

Resenha

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FLORES, Juan. *From Bomba to Hip-Hop. Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, 265 p.

During the first part of the 1990s, a considerable number of publications on the “Hispanic” or “Latino” experience emerged, but Juan Flores’ book, *From Bomba to hip-hop* is one of the few scholarly studies to reveal the complexities of Latino identity. In addition, it is a homage that constitutes one of the few pioneer pieces of research on Puerto Rican culture and artistic expression. The title of this book, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, is one that catches the reader’s attention and is more than a phonetic and musical juxtaposition of words. I will try to define this phrase, adopting the author’s definition: “A celebration of the continuity of Puerto Rican Culture” (p. I). Juan Flores’ study lucidly traces the evolving distinctiveness of Puerto Rican culture in both New York and Puerto Rico and the title attempts to combine these locations. Thus, “bomba” refers to the folkloric origins of Puerto Rican popular dance and music, which is the ancestor of the “hip-hop” music that emerged in

* Resenha recebida em junho e aprovada para publicação em setembro de 2005

1970s and 1980s in the marginalised areas of New York, becoming a prominent feature of Puerto Rican youth culture in New York. The book is structured in ten rather brief chapters, with a short introduction and a concluding Postscript. The introduction, though brief and anecdotal, is based on Flores' observations of an event entitled "From Bomba to Hip-Hop" at his Hunter College alma mater. It addresses many of the issues that the subsequent chapters of the book will deal with and invites us to read more. Although the book does not have a clear connecting thread, each of the chapters is written clearly and leads in to the next, allowing the reader to enjoy a progressive understanding of the main theme of the book.

At the very beginning of the book the reader is introduced to the notion of "popular culture" in a clear manner, Flores defining the concept "popular" as that belonging to the majority of people (i.e. poor and low middle classes, the common people). Flores distinguishes the different meanings that "popular" has acquired over time, convincingly showing how the term has evolved from its earlier definition as the survival of traditions or folklores, to its current definition of "mass culture".

The most interesting aspect of this scholarly researched book is the account it gives of how Puerto Rican identity has developed in New York, providing an exhaustive description of its national roots, cultural space, musical and literary expressions. Flores continues to argue consistently the shaping of Puerto Rican identity is not defined by geographical, linguistic or behaviour models, but by a close kinship with its origins, the people and the culture that define the genuine self, rather than being defined by its condition in the Diaspora. An important characteristic of this study is the emphasis placed on the Puerto Rican's experience of being "in between" two cultures, leading in Flores' opinion to "the possibility of an intricate politics of freedom and resistance" (p. 55). Like Díaz Quiñones in *La memoria rota*, which analyses the construction and breaking of Puerto Rican nation, Flores emphasises the continuity of the Puerto Rican cultural development in the Diaspora. He gives the eloquent example of the emergence of Spanglish in Puerto Rican culture, as a symbiosis

between language and place, between identity and memory. The main idea proposed here is that the apparently fragmented image of Puerto Rican culture is actually connected by a constant process of re-construction, where unity and diversity maintain a robust Puerto Rican identity that is bond by its historical memory.

The book reveals how the cohabitation of diverse ethnic minorities in the Diaspora leads to the emergence of hip-hop, via the interaction between Puerto Ricans and Black youngsters within the shared context of New York, creating a common space for a fusion of African American and Latino musical expression. However the author describes how “this fusion” has obscured Puerto Rican cultural and musical heritage. He supports this hypothesis by referring to the neglect of Puerto Rico’s native Spanish language and to how Latin styles have been subsumed by the American label. Flores expands this issue by highlighting how bands and singers of Cuban, Panamanian, and Ecuadorian origins in the USA have gained fame and popularity as Spanish-language reggae-rap in the Caribbean and Latin America. Whereas New York Puerto Ricans with their hip-hop backgrounds have become dispersed and have lost their Puerto Rican identity. Flores stresses how the prevailing racial hierarchy with which Puerto Ricans find themselves confronted in the American Diaspora can explain the invisibility of this Hispanic community.

The book includes a number of case studies to illustrate its main points, as well as a valuable selection of contemporary Puerto Rican and other Latino rap songs. These lyrics illustrate the innovation and heritage of minorities such as Puerto Ricans, despite their apparent invisibility in New York. In his analysis of the complexities of Latino life, Flores shows that although Latino Studies is a growing area in further education institution in the USA, this has involved a complex and arduous process of development. In other words, the struggle of Latino people to adapt to in the colonial context of North America has been paralleled by the academic struggle encountered in establishing Latino Studies as an independent discipline. In an admirably challenging manner, Flores proposes that

Latino Studies should be integrated urgently into academia as a social movement and in the name of human rights. He adds that this also will address the need to awaken awareness of historical memory among Puerto Ricans and other Latino immigrants.

This book undoubtedly represents a comprehensive study of contemporary Puerto Rican culture and is a valuable contribution to the field. Although several studies have already been carried out, these are restricted to mainstream issues in Latino culture. Flores' book emphasises the complex particularities of Puerto Rican cultural experience and is an insightful exploration of the complexity and contradictions of contemporary Puerto Rican and Latino culture, informed by a contemporary cultural theory. *From Bomba to hip-hop* is a well-researched and valuable work that uncovers many enigmas of "Latinos" in New York and invites us to re-evaluate the issue of Puerto Rican culture and identity in the United States. It undoubtedly provides the groundwork for important studies on ethnic minorities yet to come.