"Double the Struggle"

Chicano/Latino Hip Hop in *The Source* Magazine

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Abstract *The contributions of Latinos and Chicanos to hip hop have not been studied nearly as much as those of African American hip-hop artists. While it is largely acknowledged that Latinos played an active part in the creation of hip hop in New York, their contributions in Los Angeles are rarely included in West Coast hip-hop history. At the same time, Chicano/Latino actors are not represented in the popular narrative of the East Coast/West Coast conflict. Aiming to address this research gap, this chapter locates LA Latino and Chicano artists within the East Coast/West Coast dialectic and explores how it affected their careers. Drawing on discourse analysis of the East Coast-based hip-hop publication* The Source, *as well as ethnographic interviews with Chicano and Latino artists on the West Coast, this chapter offers a fresh perspective on hip hop's most infamous conflict. Media coverage of Chicano/Latino artists in* The Source *was scarce during the 1990s and clearly written from an East Coast perspective. My ethnography shows that Latino and Chicano artists faced "double the struggle" to build their careers in hip hop during the 1990s, as they were not only affected by the place-based east/west antagonism, but also by their ethno-cultural classification within music industry discourse. Despite this separation, my findings show that artists' alliances and collaborations do not necessarily run along the lines of an assumed sense of belonging to an ethnic group ("Pan-Latinidad", Rivera 2003) or coast.*

In the Fall of 2022, Bronx-born MC Fat Joe presented the annual BET Awards—proving that a Latino in hip hop can hold his own with African

American artists on a network that, according to its name, "Black Entertainment Television," originally focused on Black culture and music. Fat Joe's involvement was promoted by the network, who hailed him as "hip-hop royalty… [who] has represented the art form and the Bronx, the birthplace of hip-hop" (Lamarre 2022). On social media, however, this announcement was not always celebrated, with Fat Joe's engagement for this award show being called into question because of the artist's ethnicity. Born Joseph Cartagena to a Cuban father and a Puerto Rican mother in The Bronx (Rivera 2003: 222; Fat Joe 2022), Fat Joe was criticized for not representing hip hop because of his Latino and Caribbean heritage, while some even viewed him as "white" (Ocho 2022). Earlier that year, Fat Joe had already faced a similar wave of outrage after posting a video on Instagram that celebrated Latino/a participation in the beginnings of hip hop (@fatjoe, August 25, 2022), whereafter users had accused him of "stealing the culture from blacks" (Eustice 2022). In an interview with Jay Williams at National Public Radio (NPR), Fat Joe explained that he grew up in an overwhelmingly Black section of the South Bronx, "blond hair, green eyes—knowing I'm Latino but thinking I'm Black" (Williams and Fat Joe 2022). He confidently argued against the social media backlash, stating that he witnessed the birth of hip hop as a multi-ethnic culture and that he never experienced racism because of his ethnicity (ibid.). Still, the above debate exemplifies that in hip hop, ethnicity can still trump local origin: Fat Joe may be from The Bronx, the birthplace of hip hop, but his Latin ethnicity does not appear to give him the full ownership of hip hop in the eyes of fans and critics who consider hip hop a Black culture.

In hip-hop scholarship, likewise differing points of views are expressed on the ethno-cultural ownership of hip-hop culture, but it is largely acknowledged that Latinos took part in the creation of hip hop in New York, first and foremost Puerto Ricans (Flores 2000; Rivera 2003; Chang 2005; McFarland 2008). Latino/a and Mexican American contributions in Los Angeles, in contrast, are rarely included in West Coast hip-hop history or in the overall narrative of gangster rap that influenced hip-hop styles in the US and abroad. Fat Joe started his musical career in the early 1990s with the overwhelmingly Black rap

crew D.I.T.C. and released his solo album *Representin'* in 1993. Though never concealing his ethnic background and always including nods to his culture in his music, he did not necessarily highlight this as much as Latino rappers from the West Coast such as Mellow Man Ace and Kid Frost: two artists who emerged a few years earlier that Fat Joe cites as a big influence on his artistry (Donohue 2018).

Back in the 1990s, social media was yet to be born, and hip-hop journalism largely featured in music publications, at times newspapers, and mostly in magazines dedicated to hip-hop culture that were almost exclusively East Coast-based—the most influential of these being *The Source*. Fat Joe, as well as the late Big Pun (Christopher Rios), who was signed to the former's Terror Squad label, went on to have far greater success and enjoy(ed) far more media attention than Latino rappers from the West Coast. On the surface, this inequality between the coasts bears resemblance to the highly mediatized "East Coast/West Coast beef." Quinn (2005: 84) states that "there was a simmering hostility based on market neglect and lack of exposure." New York hip-hop artists claimed the culture for themselves, overshadowing Los Angeles artists who developed an "inferiority complex" due to the neglect of labels and media outlets that were primarily based on the East Coast (ibid.). However, Latinos in hip hop did not partake in the conflict. The East Coast/West Coast-rivalry centered around African American rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls and their respective labels Death Row Records and Bad Boy and culminated in the deaths of both rappers in 1996 and 1997, respectively (Keyes 2002: 167–71). Latinos/as and Chicanos/as are not represented at all in the popular narrative of the East Coast/West Coast division, despite the fact that they were affected by these animosities all the same. On the contrary, the myth of "pan-*latinidad*" (Rivera 2003) promotes Latino unity in hip hop across coasts and countries of origin.

Latinidad, "Latino-ness," describes "a unified U.S. Latina/o identity straightforwardly linked to a Latin American heritage that in some fundamental way binds together various disparate groups, such as… Chicanos/as, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, [and] Mexican Americans" (Kirschner 2019: 340). Within hip hop, Latino artists are considered

"the minority" (Weisberg 1998). Many Latino hip-hop artists, alongside some hip-hop journalists, proclaim a Latino unity that grows out of this marginalized position, and not only cuts across countries of origin in the Caribbean or Latin America, but across coastal affiliations as well. Rivera (2003: 106) refers here to "pan-*latinidad*," a highly essentializing concept that presupposes that Latinos, Afro-Latinos, and Caribbean Latinos "have experiences, histories, identities, and solidarities that 'naturally' place them within the pan-Latino aggregate." This assumption not only blurred the heterogeneity of Latinos in the US, it also forced Puerto Ricans in hip hop to pick sides, although "Latino and Afro-diasporic identities… are not mutually exclusive identities" (ibid.: 107).

"Racial identities are not categorically fixed," Suzanne Oboler and Anani Dzidzienyo (2005: 12) remind us, "they are subject to constant fluctuations in terms of both their meanings and social value." In hip hop, these identities operate at the intersection of *perceived* race/ethnicity and publicly *acknowledged* race/ethnicity, as the above debates around Fat Joe exemplify. Afro-Latinos and -Caribbeans in particular, have occupied an invisible threshold in the Black and Latino binary since hip hop's early days in the 1970s and 1980s. Many Puerto Ricans in early New York hip hop were assumed to be African American because of their dark complexion and slang (Rivera 2003: 75). Furthermore, many artists did not challenge this representation, as in the example of Ruby Dee of the Fantastic Five MCs, who in Charlie Ahearn's classic hip-hop film *Wild Style* (1983) raps: "Well, Ruby Dee is my name, and I'm a Puerto Rican/ You might think I'm Black by the way I'm speakin.'" Afrika Bambaataa, in turn, considered "Black" and "Caribbean" one and the same, as he stated in an interview with Nelson George (1993: 48) in *The Source*: "Now one thing people must know, that when we say black we mean all our Puerto Rican or Dominican brothers. Wherever hip-hop was and the blacks was, the Latinos and the Puerto Ricans was too." It is worth pointing out that all three "founding fathers" of hip hop—Afrika Bambaataa, DJ Kool Herc, and Grandmaster Flash—are of West Indian descent (Chang 2005; Keyes 2002: 54). Again, this was not a well-known fact during the early days of hip hop and is only alluded to in the above interview by George. In the case of Fat Joe, his very light-skinned phenotype allows for him to be

perceived as "White" and thus his authority in hip hop to be called into question—despite his publicly embraced Cuban and Puerto Rican ancestry. Shortly after he had hosted the BET awards, in an interview on *The Breakfast Club* at the New York radio station Power 105.1, Fat Joe called out "colorism" in hip hop, stating that there would always be critics who did not accept him as a spokesperson for the culture simply because "he does not have the right look" (Breakfast Club 2022).[1]

On the West Coast, I encountered similar debates on "perceived ethnicity" in my ethnography of the Latino and Chicano hip-hop scene. Afro-Cuban rapper Mellow Man Ace remembers that, growing up, "Mexican kids didn't understand how come we [he and his brother, Sen Dog of Cypress Hill] were Black and spoke fluent Spanish. And Blacks didn't understand how we were Black and didn't speak English."[2] On the other hand, African American rapper Hi-C who was produced by Mexican American DJ Tony A. was frequently assumed to be half-Mexican because of his sound and use of "Spanglish" slang.[3] Cypress Hill, hailed "the biggest Latinos in the game" by Fat Joe (Donohue 2018), and arguably the most famous "Latin rap group on the planet" (McFarland 2008: 41), did not even want to be promoted as such and successfully built a fan base that far exceeded Latino and even hip-hop audiences on both coasts.

In this chapter, I aim to locate LA Latino and Chicano artists in the East Coast/West Coast dialectic during the 1990s, examining their relationship and media representation within the Latino hip-hop community, and the wider overwhelmingly African American hip-hop scene.[4]

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1 What adds to the complexity of these issues is the use of the n-word by Latino artists. Fat Joe, who prominently used it on his 1993-track "Another Wild N***** From The Bronx," explains that he has been subjected to the term (used with a positive connotation) ever since his childhood despite his light-skinned phenotype and started to identify with it (Breakfast Club 2022).

2 Mellow Man Ace, interview by author, May 13, 2019, Alhambra, CA.

3 Tony A., interview by author, May 9, 2019, Los Angeles, CA.

4 The artists covered in this article are all male, which is why I mostly use the terms "Latino" and "Chicano." "Chicano/a" and "Latino/a" imply that the addressed group includes females. Occasionally, "Latino" is used as an umbrella

In the first part, I briefly sketch out the creative connections and influences between Latinos on the East and West Coasts. Drawing on Raquel Rivera's (2003) notion of "pan-*latinidad*" in hip hop, I will then examine the dialectical relation between East Coast and West Coast Latinos/as that suggests Latino unity is more fiction than fact. The main portion of the chapter concentrates on close readings of examples of how Latinos in hip hop were represented in the East Coast-based hip-hop publication *The Source* and explore if pan-*latinidad* applies.

The methodology brings together ethnographic interviews with Chicano and Latino artists conducted in 2019, 2022, and 2023, and discourse analysis of *The Source* magazine. While a complete physical archive of *The Source* does not appear to exist, the very well-organized Houston Hip Hop Archives Network at Rice University in Houston, Texas, holds a large collection of issues. There, I viewed 84 issues from 1990 to 2001, including numerous consecutive issues, which enabled me to examine discourse spanning over various issues and even years.[5] I also found several issues of *The Source* online, where fans had scanned and posted them for the community.[6] So, while I am drawing on a relatively large body of sources, I nonetheless highlight examples surrounding the discourse of pan-*latinidad*. Today, the magazine has a "Source Latino" section dedicated to Latino artists in hip hop and related genres such

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term for people of Latin descent that is not meant to exclude persons who do not identify with it for reasons of gender or ethnicity. I do not use "Latinx" or "Chicanx" because these terms are not widely accepted in the community and are particularly rejected by some Chicano artists. "Latino hip hop" and "Chicano hip hop" are established genre terms, although there are debates about their validity as well (Rivera 2003; McFarland 2008; 2013; Castillo-Garsow and Nichols 2016).

5 I visited the Houston Hip Hop Archives Network at the Fondren Library at Rice University in Houston, Texas, in 2019, 2022, and 2023. The issues of *The Source* can be requested under the call number ML3531 .S68 and viewed in the reading room. Many thanks to the staff for their assistance and support.

6 Two gems of *The Source*, issues 28 and 40, are available at Internet Archive (archive.com), partial scans of further issues are available at *THMK*, a blog published by Vincent Lopez (http://thimkingman.blogspot.com).

as R&B, reggaetón etc.—but in the early-to-mid-1990s, coverage was scarce and clearly written from an East Coast perspective, often one-sided and even condescending.

My ethnography shows that Latinos and Chicanos had "double the struggle" to build their careers in hip hop during the 1990s, as they were not only affected by the place-based east/west antagonism, but also by ethno-cultural classification in the music industry. Focusing on media coverage of Chicano and Latino artists, as well as personal and musical influences that occurred between the coasts, this chapter offers a fresh perspective on the most famous divide in hip hop.

The Latino Hip-Hop Diaspora and Pan-*Latinidad*

The beginnings of Latino and Chicano hip hop on the West Coast can be traced back to Cuban American Mellow Man Ace (Ulpiano Sergio Reyes) and Mexican American Kid Frost (Arturo Molina Jr., commonly referred to as 'Frost'). Mellow Man Ace's hit single "Mentirosa" (1990) and Frost's "La Raza" (1990) are largely considered to be the corner stones of both genres because of the Spanglish lyrics and the Latin-tinged music samples. Both artists' sound is indebted to Cuban American DJ-producer Tony G. (Tony Gonzalez), who grew up between New York and Miami and moved to Los Angeles as a teenager. "Mentirosa" was "the first Latino rap record to go gold," as Juan Flores points out (2000: 115), and both Mellow Man Ace and Frost are frequently referred to as the "Godfather of Latin Rap," although the latter is better known as the "Godfather of Chicano Rap." While neither one of them particularly minds these titles, both artists shared with me that Puerto Ricans from the East Coast were instrumental to them: Mr. Schick (Daniel Rivera Jr.) of the New York group Mean Machine was the main influence for Mellow Man Ace to start rapping in Spanglish; and Frost proudly recalls how important it was for him to have Prince Whipper Whip (James Whipper II) of the Fantastic Five MCs endorse his music, as he assured him that "La Raza" was going to be a hit, when he played it for him before

it was released.[7] Before he went solo in the late 1980s, Mellow Man Ace was part of the group Cypress Hill. He recalls that producer DJ Muggs (Lawrence Muggerud), an Italian American from Queens, made sure the group members listened to a lot of East Coast music. Because of their sound, the group was frequently assumed to be from New York, not Los Angeles.[8]

Frost and Tony G. initiated the first bicoastal Latin hip-hop supergroup Latin Alliance, which Mellow Man Ace was also a part of. The short-lived project included artists from various Latino backgrounds and released their sole self-titled album on Virgin Records in 1991. Group member Zulu Gremlin (Steve Roybal) views the importance of the group as not only bicoastal but also pan-Latino: "So, the Latin Alliance was the first assembled crew that had… Mexicans, Spanish, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Nicaraguans all in one crew."[9] Zulu Gremlin stresses, however, that the foundation of the Latino movement in hip hop came into existence in New York with Latino crews and artists like the "legendary Charlie Chase and Whipper Whip from Fantastic Five. But they weren't known as Latinos, they were known as members of legendary old school crews. … So, we were like the ones that followed [in] their footsteps, the next generation." Zulu Gremlin was very specific on chronology, pointing out that the creative flows started on the East Coast before they went west. His notion that not every Latino artist in hip hop *was known to be Latino* is very important when we consider the evolutions of the genres Latino and Chicano hip hop—and the fact that artists who did not advertise as Latinos in part had more success on a nationwide level. In his piece "How Ya Like Nosotros Now?" in the *Village Voice*, Ed Morales (1991: 91) announced that Latin Alliance was "a defining moment in the creation of a nationwide Latino/Americano hip hop aesthetic," claiming: "Where once the folks on opposite coasts were strangers, they've become one nation kicking Latin lingo on top of a scratch', sampling' substrate" (quoted in Flores 2000). Yet, even the members of Latin Alliance stated that their project

7 Frost, interview by author, Pasadena, CA, May 13, 2019.

8 Mellow Man Ace, interview by author, Monterey Park, CA, May 13, 2019.

9 Zulu Gremlin, phone interview by author, April 16, 2019.

was more of a vision, than a mirror of the actual disposition within the Latino communities themselves. As Mellow Man Ace put it: "There was no alliance in the communities, but we tried to lead by example with the project. And I think that was a beautiful thing that Kid Frost spearheaded, because eventually that started to happen."[10]

The Latin Alliance project promoted Latino unity along the lines of shared struggles of colonization, for example on their track "Latinos Unidos (United Latins)," but at the same time stressed the diverse origins of the contributing artists. Each verse is addressing a different aspect of the colonization of the Americas, sometimes related to the artists' ancestry and locality. Markski (Mark Santiago), for example, recalls the history of Puerto Rico and proudly self-identifies as a "Bronx-Rican." Frost, on the other hand, is addressing Chicanos in the state of California in his verse and implores rivaling Mexican American gangs (*Sureños* and *Norteños*) to make peace. So, within efforts to unite Latinos across the US, there is the aim to unite on a much smaller scale just within the Chicano community in California. Given these local conflicts, it is not surprising that unification on a national scale was an uphill battle.

Elaborating on the variety of Latino backgrounds of hip-hop artists was not always the case, as Raquel Rivera (2003) and Juan Flores (2000) point out. In their respective works on the agency of Puerto Ricans in East Coast hip hop, both criticize the idea of "pan-Latin unity" or "pan-*latinidad*" that supposedly unites Latinos/as in hip hop no matter where they are from and hereby blurs the heterogeneity of the Latino community. Flores (2000: 116) notes that "the 'Latinization' of hip-hop has meant its distancing from the specific national and ethnic traditions to which it had most directly pertained." Similarly, Rivera (2003: 103) suggests:

> In the haste to rescue Latinos from historical invisibility and to acknowledge their current role within hip hop, essentialized connections… are drawn, and crucial differences among groups within the Nation pan-ethnic conglomerate are slighted. The role played by New

10 Mellow Man Ace, interview by author, Monterey Park, CA, May 13, 2019.

> York Puerto Ricans in hip-hop culture has been different from that of other Caribbean Latin groups in New York; the differences are even greater when Puerto Ricans are compared to Chicanos and other Latinos on the West Coast. But these specificities have become obscured by the growing force of *la gran familia latina* (the great Latino family) discourse within hip hop. The historical and current connections between Afro-diasporic Latinos and African Americans in New York are at times muted or even drowned out by the naturalizing call of pan-*latinidad*.

Rivera (ibid.: 10) critiques the "contradictory effects of the *latinidad* pan-ethnic discourse" that lie at the core of the self-understanding of Latino artists in hip hop as well as journalistic and academic scholarship on the topic, which in turn leads to misconceptions and oversimplifications of the diverse Latino demographic involved. Besides the conflation of the heterogenous Latino community in hip hop, Rivera (ibid.: 105) considers the rallying behind the collective term "Latino" problematic as it does not do justice to the specificity of Puerto Rican agency in New York, and permits other Latino groups to free ride on their accomplishments:

> Although the Latinos who participated in hip hop's earliest history were specifically Caribbean Latinos and overwhelmingly New York Puerto Ricans, the Latino aggregate as a whole reaps the claim to hip hop historical presence and authenticity. A transcoastal, transnational Latino 'us' enables this collectivization of the experience of a sector within the Latino population.

This sense of belonging to the "Latino hip-hop diaspora" was confirmed in the interviews I conducted in the scene as well. Numerous artists proudly reiterated that Latinos were involved in the creation of hip hop on both coasts, such as Frost who said: "*we*'ve been a part of the movement of rap and hip hop as a whole since the origin. With Latinos in [the movie] *Breakin*', with the Rock Steady Crew and all that [my emphasis]."[11] By mentioning *Breakin*', Frost stresses the importance of

11 Frost, interview by author, May 13, 2019, Pasadena, CA.

Latinos in the creation of breakdance not only on the East Coast but especially on the West Coast, which was echoed in numerous interviews. The opinion that Latinos were instrumental in hip hop "since day one" was also expressed by Latino artists in Chang Weisberg's (1998) feature article "Hip Hop's Minority?" in *Industry Insider Magazine.* The magazine had brought together several Latino artists from both coasts for a Latino "summit" in New York that was covered by Weisberg for his article. A group shot of the artists involved—including Fat Joe, Big Pun, Kid Frost, Psycho Realm, Delinquent Habits, and Cypress Hill—graced the cover of the magazine. The image was shot by Estevan Oriol, a photographer and director of Mexican and Italian descent from Los Angeles, who was Cypress Hill's tour manager during the 1990s and is responsible for many iconic pictures of the group. This cover of *Industry Insider Magazine* is famous in the community and was mentioned to me frequently, also by artists who were not included.[12] ODM (Robert Gutierrez) from the Chicano rap group Lighter Shade of Brown from Riverside, California, for example, still regrets not having been there for this rare reunion.[13] Interestingly, most artists confuse *Industry Insider Magazine* with *The Source* or *XXL*—more prestigious hip-hop magazines that hardly ever put Latino artists on their front cover at that time.[14]

12 The cover and article have been posted on social media by several of the involved artists, for instance by Eric Bobo of Cypress Hill (2020) and Kemo the Blaxican of Delinquent Habits (2022).

13 ODM, interview by author, April 27, 2023, Corona, CA.

14 This confusion might be related to an even more iconic cover by *XXL*, entitled "The Greatest Day in Hip-Hop History," that brought together almost 200 hip-hop artists (mostly African American, but Fat Joe and DJ Muggs were also there) in September 1998 in front of a brownstone in Harlem, New York. And while Oriol's cover appears to be very much informed by this photograph—although the artists are lined up at the harbor, not in front of a brownstone—it actually came out a few months later. Therefore, it is more likely that Oriol's source of inspiration was the same as *XXL*'s, who drew their idea for the cover from Art Kane's "A Great Day in Harlem" photograph from 1958 that captured Jazz-icons such as Count Basie and Thelonious Monk in the very same spot in Harlem (Gonzalez 2014).

Rivera (2003: 105) criticizes Weisberg for "construct[ing] a mythical, pan-ethnic bond between Latino artists" in his article, but points out that the "family"-centered narrative was also expressed by some of the artists. Sick Jacken of the LA group Psycho Realm is cited as saying "Since we're all Latinos it's like were [sic] all family" (Weisberg 1998: 50–51). New York-based artists also claim that being Latino was more important than East Coast/West Coast affiliations, as for example Big Pun: "It's Latino first. That's more important than East/West. That's familia. That's La Raza" (ibid.). Fat Joe agrees: "Since we're Latino, I feel that we're all spiritual in a way. It doesn't matter if you're Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Columbian [sic], or whatever. … It doesn't matter if you're from the West Coast or the East Coast. We're Latino. … We cut across all that shit" (ibid.).[15] Rivera (2003: 105) concludes that "the Latino unity that these artists are advocating is as much a commercial necessity and market strategy as a spiritual, familial or historical imperative" due to Latinos' marginalization in a business dominated by African Americans. Almost twenty-five years after this "Latino summit," these opinions still remain strong among the West Coast Latino artists I interviewed. Kid Frost also referred to Latinos as "hip hop's minority" in a predominantly Black industry.[16] ODM confirmed that Latinos in hip hop did not participate in the East Coast/West Coast beef: "You didn't hear Big Pun dissing West Coast. You didn't hear Fat Joe dissing West Coast. It was all love. In fact, when we would run into Fat Joe on tour, it was all love. … 'Cause there weren't many of us doing it, mainstream. So, for the most part, the artists stuck together."[17]

But paradoxically, transcoastal collaborations between Latino artists were rare in the 1990s. Apart from Latin Alliance, there were not many collaborative efforts. Delinquent Habits from LA are an exception as they featured the late New York Latina rapper Hurricane G. (Gloria

15 These quotes can also be retrieved in rare footage of the meeting in New York that was posted on Instagram by Kemo the Blaxican of Delinquent Habits (2023).

16 Frost, interview by author, May 13, 2019, Pasadena, CA.

17 ODM, interview by author, April 27, 2023, Corona, CA.

Rodríguez) on the track "Underground Connection" on their debut album *Delinquent Habits* in 1996. According to Rivera (2003: 104), "[t]he virtual lack of collaboration—particularly cross-coastal—among these artists… exposes this celebrated Latino unity as either still forthcoming or wishful thinking." ODM confirmed in our interview, that his group Lighter Shade of Brown "never really collab'ed with anybody on the East Coast, just producers."[18] What came up repeatedly in my interviews was the soundtrack of *I Like It Like That*, Darnell Martin's 1994 motion picture, which is set in The Bronx but features East- and West Coast Latino artists on its soundtrack. As Henry Puente (2012) points out, however, the promotional strategy of *I Like It Like That* focused on the African American director, not the Latino/a cast or soundtrack and despite massive publicity on the West Coast, the movie was not a success at the box office. According to Puente (ibid.: 65), this was largely due to the excessive marketing around the African American director Darnell Martin in Black media and the lack of promotion of the Latino/a cast, while the Latina PR director on the West Coast argued that "Mexican Americans did not relate to this Puerto Rican story" (ibid.). So, one of the rare occasions in the 1990s to find Latino/a artists from both coasts on the same record was due to marketing strategies of studio executives—not as a result of personal artist connections or an expression of pan-*latinidad*. In addition, the success of the movie was diminished by marketing strategies that built on false commonalities between Latinos in the US.

Hip-hop publication *The Source* criticized the "Cinderella story" Columbia Studios used to market Martin as the first African American woman to direct a feature length film in their only article on the subject—which ironically also focused on her and failed to mention the Latino/a cast or the Latino hip-hop soundtrack. The piece explains that even though the protagonist Lisette (played by actress Lauren Vélez) is "Black and Puerto Rican," the director herself was not, but that "she based the characters on Latin relatives, neighbors and friends" (*Source* 1994a: 32). Oddly enough, *The Source* as a magazine for "music, culture

18 ODM, phone interview by author, May 9, 2019.

and politics" does not mention the soundtrack at all—it only appeared in an advertisement one month later (*Source* 1994b: n.pag.). This omission of Latino/a artists fits into the overall lack of Latino representation in *The Source*, as we will see now.

Chicano/Latino Representation in *The Source* Magazine

Often referred to as "The Bible of Hip Hop," *The Source* magazine was founded in 1988 as a concert newsletter by two Jewish Harvard University students David Mays und Jonathan "Jon" Shector in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and moved its headquarters to New York City in 1990. The magazine represented a clear East Coast stance and focused on African American issues, considering hip hop as a primarily Black art form. This helps to explain why Latinos/as and Chicanos/as in hip hop from both coasts were not portrayed nearly as much as African American rappers and producers. New York Latinos such as Fat Joe and Big Pun, as well as Cypress Hill from LA received some coverage. In my study of Latino representation in *The Source* and the analysis of pan-*latinidad* I include hip-hop artists, journalists and fans/readers, whose opinions were voiced in the form of letters to the editor.

For the analysis of pan-*latinidad* in this medium, staff writer Ronin Ro, a Puerto Rican from the South Bronx, is an important figure. The magazine itself introduced him as an "eccentric character [that] has churned out some of the most controversial and exciting pieces in The Source" who "describes himself as a 'fast livin', shit talkin', freelancin', rhymin' hip-hop maniac from the South Bronx'" (*Source* 1993a: 14). Ro made a name for himself in *The Source* but also wrote for other hip-hop publications and authored several books. His debut, *Gangsta: Merchandising the Rhymes of Violence* (1996), a collection of essays about gangster rap on the West Coast, included journalistic work published in *The Source*, *Rap Pages*, and *Spin*. In contrast to Rivera's (2003) examples for pan-*latinidad* in hip-hop journalism, Ro did not seem to feel this kinship and thus did not portray Latino artists on the West Coast in a particu-

larly good light. In *The Source*'s June issue of 1992, Ro (1992a: 56) authored a review of Frost's second studio album *East Side Story* (1992), stating:

> Frost understands his people on the West Coast and speaks to them about things they can understand: police harassment, drive-by's [sic], dying young, jail and trigger happy gangbangers. But musically the album suffers from too many melodies, sung choruses, familiar samples and old sounds. … Maybe it's a West Coast thang and I'll never understand but methinks [sic] Frost could use some new breakbeats and a more exciting lyrical delivery 'cause as it stands now, not many outside of East LA will catch the vibe of this record.

The album received two and a half microphones out of five. Musical reviews are subjective and while Ro is acknowledging that "maybe it's a West Coast thang" [that he]'ll never understand," he also assumes that Frost's music could only be successful in East LA, an unincorporated part of LA County with a Mexican American demographic of 95 percent in 1990 (*Los Angeles Times* 1991). While it is a common misbelief that East LA is the only part of Greater LA to produce Mexican American art and music, it demonstrates Ro's East Coast stance and just how little he understands of the rising Chicano rap scene on the West Coast that included Chicano and Latino artists from all over LA County, San Diego, and the Bay Area. Ro also clearly differentiates between himself and Frost ("*his people* on the West Coast," my emphasis) and does not seem to register any "pan-Latin" commonality between them.

Shortly after this review, Ro was assigned a think piece on Frost and flew out to LA. The feature article entitled "Riding Shotgun" was published in the September issue of 1992 and is a Gonzoesque account of an interview trip to Los Angeles in the aftermath of the LA riots. The piece chronicles a day with Frost and some of his fellow artists, with stops at Frost's home in Van Nuys and a lowrider car show and concert in Pomona, California, including gang violence at the scene. In his book *Gangsta*, Ro (1996: 14) voiced his concerns about what Frost might have to say about his critical review in more detail than in *The Source*, and even included a backstory of why he did not want to cover the story in the

first place, wondering "why, one month after dissing Frost's album in the *The Source* review section, I accepted this assignment." He goes on to describe a conversation with the then editor-in-chief Jon Shecter, urging him to cover Frost, even though Ro wanted to cover Public Enemy: "'Just do your Kid Frost story for "La Raza,"' he [Jon Shector] laughed. 'But no one wants to read about this guy!' I countered. 'Nobody likes his shit!' 'Frost has a large regional audience in parts of Texas,' I was told. What would I write about? I thought; Frost's whole 'Mexican Chuck D' schtick?" (ibid.) The editor seemed to assume that Ro as a New York Puerto Rican was a perfect fit to cover a Mexican American artist on the West Coast and that Ro shared the interest for "la raza." Clearly, he was mistaken. The mention of the "regional audience in parts of Texas" points to the fact that Chicano hip hop developed as a phenomenon in the Southwest throughout the 1990s (McFarland 2006; Mausfeld 2021) and that its audiences were not based in New York—which for Ro obviously made it less interesting for a feature article. This again demonstrates the New York-centeredness of Ro's perspective and that pan-*latinidad* was not a given among hip-hop artists and journalists. Ro mentions that the Samoan American group Boo-Ya Tribe also complained about record reviews published in *The Source*, establishing the impression that West Coast artists and *The Source* did not seem to have the best relationship at the time. Mellow Man Ace, however, who is covered only in passing in the "Riding Shotgun" article but has his own chapter in the book *Gangsta*, remembers Ro as a "really good dude [who] loved hip hop."[19] Interestingly, he has no recollection of Ro's ethnicity, only that he was from the East Coast.

Overall, violence and tensions are the main sentiments in the four-page article *Riding Shotgun*—a play on words of Ro's front-row seat to the events and actual use of arms—within the city of LA as well within the Latino hip-hop community. Announced on the cover of the magazine with the teaser "Kid Frost and Latino Gang Culture," the article focuses on Kid Frost's (alleged) link to gang culture, not his music. The pull quote on the third page of the article reads: "At the car show, I watch someone

19 Mellow Man Ace, interview by author, Hacienda Heights, CA, March 18, 2022.

get stabbed up five feet away from me. I watch him bleed as the victors run by me smiling" (Ro 1992b: 34). In the text, the stabbing is described more vividly, yet Ro trivializes it, noting: "I almost have to laugh at this senseless violence" (ibid.). Despite the raw violence that he experienced on his trip to LA, Ro (ibid.: 32) was not shy to broadcast what fellow Latino artists thought of Frost, quoting one group as saying: "It seems that Kid Frost is at war with other rappers. … Particularly Latinos."

While I can corroborate the tensions within the Chicano hip-hop community, as I was confronted with them throughout my fieldwork, I am very careful with this information and would never print any names. I therefore find it highly troubling for Ro to publish these rumors in a nationwide magazine as he clearly did not reflect upon what might happen to the artists who now went on record speaking out against Frost. It also opposes the notion of pan-*latinidad*, while at the same time contributing to negative stereotypes about Latinos and Chicanos. While his article is certainly an interesting account of LA shortly after the riots and the heavy gang problem that LA was dealing with at the time, Ro is putting the tension in the city and in the music industry on the same stance as the unbridgeable gap between hip-hop culture in New York and LA.

In comparison to the extended version in *Gangsta*, Ro's piece in *The Source* was harmless, but it was still not well received by Latino/a readers. Several issues after the article, a letter by Luis from New Jersey was published in the "letters to the editor" section (*Source* 1993b: 11), entitled "Latino Love," criticizing Ro for not being "conscious" of Latino issues in the magazine:

> When are you going to hire a Brown conscious Latino(a) writer to do the knowledge from our perspective? I know you don't think Ronin Ro is it, because he's not. The brother is a good writer, don't get me wrong, but you need a Latino who is conscious about the state of his people, a Brown nationalist. … Queremos Justicia! [We want justice]

Inspired by Luis' letter, Pequena (also from New Jersey), sent in a letter that was printed three issues later under the title "Latino Lessons"

(*Source* 1993c: 16). She views the lack of awareness for Latino issues in *The Source* as a mirror of overall society and particularly references the "Riding Shotgun" article:

> I also feel that Latinos are stereotyped, trivialized and in general ignored by not only our society but by your magazine as well. Barring the shameful piece on Kid Frost last year, which basically concluded that all Chicanos are *vatos locos* [gang members] out to kill each other, I have never seen a feature or interview with a Latino artist. How many people out there know that the lowriders that Dr. Dre and Ice Cube drive around in their videos were invented by the Chicano members of La Raza?

It is interesting that these letters were written by East Coast Latinos/as, but in the case of Pequena, advocated for the involvement of Chicanos on the West Coast. She is addressing an issue that came up repeatedly in my ethnographic interviews as well: that lowrider culture was in fact created by Chicanos but is often wrongfully attributed to African Americans because of its popularization in Black gangster rap. In the August issue of 1997, Roberto "Cuba" Jimenez II, from Hawaiian Gardens, California, complained that: "THE SOURCE doesn't cover any Latino artists. I also wanted to add that LA isn't only filled with Crips and Bloods. The majority of LA is Latin or cholos—'Ese's' [Mexican American gang members]. All I'm saying is recognize the majority from the minority" (*Source* 1997: 22). Similar to Pequena, Roberto felt the need to educate other readers in his letter, since *The Source* did not. His clarification of the presence of Chicano gang culture shows that the misunderstanding of LA culture by *The Source* is two-tiered: not only does the East Coast not understand the West Coast, but it also fails to comprehend the ethnic diversity of hip hop and gang culture in LA—which is highly intertwined. In *Gangsta*, Ro dedicates a section to Chicano gang culture and its impact on gangster rap, yet only African American artists can be seen on the cover of the book. *The Source* readership seemed to band together in lamenting the lack of coverage of Latino issues, and in this sense are somewhat expressing pan-*latinidad*.

To be fair, one issue prior to Pequena's letter, in July 1993, *The Source* had put Cypress Hill on the cover (maybe her letter had not yet arrived at the magazine). Cypress Hill had been regularly mentioned in *The Source* even before their cover and feature story in this issue. It is important to remember, however, that Cypress Hill were not primarily promoting themselves as Latinos and rather performed at cross-genre festivals like Lollapalooza and Woodstock than lowrider car shows. The title of the story, "The Cypress Hill Experience," alludes to "The Jimi Hendrix Experience" and puts the group closer to psychedelic music from the 1970s than to hip hop (Gonzales 1993: 54). Author Michael A. Gonzales, focuses on the group's DJ-producer Muggs' New York roots, but does not mention the other group members B-Real's and Sen Dog's Latino ethnicity at all: B-Real (Louis Freese) is of Mexican and Cuban descent and Sen Dog (Senen Reyes) of Afro-Cuban descent.[20] This could be linked to the group's desire to be "mysterious" and not be judged based on their ethnicity alone, something which they have mentioned on several occasions.[21]

The late 1990s saw an increased Latinization of the hip-hop industry (Rivera 2003; Pacini Hernandez 2010). Rivera (2003: 116) notes that "[b]y 1998, not only had they been accepted and legitimized within hip hop, but Latino images and artists had become somewhat of a fad." This development was also reflected in hip-hop media and there is a noticeable change in the way Latinos are being portrayed in *The Source*, both in frequency and tone. In August 1997, an interview with Frost by

20 The literature is full of inaccurate ethnicities for the members of Cypress Hill, so I confirmed with B-Real and Sen Dog's brother, Mellow Man Ace, to verify this information. I was not able to meet Eric Bobo, son of Latin jazz legend Willie Bobo, who joined the group in 1994 and, according to several sources, is of Puerto Rican descent (Smithsonian n.d.).

21 See for example B-Real on American Latino TV (Pacheco 2012) and DJ Muggs on the footage of *Industry Insider Magazine's* Latino summit (Kemo the Blaxican 2023). In my personal interview with B-Real, however, he ascribed their strategy to stay mysterious to their heavy-metal influences, not their unwillingness to reveal their ethnicity (B-Real, interview by author, April 16, 2022, Los Angeles, CA).

Soren Baker showed Frost (who officially dropped the "Kid" in 1995), as a matured rapper and responsible family man and father, whose "place as one of hip-hop's West Coast legends is secure." Baker, a White journalist from Maryland who has written for several hip-hop publications and newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, strikes a much more respectful tone than Ronin Ro did in the early 1990s. It is possible that Baker was more cautious, precisely because he is White and comes from neither LA nor New York, and therefore is a more neutral player than Ro.[22] In the same issue, two Chicano hip-hop albums are credited with three microphones in the Record Report section: Psycho Realm's debut *Psycho Realm* (1997), reviewed by Baker, and Frost's fourth studio album *When HelLA Freezes Over* (1997), addressed by Latino staff writer Rigoberto Morales.[23] Morales (1997: 156) starts his critique of Frost's album with a nod to the regional differences in Latin rap: "Depending on where you live, when you think of Latin rap acts that have made a name for themselves, Frost might not be the first name that pops out your mouth." Yet he acknowledges that Frost "has been on the forefront of West Coast and Latino hip-hop for a decade-plus" and that with this album he "attempts to expand his audience with a change in lyrics, beats and style," no longer exclusively catering to "the low rider section of hip-hop" (ibid.: 158). Morales closes his critique far more diplomatically compared to Ro's five years earlier: "Although Frost's musical style is surely not everyone's cup of tea, one cannot dismiss his significance in the rap world" (ibid.).

In 1998 and 1999, *The Source* published several issues with Latino topics. In March 1998, Carlito Rodriguez' article "Vamos a rapiar" (Let's rap) examined the Latino involvement in hip hop, even challenging the Afrocentricity of the culture, opening with the line: "They call hip-hop Black

22 In his epic *History of Gangster Rap* (2018) that focuses on gangster rap on the West Coast, however, Baker mentions hardly any Latino artists.

23 Rigoberto, better known as "Rigo" or "Riggs," Morales started his career as a music journalist for *The Source, XXL,* and *Vibe* among others before he became involved in music production and Artist & Repertoire. He is currently Executive Vice President of A&R at Def Jam Records (Morales 2023).

music. But is it?" (Rodriguez 1998: 152). Rodriguez is of Cuban and Dominican descent and, like Ro, grew up in the South Bronx. He joined the staff of *The Source* in 1996, had his own column "Carlito's Ways," in which he "wrote about upcoming music but also dropped in some cultural commentary" (King 2021), and even became editor in chief, before he left the magazine in 2002. Given the positive tone towards Latinos in this article, I assume he played a vital role in pushing Latino issues at *The Source*, besides pressures from readers and the overall Latinization of the music industry in the late 1990s. Big Pun received four microphones for his debut album *Capital Punishment* (1998) in the June issue of 1998, which was also the first album by a Latino rap artist to go Platinum.[24] In an article entitled "Spanish Fly" on Latino celebrities in sports, movies, and hip hop, author Kevin Baxter pondered: "If society hasn't changed, why has Latin culture suddenly become so hot? … why are bicultural and bilingual acts such as Noreaga, Fat Joe, Big Punisher and Cypress Hill, los padrinos [the godfathers] of crossover hip-hop suddenly on top of rap's most-wanted list?" (1999: 138) The same issue entailed a feature article on Big Pun by Riggs (formerly Rigoberto) Morales (1999: 154–58).

The Source's readership showed appreciation for this turnaround and specifically rallied behind Big Pun. In the August issue of 1998, Jesus Rivera from Milwaukee wrote: "Much love goes out to THE SOURCE for finally giving props to Latino artists. It was a dream come true to see Big Pun receive four mics, and appear in the Best Buy section. Maybe one day we'll get a little piece of the front page" (Source 1998: n.pag.). The same issue entailed an article on Big Pun's album debut *Capital Punishment*. In April of 1999, Chris from Orlando, Florida, complimented the increased coverage on Big Pun, arguing that "Pun could be the next Biggie if people would stop limiting his abilities to the Latino community" (Source 1999a: 33). And Shorty, again from Milwaukee, expressed his happiness with Baxter's "Spanish Fly" article, especially because it entailed so much

24 This issue of *The Source* is available on *THMK*, a blog published by Vincent Lopez (http://thimkingman.blogspot.com/2010/01/source-june-1998-issue-featuring-big.html).

Latino history. The letter concludes: "It's really refreshing to see Latinos make it in the industry. Viva la raza!" (*Source* 1999b: 33).

Regardless of the increased frequency of Latino issues in *The Source*, it is important to point out that New York Latino artists such as Fat Joe and Big Pun were featured more frequently than West Coast Latinos. This may not only be grounded in locale, but also in success as East Coast Latino/a artists were (and still are) far more successful than Latino/a and Chicano/a hip-hop artists from the West Coast. After the untimely passing of Big Pun in early 2000, the May issue of *The Source* did finally put him on the cover, a decision that was made shortly before his death, as Carlito Rodriguez explains in the editorial (2000: 32). The issue also featured a lengthy "Rest in peace" photo article focusing on the murals that were painted in his honor all over New York City. Rivera (2003: 174) writes about the big crowds that attended Big Pun's funeral and that he was posthumously covered in a wide range of media, from the *New York Post* to *New York Magazine* and *El Diario/La Prensa* (which had previously disregarded him completely). So, without diminishing Big Pun's talent or his presence in hip hop, this broad coverage also needs to be considered in the context of his passing.

Despite this regional focus on New York Puerto Ricans, most readers appreciated the acknowledgment and the newfound "Latino presence" as a success for Latinos in general. In some instances, however, internal group animosities were still quite apparent. A letter from Sergio, a "Cuban-American mc" from Miami, for example, thanks *The Source* for the recognition but also points out that "Cubans are overlooked by Dominicans and Puerto Ricans when it comes to hip-hop, but we appreciate it just as much" (*Source* 1998). In Roberto "Cuba" Jimenez's above-mentioned letter, "Vanishing Latino Acts," he enquires about Mellow Man Ace, Sen Dog, and Skatemaster Tate—all Angeleno rap artists of Cuban descent—and why they were not being covered in *The Source*. Judging by his precise interest in Cuban artists and his nickname, "Cuba," it is conceivable that this reader is himself of Cuban descent; regardless, he does not appear to dwell on it. Rather, his letter primarily aims to set the record straight on the Latino presence in LA, implying a

critique of *The Source*'s East Coast stance that overlooks Latinos on the West Coast hip-hop spectrum (*Source* 1997).

Pan-*Latinidad*—Fact or Fiction?

Latino hip-hop artists were not a part of the East Coast/West Coast beef, but they were affected by it, nonetheless. ODM emphasized that it was twice as hard for Latino artists to overcome the differences between the coasts: "Even to this day, it's tough for the East Coast to understand and respect West Coast hip hop, because of the whole West Coast/ East Coast thing. And then being Latino—again, it was even double the struggle."[25] I argue that Latinos/as in hip hop can neither be considered a homogenous group nor be categorized in this binary opposition of east and west. Instead, Latino/a and Chicano/a hip-hop artists form a complex network of alliances, musical influences, and media representation that do not necessarily run along the lines of an assumed sense of belonging to an ethnic group. Pan-*latinidad* is a complex and contradictory concept: LA Latino artists strongly identified with Latinos in the east and their contribution to hip hop, and vice versa, yet bicoastal collaborations rarely occurred in the 1990s.

In addition, on the West Coast especially, the considerable tensions within the Chicano/Latino hip-hop scene undermine the notion of pan-*latinidad* on a smaller scale. The Latino readership of *The Source*, however, mostly rallied behind "Latino issues," felt the need to educate on the heterogeneity of the Latino community, and complained about the nature of the coverage of Latinos altogether, regardless of their origin in the US. The examples from *The Source* suggest that Latinos in hip hop were not considered crucial figures until the late 1990s, when rap "went Latin" (Flores 2000: 132). Putting Latino writers on assignments did not necessarily change that. To clarify: it is not my intention to disparage Ronin Ro—his book *Gangsta* is a great read and his position on gangster rap

25 ODM, phone interview by author, May 9, 2019.

very compelling. The point I want to make here is simply that pan-*latinidad* in hip hop during the 1990s was a myth—in music as well as in music journalism. The increased coverage of Latino issues in *The Source* toward the end of the millennium also needs to be considered in the context of the overall Latinization of the music industry. And while Fat Joe's involvement in the BET Awards 2022 proves that this trend is still ongoing twenty-five years later, the social media turmoil following his open acknowledgement of Latino/a hip-hop pioneers demonstrates that these issues are not a thing of the past and Latino/a artists are still fighting for acknowledgment of their rightful place in hip-hop history.

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