



Centro Journal

ISSN: 1538-6279

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

The City University of New York

Estados Unidos

Arévalo Mateus, Jorge

Everything youve ever heard, and nothing youve ever heard: Ricanstruction, New-Nuyorican Punk
Activists

Centro Journal, vol. XVI, núm. 2, fall, 2004, pp. 248-271

The City University of New York

New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37716216>

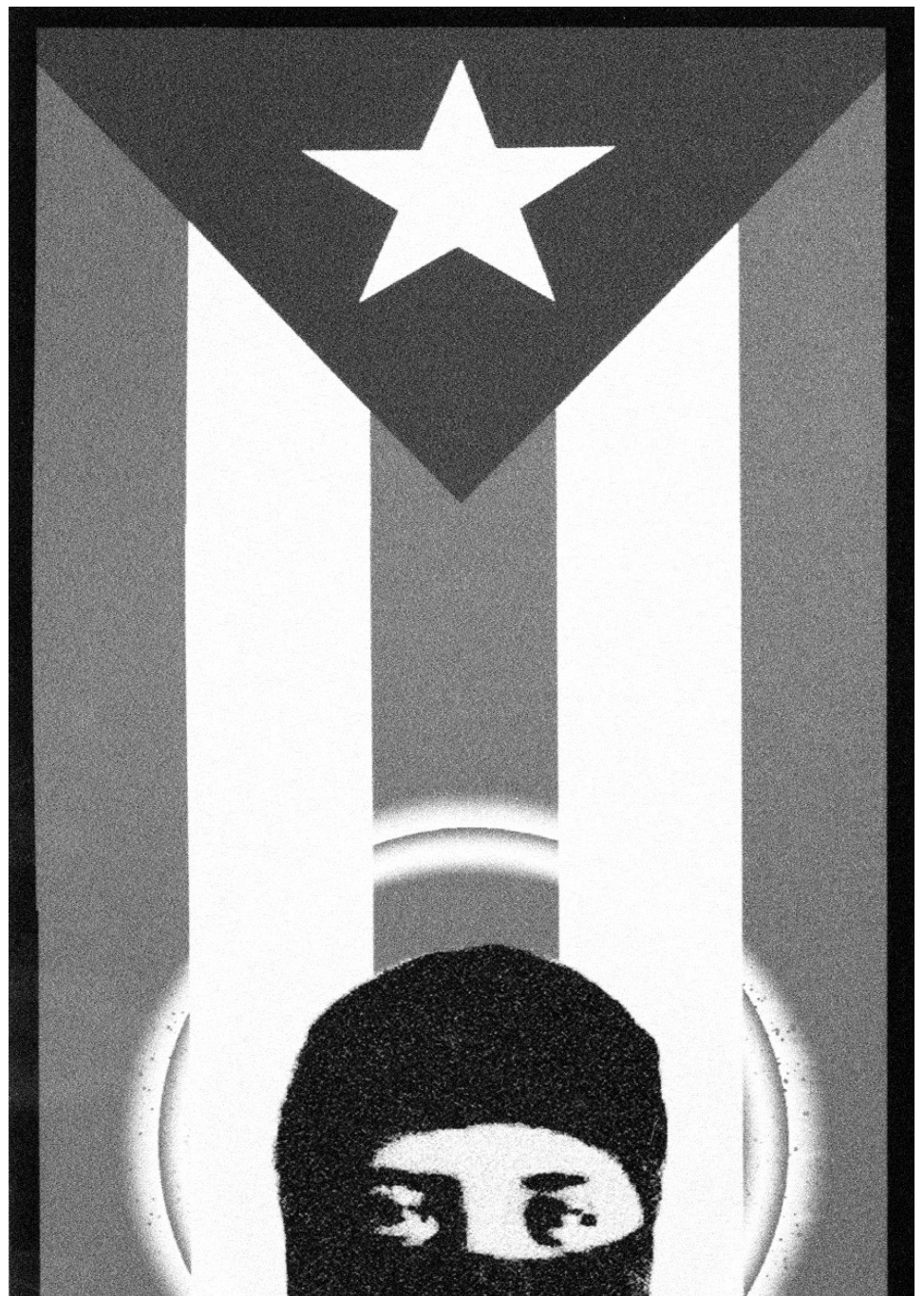
- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in [redalyc.org](http://www.redalyc.org)

[redalyc.org](http://www.redalyc.org)

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative



The artist must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.

—Paul Robeson. From a statement to a 1937 Royal Albert Hall, London, rally in defense of the Spanish Republic. It also appears on Robeson's tombstone in Hartsdale, New York.

The choice, as every choice, is yours; to fight for freedom or be fettered, to struggle for liberty or be satisfied with slavery, to side with life or death.

—Mumia Abu Jamal. From the liner notes to Ricanstruction's *Abu Jamal* CD (AWOL 1998–2002)

In the history of Puerto Rican popular music, songs of protest, struggle, and resistance have played a significant albeit somewhat obscured role in the political life and culture of New York's Boricua communities. With a long and varied tradition of *canción* styles, including *música jíbara*, *plena* and *bomba*, *nueva canción*, together with the highly popular *guarachas* and *boleros* introduced to Puerto Rico by Cubans, Puerto Ricans migrating to New York in the early twentieth-century brought with them a musical language that enabled and empowered them to deal with new and often hostile surroundings. Puerto Rican popular musics, including the new song movement, salsa, and more recently Latin rap, have garnered considerable attention in sociological, historical, and cultural studies and musicological scholarship (Aparicio 1998; Boggs 1992; Flores 1993, 1994, 2000; Glasser 1995; Roberts 1974, 1979; Singer 1983; Manuel 1994; Quintero Rivera 1998; Rodríguez-Rodríguez 1995; Santiago 1990; Rivera 2003). Nevertheless, few studies have examined the history of political activism by Puerto Rican musicians in New York City, despite the thematic emphasis on Puerto Rican marginalization and discrimination in early salsa. Therefore, even as academic discourse continues to echo questions about salsa's "authenticity" vis-a-vis Cuban vs. Puerto Rican origins, and Cuba's *nueva trova* continues to be regarded as the model of innovation and inspiration that spawned "protest song" movements throughout Latin America during the 1960s, Nuyorican political music and musicians, particularly those performing non-traditional styles, remain conspicuously hidden from view. Although Pacini Hernández's comparative study of Chicano and Puerto Rican musicians in Los Angeles and New York City correctly notes that racial

The significance of this group of young Boricuas will be argued from several perspectives: through a consideration of their political commitment and activism in relation to *puertorriqueño* identity politics; the consistency of their participation with traditional Puerto Rican issues such as independence, nationalism, and anti-colonialism; their struggles as Nuyoricans for social, political, and economic civil rights and empowerment; and, finally, the artistic hybridity of their music as an expression of a developing Nuyorican and contemporary Puerto Rican culture.

Ricanstruction's mobilization

We can be creative, even in the arms of hell

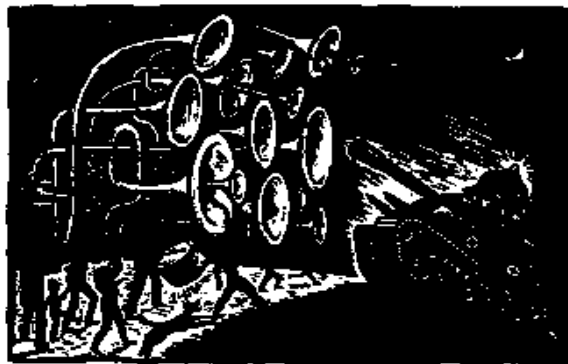
—Oscar Lopez Rivera

Rooted in the radical and counterculture movements of the 1960s and earlier, Ricanstruction's progressive activism is ideologically linked to the Cuban Revolution, Black Power, the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, and Puerto Rican Nationalism. The romantic image of the young Cuban *guerrero* defiantly standing up to US imperialism, the Black Panthers' commitment to revolutionary goals, and Albizu Campos' unyielding political vision of Puerto Rico's liberation inform the band's militant stance. Ricanstruction's defiant oppositional rhetoric also echoes the Young Lords and other Puerto Rican radicals in the US, who struggled not only at the economic and political level but also were involved in constructing a political identity framed by race, class, and coloniality (Rodríguez-Morazzani 1998: 42–43):

Quiero ser libre! (1997). *One of a series of four street murals (104th street and Park avenue). vagabond, street mural. Reprinted, by permission, from vagabond.*



**Friday,
November 12, 8PM**



Ricanstruction
performing at
Charas
605 E 9th St. (btwn aves B & C), NYC
Benefit party for \$7 to \$15 donation
RECLAIM THE STREETS

People vs. Military Industry.

Illustration by Eric Drooker. Handbill for a benefit held for Reclaim the Streets, an organization that supports street protest, at Charas, November 12, 2000.

Handbill designed by Sam LaHoz.

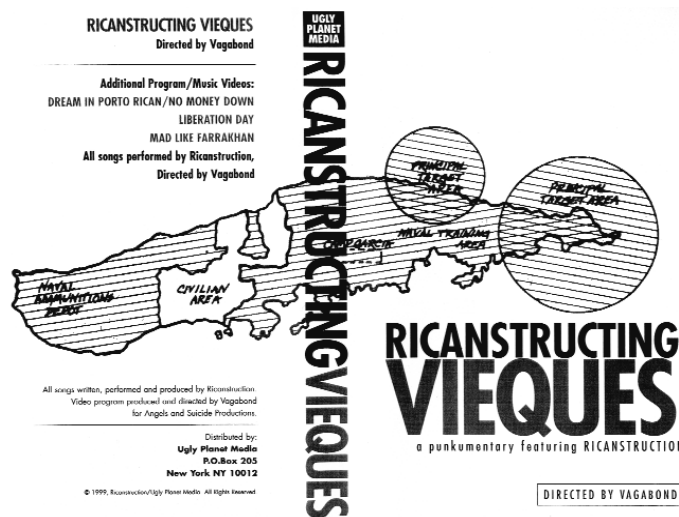
Reprinted, by permission, from Eric Drooker, © Eric Drooker (www.drooker.com).

accustomed to inhabiting low levels of society, “puertorriqueños will always be the thorns sticking the elephant in the ass” (N4Prophet, interview). Ricanstruction’s contribution—a kind of street-based, grassroots cultural consciousness-raising campaign—illustrates the coalescing of traditions of resistance and struggle, as it presents an uncompromising and culturally innovative and always oppositional position that acts as an empowering alternative to current ineffectual social policies and/or political strategies. Acts of social protest are conducted at the “street” level, a local sphere where members of the band can directly impact the community through education and cultural awareness programs. Despite the fact that their presence in the commercial popular music marketplace is—by their own choice—limited, the members of Ricanstruction remain on the cultural fringe, removed from the trappings of unwelcome media attention or mainstream measures of success. Although not strictly exclusionary or exclusionist, the group maintains its Puerto Rican identity apart from mainstream society and yet confronts and engages society at large at cultural and socio-political levels.

Punk music, a product of mid-1970s American and British youth subcultures, is central to Ricanstruction’s identity formation.⁶ Although not usually associated with multi-ethnic Latino/a diasporas, punk values and aesthetics inform the group’s image, sound, and social and political sensibilities. Having grown up in New York

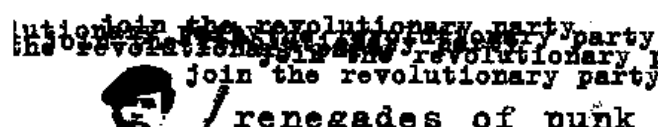
Action/Acción

From its inception, Ricanstruction realized that their hybrid musical fusion made a powerful impact on audiences, particularly those with whom the band's radical and progressive-minded polyculturalism resonates. The combination of hardcore punk rock with "old school" hip-hop, funk, rhythm and blues, soul, jazz and Latin music (salsa, Porto rock, or Latin rap) demonstrates the eclecticism with and adaptation of North American, South American, and Caribbean Afro-diasporic influences for which Puerto Rican musicians have long been recognized (Glasser 1995; Roberts 1972, 1979; Leymarie 2002; Waxer 2002). However, as Rivera points out, "their efforts are not limited to the musical environment; they are also known in various leftist organizations of the city [New York]."⁸ Adding that "[a]dmirably, music and activism go hand in hand with them" (Rivera 1998:25), for Ricanstruction, musical performance, and art (including street graffiti, murals, poetry, film, and video production) serve as "tools of resistance" and agitprop communications media.



Ricanstructing Vieques. Film documentary produced by re-sister and vagabond and directed by vagabond, 26 min. Audio Visual Terrorism / Ugly Planet Media, 1999.

Forming a collective known as *The Ricanstruction Resistance*, they nurture other musical groups, artists or projects that demonstrate leftist or progressive political orientation.⁹ As N4Prophet explains: "We started putting on shows called 'revolutionary parties' to give new bands, artists, and projects exposure."



RESISTANCE 101

Puerto Rico and the continuing struggle for liberation!
220 east 106th street, room 35, El Barrio NYC
EVERY TUESDAY in MAY @ 6:30 pm

MAY 4th

"Paradise Invaded."

Spanish Colonization, the Taíno and African resistance to Spanish rule.

MAY 11th

"Re-birth of a Nation."

1898-1900.

El Grito de Lares. The abolition of slavery. Autonomy from Spain. And the U.S. invasion.

May 18th

"The Nationalists & Exiles to the U.S."

The rise of Don Pedro Albizu Campos & the Nationalist Party. And Operation Honttrap.

May 25th

"The Struggle Continues..."

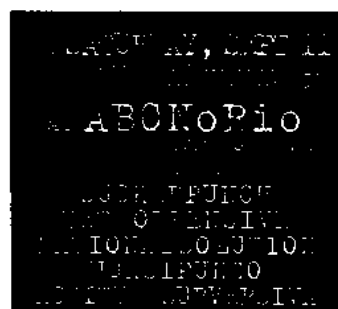
The Young Lords Party. Armed underground resistance. The front line struggle in Vieques.

For more information call: 212.539.3620

ALL CLASSES FREE!
ALL AGES WELCOME!

Resistance 101 political education workshop course descriptions. Double-sided, bilingual postcard, 4 x 6. Designed by vagabond. Reprinted, by permission, from vagabond.

Resistance 101 and Political Prisoner 101; titled after the 101 years that Puerto Rico had been a colony of the U.S. at the time. Class curriculums are designed to teach the history of Puerto Rico's colonial condition and about individuals who have been incarcerated for anti-colonial political beliefs.



The human rights of political prisoners are of particular concern to the band and, as a result, they have been involved in several U.N. rallies. Moreover, addressing local issues, such as lack of affordable housing and illegal working conditions, the band advocates for the squatters movement, the National Mobilization Against Sweatshops, and the Chinese Staff and Workers Association.

In terms of alternative media development and efforts to assist the free the airwaves movement, Ricanstruction has performed benefits for numerous pirate radio stations, even working at Steal this Radio, a community-based activist radio station located in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Their participation and presence at numerous alternative Latino film screenings is prolific. Also producing what they call "anti-videos" (including music videos, a documentary about Vieques, and an original film script about a *machetero*), the band collaborates with film, video, and graphic artists to help define a new politicized sensibility to media arts.¹¹



The song begins with a soft, slow murmuring blues vamp on bass and drums. A Curtis Mayfield-like '60s soul guitar wah-wah soon enters and teasingly plays in, around, and throughout the opening vocal verse, sung softly at first but with an underlying and mounting feeling of tension—sounding, ironically, not unlike world pop stars such as Sting, Peter Gabriel, or Paul Simon. In the second verse, by the time the lyric “*then the sudden smell of burnin’ flesh*” is articulated—nearly at a scream—the band abruptly shifts into a loud semi-improvised dirge, with Hendrix-style blues-inflected rock guitar that emulates Sonny Sharrock and James “Blood” Ulmer, further recalling the improvisational avant-garde jazz of Ornette Coleman and Ronald Shannon Jackson’s De-Coding Society. Add to this, powerful, virtuosic drumming in the Tony Williams vein, and sound production reminiscent of Miles Davis’ *Live at the Fillmore* (East and West) era experiments in funk-noise, that build into an emotional crescendo before returning to the softly sung yet bitter and melancholy third verse:

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

and what you have is a “Strange Fruit” that is itself a hybrid of black musics. Although the numerous aural references to black popular music are not unusual in the music of Ricanstruction, this cover song is not stylistically typical of the band. Nonetheless, it exemplifies how Ricanstruction’s hybrid musical production serves to express moral outrage and hatred of racism. The combined musical references and high level of musicianship work together—in this case, calling attention to the Abu Jamal case—to appeal to the listener’s humanity with respect to the inhumanity of unjust incarceration.

Daily life in *el barrio* and the hardships of urban survival are recurring themes in Ricanstruction’s music. However, punk rock more typically provides the musical means of expression. As young Boricuas exposed to punk rock culture through the music of Bad Brains, Black Flag, and the Dead Kennedys, among other influential bands, the members of Ricanstruction embrace punk aesthetics for a number of reasons. First, punk’s strident urgency, power, and anti-status quo message works well with Ricanstruction’s rejection of government and corporate control; punk’s refusal to be politicized or co-opted by the mainstream also echoes Ricanstruction’s espoused aversion to “politrix” (or politics) and the “shitstem”; punk allows Ricanstruction to embrace their “marginalization” as a position of resistance; punk, though once associated with “white” youth, today crosses race, class, ethnic, and gender boundaries, enabling Ricanstruction’s message to reach audiences beyond

Latin percussion, salsa-influenced *montuno* and *coro* sections, and Spanish words and phrases are dispersed over exceedingly frenetic drum rhythms and hammering punk rock harmonic progressions, effortlessly combining Nuyorican and punk musical cultures. That Ricanstruction continues to shun commercial success is also consistent with their understanding that the “underground” remains the zone in which their hybrid “unpopular popular music” can thrive. Moreover, the do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude with regard to the distribution of their music is yet another conspicuous punk value to which they adhere. As band poet and vocalist Not4Prophet manically repeats at the end of “No Money Down”: “*We will not be bought and sold, we will not be bought!*”¹⁶

anti-Conclusion

Never doubt that a small group of committed people can
change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.

— Margaret Mead

Since 9/11 and the U.S. Navy’s withdrawal from Vieques, Ricanstruction has turned toward material that demonstrates a greater preoccupation with “love” themes. These are not, however, the smooth, radio-oriented pop *baladas* or easy-listening verses favored by top 40 commercial programmers. Instead, Ricanstruction’s hardcore Porto punk manifesto remains as proletarian, leftist, and oppositional as ever. Metaphors dealing with unequal power relationships abound: the patriarchy of the dominant colonizers, its neglect of the *pueblo*, and the need to break away from dominant society’s manipulation continue to prevail—dismantling the system itself is the objective. Comparable to the new song movement (NSM), whose discourse too was anticapitalist, anticolonialist, and antimilitarist, advocating for Puerto Rico’s independence, Ricanstruction’s content and language has evolved from protest language to narratives about love in varied political dimensions: patriotism, solidarity with Latin America, the need for a new social and political system for Puerto Rico and the world (Rodriguez-Rodriguez 2003; Moore 2003); in short, love of nation, culture, and a desire for a better world—love as the quintessential political and revolutionary act. The strategy behind this action is to emphasize the tactical cultural shifts that are required of the group as radical, social, and political actors, which, in turn, is symbolic of their position in society at large. Such transmutations further render a clearer picture of the artists’ cultural intent: revolution—without sacrificing either the personal or collective account.

Not unlike salsa and the NSM, attempts to define or classify Ricanstruction’s

confronting and rejecting the idea that socially conscious artists, by dismissing the “mainstream,” render their work more inaccessible than need be, particularly when reaching larger audiences might advance their agenda.¹⁷ Ricanstruction, in contrast, opts to remain peripheral to the capitalist orientation of contemporary society as a whole (Moore 2003: 3). In particular, their conscious and overt negation of so-called “white” society—while appropriating elements from it—underline the extent to which Nuyorican cultural awareness has developed in terms of identity politics (race, class, and gender). The fact that Ricanstruction’s music has reached only marginal success in the commercial marketplace or in terms of audience size does not diminish their significance as a kind of identity affirmation or cultural representation, particularly when the subversion of cultural hierarchies is a prominent feature of subcultural praxis.

In the context of the contemporary Nuyorican diaspora, punk and Puerto Rican musical genres and styles (e.g., NSM and salsa) seem to share commonalities which

THIS FRIDAY, DEC 13



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to give special thanks to all the members of the Ricanstruction collective for their participation and willingness to answer all my questions. I am grateful to Raquel Z. Rivera, Juan Flores, and Deborah Pacini Hernández for their insight and support. Thank you to the essay reviewers, Robin Moore, and María Elena Cepeda for their comments and suggestions. Finally, a very special thank you to Mimi Lopez for her love of music.

NOTES

¹ Cf. Arévalo Mateus (2004), where I introduce and discuss Ricanstruction, among other Boricua rock bands; fieldwork for this work was conducted in Puerto Rico and New York City from 1998 through 2002. In the present work, I am more interested in what Duany identifies as the broader implications of the diaspora's "reluctance to incorporate into the U.S. mainstream culture" and its "popular claims to national identity on the Island" (see Duany 2002). Following Turino (2000), I am also interested in the evolving cosmopolitanism and/or its rejection as demonstrated by the heightened political awareness and cultural nationalism among young Nuyoricans.

² Quoted from Ricanstruction press kit. New York: Ugly Planet Media, n.d.

³ See "Line Up" (<http://www.ricanstruction.net>), for links to organizations and media outlets with which Ricanstruction is affiliated.

⁴ Not4Prophet's combined adjective-noun phrase, "unpopular popular music," contains a double-definition of the term "popular": "although Ricanstruction's music is music of (and by) the people (popular), it is not pop(ular) [sic] music" (personal communication, email 8/7/03). N4Prophet's use of the term "popular" thereby suggests that the group's merging of popular musics with radical politics often results in either less than desirable mainstream media coverage or general public consideration or acceptance.

⁵ Lyrics from "Mad like Farrakhan," *Liberation Day* (CBGB-02), 1998.

⁶ Cf. Garofalo 2002, Hebdige 1979. See also Lipsitz' discussion of Chicano punk (1986; 1994: 84–90).

⁷ Salsa artists such as Willie Colón, Héctor "Lavoe" Pérez, Ray Barretto, and Rubén Blades come to mind, for example; Nueva Canción or new song movement (NSM) artists from the late 1960s include Noel Hernández and Roy Brown; see Santiago (1994: 315–19) and Valentín Escobar (2002: 161–86 — especially 167–69).

⁸ "... sus esfuerzos no se limitan al ambiente musical; también son conocidos en diversos movimientos inquietos de la ciudad. Admirablemente, música y activismo político van de la mano con ellos."

⁹ These include Anomie Mind, Bay of Pigs, Shakuan, M16, and bonifide (a graffiti writer in Chicago). Projects include Renegades of Punk (a rap duo that perform "spoken noise" — electronically processed human "beat-box" with rap poetry), the Shining Path (a revolutionary Hip Hop ensemble), and Cenén (a poet of self-described "political puerto poems"). They have also collaborated with other political artists such as Dead Prez (New York), The Coup (Oakland), Pocho (East Los Angeles), Los Crudos (Chicago), Public Enemy (New York),

- , and George Yúdice. 1993b. Living Borders/Buscando América: Languages of Latino Self-Formation. In *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*, 199–224, 246–52. Houston: Arte Público Press.
- Garofalo, Reebee. 2002. *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the United States*. Second Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Glasser, Ruth. 1995. *My Music is My Flag: Puerto Rican Musicians and Their New York Communities, 1917–1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hampton, Wayne. 1986. *Guerilla Minstrels: John Lennon, Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- Leymarie, Isabelle. 2002. *Cuban Fire: The Story of Salsa and Latin Jazz*. London and New York: Continuum Press.
- Lipsitz, George. 1986. Cruising Around the Historical Block: Postmodernism and Popular Music in East Los Angeles. In *Cultural Critique* 5: 157–77.
- . 1994. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place*. London: Verso.
- Manuel, Peter. 1994. Puerto Rican Music and Cultural Identity: Creative Appropriation of Cuban Sources from Danza to Salsa. *Ethnomusicology* 38(2): 249–80.
- Margolick, David. 2000. *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*. New York: Running Press.
- Moore, Robin. 2003. Transformations in Cuban *Nueva Trova*, 1965–95. *Ethnomusicology* 47(1): 1–41.
- Morales, Iris. 1998. Palante, Siempre Palante! In *The Puerto Rican Movement, Voices from the Diaspora*, eds. Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez, 210–27. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Not4Prophet (née Alano Baez). 2000. Dream in Porto Rican. In *New Rican Voices, Un Muestrario/A Sampler at the Millenium*, eds. Jorge Matos Valdejuli and Juan Flores. *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 12(1): 78.
- Pacini Hernández, Deborah. 2000. A Tale of Two Cities: A Comparative Analysis of Los Angeles Chicano and Nuyoricano Engagement with Rock and Roll. *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 11(2): 70–93.
- Pietri, Pedro. 2000. Broken English Dreams. In *Puerto Rican Obituary*, 25–34. Santo Domingo: Isla Negra Editores.
- Quintero Rivera, Angel G. 1998. *Salsa, sabor y control! Sociología de la música "tropical."* México, DF: Siglo Veintiuno Editores.
- Rivera, Raquel Z. 1998. Viva la Ricanstrucción. *Claridad* 13 al 19 de marzo: 24–5.