



# New York City Latina/o

## I. History and Social Context

Latinos (people of Latin American descent living in the United States) comprise more than one-fourth of the population of New York City, the largest and the most densely populated city in the United States. Puerto Ricans have long been the dominant Latino population. However, census numbers show steady and strong growth in the number of Dominicans and Mexicans living in New York, speculating that those numbers will surpass the Puerto Rican population by the year 2023.



New York City saw its first notable Puerto Rican immigration as early as the mid-nineteenth century. In 1917 the “Jones-Shaforth Act” granted U.S. citizenship to residents of Puerto Rico, which resulted in migration to New York. After the Great Depression and World War II, the 1950’s saw the advent of affordable air travel. It was this time period which saw the largest migration of Puerto Ricans to the city. Literally thousands of Puerto Ricans left the island in search of a better life, settling in the South Bronx, East Harlem, and Brooklyn. The most famous of the Puerto Rican “barrios” is East Harlem, which soon came to be known as Spanish Harlem. Puerto Rican influence on food, language, and the arts is abundant in New York City. Perhaps one of the most famous artistic havens is the “Nuyorican Poet’s Café” located in the East Village. Started in the 1970’s by poets Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Bittman “Bimbo” Rivas, and Lucky Cienfuegos, this café is a center for creative activity. The popular term Nuyorican has been embraced by Puerto Ricans living in New York and is a distinguishing term from the “Boricuas” living in Puerto Rico.



Location of The Heights and Spanish Harlem

Again, while the Puerto Rican population is currently dominant in the city there is a change happening. Dominican, Mexican, Ecuadorian, and Colombian populations are on a significant rise. There are definite cultural, ethnic and racial distinctions in these groups; however, the heavy influences of the Spanish language and the distinct New York accent allow for a significant amount of similarities in the New York Latina/o dialects. We will focus on what is known as the “Nuyorican” sound; however, other examples of New York Latina/os will be used as well.

*Census population numbers come from "Latino Data Project: NEW YORK CITY'S LATINO POPULATION IN 2006," by Laird W. Bergad (Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies, City University of New York, November 2007.)*



## II. Sound Placement

*Where the sound “lives” in the mouth.*

Like the New York City dialect, placement for NY Latino dialect is distinctly in the lower jaw, with the jaw and lips moving a lot during speech. Additionally, you will hear a strong nasal quality. Be careful not to let the sound settle in or tighten the throat.

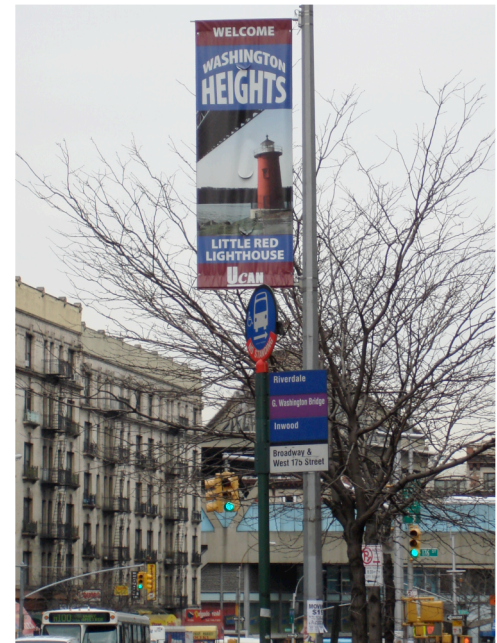
## III. Intonation Pattern

*Musicality, lilt, inflection and stress.*

The New York sound fits many of the American stereotypes of speech: Pitch drops severely at the end of a phrase often resulting in vocal fry, volume tends to be rather loud, and speakers are commonly considered brash or outspoken. These characteristics are all apparent in the NY Latino dialect. The pitch may jump around, there is a distinct nasal quality and the rate of speech is quite fast. There is also a great deal of linking of words and dropping sounds during speech, which is influenced by both the New York dialect and the Spanish language. Additionally, the urban sounds of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) have also influenced the dialect.

Factors including fluency in English, social class, and education will affect the dialect. There is also a range of nasal quality in the speakers. Puerto Rican actress Rosie Perez is famous for her nasal Brooklynese sound. Born in the Bronx, Puerto Rican actress/singer Jennifer Lopez has far less of the nasal quality. Born in Colombia, fast-talking actor/writer John Leguizamo was raised in Queens and demonstrates most of the characteristics mentioned. Listen for the open vowels that are taken from the Spanish language. Also, the pliable tongue which is able to produce sounds like the Spanish trilled-R (rr) aide in giving the speaker a quick moving pace to their speech.

The energy in New York City is palpable. Spanish Harlem, in particular, is full of the rhythms of the history, culture, and art of its people. It is the home to the work of timbalero Tito Puente. It is the harsh reality of Piri Thomas' autobiography *Down These Mean Streets*. It boasts El Museo del Barrio and countless murals painted on the sides of buildings. There are Dominican bodegas (convenience stores) and Puerto Rican restaurants. The harshness of the city and the economics of “El Barrio” translate into the sounds of the dialect.



Washington Heights  
or “The Heights”

#### IV. Helpful Hints

In order to find the lower pitch and a more open resonant space, it is often useful to imagine your character is extremely stupid. For some odd reason, people are usually comfortable lowering their pitch and reducing tension when assumptions are made about lower intelligence. Once the tension is released and the pitch dropped, the assumptions regarding the IQ of the character may be readjusted.



A building mural in Spanish Harlem

One of the aspects of the dialect that can be difficult to grasp is the placement of sound in the jaw. It's considered rude to talk while you are chewing, but it may help you to find the placement for this dialect. Chewing will help to open the jaw further and get it moving very actively while talking. Don't forget to include the nasal quality (depending on the character that you are portraying).

Another way to drop the placement into the lower jaw is to pull the lower lip forward and down as you speak, as though you have a fat lower lip.

Remember that depending on the character (i.e. where they were born and raised, the level of education, and social class) you will change the influence of Spanish language, AAVE, and the New York dialect. For example, Maria in *West Side Story* would tend to have more of a Puerto Rican influence than anything else. Her sounds will differ from the other Puerto Ricans in the play that have been in Manhattan for a while. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, it is helpful to realize the harshness of the sounds for a character like Norca in *Our Lady of 121<sup>st</sup> Street*. The variety of samples included on this download will help you to distinguish these differences in characters.



## V. Sound Substitutions

*Changes in individual speech sounds (from a Neutral American dialect). Listen carefully to the recordings that will guide you through this section. The phonetic symbols are decoded in the shaded boxes.*

### Consonants:

1. a) The [ɹ] is like most American dialects at the beginning of a word, when following a consonant sound or between two vowel sounds (even if the vowel sounds are in adjacent words and the [ɹ] is reinserted. This “linking-R” should, in fact, be more strongly associated to the beginning of the word that follows rather than simply being reinserted where it belongs in neutral American speech.):

*red, rules, Ralph, running;  
bring, approximately, trying, strong, retrieve;  
very, around, plural, parish, narrow;  
powerof, bearon, wireit, fartheralong*

[ɹ] = red

- b) The [ɪ] is dropped (elongating the vowel before) or is replaced by [ə] when it comes after a vowel sound and is followed by a consonant sound, or ends a word:

[ɪ] = *fear, cheer, appear*  
[ɛɪ] = *fair, chair, rare*  
[ʊɪ] = *lure, sure, tour*  
[aɪ] = *fire, tired, admire*  
[aʊɪ] = *our, sour, flower*  
[ɑɪ] = *far, parson, dark*  
[ɔɪ] = *chore, pour, or*  
[ə] = *answer, survive, murmur*

[ə] = above

- c) A light R-sound remains & the lips are more rounded for [ɜː]:

[ɜː] = *fur, her, murmur*

[ɜː] = her

- d) Sometimes the [ɹ] is inserted into a word or a phrase where it does not appear in either the spelling or in neutral American pronunciation:

*saw him=saw-r him; the idea of= the idea-r of*

**Practice:** I was sure the chair appeared tired at the top of our meeting.  
It will be far too dark for that if you're short on lights or candles.  
The daughter of the senator will answer the questions.  
Her murder caused further concern for personal safety.  
I got the idear of making them fit by sawr-ing them in half.



2. [ŋ] can become [n] or [ŋg]:  
*driving, having, singing, going, nothing, anything;*  
*ringer, singer, hanger, Long Island*

[ŋ] = ring

**Practice:** Something about driving this long is annoying.

3. [θ], [ð], [t] and [d] are dentalized. This means that the tongue pops on the back of the upper teeth (instead of touching the gum ridge behind the teeth for the T- and D-sounds, or going between the upper and lower teeth for the TH-sounds).:
- theme, thing, thistle, nothing, myth, bathhouse;*  
*these, them, there, bathing, scythe, breathe, the;*  
*tell, total, toad, Terry; don't, drink, dairy, Dave*

[θ] = thing  
[ð] = this

**Practice:** All three of his brothers over there look tired and dirty.

Often [t] and [d] at the end of a word are dropped or replaced by [ʔ] (a glottal stop):

*lost, don't, visit, at, eight, tourist, parents, that's;*  
*old, advanced, sound, moved, kids, raised*

[ʔ] = \_uh-\_oh:  
*airflow is stopped at  
the vocal folds for a  
moment*

**Practice:** The first thing I lost when I moved was a plant my parents raised.

4. A T-sound between two vowels becomes a D-like [ɾ], as in most American accents. It can also be dropped completely and become a glottal [ʔ]:
- butter, beautiful, Manhattan, what do you want, forget about it*

[ɾ] = butter

**Practice:** You'd better wait a while until he can forget about it.

5. [l] pulls back in the throat to become [ɫ] or may become [w] at the end of a word:
- love, laugh, lucky, like, below, along, little, feel, still, cool*

**Practice:** I'd like to refill these pill bottles, lady.

6. [h] may be dropped, especially before [ju]:
- humor, humidity, huge, human, come here, him, need help*

[ju] = you

**Practice:** But he never said how huge he was!





7. Voiced consonants may become unvoiced. This is especially true at the ends of words and with the consonant sounds [z] and [ʒ]:

[ʒ] = pleasure  
[ʃ] = ship

*rob, sad, pig, have, breathe;  
has, please, choose, houses, classes;  
beige, pleasure, measure, Asian, closure*

**Practice:** He still has an accent from the years he spent taking classes in Asia.

### **Vowels:**

*Some vowel sounds may be short or clipped due to the Spanish language influence.*

1. [ɑ] becomes [a] (adding slight lip rounding):  
*father, swan, llama, cop, not, God*

[ɑ] = father

**Practice:** My mom saw your father and his dog in the park.

2. [ɔ] is elongated with extra lip rounding to become [oə]:  
*saw, all, awful, law, caught, lost, walk, cloth*

[ɔ] = saw

**Practice:** He almost got caught, cause they saw all of it.

3. The tongue flattens for [æ] becoming [ɛə]:  
*cat, math, grad, ask, dance, answer*

[æ] = ash  
[ɛ] = end

**Practice:** For the last time, I can't dance with you.

### **Diphthongs:**

1. [aɪ] may become [ɒɪ] and sometimes [a]:  
*my, surprise, aisle, smile, rhyme, high*

[aɪ] = my  
[ɒ] = offer

**Practice:** I think it's a fine time to beat up a mime.



2. [eɪ] becomes [ei]:  
ache, chafe, pay, aid, weigh, amaze, aim

[eɪ] = pay  
[i] = fee

**Practice:** We had a great day but we couldn't stay.

3. [ɔɪ] becomes [ɔi]:  
boy, oil, voice, point, join, employ

[ɔɪ] = boy

**Practice:** My employer's voice is so annoying.

## VI. Alternate Pronunciations

*Common words that may have surprising pronunciations. Don't be confused by the phonetics; the words will be pronounced on the recording.*

ask	[ɛəsk] or [ɛks]	Mary	[ˈmɛəri]
Bariqua	[bəˈrikuə]	merry	[ˈmɛri]
because	[bəˈkɔz] or [kəz]	milk	[mɛlk]
didn't	[ˈdɪʔn]	of	[ə]
going to	[gənə]	picture	[ˈpɪtʃə]
Greenwich	[ˈɡrɛnɪtʃ]	Puerto Rico	[ˈpwɛɪto ˈriko] or [ˈpoɪtə ˈriko]
gyro	[ˈdʒɹuɪo]	quarter	[ˈkɔərə]
happen	[ˈhɛpən]	recognize	[ˈrɛkənɪz]
Houston	[ˈhaʊstən]	something	[ˈsʌmpʔn]
hundred	[ˈhʌnəd]	street	[stri:t]
jewelry	[ˈdʒuɪ]	Stuyvesant	[ˈstɹɪvəsənt]
let's	[ləs]	temperature	[ˈtɛmpərətʃə]
Long Island	[lɒŋ ˈɡwɪlənd]	twenty	[ˈtwɛni]
Manhattan	[mænˈhætən]	you	[ju] or [juz] or [jə]
marry	[ˈmæri]		

These materials may not be duplicated or distributed without the consent of the authors. In order to distribute these materials to a larger group or for information on coaching accents for actors, please contact Michelle Lopez-Rios or Jim Johnson for further details:

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## VII. Additional Practice Material

*When learning an accent, it is most useful to listen to recordings of native speakers. This section provides a brief list of scripts, films, television programs that may be helpful for further study.*

### Scripts:

Alám, Juan Shamsul, *Zookeeper*  
Piñero, Miguel—*Short Eyes, Sun Always Shines for the Cool*  
Rivera, José—*Marisol, The House of Ramon Iglesia,*  
Guirgis, Stephen Adly—*Our Lady of 121<sup>st</sup> Street, Little Flower of East Orange, Jesus Hopped the A Train*  
Miranda, Lin-Manuel—*In the Heights*

### Film, Television, Audiobooks:

OZ—HBO series with Rita Moreno and David Zayas  
John Leguizamo: *Empire, Carlito's Way, Mambo Mouth, Freak, Sexaholic*  
Jennifer Lopez: *Maid in Manhattan, Money Train*  
Rosie Perez: *Fearless, White Men Can't Jump*

## New York City Latina/o sound files:

*Featuring Accent Help coach Michelle Lopez-Rios*

01 Intro

02 Consonants

03 Vowels

04 Diphthongs

05 Words

06 Wrap up

*Speakers recorded by Michelle Lopez-Rios,  
Marissa Ramirez and Amelia Rico.*

*All recordings ©2008 Michelle Lopez-Rios  
& Jim Johnson*

07 Nuyoricana Female reading

08 + her conversation

09 NY Hispanic Male reading

10 + his conversation

11 Nuyoricana Female reading

12 + her conversation

13 NY Dominican Female reading

14 + her conversation

15 Nuyoricana Female reading

16 + her conversation

17 Puerto Rican Female reading

18 + her conversation

19 Puerto Rican Male conversation

20 Nuyoricana Female Spanish reading

21 NY Dominican Female Spanish reading



**The English Reading:**

These	Wash	Are
Things	Bottle	About
Bait	Ball	Avoid
Get	Lost	Quarter
Ready	Roar	Burn
Bat	Button	Fear
And	Going	Share
End	Butcher	Par
Ant	Coupon	Pour
Ask	Buying	Poor
Aunt	Hour	
Father	Our	

**The Rainbow Passage**

*When the sunlight strikes raindrops in the air, they act as a prism and form a rainbow. The rainbow is a division of white light into many beautiful colors. These take the shape of a long round arch, with its path high above, and its two ends apparently beyond the horizon. There is, according to legend, a boiling pot of gold at one end. People look, but no one ever finds it. When a man looks for something beyond his reach, his friends say he is looking for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.*

**The Spanish Reading:**

agua	anoche	calló
gente	chocolate	cayo
que	cuanto	corazón
un gato	los canos	plaza
un queso	cada	próximo
un hueso	casa	examen
hombre	caza	Quixote
ella	cara	México
bella	caro	pero
amarillo	carro	perro

**La noche**

*Las estrellas bailan en el cielo cuando viene la noche. Y tambien el ruido de las ranas juntos con los grillos llena el aire. La luna brilla la luz en los árboles y los arbustos. El viento tiene razón cuando susurro en las hojas. Colores de oscuro. Sonidos de silencio. Olor de magia. En este tiempo hacen los sueños de la tierra.*