

# HOW BIG PUN PRECEDED THE MOVEMENT OF AFRO-LATINIDAD

by Victoria Kabeya

«The strength of a Black man  
The heart of an Indian  
The pride of a Spaniard»  
Intro, Yeeeah Baby, 2000

## Introduction

This article focuses on the importance of the late Boricua rapper Big Pun in the Afro-Latin movement which became mainstream in the United States in the mid 2010s during the apex of the Black Lives Matter movement. It will explore how Pun managed to surpass the divisions nurtured by a racist American system which divided the diaspora in showcasing the Afro-Indigenous heritage of the Hispanic Caribbeans, at a time when their racial identity, deemed complex by the Black Americans, was always dismissed and never acknowledged, out of disdain and lack of political power.

## BORICUA. MORENA?

Throughout the years, the Black American community often asked themselves about the racial identity of the Boricuas and the Spanish speaking Caribbean immigrants in New-York, as well, especially for those living in the Bronx. Even if the Young Lords of Chicago always advocated for the union between black and brown bodies, many members of the political organization being Afro-Caribbeans as well. Yet, the Caribbean body was, from the start, in opposition to the rigidity of the racial caste system of the United States. There, Black Americans never could understand the concept of triracial identity, as a consequence of slavery and colonialism, when their own heritage had been erased and solely reduced to the color black. On the contrary, the Spanish speaking Caribbeans were more than a simple color, and though the descendants of colonized places, they were first considered regarding their nationalities, whether Dominican, Boricua, Cuban or Haitian.

The waves of protest which resulted from the Black Lives Matter movement throughout the last 2010 decade were at the center of social media, marking the rise of digital, virtual protest organization. It is true that, since the election of Barack Obama in 2008, as the world entered the first deep phase of globalism, the world was exposed to synchronicity and so, before the social media such as Twitter could play apart in it. A few years later, through the use of hashtags, activists were able to orchestrate and organize protests from a geographical distance. Therefore, many minorities which had always been excluded from the Black or White spectrum also saw the opportunity to express their support to Black Lives Matter but also to talk openly about the legacy of colonialism within their own families and lineages. There, Americans of Caribbean, Asian or Middle Eastern descent denounced their own experiences of racism from their perspective or wrote about anti-blackness in their own communities. The movement for Black Lives Matter also allowed other populations whose members were trapped in the middle to explain themselves and their identity.

The Afro-Latin movement, in the mid to late 2010s, was one of the affirmation movements which became much more visible in the United States. The discussion had been greatly amplified nationally by singer Amara La Negra. In 2018, she appeared in the first season of *Love and Hip-Hop Miami* and put an emphasis on the hidden racism and colorism in the Latin community and the diaspora. An Afro-Dominican woman herself, the episode followed her struggles to fit in a whitewashed community. If Afro-Latin scholars had always been working in the past regarding the fight for the visibility of Afro descendants in Latin America, Amara allowed the movement to become more Americanized and also mainstream. As a consequence, as it went national the Afro-Latin individuals chosen to embody the African descendants in Latinized America and the Caribbean were mixed race and greatly differed from the first black bodies studied by the Latin scholars fifteen years ago, in the mid 2000s. At that time, the individuals interviewed were clearly Africans, had little to no admixture and looked like their Kongo and West African ancestors. These bodies would be replaced by mixed entities, most not being even visibly African. Such replacement was deeply rooted in the racism of Latin media owners in the United States, who, of European descent, aim to preserve the false colonial propaganda of Spanish *mestizaje* by indirectly claiming that all Latinos are mixed and descend from the Spaniards first, before the Africans or the Natives. The propaganda of *mestizaje* allows the illegitimate presence of Spain to be preserved and placed at the center by confused individuals who embrace the triracial trilogy. Through this, as everybody is supposed to descend from Spain, the Spanish entity still can appropriate, steal and claim cultures which were never created by the colonizers in the first place.

It is true that the invisibility of the Afro-Latin community was also curious, especially when the essence of the culture falsely known as "Latin" is deeply African and Indigenous, not Latin, understand Southern European.

Though Big Pun, born Christopher Lee Rios, a Boricua from South Bronx, was celebrated for the power of his lyricism as well as his delivery, his impact regarding the Afro-Latin movement has never really been studied by academics. Indeed, his musical legacy was an important social testimony when it comes to the experience of the Boricuas in New-York, but also a statement regarding the race and identity of the Spanish speaking Caribbeans. During his short-lived life, Rios left a tremendous impact on the industry as he became the first Latin rapper to go platinum. Yet, the importance of Big Pun did not stop here as he also became the most important cultural representant of a diaspora. Even if the Boricuas were apart of the creators when it comes to the hip-hop movement in the 1970s, they had always been present along with Dominican and Cuban emcees. However, it was not until Big Pun took the risk to boldly represent his Boricua heritage that so many other rappers of Caribbean descent also decided to embrace their roots.

The presence of Big Pun greatly broke with the rigidity of American rigid racial castes, as an Afro-Indigenous man but the late rapper, rather than divide and place the Caribbeans as an isolated group, would rather gather and unite elements which were made to be opposed. Through his Afro-Indigenous blood, and his experience in the Bronx, a multicultural place, Pun made entities cohabite. One could therefore be a Black, Indigenous man, all the while living with Black Americans in the United States. In many of his lyrics, Big Pun has clearly paid tribute to different artists who had influenced him over the years, among them Kool G Rap or Marc Anthony, the salsa singer, proving that the identity of the Caribbean body was never stable, fixed but rather the product of many things. Therefore, the Boricua identity of the rapper, placed at the center, was in perpetual movement, but also a crossroads of races and cultures which never, eventually, took away his legitimacy to be a real Boricua at heart and in mind.

This instability never allowed the Caribbean rappers with Spanish colonizers to find a safe space among the African-Americans of the East Coast. Indeed, the Caribbean body in itself is perceived, from the Black American point of view, as either an ally or a threat. The identities of the Spanish speaking Caribbeans were never fixed as they were historically mixed race. Their Black American fellows never could understand the concept of race mixing outside of the basic biracial admixture, hence a white and black parent. Many were confused when exposed to the concept of the Boricua, Dominican, Cuban body as the skin color of the individuals did not always reflect their true ancestry. Many visibly white Boricuas can have an important degree of African ancestry and a Brown Boricua can carry a certain level of Indigenous heritage and not necessarily African, as the Tainos are a brown skin people. The concept of triracial identity, a result of Spanish colonialism, was not embraced. Such confusion was also motivated by a disdain of many Black Americans who dismissed as much as the White institutions the importance of recognition of the origins of the Caribbeans.

The Caribbean immigrants would also be exposed to the great contempt of the American institutions which, out of lack of consideration regarding the respect of their distinctive identities, lumped them into one same group as they spoke Spanish. In that sense, the Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Colombians, Peruvians, Salvadorans, though greatly different in terms of culture, were attributed the colonial term "Latino" (Southern European) or "Hispanic" (from Spain), furthering the confusion in the diaspora.

Indeed, though both the African-Americans and the Spanish speaking Caribbeans were the descendants of enslaved Africans, only the first group was given the ultimate power to detain the narrative regarding slavery. Such issue is rooted in economy and capitalism. The disparity between the rich countries of the North and those of the South, maintained by neo-colonialism, has accredited more importance upon the minorities of the North rather than that of the South. In that sense, through submitted to brutality by the white institutions in America, the African-Americans still have an important power in the circles of minorities, as they are Americans, from the most powerful sphere in the planet as political issues, also center around them. If the world was Americanized since 1947, the minorities would be African-Americanized, as well, their original cultures, and the validity of their heritages as descendants of enslaved Africans, questioned, for coming from the Caribbean space. Moreover, the Spanish speaking Caribbeans differed from the others as they were colonized by Spain and spoke Spanish. The other Caribbeans, also great contributors to hip-hop in the 1970s, such as the Jamaicans, the Trinidadians, the Barbadians or the Bahamians were, for the most part, visibly black and also shared the same English colonizers as the Black Americans. For this reason, contrary to the Spanish speaking Caribbeans, the English speaking West Indians were much more welcomed by the African-Americans who never questioned their testimony regarding slavery. Some African-American leaders such as Louis Farrakhan or Malcolm X even carried West Indian blood as well, and later on, in music, acts such as Foxy Brown, Trina, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, and more, with Caribbean heritage, would be welcomed by the Black American community with almost no distinction. This proximity through visible blackness and a shared common language, English, were elements which allowed the Black Americans to trust them enough.

However, if artists such as Heavy D or Notorious B.I.G., both of Jamaican descent, also represented the Caribbean heritage in their music, they built their image and career through the Black American lens. As they really wanted to be integrated within the Black American experience, many have evolved through that prism only. Therefore, the political domination of the Black Americans towards the other minorities was still exported into art as well. Though oppressed, the Black Americans, still dominated over the other minorities, especially in the hip-hop realm where they were the ones to choose to include one party or not. In the West Coast, for example, Eazy-E gave platforms to Mexican rappers and collective such as Brownside, in the 1990s. Later on, African-American YG would reproduce the same scheme with Mexican-American, Sadboy Loko. The late rapper Nipsey Hussle would also share

his platform with other Mexican artists. The Black American music community proved not to be very fond of "in-betweenness" as many had had much ease accepting Eminem rather than Spanish speaking Caribbeans, though also descendants of enslaved Africans.

As a consequence, the Spanish speaking Caribbeans were afraid to stand on their own, for political, social and cultural reasons. However, they should be divided into several groups to understand their place regarding Black American culture and immigration. Some artists such as Angie Martinez, Fat Joe or the Beatnuts, had been more Americanized, through the Black American experience and were therefore, closer to them. They, thanks to hip-hop, found a part of themselves through the Black identity. Others, such as Big Pun, had been Americanized, through the Black experience, yes, but were also impacted by the Boricua-Bronx identity and the Boricua experience from the original land of Borinken. As a consequence, though he acknowledged his Black Americanization, Big Pun was the first to place his Boricua heritage first at the center and in that sense, his decision mirrored the behavior of the Mexicans in rap. Indeed, the Mexican rappers living in the West Coast, were not to compromise as they always placed their Mexican pride and identity at the center before anything else.

## BIG PUN AND THE EMERGENCE OF BLACK AND BROWN PRIDE IN THE CARIBBEAN MOVEMENT

The late 1990s and early 2000s, were marked by a cultural frenzy, a time when the whitewashed Latin craze found its way, represented by Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin or Gloria Estefan. The musical explosion was also favored by globalism, festivity regarding the approach of the new millennium, and a desire to break away from the rigid classifications of the industry. If the movement from the mainstream only represented white European Latins (Estefan, Martin, Luis Miguel or Thalia) or whitewashed bodies (Jennifer Lopez), the underground hip-hop movement launched by Fat Joe and the collective Terror Squad put the emphasis on Black and Brown Hispanic Caribbeans first.

In reality, upon deciding to place his Boricua identity at the center, Big Pun highlighted the depth of the essence which makes a Boricua, a Caribbean, hence the direct product of African and Indigenous lineages which evolved together as one soul and body since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

In the introduction of his posthumous album *Yeeeah Baby* (2000), released a few months after his tragic passing, Pun refers to history and describes his background proudly mentioning being made of the "strength of a Black man", having "the heart of an Indian" and the "pride of a Spaniard", all the while mentioning Black American artists and Boricua musicians as well who shaped his identity. This line, not only broke with the desire of many Spanish speaking Caribbeans to exist only through the Black American lens and experience but it also put an end to the shame regarding the misunderstanding of racial admixture of the Caribbean bodies. The racial confusion which had contributed to the erasure of the Latinized Caribbean body was now being mentioned and talked about with pride. Yet, the blackness Pun referred to extended as far as the African-American experience, as he, himself, shaped his identity through Marc Anthony or Kool G Rap.

The Boricuas had a hard time dealing with this ambivalence, as misunderstood and probably toned their heritage down so as to fit in one group and remain outside of the spectrum of confusion. However, Pun used this instability, unfixed identity to turn it into a pride for his own people. Therefore, the collective Terror Squad would represent the bridge and create a safe space, place for the Spanish speaking Caribbeans who were, thanks to Pun, placed at the center. In that sense, Cuban Link (of Cuban descent), Triple Seis (a Dominican), Tony Sunshine (Boricua), and other collectives such as the Beatnuts made of a Colombian and a Dominican, were also encouraged to represent their heritages as well. It is thanks to and through Big Pun that the Boricua pride movement in hip-hop movement was

born. Yet, once again, Pun extended Afro-Latinidad beyond the Caribbean diaspora as he also included Black American acts such as Remy Ma, who had been discovered by him in the late 1990s. In the album *Capital Punishment* (1998), Pun extended the solidarity among Caribbeans by collaborating with another important bridge regarding the issue of Afro-Latinidad, the Haitian-American rapper, Wyclef Jean in *Caribbean Connection*, as one single Caribbean body.

The Spanish speaking Caribbeans had often been accused of not being "black enough" by the Black American community, yet Pun aimed to put an end to such false narratives by proving that the Caribbeans could be even more African in blood and culture than the African-Americans themselves, through spirituality, music and customs, as their African essence could not be reduced to the simple color factor at all.

When he released his now famous song *Still Not a Player* (1998) which featured singer Joe, the lines "Boricua, Morena" became the signature. In interviews, Big Pun claimed his desire to thank the African-American community for having finally accepted the Boricuas in hip-hop. However, in his private life, Pun was always in tune with his African heritage, especially through his wife, Liza Rios, a Black Boricua or Afro-Latina with whom he fathered three children. Therefore, during the Latin craze movement, Big Pun was the first Latin rapper to represent Afro-Latinidad at a time when many non-Latinos, including Black Americans, did not even know that Latinized Caribbeans were also African and Black. The image of the Latinos portrayed in the media, at the time, used to serve the same Eurocentric phenotype and erase the original Black and Brown originators of the culture as they remained in the back and isolation.

The South Bronx region, just like Miami, are a port of reunion of the diaspora from the Caribbean where all of them meet and evolve together. As they reunite, a part of their original cultures from their birth place is exported into the heart of the place they inhabitate as well.

The impact left by Big Pun, who liberated his people from the shame of history would be the point of beginning of the Caribbean pride movement which shaped the 2000s, lasting even years after his death. For the first time, thanks to him, the Caribbeans could exist as one entity outside of the African-American gaze or approval. In that sense, he opened doors for both English speaking Caribbeans and the Spanish ones in the world of hip-hop. The Spanish speaking Caribbeans represented their pride in their African and Indigenous roots depending on the different nations they came from. As a consequence, Afro descendants and Natives would be placed ahead. One Afro-Boricua, rapper N.O.R.E from the collective of Capone-N-Noreaga, who had been much more African-Americanized also anticipated the reggaeton wave of the 2000s by collaborating with Boricua reggaetoneros from the island, such as Daddy Yankee, after Big Pun had secured a safe place for his own. In the 2005 song *Mas Maiz*, NORE honored the roots of Latinized America and the Caribbean. They not only collaborated with Mexican-American rappers from the West Coast such as Lil Rob, but also kept on representing the legacy of Big Pun by placing Black and Native American bodies at the center of their identity and culture. The 2004 anthem, *Oye Mi Canto*, whose chorus was sung by the twin Boricua sisters Nicole and Natalie Albino forming Nina Sky, reused the "Boricua, Morena" lyrics from *Still Not a Player* released in 1998. The Caribbeans, once again, were also the first to call for a union of Latinos from all the continent, as some Mexicans decided to remain within their own.

The sisters Nina Sky are one group which contributed to the preservation of the union first promoted by Pun as they, through music, were chosen to sing many ethnic pride anthems but also collaborated with other Caribbean singers, such as Sean Paul, as a new way to further the unity between the Caribbean bodies as well. This unity would last until about the late 2000s, before the whitewashing of the movement by the music industry began, as moguls decided to use Shakira as the new face of Afro-Latinidad. The explosion of globalism and electronic music would put an end to the interest many had for a deep cultural movement of recognition. However, the influence of Pun, when it comes to the pride of the Caribbean heritage had a great impact upon English speaking Caribbeans as well. Though

heavily African-Americanized by experience, in the early 2000s, rapper Foxy Brown of Indo-Trinidadian descent, also began to display her heritage, just like Trina, of Bahamian and Dominican descent. Years later, in the early 2010s, Nicki Minaj, also of Indo-Trinidadian descent used Caribbean intonations and accents in her music to highlight her roots. The legend Lauryn Hill would also include Jamaican music within her own creation furthering the link within the Caribbean diaspora, this time from an African-American perspective. The presence of Wyclef Jean who had always included his Haitian heritage, like Pun did with his Boricua roots, validates the fact that the two men were heavily influential into developing the Caribbean connection and pride.

## CONCLUSION

In his short life, Big Pun succeeded into using his musical gift to help the Caribbean immigrants reject their shame as perceived as unfixed racial individuals due to their colonial history. He did not only open doors to Afro-Latinidad as a part of the Boricua heritage as a whole, but he also created a safe space for his fellow Caribbeans, either Latinized or speaking English, who often felt misunderstood by Black Americans and Americans themselves. A multiracial Caribbean body could stand pride in America, a rigid racial society, with no shame and reject the separation. Instead of encouraging his people to remain in isolation from the Black American community he would rather make these oppositions cohabite and evolve together, breaking down with the false narratives promoted through racism and confusion. He therefore preceded the reggaeton movement from the early 2000s, but also opened doors for Black American rappers such Lil Kim who would, in the mid 2000s, collaborate with Black Boricua rappers such as Tego Calderon, hence, an alliance which could have never been possible before. Thanks to Terror Squad and Big Pun, the other Caribbean rappers who had been African-Americanized also found the courage to represent their roots they had toned down in the past. There could have been no Caribbean pride, no Afro-Latin pride, without Big Pun.

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