poetry,” Hernandez Cruz appeared to be in the shadows of blackness, the true umbra effect of his association with African American poets. But, during a time in which there were few anthologies of Puerto Rican writing, being published as a “black poet” provided exposure and the entrée to other publishing ventures, some unsolicited and unapproved. In an interview I conducted with Victor Hernandez Cruz, he explained that once Random House owned the rights to his poems from Snaps, they submitted various poems to anthologies without his knowledge. Thus, Hernandez Cruz’s inclusion in anthologies of black writing was not always a reflection of his desire to be in these anthologies or the desire of the editors to seek out his work. Instead, the revelation suggests that Hernandez Cruz’s “black poetry” was part authorial tone, but also part publisher’s ploy.

Hernandez Cruz’s place in “black” anthologies, however, would have been unlikely if not for the Afro-Latino sensibility and the continuities between his work and
his African American peers. Integrating Latin music, Spanish vocabulary, and New York accents, Hernandez Cruz constructs a poetics of cultural identity that is at once informed by traditions within Puerto Rican and U.S. literature, as well as a “deformation” of these master narratives. As Nicolas Kanellos notes in his introduction to Hernandez Cruz’s collection *Rhythm, Content and Flavor*, the poet’s diction is grounded in Black English and popular music, not in the “formalities of grammar and style” (10). Reforming, more than deforming, American literary history, Hernandez Cruz writes himself into being by writing a poetry that passes through and contests a racially segregated canon.

In their contributions to the Black Arts Movement, both Hernandez Cruz and Luciano, planted the seeds for the Nuyorican poetry movement that bloomed in the 1970s. Three decades later, Hernandez Cruz is perhaps the most prolific and most lauded Puerto Rican poet by the U.S. literary mainstream. Likewise, Luciano’s art and activism with the Last Poets and the Young Lords Party signaled a career of revolutionary commitments to Black and Puerto Rican communities fulfilled by his success as a broadcast and print journalist. In looking back on the 1960s, then, we must look closely and carefully at the ways poetry by Puerto Ricans works to contest and complicate notions of a monolithic blackness or deracialized *puertorriquen*.

Employing a Latin Soul aesthetic or an Afro-Latino sensibility, the poetry of Hernandez Cruz and Luciano opened a literary space that can serve as a model for intercultural innovations among today’s Black and Puerto Rican populations.

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1 Unlike Sonia Sanchez and Jayne Cortez, African American poets who carried Spanish surnames but were not themselves part of a U.S. Latino ethnic group, Felipe Luciano and Victor Hernandez Cruz are Puerto Ricans whose careers are definitively shaped by their involvement in the Black Arts Movement.

2 Since the founding of The Last Poets on May 19, 1968 in Harlem’s Marcus Garvey Park, and through its many reincarnations, the group has included several different members: David Nelson, Gylan Kain,
Abiodun Oyewole, Felipe Luciano, Umar Bin Hassan, Nilijah Babatunde (drummer), Suliaman El Hadi, and Jalal Nuriddin.

This poem appears in Black Spirits, edited by Woodie King, Jr., the dramatist who produced the motion picture Right On!: The Original Last Poets. The volume also includes selections by Gylan Kain and David Nelson, fellow Last Poets.


On the other side, Hernandez Cruz's literary ancestor, William Carlos Williams, continues to be firmly located in a (white Anglo) American canon, which mitigates the influence of Williams' Puerto Rican heritage and the foundation for his concept of a New World poetics.

See Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, on "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery."