

Latin@/Borderland Hip Hop Rhetoric: Identity and Counter-Hegemony

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The discursive practices of Latin@s¹ have been studied and written about by numerous scholars from a diverse number of angles and disciplines. This scholarship continues to grow in importance considering the fact that this population is now the largest minority group in the United States and arguably the most influential in political and social matters. Scholars of Rhetoric and Composition have produced a plethora of important works connected to the Latin@ population but have yet to approach Latin@ rhetoric through the lens of Hip Hop discourse/culture. Latin@ Hip Hop is only one piece of the landscape of Latin@ rhetorical studies but it is an important, and thus far underrepresented, area of study.

This essay foregrounds Hip Hop rhetoric in analyzing the identity-showing and identity-shaping discourse of the present day Latin@ community while emphasizing linguistic practices, culture, and identity. While no one rhetorical analysis ever functions as a full representation of any community, or an exact representation of all individuals in a specific population, critically analyzing the Latin@ community through the lens of Hip Hop provides important and unique insight and functions as a critically useful tool to approach Latin@ studies. The discourse of this community is identity-showing in that it displays the lived realities of many in the Latin@ community—many of whom live on and in literal and metaphorical borders. The discourse is identity-shaping in that the rhetoric (lyrical, textual, visual) can also shape the lives and

¹ The term Latin@s, with the “@”, is used to signify both males and females. “Latino” is used periodically to signify only males while “Latina” is used specifically for females. The use of the progressive term here emphasizes this essay’s focus on Latin identity and serves as a visual marker of that complex identity.

worldviews of those who strongly connect with Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric. As discourse is a showing/telling phenomenon, it is also an epistemic one, and this is no different in the case of the Latin@ community.

More specifically, this essay focuses on issues of identity. Identity among the Latin@ population functions many times in a state of double-consciousness but, as viewed through the community's Hip Hop discourse, more readily functions in a state of multi-consciousness. This is manifested in Latin@s placement in cultural, linguistic, physical, and psychological borderlands (Anzaldua) and their possession of a "contradictory consciousness" (Villanueva). Furthermore, the discourse of many Latin@ Hip Hoppers is counter-hegemonic in critical ways: It can function, as much Hip Hop discourse does, in opposition to social "norms" and sensibilities in regard to linguistic practices, identity, and culture and it is espoused through nontraditional mediums of rhetorical studies such as lyrics, music videos, graffiti, tagging, and "vehicular rhetoric." The multi-consciousness of this community, expressed in linguistic practices and culture, will be addressed first followed by an analysis of how this multi-consciousness serves as a counter-hegemonic force.

Ultimately, the Hip Hop discourse of the Latin@ community is directly connected to the complex identity of this ethnic group and is a powerful tool in displaying some of its central characteristics while also serving as a shaping-tool of the group's identity. Latin@ Hip Hop illustrates the power of everyday rhetorics to affect identity and society. Reaching out toward these untraditional places expands and enriches the rhetorical landscape and teaches us about a historically marginalized population that is growing in numbers and influence.

Defining Latin@ Hip Hop

Though any genre or sub-genre of music is nearly impossible to strictly define, it is important to have a working definition of “Latin@ Hip Hop” for the purposes of this essay. Latin@ Hip Hop is Hip Hop produced by those of Latin@/Hispanic origins and/or those that self-identify, either fully or partially, with that ethnolinguistic group. Linguistically, this may include Hip Hop that is written, spoken, or performed entirely in English, Spanish, or a mixture of the two languages. Culturally, the Hip Hop artist(s) will usually have strong ties to the Latin@ community not only in terms of language but also in rhetorical references to specific experiences, food, dress, Latin@ popular culture, etc.

It is also important to note the presence of nationalistic and geographical differences among Latin@s which is, of course, not a homogenous group but a diverse group of individuals with some strong, and some loose, connections that bring them together under the umbrella of “Latin@.” Latin@s may have ancestry from Mexico, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Columbia, etc. and will also have regionalized experiences depending on where they were raised and live(ed). Because of these complexities it is difficult to pinpoint any one “Latin@” experience but a major element of this essay is to highlight and analyze some of the rhetorical and ideological underpinnings of the Latin@ Hip Hop community which in turn reveal important characteristics of the Latin@ community at large.

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical framework of this dissertation begins with the call of Jacqueline Jones Royster to critically analyze and re-analyze the field of rhetorical studies and rethink its “terrain.” She asks that scholars of rhetoric shift rhetorical subjects, shift the circle of practice,

shift where they stand, and shift the theoretical frame (150-162). These sentiments are echoed by many others in the field including Michael Leff and Patricia Bizzell, among others (Charland 2003; Glenn qtd. in Portnoy 2003; Berlin 1994; Jarratt 1991). The work of relandscaping the terrain of rhetorical studies is important in that it diversifies the field, expands the number of voices and experiences heard and analyzed, adds to the fabric of world discourse, adds legitimacy to lost/forgotten/ignored rhetorics and the populations that produce(d) them, and creates new lenses from which to study the power of discourse in displaying and creating the identity of communities. The study of Latin@ Hip Hop accomplishes these tasks. The very use of Hip Hop lyrics throughout this essay represents a shift from the subjects of traditional rhetorical studies and the multiplicity of non-traditional mediums incorporated by Latin@ Hip Hop will be touched on at the end of the essay.

Beyond the general sense that the study of Hip Hop rhetoric, in this case Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric, adds to the terrain of rhetorical studies, this essay uses theory that focuses on multi-conscious identity and cultural counter-hegemony—with the latter frequently expressed in terms of Homi Bhabha’s notion of “menace.” The identity of many Latin@s can be described as influenced by two dominant cultures—that of the United States and that of their mother country (and even a third that already is a mixture of U.S. and Latin American cultures). Interestingly, the discourse of Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric reveals two other cultural layers of influence for those Latin@s strongly connected to the Hip Hop ethos, that of African American

culture and Hip Hop culture. These four layers create an organic multi-consciousness among those Latin@s who produce and are highly influenced by Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric².

A state of multi-consciousness is created as Latin@s become aware and deal with—linguistically, psychologically, and physically—the influence of a multitude of social forces. The notion of multi-consciousness is rooted in the idea of “double-consciousness” introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois in his influential work *The Souls of Black Folk*. What he explains about African Americans of his time resonates with Latin@s today³:

[they are] born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness... (896).

This resonates with Latin@s of the new millennium because the consciousness of many Latin@s is split in a multitude of ways as well. This sense of multi-consciousness is thematic in Latin@ discourse and Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric and has been expressed by Latin@ Hip Hoppers just as it has been expressed through more traditional mediums by scholars like Victor Villanueva, Richard Rodriguez, and Gloria Anzaldua. Some of these Latin@ Hip Hop texts, and their connection to multi-consciousness in language and culture, will be discussed at length in the next section.

Cultural and critical race theory also offer valuable perspectives on Latin@ Hip Hop culture. The work of Homi Bhabha can be used to complicate and politicize the multi-consciousness of Latin@s. While, on one level, the layered existence of Latin@s can be said to

² A more expansive analysis could consider other characteristics such as sexuality and region (both the regional home within the United States and the region of the Latin@s’ mother country).

³ Not surprisingly, as can be seen in Hip Hop rhetoric in general, the struggles and social concerns of Latin@s and African Americans have historically paralleled each other in important ways.

be a common sociological occurrence in most people (i.e. all people exist in different roles in their lives—child, parent, employee, friend, etc.) the multi-consciousness of Latin@s was born out of powerful historical circumstances that have, in many instances, devalued at least a portion of their identity. This diminution of the value of Latin@ existence, experience, and culture in traditionally powerful circles, which has encompassed language, cultural norms, dress, food, etc., is part of the history of Latin@s and surfaces in Latin@ Hip Hop. It is also important to note that while other ethnic groups, such as the Irish, Polish, and Italian, were historically demonized in the United States they have since, to a large extent, become part of the main-stream of American society⁴ and, at this point in history, do not face the cultural, social, and linguistic attacks that Latin@s do—certainly not to the same degree. Furthermore, these ethnic groups do not deal directly with a history of colonization. Latin@s are not only metaphorically colonized, considering their subordinate status in American society, but many of their ancestors were literally colonized when the United States took over parts of Mexico. These historic and present-day realities are connected to the identity of Latin@s, especially many who strongly identify with Latin@ Hip Hop, in that it articulates and creates a sense of struggle and counter-hegemony among that population. And while it is important to note that Latin@s are not simply a woe-is-us community that has only been victimized, it is equally important not to ignore the historical and present-day struggles of Latin@s which include high rates in regard to teenage pregnancy and incarceration and racial disparities in income, education, and home ownership (Associated Press).

⁴ For a discussion of whiteness, ethnicity, and historical relations between differing racial and ethnic groups in the United States see “Whiteness and Ethnicity in the History of ‘White Ethnics’ in the United States” by David Roediger.

These struggles and multi-consciousness lead to discourse, and an identity bound up with this discourse, that is indicative of Bhabha's notions of camouflaging, mimicry, and mockery—but especially “menace” which serves as an aggressive counter-hegemonic force against the dominant culture of the United States. Bhabha writes of subaltern groups within a colonialist state who exist “camouflaged” within a society where they are not the dominant group and voice. Within this state the subalterns, in this case Latin@s, are formed and reformed into a “recognizable Other” who, in their difference, are “almost the same [as the dominant group], but not quite” (Bhabha 114). In this “camouflaged” state, Latin@s often mimic and mock dominant White culture and can also be seen as a social menace to White middle and upper class norms and sensibilities. This menacing is at the heart of their counter-dominant linguistic practices and culture—both of which have been marginalized by White middle and upper-class sensibilities.

Furthermore, the unbalanced split between dominant culture and Latin@ culture is a playing out of neo-colonialism in that the dominant culture possesses indirect control over the non-dominant group. Invaluable to this discussion, as Stuart Hall reminds us, is the fact that this control is not simply economic—thus we cannot only explain racial or ethnic social divisions through the discussion of economic structures and processes. Hall understands and highlights the complex nature of the situation and uses the term “articulation” to describe the joining up of complex social, historical, ideological, and economic forces in analyzing social strata and racial and ethnic interaction (39). As applied to the Latin@ milieu, articulation highlights the multitude of ways in which Latin@s feel their culture is dominated, which then leads to discourse that expresses counter-dominant sentiments that, at once, are born out of Latin@

experience and shape Latin@ identity. Simply put, social, historical, economic, and ideological realities have shaped the multi-conscious Latin@ identity which in turn produces a discursive output that incorporates, directly and indirectly, a counter-hegemonic message. This message, viewed here through the lens of Hip Hop, then becomes a part of Latino identity *and* a shaping-tool of that identity, especially for those Latin@s who strongly connect with Latin@ Hip Hop.

Ultimately, the multi-conscious and “othered” identity of Latin@s—which is both dominated by *and* incorporated with dominant culture—serves as a menacing and counter-hegemonic force to dominant culture and ideals. Rhetorically, Latin@ Hip Hop works within the realm of this force. As Antonio Gramsci expresses, hegemony is “always constituted by a combination of coercion and consent” (Omi and Winant 130) and much Latin@ Hip Hop, whether knowingly or not, is “coerced” by record labels, social norms, the English language, the sensibilities of dominant culture, etc. But, centrally, Latin@ Hip Hop also contests this cultural hegemony with its lyrical, textual, and visual rhetoric. It can serve as “political opposition...[with its] insistence on identifying itself and speaking for itself” (Omi and Winant 132) and with its expression of an *othered* experience—an experience deeply connected with social, cultural, linguistic, and ideological multi-consciousness and struggle. The following section will highlight ways in which Latino identity is bound up in multi-consciousness, expressed rhetorically through Hip Hop discourse, while the final section will more deeply delve into ways this identity grapples with and against the dominant culture.

Multi-consciousness: Language, Culture, and Identity

How you know where I'm at / when you haven't been where I've been /
Understand where I'm coming from? -Cypress Hill-

The discourse of Latin@ Hip Hop highlights integral pieces of the Latin@ experience, and it also creates a rhetorical atmosphere in which many Latin@s who strongly identify with Hip Hop, usually from an early age, are influenced to think and act (verbally and physically) in specific ways—ways “othered” by dominant culture⁵. These experiences and influences come to light in issues of language and culture as Latin@ Hip Hop exists within a multiplicity of linguistic and cultural borders.

Language

As John Frances Burke states in *Mestizo Democracy*, “being open to dialogue with the ‘other’ that is different from us” is important and the “use [and analysis] of multiple languages increase[s] the breadth and depth of the understanding [and knowledge] that ensues” (207). In this case, the knowledge that ensues is a deeper understanding of the complex linguistic makeup of Latin@ Hip Hop discourse and how this discourse articulates and influences important pieces of the Latin@ identity.

Linguistically, Latin@ Hip Hop functions at the crossroads of a number of languages/dialects: English, Spanish, Spanglish, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and Hip Hop. Many have discussed Latin@ linguistics only in relation to the Spanish-English dichotomy, but when looking through the lens of Latin@ Hip Hop discourse, AAVE and Hip Hop linguistic practices must also be considered. These linguistic influences create a layered and complex ethnolinguistic rhetorical situation and are representative of the code-switching ethos

⁵ Once again, I find it important to stress that no one section/type of discourse, in this case Latin@ Hip Hop, can fully describe the identity of an entire people nor does it describe perfectly any one individual of that community.

of *mestizaje* (Burke). This presentation—and a discussion of its connection to cultural hegemony in the final section—also represents a move toward what Ulla Connor terms as “intercultural rhetoric research” where there is a focus on studying language through “social context and ideology” (295-296). This section focuses on displaying the multi-layered linguistic practices of Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoricians, providing lyrics from two representative examples: Cypress Hill and Kid Frost.

Many scholars in the field of rhetoric and writing studies have discussed the importance of studying and valuing ethnolinguistic practices (Gilyard; Elbow; Schroeder, Fox; Bizzell). Jonathan Kozol in *Savage Inequalities: Children in American's Schools* discusses the marginalization of Latin@ students and how “language ideologies” have negatively affected Latin@s in general. These negative effects illustrate the effects that devaluing multi-ethnolinguistic practices have on Latin@s in general and create an atmosphere ripe for Latin@ backlash. They also show that valuing layered and ethnolinguistic practices is often not the norm for a dominant culture that applies its linguistic normative gaze to, among others, Latin@ discourse. It is a gaze that often devalues non-traditional and non-standard English. Thus, the linguistic practices of Latin@ Hip Hoppers not only constitute a multi-layered discourse but a discourse that represents opposition to monolingualistic (English) and monocultural (simplified Americanness) leanings. These leanings have been present in the United States from the Americanization movement against Native Americans to contemporary English-Only movements and will be addressed more fully in the following section on counter-hegemony.

The quotation that begins this section is by Cypress Hill, a Latino rap group that utilizes linguistically complex lyrics and that understands that the Latin@ experience is many times

misunderstood—and diminished—in dominant culture. “How you know where I’m at / when you haven’t been where I’ve been” is a defensive statement that emphasizes the fact that others—non-Latin@s, especially those of the middle/upper class—cannot understand the situation of Latin@s. Part of this “situation” involves the common use of a number of languages/dialects and is indicative of how Gloria Anzaldua describes her “language of the Borderlands”—it is a space at the juncture of cultures where “languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized” (Preface).

The first, and most obvious, is the space that much Latin@ Hip Hop occupies between English and Spanish. This may come in the form of intermixing English and Spanish words within a single phrase/sentence as in “*el closet*” or using Spanglish words/phrases like “*troca*”⁶ which take the English “closet” and “truck” and Spanish-izes them. This linguistic interplay is a common, everyday practice for many Latin@s living on the border or in areas where border-existence has moved into non-border regions (e.g. Houston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, etc.). Latin@s who use this mixture of Spanish and English are often criticized by non-Latin@s (and even Latin@s) who look down on this practice of linguistic mixing. The call of “just speak one language” attests to the fact that many, especially those who serve to gain the most from speaking only English, are bothered and/or threatened by the intermixing of languages⁷.

Whether they purposefully employ this linguistic mixing or, more often, are simply speaking a language/dialect they were raised in, the Spanish-English-Spanglish interplay, functions as a form of dissent and protest that pushes up against dominant culture and “standard” English. As Cypress Hill states, “they clownin’ [ragging/disrespecting] on me ‘cause

⁶ *El closet* is “the closet” while a proper Spanish word for “truck” is *camion*.

⁷ The irony here, of course, is that Standard English itself is already an intermixed language.

of my language / I have to tell them it's called Spanglish." These Latino rappers understand that their linguistic practices are disrespected and diminished by dominant culture because they do not fit neatly into a linguistic category. And because linguistic practices are linked to one's identity, many Latin@ Hip Hoppers, and Latin@s in general, feel that their identity—their very being—is commonly disrespected by dominant culture.

As Victor Villanueva discusses in "*Memoria Is a Friend of Ours*," "for the Latino and Latina, [their] language contains the assertion of the interconnectedness among identity...and the personal" and it is an identity of "contradictory consciousness" (17). For Latin@ Hip Hoppers, there is little separation between their multi-layered linguistic practices and their identity. Their language(s), their rhetorical output, are integrated pieces of their history, their family life, their neighborhood, their worldview, their means of communicating who they are. In turn, this output becomes part of the fabric of Latin@ness which shapes future generations.

To add to this dynamic, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and words, phrases, and imagery that are directly connected to Hip Hop discourse are also a major piece of the linguistic collage that is Latin@/Borderland Hip Hop. Because African American experience and discourse is the central template from which Hip Hop was created, Hip Hop rhetoric is already infused with African American culture. The following example, also from rap group Cypress Hill, illustrates the linguistic interplay of Spanish, English, AAVE, and Hip Hop. These are lines from their song "Latin Lingo":

Freak to the funk that no one else is bringin'

Sen Dog with the funky bilingue
Yeah that's the nombre, heard the homie
Peace to Mellow and Frost en el deporte

Sen Dog is not kid of veterano
 I'm down, another proud hispano
 One of the many of the Latinos de este año...

But wait, they're clownin' on me 'cause of my language
 I have to tell 'em straight up, it's called Spanglish
 Now who's on the pinga, tha gringo
 Tryin' to get paid, from the funky bilingual

[Chorus]

Latin lingo baby (funky bilingual) funky bilingual...

It's the Latin lingo!

[Sen Dog]

Cuando entro, when I come in, suckers fronted
 Me mira another bilingual from villa
 Vengo con un ejemplo, check the tiempo

Hey homes, pass the cerveza
 Before I have to go and push up on your esa

Where you live, si tu puedes
 Nowadays you ain't shit without your cuetes
 Something like it's gangbang, vatos quieren BANG BANG!

Salte de mi cara, sal de mi camino
 Make way, for the funky bilingual

The back-and-forth of Spanish and English is obvious in the very first line as one of the rappers calls himself the “funky *bilingue*”⁸. This mixture of Spanish and English words is common among Latin@ rappers and among many in the Latino community. Words that are Spanglish slang, and which depend on the country or region the Spanish speaker comes from, are present as well: “pinga,” “esa,” and “cuetes”⁹ are used to mean “penis,” “girlfriend,” and “guns,” respectively. Also, terminology/imagery that is common in Hip Hop discourse is displayed: “homie” is commonly used to mean “friend/comrade”; “el deporte” refers to “the game” which

⁸ *Bilingue* is the Spanish word for “bilingual.”

⁹ These terms are used by Latin@s of various origins and are common among Cubans (*pinga*) and Mexican Americans (*esa* and *cuetes*).

is how many in Hip Hop refer to life in general or the rap industry or one's work/hustle to make a living; "*veterano*" is used to refer to a veteran of "the game" and is synonymous to the OG (original gangsta) of African American rap; "check the *tiempo*" is a common Hip Hop phrase—in this case mixing Spanish and English—meaning that one should check/analyze the status of one's place/situation. The general reference to defending one's space/identity (*salte de mi cara, sal de mi camino*; get out of my face, get out of my way) and defending it violently if need be (nowadays you aint shit without your *cuetes*¹⁰) are also commonplace in Hip Hop rhetoric.

Beyond that, the complexity of the language issue is caught up in the social structure. The counter-hegemonic message—"that gringo / tryin' to get paid, from the funky bilingual"—brings to light the opinion among many in the Latin@ community that some/many White individuals will exploit Latin@ culture and language in order to profit financially. Cypress Hill seem aware that their ability to incorporate Spanish, English, and AAVE in the context of Hip Hop and to connect with Latin@ and African American audiences could be exploited by White-led record labels who may look at the linguistically complex lyrics of Latin@ rappers as not an important rhetorical production but as a means to gain larger profits. It is a matter of linguistic exploitation and appropriation that, as Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh remind us in *Western Music and Its Others*, are necessarily bound up in culture, power, ethnicity, and class (3). So while Cypress Hill believes that society needs to "make way" for Latin@ rappers, the group seems aware, at least at some level, of some of the political, social, and economic implications—a complex web of implications directly connected to Hall's discussion of "articulation" and cultural hegemony. These implications are connected to the fact that the

¹⁰ *Cuete* is a Spanish slang word, sometimes spelled *quete*, that is used to refer to a gun/pistol; it can also be used to refer to "firecracker" or "getting "drunk/plastered."

Latin@ identity—linguistically and otherwise—can function as a form of social protest against the dominant culture. At times it is a purposeful/intentional menacing of dominant culture and other times the organic existence of Latin@ culture is labeled as non-normal, illegitimate, or menacing by the dominant culture.

Lyrics from the song “La Raza” by Kid Frost, a pioneer of Latino rap provide another short example of linguistic layering by a Hip Hop rhetorician. In his song, which translates as “the race,” but which more closely means “the people” or “the people of the race¹¹,” he raps:

What's da matter? Are you afraid, you gonna get hurt?
I'm with my homeboys, my camaradas

Yo soy chingon, ese
Like Al Capone, ese

Once again, the intermixing of English and Spanish words is present as is the use of Spanish slang like “chingon” (awesome/great/tough), “ese” (used by some Latin@s, many times of Mexican descent, and many times as a slang/street term, to mean “that one,” “that guy,” or “that guy who is my friend or homeboy”), and even “camaradas” (comrades/friends) which is common in “street” and Latin@ Hip Hop dialect. Even the reference to Al Capone is linked here, in the lyrics of a Latino rapper, to both American culture *and* Hip Hop culture. Al Capone was an American gangster of the 1920s and 1930s and the image of the “gangster” or “gangsta” is highly prevalent in Hip Hop culture. As an important side note, the 1983 film *Scarface* (“scarface” was a nickname for Al Capone), based on a gangster figure, is extremely popular in Hip Hop culture and Hip Hop textual and visual rhetoric. Thus, the reference to Al Capone is a discursively implicit way for Kid Frost, who is already rapping in Spanish and English in a Black-

¹¹ The term *la raza* was coined by Mexican writer Jose Vasconcelos in his 1925 book *La Raza C6smica* (The Cosmic Race).

dominated medium, to connect to a Hip Hop audience that readily identifies with gangsta and “tough-guy” imagery—imagery that connects with the prominent strand of machismo and self-reliance among Latinos who have strong connections to Latino Hip Hop.

References to a gangster lifestyle—like that of Al Capone—add another layer to the complex rhetorical output of Latin@ Hip Hop discourse—connecting it to popular Hip Hop discursive practices—and shows how dynamic this rhetoric is. Latin@ Hip Hop discourse often rhetorically connects itself to the overall Hip Hop ethos of struggle and violence by using words such as “gangsta” and “soldier”—or referencing specific gangsters or soldier-like activities. This not only articulates a self-identity bound up in struggle but directly connects Latin@ Hip Hop to the culture and wordplay of Hip Hop in general. The use of “gangsta” also re-emphasizes the anti-establishment and menacing nature of the discourse—after all, gangsters are characterized as social outsiders proud of their rule-breaking. The reference then to “gangsta” rhetorically and ideologically connects Latin@ Hip Hop to Hip Hop discourse in general and, as Michael Eric Dyson reminds us, to African American discourse considering that the genre of Hip Hop, especially through gangsta rap, “aggressively narrate[s] the pains and possibilities, the fantasies and fears, of poor black urban youth” (179). It is no wonder that one struggling minority group would incorporate the textual and ideological output of another. Deeper connections between the Latin@ “gangsta” attitude in Hip Hop and counter-hegemony will be more fully explored in the final section “Counter-Hegemony: Complex Connections.”

Those studying linguistics, sociology, literature, composition, rhetoric, etc. can find in Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric, and Hip Hop rhetoric in general, complex linguistic practices and a deep well of knowledge and experiences. They will find that the multi-mixed discourse of

Latin@ Hip Hop is a central piece of the “code-switching ethos of *mestizaje*” (Burke 209)—a common thread among these “mixed” people—and that this multi-ethnolinguistic discourse represents a challenge to dominant culture and contains a counter-normative message. The ability of many Latin@ Hip Hoppers to code-switch between English, Spanish, Spanglish, AAVE, and Hip Hop is a discursively rich and powerful tool embraced by many in the Latin@ community and highlights their identities as multi-conscious *mestizos*.

The examples above, from Cypress Hill and Kid Frost, are but two short instances of this complex interplay but many other artists are available as examples. A few of these artists include South Park Mexican, Down A.K.A. Kilo, Lil Rob, Chingo Bling, Big Pun, Fat Joe, A Lighter Shade of Brown, Mellow Man Ace, and Latin Alliance¹². In all instances there is linguistic and cultural weaving and, in most cases, an emphasis on the “otherness” of the Latin@ experience.

Ultimately, the dynamic and multi-linguistic/multi-dialectical discourse of Latin@ Hip Hop, while diversifying the landscape of rhetorical studies, forces scholars to focus on issues of language, dialect, and identity, and highlights the complexity of Latin@ rhetoric in general. As Khadar Bashir-Ali argues in “Language Learning and the Definition of One’s Social, Cultural, and Racial Identity,” linguistic practices help individuals form an allegiance to a group (628)—in this case the allegiance is to the Latin@ population and, more specifically, to the Latin@ population that embraces the Hip Hop ethos. Their discourse reveals and creates identity while complicating our understanding of the discursive practices of a particular section of the Latin@ community whose discourse is often marginalized and labeled as dumbed-down and

¹² There are certainly hundreds of Latin@ artists to choose from but I chose some of the more influential and commercially popular artists in this short list. Also, Reggaeton and other sub-genres of Latino rap were not included in my analysis. See a list of Latin@ rapper at www.brownpride.com.

discursively simplistic. It highlights the fact that Latin@ rhetoric, in general, is linguistically rich and that this richness is actually in opposition to dominant ideals that emphasize standard Americanness and the use of standard English as a leveling tool for those interested in maintaining the linguistic status quo.

Multi-conscious Culture/Identity

The complex linguistic practices of Latin@ Hip Hop artists serve as integral pieces of the overall culture of Latin@ Hip Hop, but other elements also merit attention. Latin@s also deal with the discursive practice of labeling/self-labeling—a process connected to assimilation/opposition to the dominant culture—and with dichotomies between economic struggle and wealth, placidness and violence, and gender equality and discrimination. These layers/dichotomies are embodied by the cultural *mestizo* that is the Latin@ Hip Hopper who rhetorically displays, and forges, the identity of myriad Latin@s, and thus affects relations between different sectors of society in regards to race, ethnicity, and gender. Latin@ Hip Hoppers are directly affecting the ethos and identity of a specific social grouping and, as sociologists Lawrence D. Bobo and Cybelle Fox emphasize, are thus “guid[ing] patterns of relations among individuals recognized as members [of this group]” which “entail[s] the labeling and social learning of group categories, identity, feelings, beliefs, and related cognitive structures” (319).

Latin@s are simultaneously influenced by the history and cultural norms of Latin@ culture and by the norms and sensibilities of White cultural hegemony and African American culture. This creates a situation where Latin@s become concerned with their identity in relation to a diverse racial landscape. The most obvious ways that Latin@ Hip Hop is connected to White and Black culture are through the use of English and AAVE which add to the linguistic

complexity of Latin@ rhetoric. Beyond that, Latin@ Hip Hoppers are at once very main-stream American with their cultural and pop references, their emphasis on individualism, and a focus on a personal climb toward wealth. They are simultaneously connected to Black culture in their use of Hip Hop as their discursive medium, in modes of dress, and with their anti-establishment message which has been engrained in Black Hip Hop since at least the early 1980s. This last point, the anti-establishment message, is central in that it emphasizes that Latin@ Hip Hop is a multi-conscious genre that complexly integrates three races/cultures while attacking one. Because Hip Hop often contains an anti-establishment—mainly anti-White—message, it is caught up in the “micro social process” of imbuing ethnoracial groups with meaning and developing racial categorizations and identities (Bobo and Fox 325). The use of Hip Hop by many Latin@s connects their status as a marginalized group to the pervasive anti-dominant message of the genre. This is highlighted in their practice of self-labeling.

The naming of Latin@ identity—that is, the discursive labels used to describe/self-describe Latin@s—plays a role in the identity-showing, identity-shaping, and menace-producing ethos of Latin@ culture. Latin@s directly or indirectly address their place/stance within U.S. culture through self-labeling and by using/not-using labels created for their populations. The aspect of self-labeling is important because it is a “proclamation of existence” (Root 365) and is directly connected to the identity and ethos of individuals and cultural communities. Importantly, this self-labeling becomes part of the rhetorical web of “social structural conditions [which] create individuals possessing particular types of ethnoracial identities, beliefs, attitudes, value orientations, and the like” (Bobo and Fox 325).

One telling example is offered by the Latin@ population that has its roots in Mexico. This population uses (or is given) a number of labels: Mexican American, Mexican-American, Hispanic/*Hispano*, Latino, Mexican, *Mexicano*, and Chicano. These labels carry with them complex social and political meaning:

Mexican American: stresses the persons/populations connection to the separate countries of Mexico and the United States

Mexican-American: this hyphenated phrase stresses the melding of Mexican culture and U.S. culture in the individual or population

Hispanic/*Hispano*: is a term with much history that was used by the 1970 U.S. Census to denote people of Latin/Spanish origin¹³; because the term was used by the U.S. Census it is seen by many Latinos as a label imposed by the ruling racial group (Whites); the Spanish version (*Hispano*) is more commonly used in Latino Hip Hop

Latino: this term denotes someone of Latin American descent living in the United States and is preferred by many of this group over “Hispanic,” especially in Hip Hop rhetoric

Mexican/*Mexicano*: term used by many in this group who prefer to stress their ancestry and connection to Mexico; this connection is further stressed when expressed in its Spanish form

Chicano: Chicano was created in a highly politicized atmosphere and is used by many in this group who wish to stress, in varying degrees, their opposition to U.S. and White hegemony

So among Latin@ rappers one hears Lil Rob saying, “it’s Lil Rob the Chicano, and proud one” and calling himself the “Mexican gangsta” or Cypress Hill rapping, “another proud Hispano” and “one of the many Latinos *de este año*.” Rappers also name themselves in reference to their Latino-ness: South Park Mexican, Another Latin Timebomb, Aztlan Nation, Brownsides, Cuban Link, Funky Aztecs, Latin Alliance, Latin Bomb Squad, Latin Frozz, Latino Velvet Clique, Lighter Shade of Brown, Tha Mexakinz, Spanish Fly, 2 Mex, and the Brownness Camp.

¹³ For more information visit <http://www.census.gov/population>

The process of self-labeling by Latin@ rappers points to the many meaningful labels at their disposal and their multi-consciousness in choosing a label for themselves and their people. Most notable, as will be discussed more fully in the final section, is the how this self-labeling is part of a process of resistance. For Latin@ rappers, and Latin@s in general, there is a deep personal, psychological, and social connection between themselves and their self-imposed label and a larger connection to historical dominance and White hegemony.

Interestingly, Latin@s also deal with a variety of identities and labels *within* Latino culture. One example is how the country of origin (e.g. Mexico, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, etc.) can play an important role in the cultural and linguistic norms associated with communities, families, and individuals. “Latino-ness” is an essentializing term that tends to blur the diverse backgrounds of this population—in many cases blurring out national roots. While using the general “Latino” term is common it is important to remain aware that “Latino” represents a very diverse population. Within Latin@ Hip Hop there is mutual Latin@ respect, yet difference, in say Puerto Rican rappers like Fat Joe or Big Pun and Mexican-American rappers like South Park Mexican or Lil Rob. Country of origin and cultural references are the main ways in which these rappers emphasize their Latin@ distinctiveness. Thus, another set of borders that Latin@s work within are those borders that divide Latin countries/cultures.

Beyond these central cultural crossroads are other borders often expressed, implicitly and explicitly, in Latin@ Hip Hop. One of these borders/crossroads is a seeming struggle between expressing one’s connection to modest means and life on “the streets” while putting a strong emphasis on gaining material wealth. Secondly, there is the struggle between respect/placidness and necessary violence. Latin@ Hip Hop expresses, once again, a complex

multi-consciousness which in this case sits on the border of struggle and complacency—a common characteristic in the general Latin@ community. These two psychological borders are highlighted in much Latin@ Hip Hop.

An excellent representative example of this can be found in South Park Mexican's song "SPM vs. Los." The title itself refers to the split existence the rapper embodies—"Los" is short for Carlos, the rapper's given name, which is meant to signal his calm/respectful self and "SPM" which stands for South Park Mexican and represents the rapper's angry and money-hungry self. In the song, the rapper alternates between stanzas of lyrics by SPM and Los, with the former expressing an angry diatribe that includes telling of a childhood filled with personal and social struggle while the latter tries to placate "SPM" with discourse about success and enjoying life. Below are lines from each personality:

"SPM":

I was raised on beans and rice...
 Mama used to trip cuz I fed the mice
 I'm the one they sent home cuz my head had lice...
 Mama sat me down for some serious talks
 On how to keep the rats out the cereal box

"Los":

Sure we was broke but we were BB guns
 Havin' hella fun...
 Now you got children and a beautiful wife
 The kind of money that you make...you set for life

"SPM":

The penitentiary's the only place that I can relax
 I'm just sippin' Patron, I handle shit on my own
 It's in my blood to be a drunk and not give a fuck
 ...daddy left me at the age of three

"Los"

You blessed by God man, you can't give up
 And run around town not givin' a fuck...
 It's hard to be that Mexican that came up so quick

"SPM":

Muthafuck you...stop preachin' n'shit
 I'll grab my glock and start squeezing that shit
 You gettin' soft now? You must wanna die too
 All it takes is one bullet to kill me and you

The song ends with the rapper pulling the trigger of a gun and killing the two personas that struggle within his one body—SPM and Los.

This song, with its layered and divisive consciousness, is symbolic of the thoughts and feelings within much Latin@ Hip Hop discourse. It expresses cultural and social complexity and vividly expresses a deep sense of struggle—many times a cultural and economic struggle that pushes up against White middle and upper class hegemony. This is an expression of economic realities in the United States where Latin@s (Hispanics) experience over double the poverty rate of Whites (non-Hispanic), according to the Pew Hispanic Center's 2007 information, and a dominant culture that at times devalues Latin@ cultural identity. The "pushing up" against the White middle and upper classes is not simply an economic phenomena but illustrates that the very fact that Latin@ rappers bring up, and popularly express, economic, racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, is an act of resistance that menaces the "narcissistic demand of colonial authority" (Bhabha 117).

The song displays the common psychological struggle between wanting to gain wealth *and* not wanting to be seen as disconnected to the struggles of poverty and/or modest means. This is also connected to the struggle to achieve and enjoy success "peacefully/legitimately" and/or achieve some success/respect through violent means—something common in Hip Hop

culture. Importantly, this song, and other Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric with the same sentiments, is not an expression of the crossroads that convene in only the Latin@ Hip Hopper but in many Latin@s in general, as well as other minority groups. It also works as part of the complex web of popular discourse that helps both express and shape the Latin@ psyche.

A final border in which many Latin@s exist/struggle involves gender bias and gender (in)equality. While important strides have been made for women in general, and Latinas specifically, there is still a strong male-centered ethos present in Latino culture and especially in Latin@ Hip Hop. No Latina Hip Hop artists appear in this essay because there are so few women actively rapping, and none who have, or have been allowed to have, a large impact on the overall Latin@ Hip Hop scene. It is also not surprising that a search through Latinrapper.com produces very little information about Latina rappers but quite a bit on “sexy and hot Latina pictures” and “Latin eye candy.”¹⁴ This lack of Latina Hip Hop discourse is somewhat surprising considering the popularity of rap music among Latin@s in general and the fact that there have been quite a few successful female rappers from the African American community. This lack is representative of a culture that has its struggle with issues of gender equality.

Many traditional values in Latin@ culture are also conservative values when it comes to the role of Latinas. While Latinas are meant to be respected, especially mothers and grandmothers, there is also the sense that Latinas are meant to be silent supporters and caregivers—while the males are viewed by many in the culture as the physical and verbal leaders. Interestingly, in “Racial and Ethnic Variations in Gender-Related Attitudes” sociologist

¹⁴ See <http://www.latinrapper.com/eyecandy.html>.

Emily W. Kane finds contradictory results when studying the attitudes of Hispanic Americans toward gender roles. Some propose and defend more traditional and subservient roles for Latinas while others work against these views. This is not surprising considering the complex mix of respect, disrespect, veneration, and gender-role conservatism in Latin@ culture. It is also not surprising that Jezy P, a female rapper from the slums of Mexico City, expresses often that she is “furious about sexism in macho Mexico” (Grillo). The machismo of Latin American countries, not surprisingly, trickles into Latin@ culture—expressed vividly in its Hip Hop. This way of thinking, of course, has varying levels of severity and it is important to remember that most cultures display sexism to one degree or another. Gender roles do, however, represent a crossroad for many Latin@s. Certainly in Latino Hip Hop, there is simultaneously a respect-giving and respect-taking in regards to Latinas.

On one hand there is, in Latino Hip Hop, the deep respect for and defense of mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and at times wives and girlfriends. This is expressed by South Park Mexican when he raps, “My only daughter she’s daddy’s girl / And for her I’ll buy the whole Astro world” and by Lil Rob when he writes, “call the *ruca* [girlfriend] on the phone... / let her know she looks beautiful to me... / ...she is such a sight to me / the kind of woman that would put up a fight for me.” While the woman/girl is willing to fight, it is in the context of fighting for “him”—it is still the male at the center of that action. There is also a strong defense of female family members by males who at once often see these females as women deserving of respect (mainly by other males) but also women who are socially and physically weak and need “their man” to defend them. On the other hand there is the more common objectification of women in much Latino Hip Hop. As Imani Perry reminds us, most rappers “exist within...a colonized

space, particularly in regard to race and gender...[which is] full of traditional gender messages” (145). These messages are vivid in Latino Hip Hop where references to “bitches,” “hos,” and “*putas*” are common along with visual images of scantily clad Latinas in music videos and on websites.

Thus, though Latino Hip Hoppers at times project female respect/defense/veneration it is the female objectifying and misogyny that often wins out. This rhetoric displays and affects the fact that many Latinas, especially those strongly connected to Hip Hop culture and “the streets,” are at the crossroads between physical, psychological, and social advancement and the competing rhetoric and images of male dominance and traditional views in regard to gender roles—views perpetuated by both United States culture and the culture of their national roots. This final point is emphasized by Jessica Enoch, though she does not directly discuss Hip Hop, in “*Para la Mujer: Defining a Chicana Feminist Rhetoric at the Turn of the Century*” where she highlights the fact that Latinas (she discusses Mexican women here), battle a long history of male-centered views in texts from Anglo writers like “Stephen Crane, Carleton Beals, and Ruth Allen” *and* in Mexican texts where “women’s gender roles were clearly defined” (23). This places Latin@s in a web of borders characterized by gender, race, nationality, sexuality, and cultural tradition. More specifically, it highlights the pervasiveness of misogynistic rhetoric among Latin males and the presence of many Latin females who become subservient to male dominance—both of which challenge the dominant discourse of female equality and advancement.

Critically, these complex gender roles can have long-reaching affects on the Latin@ community. They can affect Latina self-esteem, education, career goals (or lack there of),

economics, health¹⁵, and general social standing. For *some* Latinas, especially those entrenched in a more traditional social web—as many Latinas who are strongly connected to Latin@ Hip Hop culture are—there can also be a strong psychological struggle in dealing with real and perceived gender roles. If a Latina is entrenched in a world (Hip Hop culture) that often espouses traditional gender roles—and at times misogynistic discourse and imagery—then that Latina may from an early age be “trapped” in a situation where she is over-sexualized, becomes a mother, and serves the role as a mother without the father present, while never achieving much social advancement—unfortunately a common trend among many Latinas. This very “real world” connection between Latin@ Hip Hop discourse and what is happening with many Latin@s points to the importance of studying this discourse and, as it closely pertains to the following section, to the menacing threat that Latin@ Hip Hop poses to dominant culture. After all, dominant culture in the United States champions women’s rights and does not want to be reminded of past (and present) gender inequality and injustice. It also fears a popular discourse that espouses misogyny, traditional gender roles, and which may be a rhetorical force in the production of fatherless minority children.

Ultimately, multi-consciousness is an umbrella term that incorporates the many languages, cultures, ideologies, and identities that many Latin@s embody and traverse on a daily basis and which are vividly expressed in Latin@ Hip Hop. From the incorporation of Black, White, and Brown culture, to the process of self-labeling, to social and mental struggles of economics and gender roles, Latin@s are physically and ideologically *mestizos* whose multi-layered existence can, implicitly and explicitly, serve as a counter-hegemonic force to the

¹⁵ See *Gender Roles, Power Strategies, and Precautionary Sexual Self-Efficacy: Implications for Black and Latina Women’s HIV/AIDS Protective Behaviors* by Lisa Bowleg, Faye Z. Belgrave, and Carol E. Reisen.

dominant culture. This force contains deep and complex connections to historical, cultural, racial, political, and ideological realities of the American social fabric.

Counter-Hegemony: Expanding the Complex Connections

While the previous section touched on ways that a multi-conscious Latin@ identity runs counter to some dominant social norms and sensibilities, this section delves more deeply into the ways that the linguistic and cultural *mestizaje* of Latin@s, as expressed in Latin@ Hip Hop, challenges, agitates, and disrupts dominant culture. Important to this discussion is the fact that the marginalization of Latin@s in the United States has created a space from which Latin@s have carved out an identity that pulls marginality from the shackles of a rhetorically neutered existence toward a “space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies” (hooks 171). That is, Latin@ rhetoric, of which Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric is an important strand, does not simply function as a dominated discourse but as a discourse that points to complex social realities—it helps us see and understand the world, and connections between cultures, from a different lens. More specifically, the alternative discourse of Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric, in espousing an alternative epistemology, contains the quality of social “menace.”

The Latin@ Hip Hopper is a cultural *mestizo*, equipped with a multi-ethnolinguistic tongue, whose culturally and psychologically bordered existence disrupts dominant social ideals. These ideals include strong sentiments toward preserving “the security of a monolingual English public discourse” (Burke 206) and traditionally White American culture. This border existence highlights much of what Gloria Anzaldua wrote of in her seminal *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. She writes that “to survive the Borderlands / you must... / be a

crossroads” (217). Anzaldua acknowledges the interplay between a borderland/multi-conscious existence and survival—survival that happens at the intersection of many social crossroads. That is, existence is not only *within* crossroads but *acts as* a crossroads—a crossroads where “you are the battleground / you are at home, a stranger” (216). This sense of difference, otherness, border-ness is many times tinged with angst and anger in the discourse of Latin@ Hip Hop. This discourse suggests that many Latin@s, while being extremely proud of the cultural differences that distinguish them from White-American and Black-American culture, are highly cognizant of their marginalization from White-American, middle and upper-class sensibilities—of their subaltern status. As a consequence, the Latin@ Hip Hopper has no trouble understanding—and in fact preaching—the notion of a cultural “battleground” where cultural soldiers and gangsters fight for equality and supremacy.

An important aspect of this battleground is the maintenance of simple ethnic and cultural classification and the rupture of this by Latin@ness. As Maria P.P. Root writes, the insistence and perpetuation of “clean lines between groups...establish and maintains a social hierarchy in which the creators and enforcers of the system occupy a superior berth. Consequently, members of some groups are always ‘deserving’ of inferior status...” (357). Whether the enforcement of such clean lines is accomplished through larger social machinations such as the census or ensuing legislation, or through everyday comments that keep in place strict racial divisions, preserving these simplified divisions between racial and cultural groups helps maintain the status quo of White dominance. Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric, through its very multi-conscious, multi-linguistic, and multi-cultural nature, poses a vivid challenge to the drawing of these clean lines of division.

This multi-conscious Latin@ nature proves anti-hegemonic and menacing to dominant modes of being while a more aggressive and direct message of resistance acknowledges and perpetuates a battleground of sorts where the Latin@ Hip Hopper can be presented as not simply a challenger to simplified cultural and racial division but a menacing “gangsta.” This type of menace is articulated by Homi Bhabha, who asserts that menace is produced by a “double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” and by discourse that “articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority” (117). Although Bhabha refers to a different group of subalterns in a different place, his theory applies equally well to Latin@s in the United States. In the case of Latin@ Hip rhetoric, a mirror is held up to the dominance and neo-colonialism of White authority and a challenge presented to the cultural, racial, and ideological history of that dominance. Furthermore, Latin@ Hip Hop, in its multi-linguistic and multi-conscious ways, provides a “displacing gaze” where the traditional “observer” (White middle and upper class individuals) becomes the “observed” (117). Latin@ Hip Hop, whether aware or unaware of this, reverses the critical gaze of dominant culture by espousing a multi-layered existence and in directly revealing and attacking dominance.

Linguistically, the nature of Latin@ Hip Hop serves in opposition to sentiments toward a simplified monolingual English public discourse—a sentiment cloaked many times in nationalistic and culturally and politically conservative ideals and most poignantly represented by “English-only” and “official English” movements. While these movements do not look to rid the United States of all other languages, per se, they function under an ideological umbrella that seeks the simplification of cultural practices in the United States and preserving the social

superiority of the English language. While supporters of English-only and official English hold that “reaffirming the preeminence of English means reaffirming a unifying force in American life” (Crawford 2), they fail to understand the divisiveness that such ideologies and policies breed. At best, such ideology perpetuates a history of diminishing the linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural output of minority groups and, at worst, “serves to justify racist and nativist biases under the cover of American patriotism” (Crawford 3).

The ethnolinguistic patterns of Latin@ Hip Hoppers, who regularly use Spanish, English, Spanglish, AAVE, and Hip Hop discourse, also challenge the notion that the discourse these individuals are producing is immature and simplistic—two characteristics viewed as opposite to that of expertise in using one language (i.e. English). While these Latin@ Hip Hoppers do not attend a course in “The Implementation of Multi-ethnolinguistic Speech Patterns,” their interaction with peers, and especially with Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric in the form of song lyrics, videos, texts, etc., produces individuals with highly complex linguistic patterns. Not only are these patterns anti-hegemonic in that they challenge the push of English dominance, but they also produce multi-linguals who, as seen in a psychology study on bilinguals, “enjoy some cognitive advantages over monolinguals in areas such as cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, concept formation, and creativity” (Padilla, et. al.). The view that Latin@ Hip Hoppers are more cognitively advanced than White monolingual non-Hip Hoppers challenges deeply rooted racial and social stereotypes.

As a matter of being/nature, the linguistic patterns of Latin@ Hip Hoppers both reflect and shape multi-lingual/multi-dialectical individuals who pose a threat to English monolingual hegemony. Through more direct rhetoric, Latin@ Hip Hoppers move into the realm of social

“gangsta”—providing a more aggressive form of menace in that this discourse differs from and threatens the conservative ideal of a monolingual America. When Cypress Hill rap, “now who’s on the pinga?, tha gringo / tryin’ to get paid, from the funky bilingual,” they are expressing deeply held sentiments of angst, resistance, even hatred, toward the “gringo” who they feel is exploiting their culture and talent. There is also rap/rock group Molotov who state in their song “Frijolero¹⁶”, “*no me diges beaner / te sacaré un susto / por racista y culero / no me llames frijolero / pinche gringo puñetero.*” The angry and crude lyrics translate to “don’t call me a beaner / I’ll give you a scare / for being a racist and an asshole / don’t call me a beaner / fucking White jerk.” This aggressive rhetoric moves Latin@ Hip Hop discourse into the realm of aggressive menace and the Latin@ Hip Hopper into the realm of the cultural “gangsta.”

This move is not surprising considering that the genre of Hip Hop was born from “bleak conditions” and, from its early existence, has produced “lyrical elegies” about the “tortuous twists of urban fate” (Dyson 174)—something that continues in Latin@ Hip Hop. These elegies “force us to confront the demands of racial representation” and can “force our nation to confront crucial social problems” (181) and in doing so serve as a powerful menace to dominant culture. Latin@ Hip Hoppers that deliver these angry elegies envy, and in fact embody, “the lowdown hustlers [and gangsters]...who are not slaves to white power” (185) of whom bell hooks writes in “Gangsta Culture.” The words of Cypress Hill and Molotov express violent opposition toward dominant White culture and power which is not only present in Latin@ Hip Hop, but also, to varying degrees, in Latin@ culture in general.

¹⁶ Frijolero is slang for “beaner” which is a derogatory term used to refer to Latin@s in reference to their skin color and the fact that beans are a popular Latin American food.

Furthermore, Tim Strode and Tim Wood point out in “Growing Up Gangsta: Gangsta Rap and the Politics of Identity” that White condemnation of gangsta rap and a gangsta message many times demonstrates an ignorance of what is happening in low-income Black and Latin@ Communities (156-157). For many middle- and upper-class Whites, it is almost impossible to understand that a community that lives in the same country can have such a different social experience—a multi-conscious experience connected to economic and ideological struggle. They are in some respects, “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 118). The dominant group focuses on the “sameness” between Latin@s and themselves—the push for sameness coming at times through direct means like the English-Only movement and at other times through cultural hegemony—while not fully understanding the presence of struggle or valuing a multi-cultural and multi-ethnolinguistic existence (the “not quite”) so expressed in Latin@ Hip Hop.

Certainly, Latin@s have agency in the formation and evolution of their own group identity, but the forces of history and dominant culture impose themselves during this process. It is the “articulation” (Hall) of a number of forces—social, economic, ideological—which form the imposition by dominant forces and provoke the violent backlash found in Latin@ Hip Hop. While all groups and cultures are influenced by other cultures, including the influence Latin@ culture has on the United States, it must be noted that the dynamics are different when this influence involves the diminution of one culture. In a number of ways, Latin@ culture has come under attack for decades in the United States—in recent history there has been openly racist thinking and policies in the early and mid-1900s, to attacks on bilingual education which include the English-only movement, to a vast amount of stereotypical images in popular media, to a plethora of group actions against Latin@s which have included a “find the illegal

immigrant” event¹⁷. In more extreme cases there is race-based violence against Latin@s which includes “the birth of at least 144 ‘nativist extremist’ groups...that do not merely target immigration policies they do not agree with, but instead confront or harass individual immigrants” (Lovato). Illustrating the extent of anti-Latin@ sentiment are FBI reports which state that in 2006 “Hispanics comprised 62.8% of victims of crimes motivated by a bias toward the victims’ ethnicity or national origin” (MALDEF) and that hate crimes targeting Latinos increased 40% from 2003 to 2007 (“Hate Crimes”).

It is no wonder that many Latin@ Hip Hoppers support an aggressive opposition to dominant culture and that, as also seen in the example of rapper Chingo Bling, this menacing comes alive in their discursive output. In 2007, the Houston, Texas based rapper rented out billboard space to promote the release of his new album. The billboard read, in large text, “They Can’t Deport Us All” and caused controversy. Many conservative pundits attacked the billboard including Michelle Malkin who wrote on her blog that it was “obnoxious” and “defiant.” It was also reported that Chingo Bling received several death threats after the billboard went up (MTV). While the merits of the billboard could be debated at length, there is no doubt that Chingo Bling was acting, and perceived, as a cultural “gangsta” who was aggressively attacking dominant culture. Chingo Bling also highlights the fact that there is strong solidarity between Latin@ Hip Hoppers and Latin immigrants—legal and illegal—in the push against White cultural hegemony. Part of that push also includes Chingo Bling’s music video for the song “Like This ‘N’ Like That” which includes images of Latin@ immigrants running

¹⁷ The College Republicans group at New York University held a “Find the Illegal Immigrant” event on February 2, 2007.

from the border patrol and the repetitive image of people wearing “They Can’t Deport Us All” t-shirts.

Thus, from lyrics to billboards to music videos, Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric functions like the narratives of people of color that Villanueva commends: it is a narrative that “validates...resonates...and awakens” (15). The anti-hegemonic message of this genre resonates with millions of Latin@s; it awakens and expresses an anti-dominant ethos. It is an expression of historical struggle and a rhetorical perpetuation of an ethos of struggle and menace.

Another oppositional move made by the Latin@ Hip Hopper returns to the act of self-labeling. Because self-labeling is a “proclamation of existence” (Root 365), there is deep agency in this act for Latin@s who not only see themselves as individuals but as members of a racialized community. There is telling evidence of identity and opposition in the self-labeling we encounter in Latin@ Hip Hop. As one example, in the self-labeling used by rappers of Mexican descent there are very few instances of the use of the terms Mexican American, Mexican-American, or especially Hispanic, in song lyrics and in the names of individual rappers or rap groups. This is no coincidence as these three terms are the most “Americanized” labels for Latin@s. In connecting with the general Hip Hop ethos of decent, “menace,” and counter-hegemony, these terms, for many Latin@s (especially those in Hip Hop) are not rhetorically powerful enough in expressing a prideful connection to one’s roots in Latin@ culture. Choosing names like South Park Mexican, Aztlan Nation, or Brownness Camp, for example, are ways for these artists to clearly connect to Latin@ culture and mark their difference/defiance of White culture. From the worldview of Latin@ Hip Hop—and many Latin@s in general—it would be

seen as odd or weak if these names were changed to South Park Hispanic, Hispanic Nation, or Hispanic Camp. Thus, these cultural labels are not simplistic nomenclature but express deep personal and political meaning and can influence the cultural psyche of Latin@s who strongly connect with Latin@ Hip Hop. It creates a rhetorical environment that stresses Latin@-ness and challenges American-ness—or, more specifically, their White United Statesian-ness.

This struggle/anti-dominant ethos can also be seen in the Latin@ Hip Hoppers psychological dichotomy between a pursuit of wealth and an interest in remaining connected to modest means. As in much Hip Hop, and society in general, Latin@ Hip Hoppers stress the accumulation of wealth and the things they can buy with that wealth—not surprising considering the “ethic of consumption that pervades our culture” (Dyson 175). Yet, Latin@ Hip Hoppers make it clear that they are, or once were, connected to social and economic hardship. When South Park Mexican raps that he got sent home because “my head had lice” and that he had to learn how to “keep the rats out [of] the cereal box,” he is not only telling his life story but explicitly expressing the fact he had to deal with economic hardship. So while South Park Mexican and many Latin@ rappers consistently rap about their real or imagined wealth, they make sure to stress their struggle as well.

What pushes this dichotomy into the realm of the aggressive gangsta is when Latin@ rappers begin espousing violence or illegal actions as a way—or *the way*—to accumulate wealth. While many Latin@ Hip Hoppers choose to gain wealth by legal and non-violent means, the rhetoric of the genre more often stresses aggressive and illegal actions. Michael Eric Dyson writes “gangsta rappers...don’t merely respond to the values and visions of the marketplace; they shape them as well” (175) and “respond to economic exploitation” with, at

times, “vulgar rhetorical traditions” (174). The Latin@ Hip Hop social gangsta does this as well by stressing the accumulation of wealth through the *violent* shaping of the marketplace through illegitimate acts like robbery and/or drug dealing. In the eyes of many Latin@ Hip Hoppers, the accumulation of wealth through any means necessary (hustlin’ or playin’ the game) is legitimate—especially among a population that deals with economic struggle on a daily basis. Thus, Latin@ Hip Hoppers mimic capitalistic ideals but add the element of violence and “street capitalism” which menaces the dominant “legitimate marketplace.”

Finally, this aggressive anti-hegemony is espoused through a number of media, which in themselves challenge the hegemony of the traditional rhetorical landscape. Latin@ Hip Hoppers use lyrics, music videos, traditional websites, social video sites (e.g. YouTube), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook; Twitter), murals, graffiti, tagging, body art, and even their vehicles to broadcast their message. Thus, this multi-conscious and anti-dominant discourse reaches the eyes and ears of millions of people in multiple ways. Importantly, in “Encountering Visions of Aztlan: Arguments for Ethnic Pride, Community Activism and Cultural Revitalization in Chicano Murals,” author Margaret R. LaWare points out that “reasoning takes various forms” and “in order for a minority community to argue that its culture has distinct properties that sets it apart from dominant culture, it needs to show those distinctions within cultural artifacts.” These cultural artifacts are often attacked and criminalized by dominant culture—music lyrics and videos demonized, murals and graffiti labeled simply as the work of criminals, and loud and colorful vehicles mocked as not conforming to “normal” standards. A debate over the aesthetics of these media is not the focus here, but instead the realization that the anti-

dominant message is espoused through multiple avenues and that these media themselves pose a threat to dominant sensibilities.

These sensibilities include the thinking that only certain forms of expression are valid and important. This thinking even creeps into the discipline of rhetorical studies and what is labeled as *the* rhetorical tradition. Patricia Bizzell, co-author of the influential *The Rhetorical Tradition*, has acknowledged that traditional texts—such as rhetorical manuals, published texts, and political discourse—still dominate the field into the early 21st century (“Editing” 110). This is why Jacqueline Jones Royster argues that “new” rhetorics are valuable in the re-envisioning...of what constitutes knowledge (161). This is echoed by Bizzell herself who states, “we must hear from rhetoricians who have struggled with culturally complex venues in which they were marginalized” (112). Latin@ Hip Hoppers are representatives of a new, complex, marginalized rhetoric that is espoused through non-traditional mediums. And because it carries an aggressive anti-hegemonic message through non-traditional means, it is a part of the cultural gangstanness that pervades the Latin@ Hip Hop ethos.

Conclusion

Latin@ Rap is for...

The OG, life story tatted up on both sleeves¹⁸ ...
 For every Latin tryna make it with his rappin’
 I’m so confused...trying to break loose
 It’s the mic or the cuete I’m expected to choose¹⁹ ...
 It’s for the people...who seem to have the odds against them
 Since the day of their birth...
 And try to figure out what their living is worth
 ...and when you try to do some good in your life
 Everybody acts like nothing you’re doing is right...
 We try to give a closer look to how it is on the streets

¹⁸ Meaning: the Original Gangsta with his life stories tattooed on both arms.

¹⁹ Meaning: it’s the microphone or gun I’m expected to choose between

So when we hearing these beats, we grab some sheets
 And write down everything we feelin' til we finally have peace...
 --Duende in "Chicano Rap"

These lines "from the streets" echo what Latino academic Villanueva speaks of when he states, "I'm trying to figure this out, somehow: who I am, from where, playing out the mixes within. I am contradictory consciousness. The discourse should reflect that. I am these uneasy mixes of races...[that] find themselves victim to racism. The discourse should reflect that" (17). And certainly, Latin@ Hip Hop's identity-showing and identity-shaping rhetoric expresses a multi-conscious and bordered ethos which contains an anti-dominant message and worldview that challenges those who would push for a more unified cultural and national identity—more specifically, a unified identity which places greater value in the linguistic, cultural, historical, and ideological practices of White middle and upper-class Americans. In more antagonistic instances, the Latin@ Hip Hop ethos works in aggressive opposition toward dominant culture and highlights the presence of the cultural gangsta. These menacing instances include messages which are Anti-White, that venerate violence and illegal activity in the accumulation of wealth, that defend illegal immigration, and that use self-labeling to diminish American-ness/White-ness.

Importantly, Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric also points to the ethos of the greater Latin@ community. Many Latin@s rely on personal experience and the memory of past racial injustice to help shape an identity that is tinged with subtle *and* aggressive anti-hegemony. The Latin@ Hip Hopper affects this formation of a collective—though complex—Latin@ identity. As a "narrative of people of color" Latin@ Hip Hop "jogs our memories as a collective in a scattered world and within an ideology that praises individualism" while asserting "the

interconnectedness among identity, memory, and the personal” (Villanueva 16). This “jogging of memory” occurs for both the Latin@ and the dominant culture and is a reminder of a past and present that is complicated with competing cultural, linguistic, social, economic, and ideological realities.

Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric is a validation of that memory and of the bordered and layered existence experienced by many Latin@s. It is a rhetoric that shows and complicates “racial and ethnic power dynamics of...cultural relations” (Born and Hesmondhalgh 6) as well as complex connections to linguistic and cultural identity. These complex connections work within Latin@s and produce—in the Latin@ Hip Hopper—a discourse that challenges dominant cultural hegemony. In this rich discourse we find the playing out of Bhabha’s notions of “camouflaging, mimicry, and menace,” of Stuart Hall’s “articulation,” and of Anzaldua’s and Villanueva’s fight for the validation of multi-cultural identity. All of these are directly or indirectly connected to the many borders navigated by Latin@s who are strongly connected to Hip Hop culture and, to various extents, Latin@s in general. These borders create a culture of *mestizaje* which is vividly displayed by the Latin@ Hip Hopper and which is worth deep analysis because, ultimately, we must work at increasing our capacity to “acknowledge and combine multiple identities”—work that can help us understand a “shrinking world in which each of us is increasingly ‘crossing borders’” (Burke 245). Latin@ Hip Hop rhetoric can be an important part of this work.

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