

# **Following Their Footsteps: Tracing Puerto Ricans' Sociopolitical Activism in New York City from an Afro-Centric Perspective\***

by

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## **Abstract**

Many studies stress that Puerto Ricans do not fit into the American racial binary of “black or white,” and that because of this “uniqueness” the Puerto Rican racial experience should be measured differently. This work evaluates the activities of the black Puerto Ricans who arrived and settled in New York City. Although they confronted issues of adaptation, racism, and persistent poverty, they forged an identity in ways that resonate with the experience and perspective of Arturo Schomburg, a black Puerto Rican and a pioneer of the Africa-centered tradition. As a historian, I review the life and work of Schomburg and examine his perspective on the central role of Africa and its descendants in the history of the world, giving voice to Afro-descendants’ quest to preserve their culture wherever they are. I also review the philosophy of C. Tsehloane Keto, who posited the centrality of African history in interpreting the experience of people of African descent in the U.S. and around the world. Against the background of Schomburg’s and Keto’s work, I trace the emergence of Puerto Rican nationalist cultural identity in the city of New York, specifically the extent of black “Nuyoricans” articulation of an Afro-centric identity or black consciousness.

## **Introduction**

In early December of 2010, I attended a town-hall style meeting at City College-CUNY, where a group consisting of academics, politicians, and grassroots leaders, among others, responded to the call of creating a task force to address issues of the African Diaspora. This group reports to the African Union (AU). Known as the African Union Diaspora Task Team, it outlined its specific objectives to include the appointment of an Afro-Latino representative, who is a black Puerto Rican woman. This group proposes that despite the challenges confronting Africana and African Diaspora Studies departments/programs in the United States higher education system, these departments should remain in dialogue with institutions promoting a better Africa. As stated by the AU ambassador to the United States, “the African diaspora is an important component in the building of the African Union” (AU press release 11/1/2010). For this purpose, a better understanding of Africa’s dispersed children must be documented, and the mechanism for accomplishing this task should be focused on renovating and reinforcing those “ties that bind” them to the motherland. The mother-child relationship is not simply a way of describing those who migrated or their descendants; instead, it must be a repatriation mechanism that many people follow as they try to recover what was left behind. When individuals rescue a relationship with their roots, we call it rediscovering one’s “heritage.” If it is a “country” that seeks to close such a historical gap, we can call it “home welcoming.”

When the first generation of Puerto Ricans reached New York City (NYC) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they found themselves in the midst of a biracial discourse. They found that New York was unlike Puerto Rico. They had no choice but to articulate race within their historical and cultural background and to denounce racism in many instances, including during the interwar period and the era of the Civil Rights movement. I use their example to examine aspects of Africana and African Diaspora Studies. However, first of all, as a historian I revisit the life of Arturo Schomburg and review his perspective on the central role of Africa and its descendants in the history of the world giving voice to Afro-descendants’ quest to preserve their culture wherever they are located. Second, against this review, I trace the emergence of a cultural nationalist identity among the black Puerto Ricans of New York, specifically as that articulates with an Afro-centric identity or black consciousness, in accordance with the conceptualization of history propounded by C. Tshloane Keto (1989). In so doing, I follow the steps of those Puerto Ricans who arrived to NYC. Although they were confronted with issues of adaptation, racism, and persistent poverty, they embraced the city and forged an Afro-centric identity,<sup>1</sup> which became the driving force behind their sociopolitical activism.

## **Colonialism and Migration: The Making of the Puerto Rican Diaspora**

The island of Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony from the early 1500s until 1898. The colonial situation of the island took a decisive turn when as a consequence of the Spanish American War (1898) the United States turned Cuba into a protectorate and made Puerto Rico a “colonial” possession. The presence of the United States impacted upon the island’s politics, economy and society. The island and its people became subjects of the U.S. Congress, and in 1917 American citizenship was granted to the islanders. Puerto Rico became a model for the new sugar plantation economy that American companies were establishing in the Caribbean. This new economy affected the demand for labor and employment. By the time of the Great Depression of 1929, the Puerto Rican economy, which mainly depended on agricultural production, was suffering badly. The previous year hurricane San Felipe II had destroyed the crops. This economic crisis triggered an increase in the island’s unemployment rate and a massive migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States.

The historiography of the Puerto Rican migration to the United States, which reaches its peak between the 1940 and the 1960s, focuses on their processes of arrival, issues of adaptation, and community building. However, even before becoming U.S. citizens, many Puerto Ricans had migrated to the U.S., most of them as political exiles who had fought for the island’s independence from Spain. Many others were blacks. This is the case of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg (1874-1938). He moved to New York City in 1891 and embraced what would be considered a lifelong quest for Puerto Rican independence and for an affirmation of his African identity. This he did by documenting the history of the African diaspora (Asukile 2006). Interestingly, his experience has been interpreted (Hoffnung-Garskoff 2001) as one of many “migrations” that transformed him from a black Puerto Rican to an African American. Schomburg fought racial oppression alongside other important figures of the black struggle, such as John Edward Bruce, Alain Locke, Marcus I. Garvey, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Schomburg’s quest for affirming his black identity placed him at the forefront of the movement to develop Black Studies. His essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” which was published in the *Survey Graphic* of Harlem in March 1925, influenced thousands of students and scholars, including the noted historian, John Henrik Clarke, who sought out Schomburg to guide him in his studies of African history (Clarke 1994).

Schomburg was more than a bibliophile or a collector of books. A close look of his activities in the Negro Historical Society (which he co-founded in 1911) and the American Negro Academy illustrate his consistent Afro-centric endeavors. Elinor Des Verney Sinnette’s (1989) biography on Schomburg clearly asserts that Schomburg’s “...motivation or inspiration was there, as were the need to educate himself, the need to find his personal identity, and the need to prove his ancestors’ rightful place in world history” (Sinnette 1989, 38). For Schomburg, the accumulation of knowledge and material evidence on the role of black people in history was a serious undertaking. Every artifact or publication that Schomburg found was not only shared with his friends and colleagues in his intellectual group, but also became an object for dissemination to a broader public.

An example of his zeal to propagate knowledge about Africa is the famous speech he gave titled “Racial Integrity: A Plea for the Establishment of a Chair of Negro History in Our Schools and Colleges.” Schomburg delivered this speech to a group of teachers at the Cheney Institute, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1913. The speech denounced the neglect of Africa in history books and urged his listeners to get involved to change the situation and use the classroom to “improve” history:

I am here with a sincere desire to awaken the sensibilities, to rekindle the dormant fibers of the soul, and to fire the racial patriotism by the study of Negro books. We often feel that so many things around us are warped and alienated. Let us see if we cannot agree to arrange a formula or create a basic construction, for the establishment of a substantial method of instruction for our young women and men....<sup>12</sup>

Using Schomburg’s concept of history as an example of an applied Afro-diasporic approach, Adelaine Holton observes that, “...his interest lay in the contributions and experiences of people of African descent in the modern world....” (Holton 2007, 234). She continues, “in asserting the modernity of people of African descent in the Americas, Schomburg did not challenge the Euro-American concept of civilization or its value structure, but instead worked to undermine arguments supporting cultural and racial hierarchies” (Holton 2007, 235). It can be argued therefore that in his speech of 1913, Schomburg was advocating the establishment of Africana Studies. His approach is analogous to what Keto interpreted as a “non-hegemonic” perspective of history (Keto 1989, 11); meaning that Europe should not be seen as dominate and central but part of a diversity of civilizations that encompasses the global community. In that context, Keto’s analysis may be used to suggest that Schomburg is contributing to a “pluriversal” perspective of history, approaching it from a non-hegemonic reference to Europe and positing Africa as an equal legitimate center of historical interpretation.

In addition to questioning the white man’s interpretation of history, Schomburg was urging black people/teachers/intellectuals to take control of their history by knowing their past. Schomburg stood for a broader interpretation of Africa and its descendants’ history. His views would be articulated later in his essay “The Negro Digs up His Past.” In this now famous piece, he confirmed what Alain Locke and other members of the American Negro Academy were advocating, that is, black people’s history does not begin with slavery.

Schomburg’s role in creating and advocating for an Afro-centric perspective through which one can interpret history went beyond political or cultural borders. He exemplified an “African diasporic identity,” denoting the conceptualization of the African diaspora as a collective experience. In 1915, Schomburg addressed again the American Negro Academy. On that occasion, he lectured about the presence of Africans in Spain, Portugal and in the colonial Latin America. He also emphasized that in all the circumstances in which blacks were oppressed, they rebelled.

Here again, one can identify the Schomburg who is not only critical of forms of domination and oppression against the people of African descent; he is also acknowledging African people's agency in their resistance against colonialism and slavery. This aspect was a subject in which African American and Caribbean intellectuals were well versed in their own histories. However, Schomburg's contribution was that he expanded the discussion by including people of Central and South America. On this subject, his biographer, Elinor Sinnette, stated, "Schomburg brought the international dimensions of black history to the forefront of the American Negro Academy." (Sinnette 1989, 55). Schomburg in fact paved the way to Africana or African Diaspora Studies as a cross national/cross cultural field. I would argue that his thinking became the foundation for the Africa-centered theory defined by C. Tshehloane Keto, particularly in his book *The Africa Centered Perspective of History* (1989). According to Keto, the Africa-centered approach positions Africa as the main focus of interpretation and seeks to "interpret" and "understand" global events by contextualizing the role of Africa and its diaspora within world events and activities (Keto 1989, 19-20). Schomburg, along with his peers, not only had the courage to break the silence about Africa and its diaspora's past, but he also positioned himself as a leading figure in the struggle to eradicate racism. More importantly, in that process of researching, collecting material culture, participating in conferences, and traveling around the world, Schomburg pioneered Afro-centric Studies by positing Africa as a central source of his knowledge and experience. This paradigm or conception was the rationale behind his project to document the experience of the people of African descent globally. In this sense, Schomburg understood "the universality of the black man's history" (Sinnette 1989, 46) and that history has a common provenance: Africa. For him, education was central to furthering this goal.

Schomburg continued his intellectual activism in support of the validation of people of African ancestry in world history until his passing on June 8, 1938. Hundreds of publications deal with Schomburg's life and work, but more importantly, his papers and documents have become the foundation for the establishment of the *Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture*. He is beyond any doubt a pioneer of African Diaspora and Africana Studies.

Arturo Schomburg's personal experience has many resonances with those of Puerto Ricans migrating to New York in the United States. Until the 1930s, Puerto Ricans began to migrate in large numbers to the United States. Some settled in rural areas to work on farms; but the great majority moved to urban centers such as Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York City.

In the urban setting of New York City, Puerto Ricans crossed class and racial lines and integrated into communities, such as Harlem. Harlem is a historical section of the upper Manhattan and represents the cross-cultural interaction of peoples of African descent. There, African American and other Afro-Caribbean peoples created a site of intellectual exchange where black leaders, artists, writers, musicians, preachers and workers established networks with Spanish speaking people, most of them Puerto Ricans.

In Harlem, Puerto Ricans also interacted with Italians, Irish Americans and Jews, to mention a few. Since the 1950s, social scientists have begun to address issues pertaining to the Puerto Ricans' interactions in urban centers. Remarkably, in this scholarship, issues regarding Boricuas were tied in with other minorities, particularly with African Americans.<sup>3</sup> These studies established parallels and intersections between these groups and the competition for economic resources, political power and housing. They are important sources of validation of this essay. In their quest for social, political and economic inclusion, both Puerto Ricans and African Americans intersected in different scenarios, sometimes combining strategies that included establishing social organizations. These addressed social issues, transforming and affirming racial identity in the process.

### **Articulating the Afro-Boricua<sup>4</sup> Identity During the Civil Rights era**

Scholarship on Puerto Rican-based "social organizations" emphasizes how the community needed to organize itself on the basis of regional commonalities. This type of organization suggests that among Puerto Ricans race was not an issue. These assumptions contrast with Lorrin Thomas' study (2010), which reveals that Puerto Ricans' racial construction changed dramatically when they arrived in the United States. On the island, race was not a binary concept for Puerto Ricans. It was based on a different color spectrum. The history of the island evolved from a "racially blind" society to racialized groups. Yet the U.S. Puerto Ricans' nature and self-consciousness became to be built on a "conquered"/"oppressed" platform. After they settled in the U.S., Puerto Ricans' reality changed for the worse, when discrimination, poverty and all social disadvantages pushed them to an identity crisis. Furthermore, the contribution made by Puerto Ricans serving as soldiers in various U.S. wars was not acknowledged upon their return. Issues of veteran inequality and discrimination were added to the injustices that the Puerto Rican community was already facing. In the case of NYC, community organizations, mostly labor and political groups, emerged to provide alternative services and support to Puerto Ricans. Documents testify to the existence of the activities of these institutions as early as the 1920s and 1930s (Sánchez-Korrol 1983). However, Puerto Rican immigration reached a watershed in the post-world war era. And in addition to becoming an important period in the "making of the diaspora," as sociologist José Sánchez (2007) has observed, the post war era was also the time when Puerto Rican "activism" and "radicalism" really took root. Yet it was not until the 1960s that discussions about racial identity became prevalent. At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Puerto Ricans in NYC refocused on the racial issue and challenged preconceived notions by connecting it with the Afro-centric discourse, thereby problematizing the issue of Hispanic/Latino identity.

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was signed, prohibiting discrimination based on race in schools, public places and places of employment. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed, outlawing discriminatory practices used in the South to disenfranchise African American voters. In 1966, the Black Panther Party (BPP) was formed in Oakland, California. Motivated by these developments, Puerto Ricans also mobilized to demand their rights and formed coalitions with African Americans. These coalitions were documented in the Black press.<sup>5</sup> African American and Boricuas students in the city of New York, who formed students' clubs, such as the Toussaint L'Overture and the Sociedad Eugenio María de Hostos, took the lead in the formation of alliances and the advancement of social causes.

### **The Young Lords**

Inspired by the BPP, the Young Lords was founded in the summer of 1969 in the city of Chicago. Following this, a chapter was opened in New York City, followed by Philadelphia. This group became an important vehicle for helping the Puerto Rican community to deal with social injustices. In ways reminiscent of Schomburg, the Young Lords advocated pedagogical reform to assert a more Afro-centric point of view in colleges and universities. They strongly supported students' demand for the creation of Black and Puerto Rican courses. Jiménez (2009) indicates that by the fall of 1969, City College and Hunter College led the effort to establish a Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies. These institutions were accessible to all students, and inspired other colleges and the public school systems to do the same. The author has located two letters testifying to this fact: one from SUNY at Fredonia, and another from a New Jersey public school official to the acting chair of the Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department at Hunter. Both communications request information on how to design and implement similar curricula in their respective academic systems.<sup>6</sup> This nationwide movement resulted in the establishment of programs and departments of Africana Studies (Black and Puerto Rican Studies back then) to address the experience of African Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, from public schools to institutions of higher learning.

In addition to mobilizing the Puerto Rican community to stand up for their rights, one of the important outcomes of the Young Lords' efforts was the re-articulation of Puerto Rican racial identity. In their party platform or 13-point program (originally published in 1970 in the party's newspaper entitled *Palante!*) a provision described the group commitment to "fighting for the liberation of all oppressed people," and "all third world people," among others. It continued by advocating the inclusion of an "Afro-Indio culture and Spanish language" oriented curriculum in the NYC public school system and college programs. This effort is resonant of Schomburg who developed an inclusive approach to the African diaspora experience.

For the Young Lords, whose membership included African Americans, Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans, and progressive whites, the acknowledgment of the racial diversity of Puerto Ricans became paradoxical. For instance, the seventh point of their program demanded the provision of an Afro-Indio (Taíno) and Spanish language education, reaffirming the cultural-linguistic aspect Puerto Rican identity and the celebration of its Hispanic/Latino culture. It specifies:

[w]e must learn our long history of fighting against cultural, as well as economic genocide by the Spaniards and now the yanquis. Revolutionary culture, culture of our people, in the only true teaching, JIBARO SI, YANQUI NO! (Their emphasis) (Enck-Wanzer 2010, 12)

Recognizing the impact of European powers against native people in the world is of course a theme of the Afro-centric discourse (Keto 1989; Asante 1998; 2001). Furthermore, for the Young Lords party (YLP), application of the discourse to Puerto Ricans echoed the demands of the nationalist movement on the island. The party's platform acknowledged that Puerto Ricans are racially diverse embracing three cultures: Taíno, African and Spanish. However, the party's reaffirmation of the *jíbaro* or what some call "white peasant," or the "model" peasant favored by the Puerto Rican intellectual elite, harked back to a ladder of social hierarchy and racialized identity on the island. In this respect, it was at odds with the search for a just and inclusive society implicit in Schomburg's work. It seems contradictory to have celebrated the "racial" diversity of Puerto Ricans by relying on a symbol of a hegemonic culture.

Enck-Wanzer's compilation of documents related to the Young Lord's ideology tells us more. It includes a "definition of terms" written in 1971. In this, the term "jíbaro" is defined as "The mixture of mostly [s]panish and Taíno, but also some [B]lacks...The language is [s]panish, the culture Spanish and Indian" (Enck-Wanzer 2010, 17). This might be an example of the "inclusive ideology" of the group; however, it might also perpetuate the silencing of black Puerto Ricans in the island's national make up and their struggle for self-autonomy. Another explanation for the contradiction may be found in the YLP's desire to create and maintain anti-imperialist symbols. In this case, one might suggest that the YLP's step is taken precisely to counter the American binary racial discourse by consciously carving space for diversity. Nonetheless, this is not what the perception of the term "Afro-Boricua" suggests. According to their pamphlet, it is defined as:

The mixture of mostly Spanish and African who developed in the sugar cane plantations and coast of Puerto Rico...and whose ancestors were slaves. Most Black Puerto Ricans try to call themselves [mulatos] when the language is Spanish, but the culture and customs are still mostly African...." (Enck-Wanzer 2010, 17)

Obviously, this appears to criticize black Puerto Ricans' denial of their Africanness, because it takes an essentialist stand about racial identity. Yet it appears contradictory to advocate the reaffirmation of the Afro-Boricua culture without acknowledging the Spanish language as part of the black Puerto Rican heritage. A modern interpretation within African Diaspora Studies would argue rather that there is nothing wrong with having African ancestry and speaking Spanish. There are millions of people of African descent in the Caribbean and Latin America whose native language is Spanish and who are struggling to be accepted in their societies. Schomburg himself was a key example of the "internationality" of the African diaspora, and he took full advantage of it in order to enlighten his colleagues about the populations of African descent in Central and South America. However, the Young Lords' Marxist-oriented stance was that Spain had been a colonial power. They were also denouncing Spain's atrocities. But in taking an anti-Spanish stand, the Young Lord's definition of Afro-Boricua tends to exclude the Black population of the island whose native language is Spanish.

This illustrates perfectly the distinction between the Marxist and the Afro-centric positions. The Young Lords embraced Marxism/Socialism and employed it to reject oppression and capitalism, whereas the Afrocentrism and Black Pride oratory was used to dismantle racism.

The Young Lords split up in 1972 due to "infighting" and as the result of activity by the U.S. government intelligence services. They later evolved into two different organizations, but both had faded by 1976. Despite all the changes, the enthusiastic members finally organized the National Congress for Puerto Ricans Rights under the leadership of Richie Pérez. These kinds of organizations, such as the Young Lords and students unions, while looking for a place where they could exercise their rights, managed to bring to the discussion issues affecting their communities. They felt that they helped to solve social injustice. At the end it is fair to state that they managed to change the system.

## **Grassroots/Community Organizations**

In the discussion of Puerto Rican advocacy and activism for their rights, one cannot overlook the role of grassroots organizations such as the United Bronx Parents, Inc. (UBP), founded by Evelina López-Antonetty in 1965, years after she emigrated from Puerto Rico to the United States along with her mother and two sisters. The UBP was created as a result of "the lack of responsiveness of the public school system towards the needs of Puerto Rican and other minority children."<sup>7</sup> Under the dynamic directorship of López-Antonetty, the UBP became the stalwart in citywide struggles for quality education. At first, the organization consisted mostly of volunteer staff whose mission was to train parents and encourage their participation in decision-making related to the schools. However, the UBP extended their offer of training programs and workshops to include educational workers, teachers, and students.

United Bronx Parents also embraced a pan-ethnic vision and was instrumental in furthering Afro-centric awareness. This happened as the organization broadened its mission beyond its Bronx headquarters. In addition to offering technical assistance, bilingual counseling, educational and summer lunch programs, it extended its range to the organization of events and distribution of literature that engaged both with pan-ethnic alliances and the Afro-centric discourse. Its programs included film screenings, plays and dance performances featuring Puerto Rican/Latino and African American performers. The Hunt's Point Branch of the New York Library showed the film *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger* (released in 1969).<sup>8</sup> The UBP also organized events honoring African American civil rights leaders, such as Paul Robeson, and in 1981 they paid tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Interestingly, many flyers were prepared and distributed informing the public that a discussion session would follow each activity.<sup>9</sup> What is captivating about those flyers is the Afro-centric language used in the announcements. Perhaps, this is a reflection of the times in which “Afro-identity” was a trend, but there was no need to implement publicity strategies using terms such as “Black,” or combining words such as

“Latin-Soul,” to rally people for an organization with a great majority of Puerto Ricans/Hispanic members. This “Afro-centered” language wouldn’t have been adopted unless the UBP staff felt the need to promote it. The response from the community—Latino and African American—and support for these activities were precisely the result of the efforts and pan-ethnic vision of the UBP members. It must be added that López-Antonetty became an adjunct professor at the Department of Africana and Puerto Rican/Latino Studies (Black and Puerto Rican Studies back then) at Hunter College. A closer look at her course syllabus and teaching materials emphasizes the struggle of black people.<sup>10</sup> In summary, the leadership of the UBP, represented by López-Antonetty, illustrates an important aspect of Puerto Rican activism that has played a key role in the implementation of the Afro-centric paradigm. In short, the UBP is the perfect illustration of a grass-roots activist group, whose membership without knowing it was making “history from below.”

For Puerto Ricans, sociopolitical activism means constant political participation and the creation of groups to empower the community. This was the case of *The National Association for the Advancement of Hispanic American People of African Origin* (NAAHAPAO). The legal incorporation of this non-profit organization in 1989 was the task of Julio E. Sabater, who owned a consulting and development agency in downtown Manhattan.<sup>11</sup> The NAAHAPAO’s name suggests that it was modeled after the NAACP. One might highlight the “ethnic reconciliatory dimension” of the group when they promote the advancement of “Hispanic American people of African origin.” The naming of the association also suggests that by the late 1980s black Puerto Ricans had forged an Afro-Latino/Hispanic identity, a pattern that was already evident within the Young Lords. It is also important to note that their philosophy is parallel to that of African Americans in that it sought to reconnect with Africa. For example, documentation of the NAAHAPAO shows that some of the members adopted African names.

In fact, in their memorandums and communications, Mr. Sabater signed his name as Oggunike. Moreover, an organizational chart shows that they adopted the Yoruba and Egyptian philosophical views of life.<sup>12</sup> This appears to have been an attempt to refocus the concept of Puerto Ricans' racial identity by adding a healthy dose of Africanity to it.

Moreover, the Afro-centric approach of the group is explicit in its constitution. Terminology such as "to create, promote, support activities designed to develop self-respect...racial pride," implies that Mr. Sabater and the other members of the group were deeply immersed in the Africa-centered/Black Pride movement. Another passage of the constitution describes one objective as being the dissemination of "historical facts about the greatness of ANCIENT BLACK CIVILIZATION (their emphasis) and their contributions to human development in the entire world." Unquestionably, this group aligned with the Afro-centric movement. There are links here to Professors John Henrik Clarke and Yosef ben-Jochannan, among others.

Dr. Clarke and Dr. ben-Jochannan (who is of Ethiopian and Puerto Rican heritage) had pioneered the intellectual movement for racial justice by writing, teaching and publicly lecturing about the history and culture of African people. They remained active for more than four decades, and it is fair to state that they provided the foundation for what later became an Afro-centric movement. They planted many intellectual seeds among Black and Puerto Rican youth, and the grassroots leadership in Puerto Rican communities. They also played critical roles in the institutionalization of Africana and African American Studies university programs. As stated earlier, the pledge of the NAAHAPAO members was a reaffirmation of the Afro-centric approach of the sociopolitical activism of Puerto Ricans in New York City. For example, in their pledge, the members confirmed their "conviction as GOD-GIVEN... to promote the well-being of all the descendants of our ANCIENT-AFRICAN-BLACK-ANCESTORS...." They further added that "in order to promote the highest standards of brotherhood; social justice and human dignity..." they would fulfill the duties and responsibilities of the organization.

It seems that the organization and Mr. Sabater were very assertive in their strategy to promote their agenda. Correspondences of summer of 1989 and spring 1990 indicate that the group was engaged in a campaign of increasing public awareness by sending communications to the editor-in-chief of *The New York Amsterdam News*, Judge Frank Torres (the same person who notarized the paperwork of the organization), and even to the ambassador of Nigeria in the United Nations, among others. In these letters the NAAHAPAO demanded the "Restoration of Our Black Race" (sic). They had designed a "master plan geared to create among our people at large, economic and financial empowerment; and simultaneously to reprogram their minds in order to free them from mental slavery...."<sup>13</sup> It is evident that in addition to joining the common cause of empowering the community and "restoring" ethnic pride, the NAAHAPAO broadened the ethnic definition in Puerto Ricans' and other Latinos' racial consciousness.

Mr. Sabater's efforts in promoting the citywide rights of "Latinos of African-American descent" is documented in a *New York Times* article (Lee 1991, B7). Following the results of a recent census showing that the white population in New York City was decreasing, an energetic Sabater advocated, "redistricting" the city. According to the *Times* story, the increasing number of the city's minorities had not been taken into consideration. At the hearings, Sabater represented "Latinos of African-American descent." That particular issue gave Sabater the opportunity to demonstrate his litigation skills before an audience, for which he received "one of the loudest round of applause of the night." It seems that the early efforts of people such as Arthur Schomburg had left their mark throughout the city.

### **Calling Mother Africa: Salsa Music as "Resistance in Motion"**

As an important additional note to this work, in the midst of all these historical developments, one cannot miss the fact that the popular music of Puerto Ricans has connected with Africa, particularly through *bomba*, *plena* and *salsa*. Salsa music testifies to the African influence in Puerto Rican/Latino culture, and New York City became the stage for this historic fusion. As many studies on salsa music suggest, this genre created a more inclusive venue for Puerto Ricans and Latinos' cultural expression (Washburne 2008; Flores and Valentín-Escobar 2008). These studies also point to the fact that the urban space of New York City serves as a scenario for Puerto Ricans and other ethnic groups to create an atmosphere of "ethnic camaraderie" and collaboration, not only in show business, but also in other spheres (Flores 2000). Furthermore, just as Puerto Ricans have developed a kind of Afro-centric civic approach, a similar trait is discernible in their cultural activities, particularly in musical performance. And culture is a quintessential manifestation of any individual identity (Hall 2003). Observers in the field of Africana studies have seen that this has been used as a great resource to connect the diaspora to the motherland.

In 1974, Mohammad Ali defeated George Foreman in Kinshasa, then the Democratic Republic of Congo, now Zaire, to regain the world heavyweight championship. As part of the event, the production team organized a monumental cultural event that included top-rate African American performers such as James Brown, the Spinners, B.B. King, the Pointers Sisters and the most famous tropical-music band of the moment, the Fania All Stars, a musical ensemble established in the late sixties.<sup>14</sup> During the 1970s, the star-studded group became renowned worldwide for their musical performances. The members were representative of a fair range of the ethnic background of NYC, since there were Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Dominicans.

Embracing Africa was part of the musical experience for those Puerto Rican musicians participating in the Kinshasa event. In a recent interview (2009) Cheo Feliciano, a black Puerto Rican singer and key member of the Fania group, reflected on that important moment: "When we arrived in Africa—and I think I can speak for everyone who was there—we returned to our roots, to the mother-land, to the origins...."<sup>15</sup> Feliciano's statement is a good example of the relationship between music and cultural identity.

It is also a testimony to the fact that despite the external pressures that undermine the influence of Africa in the lives of its descendants, the wider universe conspires to revive such influences. For this Fania musician, the experience of traveling to the continent became a reaffirmation of his African identity. Here again, the city of New York, the point of departure for the long journey, became an important venue for Puerto Ricans to vindicate their culture, exhibit pride in their identity, view themselves as part of the African diaspora, recognize the contribution of their heritage, and re-articulate their connection with Africa: all processes that form part of the Afro-centric movement. The trip to the continent served as a vehicle for Puerto Ricans and African Americans to interact and reactivate the animus of those who felt ties to the continent. And for many of them, the trip turned out to be a homecoming.

## Conclusion

The examples discussed in this article foreshadowed what the African Union Diaspora Task Team in the anecdote at the beginning of this essay is seeking to do. Here, the author doesn't seek to reinvent the wheel, but to use her skills to review the work of Schomburg, who gave expression to Afro-descendants' who sought to preserve their culture and to refer to Keto who propounded the view of a central role for Africa and its descendants in world history. He suggested that from a non-hegemonic perspective of European history would emerge a "pluriversal" point of view in which Africa would seem equal to Europe and Asia. Inspired by this interpretation of history, I have traced the steps of some of those who followed Schomburg, such as the Young Lords, López-Antonetty, and many others. Despite the societal pressure to ignore Africa, these activists, these Puerto Ricans in New York, or Nuyoricans, have succeeded in marking their distinct cultural and economic spaces, partly due to their embrace of the African World. This has partly enabled them to project a dynamic and progressive cultural existence in the city.

The Young Lords and students' unions, while advocating for better economic and educational opportunities, also spoke the language of a racially diverse identity and personhood. Ironically, the YLP, in their effort to denounce imperialism and racial oppression embraced a symbolic figure whose image is used on the island among intellectual circles to claim the Europeanism of Puerto Rican culture. Nonetheless, the YLP's Africa-centered/black argument was articulated with traces of the island's ruling elite racial discourse. Despite this fact the YLP conveyed a message of change and empowerment. In the end, they managed to change the system. The leadership of the United Bronx Parents illustrates the advantages of empowering students and teachers. Far from imposing limits on her organization, Mrs. López's mission and philosophy enabled her to communicate her "Afro-centric" views to the wider community through the different activities the institution organized. Then, the innovative strategy employed by the *National Association for the Advancement of Hispanic American People of African Origin* showed that by the late 1980s the definition and articulation of an Afro-Hispanic ethnic identity had perhaps become more complex.

This is evident from the explicit appropriation of the Afro-centric philosophy within an Afro-Latino U.S. context. This particular group needs to be further investigated and documented, and its trajectory located in the rich history of Afro-centric associations in New York City.

Symbolism associated with Africa is also manifest in the culture. African diasporic people have a long trajectory of using cultural approaches to demonstrate how people of African descent resisted assimilation. This is demonstrated by the example concerning the participation of Puerto Ricans musicians in the event in Kinshasa, Zaire. The outcome of Puerto Rican/Latinos interacting with top-rated African American performers epitomizes Africa as the common denominator for the convergence of both communities. Furthermore, the testimonial of the Fania singer reminds us that there are many ways to understand the experience of people of African ancestry and that the coming together of different styles and approaches is conducive to this.

Similar to the initiative of the African Diaspora Task Team of the African Union, examples here of Puerto Ricans' Afro-centric views and approaches illustrate the efforts that have been made on one side (the Americas) and the other (Africa) in order to close the gap between those who seek to affirm their heritage, and the homeland that is willing to welcome them. I am quite sure that in a specific place in time, both hands, that is, the continent and its diaspora, will embrace each other again.

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### **Endnotes**

\* The original paper was presented at “The State of African American and African Diaspora Studies: Methodology, Pedagogy and Research” Conference at Schomburg Center/Graduate Center-CUNY, NYC January 6-8, 2011.

<sup>1</sup> This essay is informed by an Africa-centered approach as defined by C. Tsehloane Keto in his writing *The Africa Centered Perspective of History and Social Sciences in the Twenty First Century*. (Blackwood, New Jersey, 1989). For Professor Keto, “The Africa centered perspective of history rests on the premise that it is valid to posit Africa as a geographical and cultural starting base in the study of peoples of African descent” (1). Dr. Keto’s conception is in harmony with what Maulena Karenga articulated in the 1960s as Black Studies, which later changed to Africana Studies and what Molefi Kete Asante refers to as “Africology.”

<sup>2</sup> Arthur A. Schomburg. *Racial Integrity: A Plea for the Establishment of a Chair of Negro History in Our Schools and Colleges, etc.* a paper presented at a meeting of the Negro Society for Historical Research, July 1913, 5-7. Arthur A. Schomburg Papers, The Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture, New York Public Library. This excerpt was also quoted in E. Sinnette, *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg*, 209 footnote 22; see also the Spanish version in Flor Piñero de Rivera *Arturo Alfonso Schumburg. Un puertorriqueño descubre el legado histórico del negro*. (Centro de Estudios Avanzados y del Caribe, San Juan, 1989) 79-89.

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<sup>3</sup> A sample of this scholarship: Oscar Handlin. *The Newcomers: Negroes and Puerto Ricans in a changing Metropolis*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1959) and Nathan Glazer and Patrick Moynihan. *Beyond the melting pot: the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1959). Studies comparing the collaboration between Puerto Ricans and African Americans include: Andrés Torres. *Between the melting pot and mosaic: African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the New York political economy*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); James Jennings. *Missing Links in the Study of Puerto Rican Poverty in the United States*. (Boston, Mass: University of Massachusetts, 1995) and Johanna Fernández. “Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics: The Young Lords, Late Sixties Radicalism, and Community Organizing in New York City” In *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South 1940-1980*. Edited by Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodward. (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 270-300.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua Española (2005: 120-121), “Boricua” refers to any person or object that comes from “Borikén.” “Borikén” and “Borinquen” are the original names given to Puerto Rico by the Taíno-Indians. In the United States, people from Puerto Rican descent have widely adopted the word “Boricua” over “Puerto Rican.” Editor Roberto Santiago states that “Boricua” could also be equivalent to what “brother” and “sister” mean for African Americans: “I imagined that *Boricua* was just affectionate slang for *Puerto Ricans*. I guessed that *Boricua* was just a word that proclaimed that you were down with your people and your culture—no different from *brother* and *sister*, the terms of endearment used by African Americans.” In *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings-An Anthology*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. (New York: One World/Ballantine, 1995) xiii.

<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this research, I sampled *The Chicago Defender*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Variety*, *The New York Times* and light publications such as *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Marilyn Amdur to Professor Beryl L. Bailey, November 17, 1969, Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies, 1969-1978; letter from Charles Smith, April 29, 1970, box 2 folder 7, Hunter College Archives and Special Collections.

<sup>7</sup> Center for Puerto Rican Studies. Guide to the Records of United Bronx Parents Association Collection, 1. Accessed online 11/19/11.

<sup>8</sup> The title of this film is a quote from a statement that Muhammad Ali made when he refused to be drafted during the Vietnam War.

<sup>9</sup> The United Bronx Parents Association Papers (hereafter UBP), box 2, folder 1, Center of Puerto Rican Studies.

<sup>10</sup> UBP, box 2, folder 9.

<sup>11</sup> The Frank Torres Papers, box 19, folder 6, Center of Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>13</sup> The Frank Torres Papers box 19, folder 2. “Letter to H.E. Joseph N. Garba” February 5, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> The Fania All Stars was a musical ensemble established in the late sixties by the composer Johnny Pacheco and the musician Jerri Massucci. The group ceased performing together in the 1980s when many members began solo careers and struggled with the emergence of other genres. Nonetheless, the Fania All Stars established a legacy for the new generation of salsa singers and validated the cultural contribution of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in American pop culture. On the cultural and ethnic validation of salsa, see *Centro Journal* volume XVI No. 2 (Fall 2004). This is entirely dedicated to salsa and its impact. Also, Jerri Massucci/Leon Gast’s 1970s documentaries *Our Latin Thing* and *Salsa* are key components of this scholarship. The multi-ethnic group’s performance is chronicled in the video/documentary entitled *Fania All Stars Live in Africa* (1974), *When We Were Kings* (1996), and more recently in the film *Soul Power* (2009).

<sup>15</sup> This is an excerpt from the documentary *Celia The Queen* (2009), directed by Joe Cardona and M. de Varona.

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## **Other documentary sources**

### Archival collections at the Center of Puerto Rican Studies

The Centro of Puerto Rican Studies Papers

The Frank Torres Papers

The Richie Pérez Papers

The United Bronx Parents, Inc. Papers

### Other collections

Arthur A. Schomburg Papers, The Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture, New York Public Library

The Bronx African American Oral History Project, Bronx Historical Society

Hunter College Libraries Archives and Special Collection