In the early 1990s, musician Bobby Short lobbied the city to redirect traffic around a small brick plaza on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 110th Street. On one side of the plaza, Short erected a 20-foot high bronze memorial to friend and composer, Duke Ellington. The site anchored the southwest corner of Harlem, the Manhattan neighborhood where Duke Ellington reigned as the most influential musician in the capital of black America.

All the photographs are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

But Duke did not face Harlem; his back was turned to the wide boulevards of Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell and Frederick Douglass. Duke gazed beyond Fifth Avenue, down the narrowed alleyway that was 110th Street after the city changed the traffic pattern. Duke gazed into East Harlem, Spanish Harlem, El Barrio (Fig. 1).

Located in a somewhat infamous corner of upper Manhattan, East Harlem is hemmed in by 96th and 125th Streets, Fifth Avenue and the East River. It has always been distinct from the far more well-known Harlem, at

Fig. 1. The Duke Ellington Memorial on Fifth Avenue facing east down Tito Puente Way.
least in the eyes of its own inhabitants, though it has not always been considered a specifically Spanish Harlem. Irish, Italians, Jews and African Americans all took up residence before the post-War mass migration of Puerto Ricans. But it was the Puerto Ricans who staked the most recent claim, overwhelming every other ethnic group by sheer numbers until East Harlem became Spanish Harlem, the other Harlem that would forever compete in a losing battle for municipal attention and economic development.

But it would not take long for the Puerto Ricans of East Harlem to meet the challenge of Duke Ellington’s gaze. Soon after the death of Puerto Rican musical icon, Tito Puente, 110th Street was renamed Tito Puente Way, and plans were set in motion to erect a statue, facing Duke, of Tito and his timbales. The corner of 110th and Fifth Avenue had become a site of aesthetic conflict, a performance of boundary maintenance between Harlem and East Harlem, and between African Americans and Puerto Ricans.

The conflict over Duke and Tito is one of many such sites of aesthetic boundary maintenance enacted by various ethnic groups as they compete for space in the neighborhood. The influx of Mexican migrants in the last decade has also destabilized Puerto Rican dominance, leading to similar aesthetic confrontations related more specifically to graffiti and wall art. Even at the level of cultural institutions, East Harlem is a site of aesthetic conflict as residents fight for greater representation in local museums, and the museums themselves fight for greater representation in the city itself.

Despite the proliferation of media images to the contrary, each of these sites of conflict is enacted aesthetically, rather than violently. The physical terror of previous decades, powerfully portrayed in various monographs and novels (Bourgois 1995; Sexton 1965; Thomas 1967), was acutely individualistic in its ability to alienate and was greatly exacerbated by the crack cocaine epidemic of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The devastations of this physical violence obscured what had always characterized collective experience in East Harlem, that is, aesthetic conflict enacted through performance and visual culture. Street fairs and processions have filled the streets of East Harlem with the sights and sounds of nationalism and ethnic distinction for more than a century. The Puerto Rican art museum, El Museo del Barrio, was established in the 1960s during the reign of the Young Lords and continued to grow during the turbulent 80s and 90s. Public art in the form of murals and graffiti has marked off the built environment for at least as long. Duke and Tito are only the most recent example of aesthetic conflicts that have carved the community of East Harlem into distinct enclaves.

Puerto Ricans, African Americans, Mexicans and others continue to take their turf wars to the streets, but not in the rumble popularized by film and television. Duke and Tito, graffiti artists and muralists, even well-established museums are bound up in the values that overlap and compete for dominance in a diverse urban community like East Harlem. This article explores that competition through the construction and maintenance of competing aesthetic systems in the highly contested public space of East Harlem. Crucial to this interpretation is the understanding that each site of conflicting aesthetics does not merely express deeper cleavages, but is itself a source of conflict. As such, this article argues for a new and more active role for aesthetic analysis in visual anthropology.

**CONFLICTING AESTHETICS**

Objects and performances produced in the context of a particular aesthetic do more than merely encode referents to other more abstract concepts. As Nelson Goodman suggests, art is about making and re-making worlds, and the aesthetic attitude is “less attitude than action: creation and re-creation” (Goodman 1976:242). David MacDougall argues that aesthetics “serves to define a familiar social space and the individual’s sense of belonging, like a lock and its key,” and that an aesthetic of power is an “enactment of power” (1999:6,12). John Dewey was also convinced of the active nature of aesthetics, suggesting that art clarified and concentrated meaning not through contemplation but “by creation of a new experience” (Dewey 1934:132). Robert Plant Armstrong (1975) understood the affecting presence of objects as more than mere symbols, and Alfred Gell (1998) carried this further in his analysis of art as indexes of agency.

In fact, rather than view art as passively encoding referents to more abstract concepts, we may more productively view the process in reverse. Concepts like

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Blackness, Latinidad, ethnicity, and even “Harlem” and “El Barrio,” are not created ex nihilo, they are themselves referents to a contingent collage of lived experience anchored in the objects and performances produced by a culturally specific aesthetic system. Just as ritual reifies the beliefs of religion, and in so doing contributes to those very beliefs, so too these objects and performances reify the abstractions we identify as culture, and in so doing contribute to its content. Aesthetics is shorthand for this ongoing process. Art is often shorthand for these objects and performances.

But how do we locate this process? At what point does it become observable, and as such open to analysis? Similar to Barth’s view of ethnic groups (Barth 1969), I contend that this process of value production is most clearly visible in the boundaries between competing aesthetic systems. Like tectonic collisions, aesthetic systems seem most productive at their edges, throwing up mounds of objects and performances that indicate a site of conflict. In East Harlem, for example, objects and performances that both reify and constitute various aesthetic systems seem to proliferate around site-specific points of conflict, such as the intersection of 110th Street and Fifth Avenue.

MacClancy’s (1997) volume, Contesting Art, offered some hints to this phenomenon, showing how art mediates contested discourses of identity, and Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of art as capital for cultural politics led to an anti-Kantian aesthetic, one that according to Felicia Hughes-Freeland “sets up a contest to establish a system of distinction and value” (1997:487). The contest proceeds by creating and re-creating various versions of the world through objects and performances, while participants struggle over, as Hughes-Freeland puts it, “the power to define appropriateness.” (1997:474).

But Bourdieu, and even MacClancy, were concerned with top-down models of cultural politics, the power of Cultural Aristocrats or colonial officials to define appropriateness for working class or colonial subjects. Bourdieu’s “anti-Kantian aesthetic” still frames all conflict as working class resistance to Kant’s elitist Cartesian framework of disinterested appreciation. In East Harlem, aesthetic conflict concerns the appropriateness of specific objects for specific spaces, Duke Ellington staring into East Harlem, for example, and while power is involved, it is not discretely hierarchical. The struggle subsumes Kantian and anti-Kantian aesthetics in the process of value production, enacted, and not merely represented, by objects and performances.

East Harlem is, in fact, ideally suited to explore these ideas (Fig. 2). Unlike its more well-known namesake, East Harlem never suffered the indignities of real estate
speculation and overbuilding like Central Harlem. Farm land for much of its early history, by the time East Harlem was absorbed into the urban milieu of Manhattan in the late 19th century it came ready-made as an immigrant ghetto. German and Irish Catholics sent to build an elevated train to carry commuters to points north settled into tenements quickly rising in the shadow of the tracks. European Jews, Scandinavians and African Americans followed, and by the early 20th century, “all accounts of East Harlem... grope for adjectives to describe its ethnic diversity” (Bourgois 1995:56).

Italians were the first dominant ethnic group in East Harlem. There were more Italians living between 96th and 125th streets than anywhere else in the world outside of Italy. German and Irish Catholics, who had settled earlier, were ruthless in their discrimination of the Southern Italian immigrants, viewed by many as more “African” than European. But by the 1930s, their numbers overwhelmed every other ethnic claim to the neighborhood, and many of the German and Irish Catholics, as well as European Jews, began to flee East Harlem. This Italian territorial victory would not last long, however, as African Americans moved into the vacancies left by Europeans fleeing the Italian invasion, and, just a decade later, the unprecedented influx of Puerto Ricans overwhelmed even the Italian claim to the neighborhood.

The 1940s and 50s were the decades of legend in the Puerto Rican community. In the era after the second World War, hundred of thousands of Puerto Ricans were encouraged to leave the island for the U.S., and New York City in particular. In the first year after the war, 39,000 Puerto Ricans made the journey with an annual average of 50,000 in the decade to come (Wakefield 1957). According to Dan Wakefield, “By the mid-1950’s, the roughly mile-square area of East Harlem was one of the world’s most densely populated areas. It was estimated that nearly 300,000 people lived in that space... [A] single, dark block... has come to be known by police as ‘the worst block in the city’ from the standpoint of crime and narcotics addiction” (Wakefield 1957:235). Another 586,000 Puerto Ricans would leave the island for New York City in the 1960s (Bourgois 1995).

In 1965, Patricia Cayo Sexton wrote, “East Harlem is now brimming with a mixture of dark and violent people: Puerto Ricans who give it a Spanish accent (41 per cent), Negroes (38 per cent), Italians and others (21 per cent)” (Sexton 1965:9). These “dark and violent people,” which included Puerto Ricans, African Americans and Italians, were apparently sharply divided: “Race and ethnicity underlie much of the open and hidden conflict in East Harlem” (Sexton 1965:13). But, according to Sexton, race and ethnicity were only a pretense to the more entrenched divider, that of debilitating poverty. In 1965, the median family income in East Harlem was $3,700, or about 38% lower than the median for New York City. One in three pregnant mothers received no prenatal care, and infant mortality was 37 per 1,000 live births compared to the city average of 26. Even then, East Harlem was home to more public-housing projects than anywhere else in the city: “one out of three East Harlem residents is now a tenant of the government” (Sexton 1965:23,24,35). But even in the midst of this crushing poverty, Sexton recognized the misleading power of stigma and the city’s “slums.” For Sexton, “the population is diverse and engaging. The street life is more vivid than improvised theater. There is passion and conflict” (Sexton 1965:x).

By the 1980s and 90s, East Harlem had become one of the most stigmatized communities in the city. With the introduction of crack cocaine to the informal urban economy, East Harlem’s notoriety exploded. Made infamous by Bourgois stunning ethnography (1995), the neighborhood was cast as a no man’s land of crime and violence. Between 1984 and 1988, violent crime increased 41% in one of East Harlem’s two police precincts. In fact, 40% became the magic number for East Harlem’s early 90s misery: 40% of East Harlem residents lived below the poverty line (compared to 19% for New York City); 40% of families living in East Harlem lived in public housing projects; and 40% of East Harlem households had no wage or salary income (Bourgois 1995).

A decade later, many of these statistics remain unchanged: 38% of East Harlem residents still live below the poverty line; 40% of households still report no wage or salary income; and while per capita income has increased since 1965 to $12,507, it has actually decreased relative to the median for New York City, which is now almost double that of East Harlem. However, while poverty indicators remain constant, reported crime has decreased dramatically. Since the startling increase reported by Bourgois in the 1980s, crime has actually dropped by as much as 64%. Many credit the New York City Police Department under the Giuliani administration for quelling the violence that most residents still talk about, though it should be noted that these statistics are
based solely on data provided by the NYPD and do not include unreported criminal activity.

With less open violence came the inevitable gentrification that has transformed Central Harlem at a much faster pace. Most streets still boast at least one derelict building, but these are being replaced by new businesses and upscale or mixed income residences at a quickening pace. One census tract in particular, consisting of four square-blocks in the southwestern corner of the neighborhood, tells the story. With a per capita income of $53,039, the residents of census tract 160.02 earn more than four times the East Harlem average, and its residents, 63% of whom are non-Hispanic whites, do not look like the rest of the community. While most East Harlem residents can still point out bullet holes in cracked facades, and still speak of the previous decades in the weary tones of veterans, all agree the neighborhood is changing.

The difference is not just the gradual appearance of downtown money and upwardly mobile but cash poor whites (including the occasional anthropologist), it includes a more drastic shift in the ethnic composition of the community. Since 1990, black and Hispanic residents have maintained a steady proportion of 33% and 56% of East Harlem’s total population respectively. However, as East Harlem has always attracted new immigrants, Mexicans have joined the already well-entrenched Puerto Ricans to radically transform the nationalist divisions of the Hispanic community. Mexicans now make up 10% of the total East Harlem population (up from 3% in 1990), and Puerto Ricans have slipped from 46% in 1990 to 32% in 2000. In real numbers, Mexican and non-Hispanic black residents have both added more than 6,000 new residents, while Puerto Ricans have actually lost more than 7,000. This leaves East Harlem Puerto Ricans at a numerical disadvantage compared to non-Hispanic black residents for the first time since the 1940s, with Mexicans gaining on their position among Hispanics. With open violence a shadow of its former intensity, conflict today is less the terrorism of individual vulnerability, but rather the deepening divisions of ethnic allegiance as East Harlem slips into a well-worn cycle of demographic transformation.

But how to characterize this transformation? Relying on census categories or the rather clumsy “ethnic group” elides the complex nature of identity politics in East Harlem, or any similarly diverse setting. Collapsing “racial,” national and linguistic identifiers, labels like Puerto Rican, Mexican, Hispanic, black and African American are contradictory and in many cases misleading. This is especially so for Puerto Ricans who may or may not identify as Hispanic and/or black, and who may or may not identify with a discrete nationality (Flores 1993, 1999; Urciuoli 1996).

A more productive conceptualization of group identification in this case would be Nicholas Thomas’ “collectivity” (Thomas 1997). Based on his work in Melanesia, and inspired in part by Marilyn Strathern (1988, 1991), Thomas argues: “…collectivities are not social aggregates but more typically images of unity” (Thomas 1997:257). Rather than circumscribe a set of concrete social relationships, a collectivity evokes unity, or even difference, which is a backward kind of unity, through expressive culture. These expressions of unity, or “images” are the objects and performances that constitute a given aesthetic system, or social aesthetic field.

As this article contends, group identification, despite the fluidity of individual self-identification, congeals around aesthetic boundaries, or in Thomas’ terms, collective images of unity. In East Harlem, demographic changes have threatened and transformed various images of unity, leading to conflict over site-specific expressions of collectivity. The result is a proliferation of objects and performances around the fault-lines of contestation—conspicuously aesthetic enactments of territorialism.

**DUKE VERSUS TITO**

Given the recent radical changes in the demographics of East Harlem, it is perhaps not surprising that Puerto Ricans would feel threatened under the bronzed gaze of Duke Ellington, icon of African American music. Lifted high above the street on a platform supported by figures of nude women, Duke Ellington stands regally next to a baby grand piano staring east down 110th Street (Fig. 3). A plaque at the base reads: “A gift to the city of New York from Bobby Short… Dedicated July 1, 1997,” and the design of the traffic circle offers inset benches for sitting at the feet of the musician. Across the narrowed avenue, the other half of the traffic circle is completed, but it remains starkly empty of any similar memorial.

But long before the statue and the recent demographic changes, East Harlem labored under the gaze of the more famous Central Harlem, native or adopted home...
to just about every iconic figure in African American experience. In fact, Duke Ellington was born to middle-class parents in Washington, DC, but it was Harlem that established his unchallenged celebrity as a composer and performer. According to Sexton, “in contrast to such celebrities, East Harlem is plain Jane” (Sexton 1965:3).

This attitude of course overlooks the pantheon of celebrity that East Harlem has contributed to American politics and popular culture. Burt Lancaster and former mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, among others, were all from East Harlem, not to mention Tito Puente himself. But none have managed to distinguish East Harlem from Central Harlem in the popular imagination.

The shadow cast by Central Harlem over El Barrio is a source of constant frustration for local artists and activists who work hard to disassociate themselves from their larger, more influential neighbor. The statue of Duke Ellington, perilously close to the Fifth Avenue border, proved a lightning rod for this frustration, a glaring symbol of Harlem’s cultural dominance. As Cecilia Mendez, a local activist, explained, “They put that statue there on purpose, to threaten us.” Mendez is part of a loose network of concerned activists, mostly Puerto Rican, who take seriously the threat of cultural absorption by Central Harlem. She protested the placement of the statue when Bobby Short lobbied the city for the space, and continues to meet with other local activists to strategize their resistance to the perceived encroachment of Harlem’s influence. Mendez argues that “Duke Ellington faces East Harlem because they are taking over. He hasn’t turned his back on Harlem, he is leading the way forward into East Harlem. It’s like they are saying, ‘You have no culture. Don’t you know what is behind me? You don’t stand a chance.’”

These sentiments are not reserved for current residents. Many of the Puerto Ricans who have moved away from the neighborhood in recent years continue to view East Harlem as the capital of Puerto Rican New York. Ed Morales, in a recent article for the New York Times, explains: “El Barrio...was a magic Spanish phrase that fell easily from my father’s lips, a reference to a place that curiously seemed to belong to us... [and] as more of us moved to various corners of the Bronx, El Barrio increas-
ingly became the source of authenticity” (Morales 2003:1).

When Tito Puente passed away just three years after the installation of the Duke Ellington statue, Puerto Ricans in East Harlem did not hesitate to use their musical icon to defend against the encroachment of Harlem. Born on 110th and Madison Avenue, Tito Puente was more than the most important New York Puerto Rican composer and musician; he was from East Harlem. So it was natural to rename 110th Street, Tito Puente Way (Fig. 4).

"Tito’s family was actually opposed to the idea," explained one of the organizers of the street naming. "Apparently they didn’t want to associate too closely with the neighborhood, but they were there on the dedication day. Everyone was there that day."

I asked if it was merely a coincidence that “Tito Puente Way” ran directly into the Duke Ellington statue: “Well, Tito was born on 110th Street, so that’s why we chose that street. I thought we should try for one of the Avenues, like Harlem has done with theirs, but no one wanted to think that big. Now we are trying to put up the statue, and that, definitely, is meant to balance out the Duke Ellington statue.”

Shortly after the dedication of the Duke Ellington memorial, and before Tito Puente passed away, José Encarnacion, a personal friend of Tito, initiated plans to erect a statue that would face Ellington. As Encarnacion explained to a reporter from a Spanish-language newspaper, “It seems to me that it’s important that we start to have images of Latinos in El Barrio” (Vega 2002:25). With Tito Puente’s death in 2000, Encarnacion’s plans gathered momentum, with community members rallying behind the idea.

Initial plans for the statue were similar to the Duke Ellington memorial, including a bronze likeness of Tito Puente standing behind his signature instrument, a set of
tambale drums. But the design offered by Puerto Rican artist, José Buscaglia Guillermety, differs in one drastic respect. Rather than lift the figure of Puente to the height of Ellington, the statue will be at ground level. To balance the difference in height between the two memorials, a billowing bronze Puerto Rican flag will extend behind and above the figure of Tito Puente, dwarfing his image and matching the height of Duke Ellington (Fig. 5). According to Encarnacion, "That was the artist's input. He felt that Tito took the Puerto Rican flag all over the world, and he wanted to point out the flag. [The artist] is a very nationalist man, and Tito was clear about his flag."

Encarnacion's first move was to enlist the support of the Cultural Affairs Committee of Community Board #11, which represents East Harlem. Responsible for promoting "cultural" activities in the community, East Harlem's Cultural Affairs Committee has also organized some of the most effective protests in the neighborhood, including the recent controversy over El Museo del Barrio (see below). Meetings held in the squat baby blue building on 115th street that houses the volunteer community board office are usually congenial discussions among a handful of both African American and Puerto Rican residents. Encarnacion's plans elicited both enthusiasm and controversy as Puerto Rican committee members were reminded of the conflict over the Duke Ellington statue. "They did that on their side of Fifth Avenue, there was nothing we could do," commented one member. Another, younger Puerto Rican responded, "We need a Puerto Rican on our side of the street!"

Finally, the chair of the meeting, an energetic Puerto Rican who was embroiled in a growing controversy over El Museo del Barrio, declared, "The Tito Puente statue would be a symbolic guardian over East Harlem, holding back Harlem's encroachment."

This site of conflict between Central Harlem and East Harlem - between black America and "Nuyorica" - is not restricted to famous musicians, nor is it only about cultural encroachment and external conflict. Tension between the two communities has festered since Puerto Ricans began arriving en masse in the 1940s. In the 1950s, Wakefield observed in racist language typical of his time, "Like a shadow of their own dark fear, the Puerto Ricans are followed by American Negroes... The Jews of the neighborhood said that East Harlem was no longer desirable because the Puerto Ricans were moving in. Later on many Puerto Ricans said the neighborhood was no longer desirable because the Negroes were moving in" (1957:41). Forty years later, this sentiment is echoed by an African American informant to Philippe Bourgois, "Blacks and Puerto Ricans really don't get along here," as well as a more expressive Puerto Rican informant, "I'm Ku Klux Klan. Ah' kill black people. You know why I hate black people? Because they're black" (1995:45).

Today, African Americans and Puerto Ricans continue to debate the ethnic character of East Harlem and its relationship to Central Harlem. David Givens, president of East Harlem's community board for 15 non-consecutive terms and an African American, argues: "African Americans were here before the Puerto Ricans. When the Irish and Italians moved out, it created a vacuum and the African Americans in Harlem filled that vacuum. Then the Puerto Ricans came. Even today, you look at the housing in the neighborhood, it is predominantly African American."

Indeed, as the recent census indicates, black residents continue to edge out their Puerto Rican neighbors in terms of numerical dominance. While still fewer in number than the total Hispanic population, non-Hispanic black residents outnumber Puerto Ricans by a small but meaningful 2%. Perhaps more importantly, in the northern half of East Harlem, black and Hispanic residents are nearly dead even in their population totals.

Tony and Carla, who moved their family to East Harlem more than fifteen years ago, personify this growing African American population. Tony grew up in California and graduated with a degree in journalism from Arizona State University. After a short internship in Washington DC, and few job prospects in Arizona, Tony moved to New York City to attend the School of Journalism at Columbia University: "I had come to New York with a vision of the Harlem that had once existed. New York and Harlem were what we used to call a Black Mecca for culture and politics and business and activism and thought." His dream was for an apartment on Sugar Hill or Convent Avenue in Central Harlem, but the unpredictability of the New York economy landed him, his wife and three children in a cramped railroad apartment on 114th street in East Harlem. After raising three kids in the neighborhood, Tony still looks to Central Harlem for a sense of belonging. As he explains: "East Harlem is not Harlem. I've never felt completely comfortable, as if I really, truly belong here. When I go to Central Harlem... that's where I feel most at home. Not really over here, except that it's a place to live. There are
a lot of positive things about [East Harlem], but I feel more connected personally... [to] Central or West Harlem.”

Both Tony and Carla speak of East Harlem as a default residence, close enough to the imagined homeland of Harlem where Carla commutes to a job in a thrift store and the family still attends church. According to Carla, “I didn’t even think of East Harlem as separate from Harlem when we moved here.” And even Tony, who today makes a clear distinction between East Harlem and Harlem, described looking at an apartment in “Central Harlem” at 124th Street and Lexington Avenue, well within the boundaries of El Barrio.

When asked about the Duke Ellington statue, Tony replied, “That was a nice touch. I was very proud when they put that up. I remember the first time it had finally been completed. I stood there and inspected it, and tried to understand what all the different symbols were.” But when asked about the statue facing East Harlem, and the implications of cultural encroachment for many Puerto Ricans, Tony said, “I’ve never thought much about it. That sounds a little far-fetched to me. I couldn’t honestly tell you why they faced Duke east, but I don’t think that’s the reason.” Carla mentioned, with some disdain, the figures of nude women that support the figure of Duke and his piano, but offered, “I did think it was interesting that the statue faced east. I didn’t know why they did that, but I noticed it.”

For Carla and Tony, and many other African Americans, East Harlem is simply an annex to Central Harlem. The statue of Duke Ellington is less a challenge to Puerto Rican territory as it is a fitting representation of the Harlem they have always seen as extending beyond Fifth Avenue. As David Givens argues, “The Duke Ellington statue reflects the population around that area. No one faced the statue any certain way.”

Mr. Givens’ interpretation of the Ellington statue and the motivations behind its orientation is no doubt as valid as any other. For some Duke Ellington is welcoming people into Harlem, for others he is plainly threatening invasion into East Harlem. It is telling that no one blames or gives credit to Bobby Short, the sculptor, or any other individual directly involved in erecting the statue who might realistically be held responsible for the direction Ellington faces.

Indeed, pitting Duke Ellington against Tito Puente in this aesthetic confrontation presents a telling irony – both musicians were known for their musical inclusiveness. Tito Puente’s music was a fusion of African and Latin American influences, popularized in the 1940s by the same Afro-Cuban sounds that were influencing Ellington. Puente often listed Duke Ellington as one of his musical heroes. And although Puente was famously proud of his Puerto Rican heritage, some of his best-known songs are arrangements of Duke Ellington compositions.

Ellington also prided himself on a diversity of influences. In fact, one of the original members of his band was a Puerto Rican horn player named Juan Tizol who started playing with Ellington in the 1920s when they were both still in Washington DC. The music popularized by Ellington, which ultimately inspired Puente, was inherently syncretic. This influenced not only Ellington’s compositions, but also his view of society. In a poetic reflection on the diversity of New York City, Ellington writes:

Among its crowds, along its streets, and in its high-piled buildings can be found every mood, sight, and sound, every custom, thought, and tradition, every color, flavor, religion, and culture of the entire earth. It is as if each of the world’s greatest chefs had sent a pinch of his nation’s most distinctive flavoring to contribute to the richness of taste of this great savory pot au feu called New York (Ellington 1973:65).

It is difficult to imagine that Ellington or Puente would have ever faced each other with anything but mutual admiration. But in the conflict erupting around 110th Street and Fifth Avenue, intentionality is largely irrelevant, and agency is assigned reflexively through the statue of Ellington itself. As Thomas observes, objects and performances can often be “taken as images of a national or ethnic collectivity, and their recognition in these terms often elides other meanings” (1997:273). Employing the notion of “framing” to describe how art is interpreted as an “image of unity,” Thomas concludes that “framing in terms of collectivity is therefore... imposed upon the work subsequently, and from the outside” (1997:273). Whether symbolizing a gateway into Harlem, or an encroachment into East Harlem, the Duke Ellington statue is more than either. Inserted into the flow of everyday life, the statue does not merely have meaning, it is itself meaningful experience – a concretization (or bronzing) of Blackness to which East Harlem residents can attach a myriad of competing values. Significantly, the response to this reification of Blackness on East Harlem’s border is not to picket or write editorials or
boycott record stores, but to erect an equal and opposite object—a statue that will reify Latinidad in the form of Tito Puente.

**Writing on the Wall**

But the Duke versus Tito phenomenon is not the only manifestation of aesthetic conflict in East Harlem. Graffiti art has long been associated with urban diversity and territorialization. Tagging anything that stands still is an important act of boundary maintenance, and a highly contested one. Graffiti tends to mediate conflict over disputed borders as artists tag over each other’s work (Austin 2001). In East Harlem, graffiti has colored the neighborhood for years (Fig. 6), but public art in general has extended beyond the more recognizable “tagging” of graffiti writers to include more discrete forms of mural painting (Fig. 7). Many of these muralists start out by completing commissioned works of public art to memorialize deceased relatives and friends. Known as “RIPs” (Rest in Peace murals, Figure 8), these graphic, highly stylized memorials often mark the spot of very public violence, and serve as semi-permanent reminders of loss (Cooper and Sciorra 1994). Other, often independent, works carry more explicitly political themes. Murals declaring Puerto Rican independence or protesting the bombing of Vieques dot the built environment south of 116th Street where the Puerto Rican community is most concentrated (Figs. 9 and 10).

One artist in particular, James de la Vega, dominates this genre. De la Vega has been painting on walls since returning to East Harlem from Cornell University. His early work was focused on RIPs and some celebrity portraits, and included figures like Malcolm X, Biggie Smalls and JFK (Fig. 11). Though most muralists in East Harlem remain anonymous, de la Vega works hard to draw attention to his paintings. In fact, many, especially Puerto Rican, residents complain about his “shameless self-promotion.” To make matters worse, although de la Vega paints many portraits of Puerto Rican politicians and celebrities, he is often criticized for not dealing exclusively in Puerto Rican themes. As de la Vega has turned to more religious and art historical images, criticism has subsided (Fig. 12).

Until he painted a portrait of Pancho Villa.

As mentioned above, Mexican migration into New York and East Harlem has exploded in the last 15 years. In 1990, Mexicans willing to be counted made up only...
Fig. 9. Political mural on 111th Street and Park Avenue.

Fig. 10. Mural connecting Puerto Rican struggle to Cuban Revolution on 105th Street and 3rd Avenue.

Fig. 11. John F. Kennedy and Self-Portrait by James de la Vega on 104th Street and Lexington Avenue.

Fig. 12. The Last Supper by James de la Vega on 106th Street and Lexington Avenue.
0.8% of the total New York City population compared to the healthy 12% enjoyed by Puerto Ricans. Ten years later, not only had the Puerto Rican population slipped to 10% of the total, the Mexican population willing to be counted had tripled to more than 2% of the population.

In East Harlem, these figures are even more dramatic. Since 1990, the Mexican population in East Harlem has increased by more than 350%, while the Puerto Rican population has decreased by 17%. Based on the latest census, there are now more than 10,000 Mexicans living in East Harlem, which does not include undocumented migrants who refused to participate in the count. Undocumented migrants fill the remaining tenement buildings, and resourceful entrepreneurs have begun to open Mexican groceries, restaurants and record stores. Most of the service sector employment in East Harlem has been taken over by Mexicans; they work in the laundromats, grocery stores and restaurants, and Puerto Ricans have made no secret of their frustration. According to David Givens, “Most of the Puerto Ricans I talk to aren’t complaining about blacks from Harlem, they’re complaining about Mexicans opening too many businesses and taking away jobs.”

Arturo personifies the relatively recent influx of Mexican nationals. Though he remains undocumented, Arturo has lived in East Harlem for more than 13 years, and raised two children who now attend local public high schools. He started out in an overcrowded apartment on 110th street at the height of the crack cocaine epidemic. Dodging addicts, syringes and vials, he shepherded his children to school and commuted downtown to a diner where he has worked as a cook ever since. His wife, Flora, works in a local laundromat with several other undocumented Mexicans under a Puerto Rican manager and white owner. They have since moved to their own apartment on 106th street, and have applied for citizenship through a recent amnesty program. Reluctant to talk in the laundromat where he helps his wife after work for fear of reprisals from Puerto Rican patrons, Arturo and I began to meet in one of the dozens of Mexican restaurants that have appeared in recent years. Over the loud Ranchero music playing on the jukebox, Arturo complained, “The Puerto Ricans are always yelling at my wife in the laundry, telling her to speak English, and asking the manager why they hired an Indian.” Arturo and Flora are both from southern Mexico, and share the characteristic features of the region in contrast to the broad range of Puerto Rican phenotypes. Arturo continued, “It makes me so angry, because who are they? They just have this little island, and we have a history and a culture that is deeper and more powerful than theirs, even greater than the United States.”

This tension between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans is one manifestation of an ongoing process in American media that some have called “pan-Latino” or the “Latinization” of culture (Flores 1999; Davila 1999). It refers to the essentialist tendency to collapse disparate national identities under one ethnic designation, obscur-
ing important differences like those expressed by Arturo above. This process not only labels East Harlem, or El Barrio, as a “Latino neighborhood,” to the exclusion of many African Americans, Chinese and others, but it also forces national allegiances, like those of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, to shore up internal ethnic boundaries against the essentializing tide of outsiders, perhaps even more forcefully than they would otherwise. As Arlene Davila observes, it is relatively common to hear Puerto Ricans complaining about this trend, “suggesting that [East Harlem’s] days as a key reference for Puerto Ricans in the city were numbered” (Davila 1999:180).

One way to shore up these internal ethnic boundaries is to maintain the steady flow of objects and performances that reify a particular aesthetic. Tellingly, the conflict brewing between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans is often expressed through complaints about Mexican entrepreneurs, especially on 116th street where new restaurants, record stores and groceries seem to have proliferated most visibly (Fig. 13 and 14). While usually articulated as an economic encroachment, as the quote from David Givens shows above, many Puerto Ricans complain about the way 116th street “looks” now that the colors of the Mexican flag embellish most of the businesses. As Joe Austin points out in an insightful comparison between commercial signage and graffiti, “These [signs] are directly visible extensions of individual corporate identities into the new shared public spaces of the streets” (Austin 2001:39).

Puerto Ricans themselves have long asserted their own collective identity into the shared public space of the street. Along with the various murals that promote Puerto Rican nationalism, Puerto Rican flags cover windows, cars and businesses with an unavoidable ubiquity (Fig. 15 and 16). But most famously, urban casitas still mark off various side streets as distinctly Puerto Rican (Fig. 17). Built by early migrants to the city and maintained by children and grandchildren, the Puerto Rican casita serves as social-club and boundary marker for exclusive cliques in “micro-neighborhoods” throughout East Harlem. Though technically public spaces, the casitas house exclusive clubs centered around extended but bounded kin networks. Often quite elaborate, the small wood out-buildings are thrown up on empty lots in the same way that community gardens dot many other neighborhoods in New York. Built to emulate the...
peasant farmhouse of rural Puerto Rico, the casitas provide a physical connection to an island many residents will never see firsthand. The changing aesthetic of 116th Street, especially in the built environment, is in direct competition to the half-century of Puerto Rican dominance of “shared public space,” as Puerto Rican casitas festooned with Puerto Rican flags and blasting Salsa tunes clash with Mexican taquerías waving Mexican flags and pumping out the Ranchero.

So when James de la Vega brushed the image of Pancho Villa, the famous Mexican revolutionary, onto an East Harlem apartment building, not surprisingly, he met with some resistance. Mexican tenants, in fact, dominated that building in particular, which happened to be near de la Vega’s studio. His decision to paint a small portrait of Pancho Villa was a way to welcome the immigrants, and in a way, to mark their territory. Within 24 hours it was obliterated from the wall. According to de la Vega, Puerto Ricans, angered by the homage to Mexicans, painted over his portrait.

This reaction was in many ways expected. Public art in East Harlem places the emphasis on the public, expecting some interaction with the people on the street. According to de la Vega, “My work is in constant dialogue with people; it interrupts their space and forces them to respond and question their own feelings about various issues. It has also been interesting to see how different ethnic groups in the city respond to and interpret the imagery” (de la Vega, unpublished material). Indeed, in the summer of 2002, an anonymous vandal blacked out the faces on many of de la Vega’s murals. The motive for the extensive de-facing is still unknown, but in typical de la Vega style, he quickly painted a simple smiley face over every marred image (Figs. 18 and 19).

But the Mexican presence in East Harlem would not, in the end, need a Puerto Rican to help mark their territory. Not long after Pancho Villa was painted over, a new mural went up just north of 116th Street. A Mexican truck-driver turned tattoo artist and muralist nicknamed “El Guerro” spread a grand salute to the Zapatista movement of southern Mexico across the exterior wall of a Mexican restaurant and dance club (Fig. 20). One of the first such murals painted by a Mexican artist in East Harlem, the work is in the great tradition of Mexican political muralists like Diego Rivera.

The masked Zapatista and revolutionary slogans are iconic references to a struggle familiar to Mexicans, though not necessarily to Puerto Ricans, African Ameri-
Fig. 20. Mexican mural honoring the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico by El Guerro on 117th Street and 2nd Avenue.

cans or any other local ethnic group. Like the Duke Ellington statue or even the other murals that color the community, the Zapatista mural does not bait conflict by overtly resisting some other group. It is more clearly an act of boundary maintenance, marking the territory of Mexican settlement in Spanish Harlem. And like the Ellington statue, intentionality is largely irrelevant, the mural is a reification of Mexican identity as much as the Mexican storefronts on 116th street to which local residents can attach competing values. Since completing the work, El Guerro has returned to Mexico, but the mural remains, curiously untouched by vandals.

Back on Fifth Avenue, another site of aesthetic conflict is brewing. El Museo del Barrio, by now a renowned museum of Latin American art, is currently embroiled in local controversy over its representation of Puerto Ricans. The museum began in 1969 as a Puerto Rican art museum and educational institution in the heart of the neighborhood. Occupying several locations around 104th street and Lexington Avenue, the fledgling El Museo asserted itself as a distinctly Puerto Rican institution. In 1977, the museum moved to a new space on Fifth Avenue and 104th street. That same year, El Museo joined the Cultural Institutions Group of the City of New York, and a year later, became a founding member of the Museum Mile Association.

The move to Fifth Avenue foreshadowed an ideological shift in the curatorial focus of the museum to include the broader category of “Latin American artists” in their original mission to showcase local Puerto Rican works. In fact, in the 1990s, the museum rewrote their mission statement to include the phrase: “to present and preserve the art and culture of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States” (Navarro 2002). According to the museum’s website, this broad focus has broadened further, “having expanded its mission to represent the diversity of art and culture in all of the Caribbean and Latin America.” As Arlene Davila has insightfully pointed out, this shift is part of a much larger process of “Latinization” in the United States that not only homogenizes Latino and Latin American artists into a marketable “cultural” package, but also tends to marginalize groups like New York-born Puerto Ricans who must negotiate an ambiguous and weakened sense of nationalism: “U.S. Puerto Rican and other Latino artists who are not identified as belonging to the national imagery of a specific Latin American country are not the largest beneficiaries of the current promotion of Latin art... They remain forever ‘minority’ rather than ‘national’ artists” (Davila 1999:189).

The still open wound of local Puerto Rican community activists over the gradual transformation of El Museo was exacerbated when the museum recently announced its search for a new director. Since its founding, and despite changes in its curatorial focus and the composition of board members, the museum’s director has always been closely tied to East Harlem or at least the wider Puerto Rican community. Fearing a final blow to the community’s influence over El Museo,
the Cultural Affairs Committee of Community Board #11 initiated the “We Are Watching You” campaign to pressure the museum to hire someone in tune with East Harlem. In a press release issued by the community board, the “We Are Watching You” campaign demanded: “Substantive community representation on El Museo del Barrio’s board of directors in the search and selection of a new director” (Community Board #11 August 15, 2002). More specifically, the campaign made clear its agenda to reclaim El Museo as a Puerto Rican institution: “Among our demands… Policies to promote local Puerto Rican artists, culture and history, and preservation efforts for Puerto Rican art and artifacts” (Community Board #11 August 15, 2002). Discussion boards on one local website, East-Harlem Online, expressed the fears of many Puerto Ricans: “It seems that Puerto Ricans can have nothing to call their own. Why do we have to share an institution we created with anyone? El Museo was founded with certain intentions and by Puerto Ricans;” “What people in the streets are telling me is that they want someone who represents them. They tell me that the Studio Museum has an African American in charge, that other ethnic institutions have ‘one of their own’ in charge. And people in the streets ask rhetorically ‘what, are we not good enough to run our own organizations?’” According to one artist quoted in the New York Times, “The threat of El Museo losing its identity as a Puerto Rican institution is very critical for us” (Navarro 2002).

In November of 2002, El Museo announced the appointment of Mr. Julian Zugazagoitia. Born and raised in Mexico, Mr. Zugazagoitia is not only El Museo’s first non-Puerto Rican director, he represents a connection to that other burgeoning Hispanic population in East Harlem – one that has already met with strong resistance from the Puerto Rican community. As one contributor to East-Harlem Online’s discussion boards observed, “I think he will fit right in our community. Have you not noticed that our neighbors and friends ARE Mexican? Do I detect a little xenophobia?”

The controversy surrounding El Museo embodies the struggle to establish an image of unity in the face of cultural homogenization. The organized protest, which included marches, music and painted signs, was an act of aesthetic boundary maintenance on the part of Puerto Ricans hoping to re-establish their social aesthetic field over at least a portion of East Harlem. But more than the physical act of protest, the desired result would re-establish El Museo as a discrete, institutionalized version of the public art that colors the walls around El Barrio. And much like the planned memorial to Tito Puente, El Museo would stand as a sentinel on the physical border of East Harlem, Fifth Avenue, a gateway to territory long marked by the local Puerto Rican aesthetic.

But there is more at work here. The Museum of African Art, long housed in SoHo, recently moved to Queens in preparation for its new home in a purpose-built facility. That facility is planned for a vacant lot opposite the Duke Ellington statue at 110th Street and Fifth Avenue – on the East Harlem side of the Avenue (Fig. 21).

As early as 2000, the Museum of African Art’s president, Elsie McCabe, began laying the groundwork for the relocation to 110th Street and Fifth Avenue. This involved establishing ties with the various committees of Community Board #11 as well as attending community events. At one such event, a “Community Forum on Culture” to discuss the then impending move of the Museum of the City of New York to the Tweed Courthouse downtown, McCabe bemoaned the drain of cultural institutions from upper Manhattan. Referring to the plans for the Museum of African Art to take up residence at 110th Street, McCabe shared her desire to have her children experience institutions like the Studio Museum, the Schomburg Center, El Museo, the Museum of the City of New York, and the African Art Museum without leaving the area. Careful to respect the territorialism of East Harlem residents, McCabe did not suggest that all of these institutions were part of one “neighborhood,” but the implication that these institutions all share the same “cultural space” echoes the response of other African American residents quoted above.

The plan for relocating of the Museum of African Art to East Harlem has received scant attention when compared to the controversy surrounding the new director of El Museo del Barrio. The public relations officer for the Museum of African Art contends that the relocation will not occur until after 2005, and that any discussion of the specifics of the plan would be premature. As those plans formalize, they will no doubt experience similar levels of conflict and resistance from the community. According to preliminary concepts for the new facility, the multi-million dollar, glass-encased structure will tower over Duke, and by then perhaps Tito, no doubt exacerbating the sense of cultural encroachment. Perhaps it is not surprising that Puerto Ricans would choose this moment to reclaim El Museo as a distinctly Puerto Rican institu-
In a memoir published shortly before his death, Duke Ellington writes, “To keep the whole thing clear, once and for all, I don’t believe in categories of any kind” (Ellington 1973:452). Ellington was commenting on his disdain for categories in music, but the sentiment could apply to his view of cultural differences as well. Despite being the vanguard of black cultural encroachment to many Puerto Ricans in East Harlem, Ellington was often criticized for his relatively low profile in regard to race relations. As one journalist writes in the 1930s, “He has purposely kept himself from any contact with the troubles of his people or mankind in general...he has never shown any desire of aligning himself with forces that are seeking to remove the causes of these disgraceful conditions” (Tucker 1993:120). Like Ralph Ellison and others of his generation, Ellington preferred to let his art speak for itself, though this was often interpreted as a lack of concern. As Ellington would comment, “People who think that of me...haven’t been listening to our music...The best way for me to be effective is through music” (Tucker 1993:366-367). Ellington embraced without politicizing his own identity as a black performer.

For at least one community activist in East Harlem, it is precisely this emphasis on aesthetics that has given Central Harlem such a competitive advantage in local politics. Debbie Quinonez, chairperson of the Cultural Affairs committee for East Harlem and leader of the “We Are Watching You Campaign,” believes East Harlem has a lot to learn from Central Harlem’s focus on the arts. Conceding Central Harlem’s political influence, Quinonez argues: “Central Harlem is better organized because they put cultural affairs and the arts first. Culture was the foundation for every other issue in Harlem. East Harlem has always viewed cultural issues as incidental to more important political views. This has enabled Harlem to have the perception of being on point, better prepared, in city politics.”

Quinonez’s statement sums up much of what this article argues in the preceding pages; that is, the power of art, objects and performances, to enact difference and embody power. More specifically, this article argues that these phenomena are site-specific, proliferating around the boundaries of discrete aesthetic fields, or collective images of unity.

But as a metaphor for visual anthropology, Quinonez’s statement proves useful as well. Anthropology has also

Fig. 21. 110th Street and Fifth Avenue, future site of the Museum of African Art.
often viewed aesthetics as incidental to more important political views, neglecting the role aesthetics plays in contextualizing politics – making conflict site-specific through objects and performances. Visual anthropology has emerged in recent decades to serve as a corrective to this rather glaring blind spot in the ethnographic record. Two flagship journals of the sub-field, Visual Anthropology Review and Visual Anthropology, include the study of art or the anthropology of art as part of their editorial mission, and two recent edited volumes include cross-cultural aesthetics under the rubric of visual anthropology (Taylor 1994; Banks and Morphy 1997).

None of this recent "rethinking" of visual anthropology has diminished its emphasis on the techniques and analysis of film, video or still photography (Hockings 1995; Devereaux and Hillman 1995; Collier 1967), but visual anthropology could more productively encompass the latent but re-emerging interest in aesthetic analysis in part because aesthetic analysis, at least in terms of visual phenomena, is an unavoidable byproduct of capturing images on film. The fetishization of technology that seems to drive visual anthropology and the business of recording images obscures the inherently narrative aspects of visual data (Hockings 1998). As MacDougall observes: "Visual anthropology is not about the visual per se but about a range of culturally inflected relationships enmeshed and encoded in the visual" (1997:288). The films of anthropologists and the visual systems of their informants both enmesh and encode relationships in the visual, the only real difference involves recording technology. The narrative aspects of motion and still photography, which visual anthropology has so carefully elaborated, reflect a similar narrative recorded in the objects and performances of any aesthetic system.

The public art of East Harlem, especially as it reveals the unfolding narrative of ethnic conflict, is part of an elaborate aesthetic system best translated by those trained in the narrative of images. Visual anthropology not only provides a theoretical context in which to pursue that translation, it also provides an Archimedean space from which to leverage the discipline of anthropology as a whole. To appropriate Harlem's alleged strategy for urban expansion, we might do well to take the radical position of placing the arts first, only to realize that aesthetics was the foundation for every other issue.

NOTES

1. The use of "ethnic group" in this context subsumes "racial," linguistic and regional/national identification. This rather inadequate essentialism will be critiqued in subsequent sections of the article.
2. Bourgois reported statistics for the period between 1984 and 1988 in the 25th Precinct, which extends into Central Harlem. For the years between 1993 and 2002, both the 25th and 23rd Precincts, which include all of East Harlem, reported decreases of 64% and 58% respectively in reported crimes (murder, rape, robbery, assault, larceny and grand larceny).
3. In this article, though still problematic, the various labels attributed to "collectivities," including Mexican, Puerto Rican and African American, are based on a consensus of informants' own terminology. Exceptions to this terminology are the references to demographic statistics where census categories are used to avoid confusion.
4. In the interest of confidentiality, some informants' names have been changed.
5. Puerto Ricans born in New York are often referred to as "Nuyorican" by Puerto Ricans who've never left the island. "Puerto Rican New York" is an awkward attempt to express the same unique status without the implied insult. However, many Puerto Ricans have embraced the term Nuyorican, as evidenced in the famous Nuyorican Poets Café in the Lower East Side. My use of "Nuyorica" in subsequent pages is meant to evoke a sense of place that is connected to this contested status of New York-born Puerto Ricans.

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