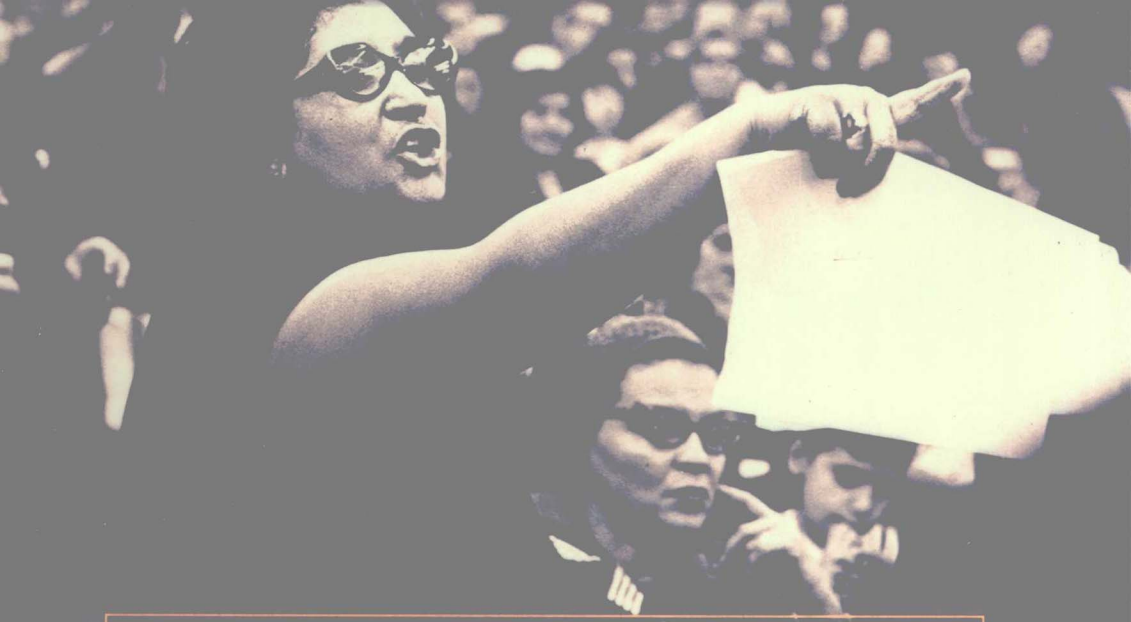

BUILDING A Latino Civil Rights MOVEMENT

Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Justice in New York City

SONIA SONG-HA LEE

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Contents

Introduction

In the mid-1970s, even as President Richard Nixon's "law and order" and anti-busing campaigns signaled to many the decline of the civil rights movement, Evelina Antonetty was beginning to reap the fruits of her organizing work in the South Bronx. Antonetty, a Puerto Rican, had been training Puerto Rican and African American mothers to fight for their children's education in New York City schools since 1965. Standing at the forefront of the bilingual education movement for Spanish-speaking children, she was at the peak of her political activism. Crucially, she was forging national networks with African American, Native American, and Mexican American parents interested in community control of education. She believed that her political work reflected a broader political transformation among Puerto Rican New Yorkers. Borrowing parts of a speech delivered by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. at a Young Men and Women's Christian Association meeting in 1957, Antonetty expressed her own desire to reclaim her dignity in the face of a racist society:[1] "Maladjusted is a word used perhaps more frequently than any other in modern psychology, and I am calling on the people of this city to be maladjusted. There are many things in this social system to which I am proud to be maladjusted. I can never adjust myself to the evils of segregation and discrimination. . . . I am sure history has a place for those who have the moral courage to be maladjusted. . . . Maladjusted like Don Pedro Albizu Campos who believed that [if] even the birds are free, why not Puerto Ricans?"[2]

Puerto Ricans' claim to being "maladjusted" represented a profoundly new relationship with the North American racial system. Anthropologists and sociologists had used the term "cultural maladjustment" since the 1930s to refer to a temporary stage of adjustment experienced by European immigrants and black southern migrants alike.[3] High crime rates,

family breakups, and economic dependency were assumed to reflect temporary modes of adjustment rather than innate inferiorities. Advocates of the cultural approach believed that their studies would improve the lives of poor migrants and immigrants, since a focus on culture rather than biology emphasized the capacity of the poor to change and assimilate to white middle-class norms. However, even as northern urban centers like New York City underwent significant changes in their racial demographics—with European immigrants and their descendants moving to the suburbs and black and Puerto Rican migrants replacing them in significant numbers—the term "cultural maladjustment" became a language of racialization. It began to represent poor migrants' permanent inability to incorporate themselves into white middle-class society. Black and Puerto Rican migrants' high rates of unemployment and low academic performances became increasingly interpreted as features of black and Puerto Rican "inferior" cultures, which were supposedly fixed and static.[4]

Antonetty's use of the term "maladjusted" indicated Puerto Ricans' new stance in dealing with their position of racial subjugation: rather than avoiding associations with African Americans, they began to align themselves more closely with black leaders' confrontational political methods. Modeling themselves after Martin Luther King Jr. and other black civil rights leaders, Puerto Rican leaders reclaimed the literature of "cultural maladjustment" and used it to create a new vocabulary of racial pride. Puerto Ricans had not "argue[d] or f[ought] back" in the past, Antonetty asserted, but they were "no longer content to exist in a minor role." They were now "determined to be self-determined." Just as Black Power leaders reimagined blackness as a basis for cultural renewal and political mobilization, so too did Puerto Rican leaders reconstruct Puerto Rican-ness as a basis for their political empowerment.

Antonetty's strategy of being "maladjusted" to segregation included establishing close collaborations with African American leaders as well as creating Puerto Ricans' own independent political organizations. Together with black leaders such as Milton Galamison, Babette Edwards, and David Spencer, Antonetty established the People's Board of Education in 1967 to promote an educational reform campaign in the city's public schools. She also began to connect with educators interested in black education reform across the nation through publications in *Foresight*, a bimonthly journal produced by the Black Teachers Workshop. Sharing ideas with writers like James and Grace Lee Boggs from Detroit, she contributed to a national conversation about the implications of Black Power

in urban education. Even as Antonetty forged vital links between Puerto Rican and black activists, she also remained committed to the development of independent Puerto Rican and Latino organizations. She utilized United Bronx Parents, an organization she founded, to address the specific needs of Puerto Ricans living in the South Bronx. In the late 1970s, as New York's Dominican population was increasing, she also took part in efforts to create partnerships with other Spanish-speaking groups through the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights.[5] By creating such multiple and overlapping political networks, Antonetty took part in a broader political movement in which black and Puerto Rican activists forged a common struggle toward racial justice.

Identity Formation within Civil Rights and Black Power Studies

This book analyzes the political world in which Puerto Ricans and African Americans conceptualized their racial and ethnic identities in overlapping ways to build a common civil rights agenda. In order to trace the construction of these racial and ethnic identities, I look at the formation and dissolution of mass social movements built by African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the post–World War II era. Numbering close to 613,000 and making up 7.9 percent of the city's population in 1960, Puerto Ricans were the second-largest minority group in the city after African Americans, who composed 14 percent of the city's population, at 1,088,000. These numbers increased in the following decades, with Puerto Ricans and African Americans making up 12 percent and 24 percent of the city's population, respectively, by 1980.[6] Puerto Ricans, I argue, were as vital as African Americans in shaping New Yorkers' notions of "race," "ethnicity," and "minority" in the civil rights and Black Power eras.

My study engages a recent trend within civil rights studies, which goes beyond analyzing the formation of racial and ethnic identities in isolation from one another. A number of civil rights studies focused outside of the South have analyzed the multiple Latino and Asian American social movements that overlapped with black freedom struggles in the 1940s through the 1960s. The histories of African Americans' collaborations with other people of color have indicated that dreams born out of the black freedom struggle impacted not only African Americans and white Americans but also other people of color.[7] Similarly, recent studies within Puerto Rican history have explored the development of Puerto Rican politics alongside parallel developments within black politics. Works from the 1980s had

analyzed the formation of Puerto Rican political structures solely through the lens of Puerto Ricans' relationships with white Americans and other Spanish-speaking groups, but more recent works have paid greater attention to the ways in which Puerto Ricans' political, social, and economic conditions increasingly resembled those of African Americans in the postwar era.[8]

My book links these parallel developments within civil rights histories with critical race theory to understand how the meanings of "blackness" and "Puerto Rican-ness" changed over time as a result of the social mobilizations that took place between the two groups in New York City. Not only were Puerto Ricans and African Americans racialized as "nonwhite" in parallel ways, but they also utilized their racial and ethnic identities as sites of political mobilization through mutual collaborations and contestations of power. The remaking of "blackness" and "Latinidad" in the postwar era thus took place not as separate movements but as intertwined and mutually reinforcing historical processes. Taking to heart Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper's critique that previous scholarship on "identity" has placed too much focus on "boundary-formation rather than boundary crossing, the constitution of groups rather than the development of networks," I look at the formation of Puerto Ricans' racial and ethnic identities as an interplay between their sensibility as a people of color with African Americans, their self-understanding as Hispanic with other Spanish-speaking groups, and their identity as members of a distinct Puerto Rican nation.[9] The boundaries between these subjectivities were never fixed but constantly shifting. Although most racialization studies have explained the establishment of those boundaries largely as a top-down process, whereby a dominant group imposes essential markers of indelible inferiority upon another, I argue that African Americans and Puerto Ricans themselves were pivotal actors within the racialization of "blackness" and "Puerto Rican-ness."[10] They helped delineate the boundaries of these categories and the permeability between them.

Recent works on the Black Power movement have described the cross-fertilization that took place across various black, Latino, and Asian American social movements. A growing literature on the Third World Left brings to light the Black Panther Party's particular influence on Latino and Asian American political mobilizations in the late 1960s.[11] These works reveal the ways in which cultural nationalism and class struggle provided common inspiration for young Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans, and African Americans who were in search of liberation from multiple sys-

tems of oppression. Breaking through the old myth that Black Power is segregationist, these scholars show the tremendous life that black nationalists breathed into the world by creating multiple circles of racial, class, and gender solidarities with other "oppressed nationalities." As Jeffrey Ogbar put it, the Black Panther Party was popularly known as a "black hate group," but its slogan "all power to the people" allowed the organization to transcend race and to serve as a paradigm for revolutionary movements across different ethnic groups.

For all the celebration of Third World unity that these works emphasize, however, many historians who have analyzed the implications of Black Power in more reformist civil rights organizations have come to different conclusions. Looking at black and Mexican American activists' efforts to secure better opportunities for their communities through various arenas, such as school desegregation, bilingual education, fair housing, and the War on Poverty, some historians argue that black and Mexican American activists found it politically expedient to forge separate civil rights struggles.[12] The reasons for the political separation vary. Some scholars take a top-down approach, demonstrating that the different forms of racialization imposed on each group necessitated different avenues of redress; others focus on the bottom-up agency of blacks and Chicanos themselves, emphasizing that their own formulation of cultural nationalism encouraged separatism and friction.

Third World and civil rights studies' disparate conclusions hinge on how they treat cultural differences between blacks and Latinos. Many scholars working within Third World studies assume that blacks and Latinos have historically shared a sensibility as "people of color." They emphasize blacks' and Latinos' shared position of racial and class subordination while minimizing cultural clashes between them. Meanwhile, those working within civil rights and antipoverty studies take those clashes at face value, assuming that black and Latino cultures are naturally fixed and in conflict with each other. Neither approach, however, adequately addresses how black and Latino activists deployed their cultures as political tools to achieve different purposes. They could be imagined as mutually inclusive or exclusive according to each group's assessment of the political benefits attached to multiracial organizing. For example, many have evoked Latinos' cultural identity as *mestizo* (racially mixed) as a static construct that makes them naturally incompatible with African Americans' mono-racial identity as "pure" blacks. Yet, *mestizaje* could conflict or overlap with "blackness": while Mexican Americans in the West and the South-

west argued in the 1970s that *mestizaje* reflected Latinos' Indian and Spanish heritages, Puerto Ricans in the Northeast and Midwest claimed that it reflected their Indian, Spanish, *and* African heritages.[13] Just as *mestizaje* could include or exclude "blackness," "blackness" could also be imagined as uniformly North American, or as ethnically heterogeneous. While West Indian immigrants in the Northeast constructed a common political identity with African Americans as "black" throughout the early part of the twentieth century, they adopted a more distinct ethnic identity as "Caribbean" in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, "blackness" was constructed as an ethnically homogeneous, North American identity.[14]

If we understand race and culture as political categories, where lines of inclusion and exclusion are constantly shifting, then we must recognize that people of color constructed their racial and cultural identities through a political process.[15] The final outcome was not predetermined by fixed cultural differences or by a natural shared sensibility as "oppressed nationalities," but it was contested and negotiated as various groups of people weighed the costs and benefits of representing themselves in particular ways. Historian Mark Brilliant, for example, argues that bilingual education inherently necessitated separate battles because it reflected Mexican Americans' needs as different from those of African Americans.[16] Language, however, marked only one of the many ways in which Mexican American children had become racialized. Their racialization as a "colored race" and as those who were assumed to possess a "culture of poverty" placed them in the same category with African Americans. Yet Mexican American leaders chose to prioritize their distinctiveness as a language minority group and to see bilingual education as an issue that was incompatible with school desegregation. This move by Mexican American activists did not reflect fixed cultural incompatibilities but was a strategic political decision to create a political base separate from African Americans. Mexican American activists themselves played an important role in delineating the boundaries between "blackness" and "Latinidad."

The Political Deployment of Race, Ethnicity, and Minority Status

Most scholars of Puerto Rican identity formations have framed their analyses around the question of whether the term "Hispanic/Latino" constitutes a "racial" or an "ethnic" category.[17] According to this literature, the majority of Latinos themselves insist that they compose an "ethnic" group. This position is viewed as advantageous because it allows Latinos