



INNER CITY BLUES

Blues Legacies and the Roots of 1968

THE COMMITTEE AGAINST FORT APACHE

The Bronx is often associated with images of destruction and urban decline. Films like *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (Daniel Petri, 1981), *Wolfen* (Michael Wadleigh, 1981), *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Brian De Palma, 1990) and others disseminated around the world images of ruins. In these films the message was clear: “To be stuck here was to be lost” (Rose 1994: 33). *Fort Apache, the Bronx*, a movie about crime in the South Bronx of the 1970s, from the perspective of the police, was attacked by a group of black and Puerto Rican activists who formed the Committee Against Fort Apache. The protest against this movie was inspired by previous traditions of oppositional politics such as the blues of the early 20th-century, the black women blues movement of the 1920s and 1930s, and all their derivatives like street funk and the inner-city blues of Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye.

One of the central elements of the Committee Against Fort Apache was to propose inter-ethnic alliances between black and Puerto Rican working-class communities in a moment of crisis in the inner-city. These alliances show the mutual influence of global social movements, music, and neighborhood-based organizations. The protest against the movie allows us to think about new racial formations that oppose US imperialism, racism, and mainstream sociological formulations which have contributed to the racialization of the black and Puerto Rican communi-

Alessandro Buffa
University of Naples
“L’Orientale”
Italy



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7532-4232>

ties. In other words, the protest against Fort Apache proposed a counter-sociology in which politics and theory were stitched into the shared texture of the same struggle. This counter-sociology, to use George Lipsitz's words, is a form of "grass-roots theorizing" that gives a "theorized account of concrete historical reality" (Hall qtd. in Lipsitz 2001: 100).

EVELINA LÓPEZ ANTONETTY

Richie Perez, one of the organizers of the Committee Against Fort Apache, in an interview said that Evelina López Antonetty—the founder of the United Bronx Parents Association in 1965—was a big inspiration to him (Morales 2009: 144). He considered her to be the mother of all the movements in the South Bronx from the Young Lords to the Committee Against Fort Apache. Initially the United Bronx Parents Association focused on problems with the school system such as the "rigidity of school administration, qualitative inadequacies in the school curricula, and the needs of children in school" (The Organization, United Bronx Parents Papers). By the late 1960s, the organization had extended its original focus to include health services, housing issues, welfare, juvenile justice and so on. The members of the organization offered a wide range of services to the community of the South Bronx such as "child care, food programs, classes, and inmate and ex-inmate services. They also organized a narcotic guidance group with meetings designed to help people internalize positive values" (Bilingual Narcotic Guidance. United Bronx Parents Papers).

The United Bronx Parents Association and the Committee Against Fort Apache disturbed the homogeneous and racist view proposed by the media and mainstream social science. They did speak "from way, way below" (Kelley 1994: 1) because they did not make any distinction between a "respectable" working-class and a "class below the working class." López Antoinette was among the first to hear the needs of youth culture in the South Bronx. In a television program about youth gangs in the early 1970s, she takes the side of the gangs, seeing them in terms of community engagement ("Youth Gangs in the South Bronx," 1972). As she put it, referring to the futility of government interventions in the South Bronx, "I am not government, I am community!"

1968
*Transnational
Legacies*

RIAS VOL. 12, FALL-WINTER Nº 2/2019

Music and other forms of artistic expression were an important aspect of the activities designed by Evelina López Antonetty and her sister Lillian López. For instance, The South Bronx Library Project created by Lillian López in 1967 encouraged children to attend workshops with writers such as "Piri Thomas author of *Down to these Mean Streets*, Latin Jazz and *Plena* concerts, films, *Bomba's* interpretations, and Black Theater Workshop with readings from speeches by Martin Luther King, poetry by Langston Hughes, and narrations of Puerto Rican folktales by Pura Belpré" (South Bronx Project. Lillian López Papers). Similarly, as part of the protest to stop the film, in 1980 the Black and Puerto Rican activists of the Committee Against Fort Apache organized a series of concerts featuring salsa, hip hop and readings of Nuyorican poetry (Stop the Movie Fort Apache Arts Festival. Lourdes Torres Papers). Even community projects undertaken in high schools like DeWitt Clinton in the Bronx put local culture at the center of their struggle. Students produced a comic book called *Salsa* which placed music squarely within the street corner tradition of the Bronx and in Afrodiasporic currents beyond the borough (1975).

"HARLEM IS THE CAPITAL OF EVERY GHETTO TOWN"

Harlem is another nodal juncture for the transmission of Afrodiasporic cultures of opposition and liberation movements. In the soundtrack of the blaxploitation movie *Across 110th Street* (Barry Shear, 1972), soul musician Bobby Womack sings: "Harlem is the capital of every ghetto town." On the one hand this line might suggest that Harlem is the place where you can find authentic black urban culture with hard-core ghetto dwellers and paradigmatic figures such as the pimp, the junkie, and the criminal. This is also an exotic view of the ghetto. It has old roots in colonialism, in anthropology, in travel writing, in cinema and ethnographic studies about the urban poor of the 1960s. Yet if we look at this line from below, Harlem is the capital of all slums and ghettos in the world including the colonized cities in the Global South. This is a Harlem that has rarely appeared in tourist guides and history text-books (Kelley 2003). Harlem is thereby connected with black liberation movements, with anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles. After all, it is at the Theresa Hotel that Fidel Castro

chose to stay in 1960 when he attended the United Nations, as a sign of solidarity with black struggles in the United States. It is from this Harlem that in 1961 black crowds reached the UN building to protest against Patrice Lumumba's murder in the Belgian Congo (Gaines 2006: 16). From the very beginning, black radicals have challenged segregation at home while making connection with colonial oppression abroad (Von Eschen 1997). Through Pan-Africanism, Ethiopianism, Garveyism, Civil Rights and the Black Power movements, African Americans elaborated a sense of solidarity with colonized people in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Prashad 2001). In the 1920s and 1930s, with the advent of Fascism and Nazism, black intellectuals and scholars insisted on the connection between imperialism and fascism. They suggested that fascism was the direct consequence of imperialism (Kelley 2002: 175). In 1945 Du Bois prophetically said that the colonies were "the slums of the world" (qtd. in Singh 2004: 220). The black ghettos of Harlem, Watts and Detroit strikingly recalled the slums of the colonies of the South of the world. In a famous passage of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), Frantz Fanon contrasts the native towns and European towns in colonial cities. He writes:

The "native" sector is not complementary to the European sector. The two confronted each other, but not in the service of a higher unity. Governed by a purely Aristotelian logic, they follow the dictates of mutual exclusion: there is no conciliation possible, one of them is superfluous. The colonist's sector is a sector built to last, all stone and steel. It's a sector of lights and paved roads, where the trash cans constantly overflow with strange and wonderful garbage, undreamed-of leftovers. The colonist's feet can never be glimpsed, except perhaps in the sea, but then you can never get close enough. They are protected by solid shoes in a sector where the streets are clean and smooth, without a pothole, without a stone. The colonist's sector is a sated, sluggish sector, its belly is permanently full of good things. The colonist's sector is a white folks' sector, a sector of foreigners.

The colonized's sector, or at least the "native" quarters, shanty town, the Medina, the reservation, is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people. [...] The colonized's sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. The colonized's sector is a sector that crouches and cowers, a sector on its knees, a sector that is prostrate. It's a sector of niggers, a sector of towelheads (4-5).

Black Power movements like the Black Panthers formed in Oakland in 1966 took the side of the colonized world, which

in the United States meant the black ghetto. As Fanon's words underline, the materialist aspect of immediate racism and its global dimensions were interconnected. The Black Panthers are generally associated with guns (a very US style) and militant action, but this view overlooks the grassroots dimension of this black liberation movement (Nelson 2011). First of all, they abolished from their vocabulary terms like 'pathological' and 'dysfunctional.' They sought inter-ethnic alliances with Puerto Rican, Chicano, and Native American social movements like the Young Lords, Brown Berets and the American Indian Movements (AIM). They fought against health, job, and educational discrimination. They organized free breakfast programs. They strongly opposed gender inequalities and the huge quantities of heroin that arrived in black ghettos. They reached people that social scientists considered dangerous, pathological and dysfunctional, like inmates, street corners men, and sex workers. Here again Fanon's influences were pivotal in his description of "the lumpen-proletariat ... the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed and the petty criminals." In Fanon's view these people could be "rehabilitated in their own eyes and in the eyes of humanity" (qtd. in Singh 193). From the Black Panthers and other black liberation movements perspective, Harlem is a signifier for all ghetto towns, including those far away from New York.

ECHO-CHAMBER EFFECT:

SHA-ROCK, SANDRA MARÍA ESTEVES, CELIA CRUZ

Listening to Sha-Rock's echo chamber effect, Sandra María Esteves's jazz/mambo poetry, Bobby Womack's urban rhythms, and Linton Kwesi Johnson's bass culture, we can start thinking about history through acoustic resonances. The beat box of the MC, jazz, soul music, bass culture, and the reverberation of dub music sustain languages of solidarity around the world, making connections among different but connected aggrieved people (Redmond 2014).

Sha-Rock, the first female MC from the Bronx in the history of hip hop, is also the inventor of the echo chamber effect in rapping. As educators, we should use new ways of teaching history. Thinking with sound is one of these methods. Sound helps us to make connections. If we follow Sha-Rock through the echo-

chamber effect we can go back in time and the interventions of black musicians not only in aesthetics, but in daily life. Take for example Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues" (1927), Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's "Runaway Blues" (1928), Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" (1939), or Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" (1964). Here the past empowered the present and indeed became the echo chamber that allows us to look forward, imagining a better future (Davis 1999).

The Nuyorican poet Sandra María Esteves is part of this radical tradition. In the 1970s she was also part of the Bronx Writers Corps. Referring to this activity she said: "We want to keep art in the community. Everyone wants fame and fortune, but that's not our priority. Our priority is to empower our community" (Hernandez 1997: 60). In her poems Esteves combines slam poetry, free jazz, rap, doo-wop, and mambo. In "For South Bronx" (1981) we can hear the rhythms of the city following young graffiti writers invading the train yards at night. The poem titled "Black Notes and 'You Do Something to Me'" (1990) could be considered an audio/visual history and collage of afro-diasporic music where the black Atlantic meets *Nuestra América* on the streets of New York. A kind of "changing same" (Jones/Baraka 1968) flying from Africa to the Bronx through black rhythms, Spanish songs, Sonny Rollins' and Rahsaan Roland Kirk's horns, Miles Davis's trumpet, Thelonious Monk's notes and Dizzie Gillespie's Afro-Cuban jazz moods:

1968
Transnational
Legacies

RIAS VOL. 12, FALL-WINTER Nº 2/2019

Jazz-jazzy jass juice,
Just so smooth,
So be-hop samba blue to sweet bump black.
So slip slide back to mama black—
To mamaland base black.
Don't Matter could be Bronx born basic street black.
Or white ivory piano coast negro dunes bembé black.
Mezclando manos in polyrhythm sync to fingers.
... Flyin across Miles 'n Sonny, across John, Rahsaan 'n Monk's 81,
Across Dizzy blue conga (75).

In "Ode to Celia" (2004) Esteves rewrites the history of African diaspora from a Puerto Rican perspective. The story begins in 1965 at the Tropicoro club in the South Bronx where new hybrid forms of music like the boogaloo (a mix of soul, r&b and mambo) emerged.

Then, listening to Celia Cruz, Esteves returns to Africa and then back to the Americas. In this journey, there is the “utopic/dystopic tension” of diasporas (Clifford 1997: 263): the terror of slavery, the so-called free labor in the tobacco fields, the racism in the new plantation system of the South Bronx, but also the power of music to bring a message of opposition and connections between Africa, Caribbean and a creolized Mediterranean where “Arabic love songs” meet “Spanish gypsy guitars:”

Celia sings and I return to 1965
 dancing sweaty mambo
 at the Tropicoro on Longwood Avenue
 or the Bronx Casino on Prospect
 or the Colgate Gardens where La Lupe exposed her soul
 to the hustle, ah-peep-peep and boogaloo pachanga of Johnny Pacheco

I may have been an only child from the Bronx but Celia takes me back lifetimes
 before I mastered English in New York City schools,
 or Spanish in tobacco fields
 even before that middle passage where so many cousins, uncles, and aunts
 perished
 all the way back to motherland Africa's family shores
 with Spanish gypsy guitars empowered by Arabic love songs (104-105).

*Alessandro Buffa
 University of Naples
 “L'Orientale”
 Italy*

THE BLUES CONTINUUM: NEW YORK/NAPLES

In Naples, Italy, African American sounds arrived with the Allied Forces during World War II, in the postwar years, and in the 1980s, where they mixed with the local and hybrid sounds of a Mediterranean city (Chambers 2008). Indeed, Naples has always been a crossroads of African diaspora. This remains a subterranean history because it has largely been erased by hegemonic European narrative. Here it is important to remember that in Naples in 1647 there occurred one of the first proletarian and multiethnic revolts in the modern world with Masaniello (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000). This revolt can be framed and tracked within a wave of Atlantic revolts that culminated in the revolution in Haiti in 1799. Almost two centuries later, in the 1970s and 1980s, Naples became the symbol of urban crisis in Italy, like the South Bronx in the US.

It is not by chance that James Senese, saxophonist and leader of the progressive/jazz band Napoli Centrale since the 1970s, locates his sound between Naples and the Bronx (Aymone 2005).

Senese was born in 1944 in Naples. The son of a Neapolitan woman and an African American soldier who was in Naples with the Allied troops during WWII and flew back to the United States immediately after the end of the war. Senese was inspired in equal dose by John Coltrane, James Brown, the shout of Neapolitan street vendors and found sounds of the city. The record “Simme iute e simme venute” (1976) mixes different sounds: the call of a fish vendor shouting “alici, alici, alici” (anchovies, anchovies, anchovies)... a street march typical of rituals of festivities, moments of silence, fast drumrolls, Hammond organ, and the screams of Senese that come close to James Brown. A line evoking the classic blues trope of “bad luck” hits like a bullet the body of the listener. Suddenly the voice of Senese becomes a percussive instrument, mixing screams and indecipherable words. Here, the ragged, acerbic sound of Senese and Napoli Centrale, strung out along infinite spirals of blues inflections, tells us stories from the perspective of the periphery and the excluded (Buffa and Chambers 2016).

Just as in the Bronx and Harlem, when we talk about the inner-city of Naples we cannot separate the work of artists from that of community organizations. In the 1970s/1980s GRIDAS, a neighborhood based organization in north Naples, worked in tandem with musicians and artists. The founders of GRIDAS, Mirella and Felice Pignataro, formed a counter school where, among other activities, children learned the art of making murals. Inspired by the great Latin American tradition of muralists, Felice Pignataro realized more than two-hundred murals both in the Neapolitan region and Italy. Art historian E.H. Gombrich defined Pignataro as the most prolific muralist in the world. The work of Felice was collective. Children collaborated in the making of murals (Di Martino/GRIDAS 2011). Like in the music of Napoli Centrale, the murals are from the perspective of the working-class, they speak in the vicinity of the unemployed people, social movements for better housing, and the “wretched of the city.” Although Senese and Pignataro never worked together they are both interested in the everyday life of the inner-city. Felice’s murals are like graffiti in New York and Jean Michel Basquiat’s early work. There is no ticket to pay to see them. They cover, with wonderful color, a disadvantaged neighborhood’s walls. In these murals, sound is very important.

In one of them, we see a street in the periphery of Naples during the early 1980s through the eyes of the children who collaborated in the making of it. There is no audio, but we can hear the noise of the construction site, the sound of the scooter, the scream of a woman (Pignataro).

Rap music arrived in Naples in the early 1990s through Jamaican dub, British trip hop and New York style hip hop and it was mixed with local sounds. The name of the Neapolitan trip hop/dub band Almamegretta means *anima migrante* (migrant soul). The song "Black Athena" (1998) resurrects the musical traces of a black Mediterranean (Robinson 2000). Following Leroy Jones' [Amiri Baraka] work *Blues People*, Almamegretta's sound is part of a blues continuum that moves across Africa, the Americas and a fervently creolized Mediterranean (Jones 1963). Almamegretta proposes an extended idea of the blues. Of course, the blues is part of a precise history that took place in the United States and Mississippi Delta: "Slavery, ten years of freedom, the overthrow of Reconstruction and the beginning of ninety-five years of what has been called "the second slavery" (Woods 1998: 16). Yet, as the late African bluesman Ali Farka Touré explains, the blues took form even thanks to the melodies and rhythms of Muslim African slaves who were themselves influenced by the cultures of the Middle East (Chambers 2012: 7).

PROJECTING HISTORY INTO THE FUTURE

Let's go back to New York City: We are at the "Kitchen" where Sha-Rock and the Funky Four are performing a live version of "Rappin and Rocking the House" (1980). Their performance is inspired by the Temptations and doo-wop groups. The music – a sample version of Cheryl Lynn's disco music classic "Got To Be Real" (1978) – produced by the poly-instrumentalists, is an incessant rhythm of funk, jazz, and improvisational practice (Toop 1991). Similarly, Sha-Rock's echo chamber effect goes back in time, returning it to the present and then projecting that negated history into the future, sending a message of Love and Peace from the Bronx to all the renegades of the world.

WORKS CITED

Almamegretta. "Black Athena." *Lingo*. CNI, 1998. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ov7wnPb-XJs>>.

Aymone, Carmine. *Je sto ccà. James Senese*. Guida, 2005.

"Bilingual Narcotic Guidance Council." United Bronx Parents Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City, box 6, folder 2.

Buffa, Alessandro and Iain Chambers. "Blues in the Bay: the Bluesology of James Senese and Raiz." *Neapolitan Postcards: The Canzone Napoletana as Transnational Subject*. Edited by Goffredo Plastino and Joe Sciorra. Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

Chambers, Iain. *Mediterraneo Blues*. Bollati Boringhieri, 2012.

Chambers, Iain. *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*. Duke UP, 2008.

Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Harvard UP, 1997.

Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday*. Vintage Books/Random House, 1999.

De Witt Clinton High School. "Salsa." *Clinton Comics*. The Bronx. New York, 1975.

Di Martino, Francesco/GRIDAS. *Sulle tracce di Felice Pignataro*. Marotta & Cafiero, 2011.

Esteves, Sandra María. "Black Notes and 'You Do Something to Me.'" *Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo*. Arte Publico Press, 1990.

Esteves, Sandra María. "For South Bronx." *Yerba Buena*. Greenfield Review Press, 1981.

Esteves, Sandra María. "Ode to Celia." *CENTRO Journal*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 104-105.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1963. Translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press, 2004.

Fort Apache, the Bronx. Dir. Daniel Petrie. Time-Life Films/20th-Century Fox. 1981.

Gaines, Kevin. "A World to Win: The International Dimension of the Black Freedom Movement." *OAH Magazine of History*, vol. 20, no. 5, 2006, pp. 14-18.

Hernandez, Carmen Dolores. *Puerto Rican Voices in English. Interviews with Writers*. Praeger, 1997.

Holiday, Billie. "Strange Fruit." Commodore, 1939. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rz5OI>.

Johnson, Linton Kwesi. "Bass Culture." Island, 1980. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWaovED4tcs>.

Kelley, Robin D.G. "Disappearing Acts: Capturing Harlem in Transition." *Harlem on the Verge*. Edited by Alice Attie. The Quantuck Press, 2003.

----- . *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press, 2002.

----- . *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class*. The Free Press, 1994.

Jones, Leroy. *Black Music*. Akashic Books, 1968.

----- . *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed from It*. Morrow Quill, 1963.

Linebaugh, Peter and Marcus Rediker. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Beacon Press, 2000.

Lipsitz, George. *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Morales, Iris. "Palante, Siempre Palante! Interview with Richie Perez." *CENTRO Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2009, pp. 143-157.

Napoli Centrale. "Simme iute e simme venute." *Mattanza*. Dischi Ricordi, 1976. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkfM_TceUtw>.

Nelson, Alondra. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Pignataro, Felice. "Murales." <<http://www.felicepignataro.org/home.php?mod=murales>>.

Prashad, Vijay. *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*. Beacon Press, 2001.

Alessandro Buffa
University of Naples
"L'Orientale"
Italy

- Rainey, Ma. "Runaway Blues." Paramount, 1928. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObGCoc3d92Y>>.
- Redmond, Shana. *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*. New York University Press, 2014.
- Robinson, Cedric. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
- Sha-Rock/Funky Four Plus One. "Rappin and Rocking in the House." Live at the Kitchen, 1980. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vw10bdA-HTQ>.
- Simone, Nina. "Mississippi Godamm." Philips Records, 1964. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJ25-U3jNWM>.
- Singh, Nikhil Pal. *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*. Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Smith, Bessie. "Backwater Blues." Columbia, 1927. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gXShOJVwaM>.
- "South Bronx Project." Lillian López Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City, box 4, folder 6.
- "Stop the Movie Fort Apache Arts Festival, April 21-22-23, 1980." Lourdes Torres Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.
- "The Organization." United Bronx Parents Papers. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City, box 6, folder 2.
- Toop, David. *Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop*. Serpent's Tail, 1991.
- Von Eschew, Penny. *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*. Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Womack, Bobby. "Across 110th Street." United Artists, 1973, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOg_8hCC4u4>.
- Woods, Clyde. *Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta*. Verso, 1998.
- "Youth Gangs in the South Bronx." 51st State. Thirteen/WNET, 1972, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFgm2ANw32U>>.