

## **BROOKLYN-BORN AND BRED BORICUA**

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### **Brooklyn-Bred Boricua Part I**

Brooklyn-bred Boricua  
Hailing from a home  
Between banderas and concrete  
Two-dimensional aguacate trees  
Painted on apartment walls  
Rebel Rican names  
Tagged and scrawled  
Between shipyards and docks  
Factorías and parks  
Tire swings and tubes  
To suck gas from privileged cars  
A poder taxiar  
And earn a buck to eat

Nam vet tecatos  
Littered in lots  
Where we built clubhouses  
Furnished with old car parts  
And rubbed razor sharp leaves  
Across our foreheads  
To gain entry into the latest  
Puerto Rican youth survival pack

Boricua outlaw brothers  
In leather and chains  
Taken off their bodies and minds  
Turn into weapons of self-defense  
Rockin' punk patches  
Patria banderas and bandanas  
On their foreheads and back pockets

Playgrounds of my youth  
From Prospect Park Slope sand boxes  
To Fatato beer factory rooftops  
Where we outran Dobermans and Rottweilers  
Cutting our bellies on razor wires  
That failed to keep us out

To Third Street Park frozen slides  
Where my sister's soaked Skippies blended with the snow  
To nearly frostbitten toes  
And CJ's graffiti bombing sessions were cut short

By mami's screams as she too climbed the roof  
Made her way to Third Street via a secret elevated route  
To howl momma bear growls through the air  
To save her son from pigs looking to lock up kids  
Planet-rock enforcer dressed in a bulletproof bata  
And big ass hollowed aluminum latas  
That curled her hair

Bongos and beats filling block partying streets  
Of Red Hook, Park Slope and Bed Stuy  
And I with satin boxer Boricua blue shorts  
Skated down second to "Play at [my] own risk"  
To the rhythms of James Brown, Hector Lavoe and the Soul Sonic Force  
And made it down on Sundays  
to eat pinchos and piraguas at a Red Hook ballgame  
Watching Wrigley's gum wrappers and twigs  
Float past the rusting ships parked at its docks  
To finish the night in Sunset Park with an heladito coco  
Topped with a frozen shot of parcha or piña

To underground Gran Combo sessions  
Celebrated Under the Boardwalk at the Rockaways  
While rolling bicicletas from above  
Dusted our arroz con gandules with sand, not salt

Till the piece-painted F train rumbled above Smith 9<sup>th</sup>  
Set to the backdrop of not-yet-torn Twin Towers and a Good Year's blimp  
To the banderas rolling past on the backs of Harleys  
In a mob of Boricua bikers  
To the rat-infested, abombao/ rotten smell of the Gowanus Canal  
That we crossed on route to Titi Cambu's  
To bus rides we took down 5<sup>th</sup> Ave past cemeteries  
For a dose of santeria salvation at fiestas  
Where trans women taught tales of Oshun  
Until brujos from abroad  
Took mami away to my grandfather's curandero hands  
in a faraway place called East New York  
in another corner of Brooklyn  
That would soon claim us all....

## **Brooklyn Bred Boricua Part II**

1984

The white landlord told my mom  
He wanted our apartment for his sister  
But if she slept with him, he wouldn't kick us out  
So instead of "movin' on up", we moved on down

From seven rooms and a wrap-around terrace in Park Slope  
To a tiny railroad and no closets in East New York  
Dusty ass rugs and cucarachas  
Burned walls and ceilings hidden  
Under ugly wood paneling  
If you punched the wall, you could hear the ashes fall.

Our first visits to the Dominican Doctor De Lara  
Who told you whether what you had was físico o espiritual  
If he couldn't help, we'd be shuffled to grandpa  
For a potion or un despojo  
But it was physical  
Asthma from ashes, roaches and dust

Dewey train Yard was more than an hour subway ride away  
And Third Street Park was far  
So instead of bombing trains my brother tagged  
His furniture and bedroom walls with fat-tipped black markers  
And hopped the train back token-less  
Whenever he needed an escape

1898  
Year of the infamous invasion  
Chizzled into the red brick  
Of my new asbestos-infested elementary school  
That rained lead paint chips on torn textbooks  
Where the children sang the star-strangled banner  
And I, the new girl, had not a clue about this unfamiliar tune

Where the schoolyard was minimized  
Half the size of the one at PS 321 in Park Slope  
Where Delmarie and I would march and chant:  
*Ungawa, Black power, Puerto Rican power,*  
*I said it, I meant it, and now I represent it.*  
Not yet knowing what it meant

Suffering through oppressive classrooms  
In colonial stamped structures  
I lived for 3 o'clock  
To watch the twins down the block  
Everyone's crush  
In le tigres, colored Lees and Pumas  
Striding to the strums of Run DMC's Rock Box

And we the little girls of the block

Became the cohorts of the big girls  
To create the Ridgewood girls  
To chant down and stomp on concrete  
In an East New York bad ass attitude training camp:  
*Bang, bang, choo choo train*  
*Wind me up and I do my thing*  
*Reeses pieces butter cup*  
*You mess with me, I'll mess you up*

Afternoons spent sitting on parked cars gossiping  
Hourly visits to the bodega  
For 25 cent juices, 10 cent icies, papitas, chicko sticks and now-a-laters  
Chasing down Mr. Frosty  
Talking 'bout boys  
Hoping no one might instigate  
A Vaseline and bobby-pins-fist fight

Rockin' a white lace outfit  
Shaven sides and sideburns  
Puffed out pollinas, long hair flowing  
In a female Boricua bad ass mullet  
Lip syncing to Lisa Lisa  
At St. Michael's summer camp recital  
Having been trained at the talent camp we built  
In Titi Haydee's basement  
Where the boiler room was the dressing room  
And my sister fashioned costumes  
Out of secondhand gloves and neon fabrics  
Performing under Christmas lights  
Boy George, Madonna and Cyndi Lauper routines  
In the space grown folks gathered for New Year's Eve salsa parties

Seasons of decorating the tree  
To Jackson Five and the Drifters  
Singing "Under the Boardwalk"  
Catching "Momma Kissing Santa Claus"  
Wanting to "Feed the World" because "We Are The World"  
Stealing metal garbage can lids on purple nights  
To run up white hills in Highland Park  
And sleigh down gripping the cold metal that froze our asses  
Till Biro saved us with his inflatable raft  
That we packed one dozen deep  
And flew down the slope  
Only stopping when we crashed into the iron fence  
That surrounded the summer sprinklers  
That cooled us down in "voodoo park"

Where the desperate left remnants  
Of limpiezas and brujos under bridges  
At crossroads and cemetery gates  
And hungry little ones strolled down Linwood  
On hot summer afternoons  
For free lunches at the colonial school  
Stealing extra peanut butter and jelly bars covered in chocolate  
Returning to the block to find Tío Jorge  
Sitting on his porch in the hot sun  
With a corrugated cartón cartel that read: “Se vende mavi”  
Brown gallons of the sweet mabí root and cinnamon  
Fermenting in the heat

Till my sister woke up one day  
And decided she was no longer Wanda  
She became “Melissa, the luscious kisser”  
Wearing cherries jubilee lipstick  
And we little ones wondered about eyeliner and boys  
Like the day a grown woman walked by smoking a cigarette  
Took one last puff and flicked it  
We picked it up, still lit  
Took it to Titi Haydee’s backyard to experience it  
Broke into the neighbor’s van  
Stole toilet tissue and paper towels  
Lit them on fire  
Laughing, running and hopping  
As the dancing flames chased us

Stealing roses from Afro’s gate  
Fearing getting caught  
From the shootouts he’d start  
In the middle of the block  
While his brother Tito attempted to watch  
But instead leaned into his heroine nod  
As we wondered why he never fell  
And could only think of wobbling weebles  
And how drugs made toys out of people

Little East New York girls with big dreams  
Jumping double dutch with Sleeping Beauty  
Playing ball with Santa Barbara  
Praying not to be lead to temptation  
Singing *O mi Yemaya, quitame lo malo y échalo en el mar*  
To be rid of negativity  
Tempted by tales of sexuality  
Not knowing what it meant

Hearing MC Lyte “talkin’ bout 5\$ crack”  
But not yet knowing just how whack

**East New York Story**

*For Elijah*

Percussive beats blaring from old 70s bocinas  
Bright strobe beaming  
Bouncing rays of light  
Off aluminum foil as wall paper  
That was titi Pilu’s sala  
meets Earth Wind and Fire  
In Black Boricua Funkadelic

Costumed crowd cleared a circle  
Bass pounding within  
Temperatures risin’  
Bodies burned in uproar  
Feet cut across the earth  
Clearing a path to drop and spin on your back  
Palms pounding lifting off the ground  
Propelling you to *freeze* then *rock*  
As you got higher baby.

Battlin’ b-boy brothers  
Windmill legs like machetes  
Slicing through thick body heat  
Fog glowing in the strobe  
Backs, heads spinnin’  
*Something like a phenomenon*  
Two brothers, two sons  
Two cousins, two loved ones

Two teenage títeres to Hollywood  
Who thought you fit the part  
of East New York bad boys  
In another Bronson flick  
Van Sicklen projects turned film set  
Rehearsing for a real life role  
Scripted by what society said  
Boricua boys should be  
Set your hands on a shotgun  
In a game none of you wanted to play  
*With nothing to gain*  
Slammed the stereotype on a table  
To shut out the bullshit  
But a bullet escaped

And it wasn't on the Bronson set  
This was real life, real bullets  
That tore open you brother's chest

Two Brooklyn Boricua Blood brothers  
Delivered to their Hollywood fates  
One in a cell, one in a grave

Years later, my sister still lined her jewelry box  
With torn, crumbled balls  
Of pink, yellow, blue and green toilet tissue  
Used to dry the tears  
Of her boyfriend's accidental death  
While writing prison letters to our cousin, the accidental murderer...  
*Street kid got arrested, had to do some time.*

When our grandmother died  
He was led into Ponce funeral home on Atlantic Ave  
Ankles shackled and handcuffed like our ancestors'  
His long John Travolta hair  
Falling to an old school, outdated brown polyester Saturday Night Fever suit  
The prison guards gave him to wear

I was a teen when he finally got out  
Bad ass bred in the bin  
More beautiful than before  
Dark brown skin, long black hair  
*Vision dream of passion* everyone called Indio  
Ghetto warrior in East New York  
Out on the street then locked up again, then out again  
Locked up beyond bars in a cycle of so-called "correction"  
Dodging 75<sup>th</sup> precinct pigs  
The same ones who took the street  
The day my tía walked over to see what had gone down  
And was told by the vecina  
Que habían matao otro muchacho  
Finally able to get through the crowd  
She saw her lifeless Indio lifted  
Into youthful ancestor sacredness

Years back my brother made me a copy  
Of the Sugar Hill collection I had bought him for Christmas  
Copied every song except the one I wanted  
Cuz he can't bear to hear  
Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five's "Whitelines"  
Too painful to think back  
To an early 80s Halloween Party

And his two B-boy brothers breakin'  
Like robotic, angelic silhouettes  
Against a celestial strobe  
Who defied Hollywood's imposed roles  
Who refused to *pay their toll, sell their souls*  
And instead of títere thugs beaten by Bronson  
Became Brooklyn Boricua Blood Brothers  
Uprockin' in the sky  
To a liberation break beat

### **East New York**

From the Junction  
of the A, L and J  
Above handball courts  
Newsstands, buses and cabs  
From a web of tracks  
The hood shall stretch to the horizon  
To waters  
to garbage dumps turned green hills  
to the light green St Michael's steeple  
and a neighboring smoke stack  
To Kennedy's control tower  
To taking off planes  
Silver bullet trains  
Dart past, dissecting landscapes  
From Highland's hills to Cypress' cemeteries  
Where you have laid countless daughters and sons to rest  
Heroes risen and fallen  
The saved and enslaved  
The shooters and those shot  
The unsundered and those who succumbed

From up here  
In the arms of the sky  
Soaring seagulls flying by  
From Jamaica Bay and the Rockaways  
All seems safe  
As one million nations' flags wave  
Another memorial name sprayed  
On far too many walls

### **Flashback #6**

Occasional flashbacks kick in



As many moving frames per second  
Today's was of concrete  
Of tenements, abandoned factories  
Waterfront warehouses  
Williamsburg to Red Hook  
Crumbling concrete  
Sinister stairwells  
Rooftop views  
Of sky and steel  
Of buildings and bridges  
Of waterways wandering  
Between these islands  
Where the same sun that dared me to leave  
And watch it set from this other island,  
Birthplace of my mother and ancestors,  
Rises and falls  
Same star shining  
Comforting and chastising  
On both sides of el charco  
Crossed and uncrossed

### **First Visit Back**

New York you revealed your truth again  
A city scattered

An inflated subway system that reveals your anxiety and harshness  
Like stepping into a boxing ring  
You take risks each time you enter and exit a train  
However plentiful your supermarkets  
Whatever sales & deals I seldom see  
on the other side of *el charco*  
I have no desire to walk down three flights, three stories  
hike various blocks, brick from the cold, to purchase groceries  
Lug 'em back and climb three flights with pounds of packages in hand

Your snow and cold curtailed my appetite  
I slept in a snow cap, knitted scarf and wrapped a fleece robe around my shoulders  
To battle the draft of my old room  
I've watched my mother's arthritic body struggle up and down those stairs  
Wonder when I go back how does she handle basic shit  
like taking down the garbage, collecting her mail

New York, I've seen your roaches and mice  
I've seen people cling to you like burnt crack to a pipe

They hold on for dear life  
I've seen people buying temporary gratification, unsatisfied  
Abusing their bodies to the point of illness, to the point of death  
I've visited their graves in a whole other community we spread  
Across Cypress Hills cemetery

I've seen you offer jobs of exploitation to the desperate  
While others make jobs out of helping the desperate  
And still others get rich off keeping the desperate desperate  
I've seen you make mules out of the accomplished  
and leave them all jaded, broke and broken in the end  
I've seen cultural arts movements born out of invisibility  
where people battle for recognition  
I've seen trendy art spotlights shined on the privileged pimping our struggles  
While we the sufferers and the innovators remain marginalized  
I've seen activist networks preaching liberation on all fronts,  
arming Olympic arenas where the oppressed battle each other  
in acts of micro and macro aggressions  
of insecurities and complexes of inferiority  
While the oppressor still roams free

I have seen my abuelo's East New York Brooklyn house  
go from the community center of my family  
to empty, decrepit and abandoned,  
to gentrified, rehabilitated and re-inhabited  
by people who don't share our family name

I've seen enough drug money luxury cars parked on this block  
that together can knock down this rotting building  
and erect state of the art affordable housing  
for all that have been locked in poverty here for over 40 years

I've seen love, smothered by cement, sprout from sidewalk cracks  
I've seen a people succumb to a dream they believed in  
that was only ever meant to consume them.

### **Brooklyn Aesthetics**

The aesthetics of survival  
Where life is never meant to last  
Where street struggles  
Have you ascending to the highest vibes  
Of imagining life in another time  
Where afro-crowned women ride panthers on black velvet  
Where the song of acrylic tear-drop-jewels and beads

Welcomed you into Tío Pablo's kitchen  
In his Brownsville apartment  
That he stepped out of each day  
With gold rimmed teeth  
A feathered-fedora hat  
Long, white Johnny-Pacheco-locks flowing beneath  
A gold, jewel-eyed Indio ring on his finger

Ancestral heads of black azabache and red beads  
Dangling from the gold chain round my father's neck  
Single gold feather, hung on the hairs of papi's chest

The aesthetic of the spiritual  
Espiritismo and santos  
Kept in the same arsenal  
As revolvers and rifles  
Boots for head stompin'  
Clean fists for swingin'  
Plaster painted statues of warriors shooting arrows  
Holding shields to the sun  
Perched atop a mountain of coins  
And an occasional folded dollar bill  
Ancestors sit on thrones of bureaus and gabeteros  
Welcomed into spaces and homes by any means necessary  
Because living in these times and walking these streets  
Is a battle never meant to be won  
But if you arm yourself and spirit  
You might just complete this mission before ascending to the next

### **All My Mothers**

She left her birthplace  
Cradled in her mother's arms  
Boarded an Eastern Airlines plane  
In October of 1950  
Just days before revolution spread across her island home  
They listed an address in Hell's Kitchen  
Before settling in East Harlem  
Then landing in East New York  
As Italians fled further east  
Leaving fig trees and grape vines  
In backyards that my abuela used to make wine  
A whole life lived in Brooklyn

Sixty-nine years of memories  
Of loss, grief and suffering  
Thirty-five years in a deteriorating apartment  
Till she was called back home

Sorting through piles of Brooklyn memories  
Packed into Rosa del Monte boxes  
Transported on trucks to colonial cabotage law docks  
Shipped across waters long ago crossed  
My mother boards a flight back to the motherland that witnessed her birth  
And I here, who opened the path years back  
Miss the mother who witnessed my birth  
There is no longer a home base there for me  
All fell away to gentrification  
Most of my family, and I, pushed out

Five years after I landed here  
My mother arrives back in Borikén  
Maletas full of Brooklyn memories  
Loose bricks of all my foundations that I must lay again  
And I, for the first time, realize  
My mother is more Brooklyn than me.