

THE NEW BOOGALOO:  
NUYORICAN POETRY AND THE COMING PUERTO RICAN IDENTITIES

By

GUILLERMO REBOLLO-GIL

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This thesis is dedicated to the island and to the woman who shares it with me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background.....	2
Nuyorican Foundations.....	6
The Migration.....	12
Island Literature, Migration and Identity.....	14
Nuyorican Poetry in Context.....	18
2 METHODS.....	20
3 PEDRO PIETRI: THE INTELLECTUAL ANGUISH OF BEING ORGANIC.....	23
Puerto Rican Obituary.....	24
Puerto Ricans in New York: The City as Killer.....	26
Nuyorican Visions of Puerto Rico.....	30
Traffic Violations.....	32
The Weight of the Community.....	34
4 WILLIE PERDOMO: NUYORICAN POETRY AS THE SOUNDTRACK FOR LIFE IN EL BARRIO.....	37
Puerto Ricans in New York: The City as Home.....	37
New Nuyorican Visions of Puerto Rico.....	39
The Weight of the Community.....	44
5 THE COMING PUERTO RICAN IDENTITIES.....	48
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	53
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	56

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Guillermo Rebollo-Gil

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This thesis analyzes the work of Nuyorican poets Pedro Pietri and Willie Perdomo in an effort to trace the development of the Nuyorican poetry movement during the past three decades. The analysis is structured according to three main themes common to both authors' works. These themes are New York City, Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican identity, and the migrant community. The authors' works chosen for analysis are Pietri's *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973), *Obituario Puertorriqueño* (1977), *Traffic Violations* (1983) and *Obituario Puertorriqueño/Puerto Rican Obituary* (2000) as well as Perdomo's *Where a Nickel costs a Dime* (1996) and *Postcards of El Barrio* (2002). These works are studied within the context of a rising interest among Island Puerto Ricans for the life experiences and cultural production of Puerto Rico's migrants, specifically those residing in New York. The thesis takes note of, evaluates and highlights the social significance of this interest, especially as it manifests itself in the work of some of the most notable young Island poets. It is hypothesized that Nuyorican poets' influence on the poetry produced

today on the Island, when coupled with the considerable level of attention and success that these young writers have already garnered and could continue to accumulate, harbors the possibility of altering traditional Puerto Rican identity constructs on the Island. This would set the stage for more inclusive conceptualizations of Puerto Ricanness to be developed

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

He steps up to the mic rather hesitantly. The glare of the spotlight bothers him as he looks over several pieces of crumpled computer paper. If one were to be standing close enough, one could hear the change in his right jean pocket rattling ever so slightly. The crowd of twenty or so waits patiently. Some look towards the stage in subdued expectation, a few go over their own sheets of paper and the rest continue with their dinner, drinks and conversations.

After a couple of minutes he looks at the crowd and finds comfort in being unable to distinguish any of their faces. Then, without introduction or warning he begins. Spanish falls abruptly into English and rises again and again as the poem tears through an unnamed urban landscape whose people are the descendants of a Taíno nation, which he claims is still alive in the back room of tourist shops filled with bobbing head dolls of ancient deities and “ethnic” t-shirts at low cost.

He ends with an urgent call for unity. His voice cracks as his age betrays him in the last line. Nevertheless, the crowd of twenty or so makes like hundreds and he is able to leave the stage gallantly. As he makes his way back to his seat, a forty-something year old lady with a thick Brooklyn accent grabs him by the wrist, congratulates him and tells him that that was “so New York.”

Later on that night, the music of former Fania All-Star Juancito Torres and his sextet will serve as the perfect backdrop for the romancing of the girl he invited there to

impress. Though still unaware of this, Salsa will somehow mean more to him after tonight.

On his way out, the guy at the door will hand him a flyer for next week. He'll almost trip over the girl's feet going down the couple of steps to the alley. Once on the street, the night's heat will strike him with almost as much force as the crowd's reaction to his poem. It will go at him with almost as much intensity as Juancito's percussionist. And it will leave him almost as sweaty and frightened as did the girl he invited here to impress.

He will fold the flyer up and stick it in his back pocket. Only the top left-hand corner of it will be visible: Nuyorican Café, Puerto Rico.

### **Background**

Recent years have witnessed a rising interest among Island Puerto Ricans concerning the life and work of their U.S. counterparts, especially those living in New York City. The opening of "The Nuyorican Café" in Historic Old San Juan, Puerto Rico is but one of the many examples of Islanders' efforts to know about and connect with the mainland community. This establishment, loosely modeled after the "Nuyorican Poets Café" in the Lower East Side, serves as space for local artists and musicians to come, meet and showcase their talents. Plays are staged. Salsa, bomba and jazz bands harmonize nightly. The Café even hosts its own poetry night every Sunday where one can hear both Spanish and English pieces amidst an eager and diverse crowd.

More importantly than the Café, however, is the attention that the U.S. Puerto Rican community has received from the Academy and the media. In the summer of 2002, "Prohibido Olvidar" and "En la Punta de la lengua,"—two news magazine shows that air regularly on the government funded television station (TuTv)—ran an entire series of

weekly episodes filmed in New York City featuring the cultural, political and artistic developments of New York Puerto Ricans. Among those featured, were several of the famed Nuyorican poets and writers, including the Café's founder Miguel Algarín.

Islanders had already gotten a glimpse into Algarín's life when earlier that year, the Miramax film "Piñero," about the life of famed Nuyorican poet and playwright Miguel Piñero, opened in Puerto Rico amidst controversy. Those who saw the film debated the issue of whether or not the movie served to further cement the American image of the Puerto Rican as a drug fiend, hustler and criminal (González, 2000). They criticized the film's explicit drug scenes and some were even troubled by the portrayal of Piñero as bisexual. The most heated discussions, however, centered on the issue of whether there was any type of real "Puerto Ricanness" at the center of the life and work of the deceased writer. Many Islanders questioned whether a true and valid Puerto Rican experience could actually take place in New York, be developed on the streets and be spoken in English. Some viewers' outrage with the film even led them to express their opinions in a more public forum and took it to the newspapers, writing jarring letters to the editor.

Interestingly enough, one of the most important, if not the most important force spearheading this growing interest for the U.S. Puerto Rican community, specifically its literature, can be found in the newspapers. Dr. Carmen Dolores Hernández, the book critic for the Island's largest periodical, *El Nuevo Día*, has frequently and favorably reviewed books from U.S. Puerto Rican writers. She also published a book of interviews with several of them entitled *Puerto Rican voices in English* (1997). Her devotion for the Puerto Rican literature of the states, coupled with her position as the preeminent book critic on the Island, has definitely helped to get several of these writers more exposure in

Puerto Rico. This is evident in that today some Nuyorican works serve as required readings for college students on the Island and their authors have come on official visits to perform and talk with the students. These visits have proven very important for they have also functioned to bring together Island and mainland authors in a space where they can share their work and establish networks across their shores.

Nowhere, perhaps, is the construction of these networks more evident than in the poetry written by several of the up and coming young writers on the Island. The works of people like Urayoan Noel, Raul Moris and José Raul González, who have all had their poetry published in book and/or audio CD form, stand as testaments to the burgeoning influence of Nuyorican poetry on Island writers. They also serve as a platform and battleground for the creation of a new Island literary aesthetic. In their works, these writers often recur to traditional Nuyorican elements like code switching and infuse their predominantly Spanish texts with English words and phrases. The three poets also draw parallels between Puerto Rican life on the Island and Puerto Rican life in the states, sketching out a scathing criticism of the social forces affecting Puerto Rican communities on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, the importance that these writers place on the public performance of their poetic works—evident in their frequent appearances at open poetry readings in public squares, bars and bookshops as well as in Universities and High Schools—mirror that of the very founders of the Nuyorican poetry movement who prided themselves on their ability to bring poetry to the people by performing it (Hernández, 1997).

The cultural significance of the work that these writers are producing reaches considerable proportions when one considers the appraisal that all three poets have

received from traditional literary circles on the Island. All three, for example, have been heralded as being among the most important new voices to emerge from the Island literary landscape by the former president of Puerto Rico's Pen Club Alberto Martínez-Márquez (Hernández-Durán, 2002). Two of them, Urayoan Noel and José Raul González, were chosen to appear among the fifteen Island representatives in an anthology published by Isla Negra Press in 2003 that featured the best of the new crop of writers from Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Also, Jose Raul González's first book *Barrunto*, published in 2000, was awarded the national third place prize for poetry that year.

What appears to be happening on the Island is a paradigm shift. During the many decades before, Islanders—with several notable exceptions in some literary and political sectors—generally ignored and even rejected the cultural product of the New York Puerto Rican community. Now, however, they appear to be embracing it in noticeable ways. Moreover, as in the case of the poets here discussed, they are even adapting that cultural product, and re-creating it within the Island national context.

The question one must then ask in the face of this growing trend is not necessarily why. Since the trend has only begun to emerge it is difficult to point out its exact causes. Rather the question is: What does this trend mean? What does this sudden focus on the New York Puerto Rican experience after decades of disinterest and marginalization (Flores, 1993), signify in terms of the future relations that will exist between the Island and the mainland community? More importantly, what consequences might this growing trend have in terms of reworking the national Puerto Rican identity?

In an effort to begin to answer these questions, this thesis will explore and analyze the work of two of the Nuyorican poetry movement's principal figures. The two poets chosen for the present study are Pedro Pietri and Willie Perdomo. Pietri is one of the founders of Nuyorican poetry and Perdomo represents the new generation of Nuyorican writers whose works initially appeared during the 1990s. They have been chosen because both have been heralded by scholars and critics as exemplary of their particular generation. Pietri has enjoyed tremendous success on the international level (Barradas, 1998; Guinness, 1999) and Perdomo has been described as headlining the new movement of Nuyorican letters (Santos-Febres, 2002). Further, they are the only two Nuyorican poets to have been published on the Island in bilingual editions. A selection of Pietri's first work *Puerto Rican Obituary* was first published by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture in 1977 and then revised and updated in 2000 by Isla Negra press. Similarly, a selection of Perdomo's poems from his book *Where a Nickel costs a Dime* (1996) along with several newer poems was published by Isla Negra Press in 2002 in a collection entitled *Postcards of El Barrio*.

A thorough analysis of these two authors' work will serve to trace the evolution of the Nuyorican poetry movement and provide us with a clear picture of what exactly the up and coming Island writers are reading, interpreting and adapting into their own works. A distinction however must first be made between Nuyorican poetry and U.S. Puerto Rican literature in general.

### **Nuyorican Foundations**

Puerto Rican literature in the states possesses a rich and diverse history. Puerto Rican authors have been writing about their experience on the mainland since the early

stages of the 20th century. These writings are in the form of novels, theaters, short stories, autobiographical accounts and poetry. They appear in Spanish and English as well as in the cross between the two languages. Similarly, the writings cover and/or touch upon every possible theme imaginable. Everything from politics to romance can be found in this literature. By the same token, there is really no prototype of the U.S. Puerto Rican writer. They have come from all social class backgrounds, possess diverse political orientations and are the product of different migration experiences. It is no surprise then that so many terms are used to pinpoint and describe these writers and the literature they produce. Terms like “NeoRican” (Barradas, 1998) and “Boricua” (Sánchez-González, 2001) are used by scholars to attempt to house these writings under one roof and neither of them is accurate or vast enough to account for and include everyone.

Nuyorican literature is but one manifestation of Puerto Rican writing in the states. Nuyorican poetry is the most recognizable and important genre within this literature. As its name implies, it is an exact and direct product of the Puerto Rican experience in New York. More precisely, it is the cultural product of a people settled in some of the poorest areas of New York City such as Spanish Harlem and the Lower East Side, who came to arrive in the states in the post-World War II era as part of a working class migration from the Island during Puerto Rico’s push for industrialization in the mid-20th century (Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández, 2001). Moreover, the term Nuyorican was originally adopted by a handful of emerging writers from this community whose main preoccupations were the survival and uplift of their fellow community members. Nuyorican poetry is thus characterized and marked as different from all other U.S. Puerto Rican writing in its constant critique of and challenge to, the social and political institutions and policies that

were hindering Puerto Ricans' life opportunities in New York City. Consequently, it is the social commitment and activism of these writers that serve as the defining characteristics of their poetic production.

These characteristics make Nuyorican poetry a "functional literature." According to Antonio Gramsci (2000: 401), a particular literature is functional when it is "based on a plan or on a pre-established social course." Functional literature is different from other forms of artistic production in that it seeks to attain a level of practicality among its intended audience. Its main focus is not on raising the present status of art itself but on raising the social status of a particular group of people through art by involving the people in the artistic process. Gramsci (2000: 401) writes:

One might say that houses are more necessary than the products of the other arts, meaning by this that everybody needs a house, while the products of other arts are necessary only for intellectuals, for the cultured. One should then consider that it is precisely the "practical" people who propose to make all the arts necessary for everybody, to make everybody "artists"

As evidenced in this statement, Gramsci's vision of functionality is inextricably rooted in notions of liberation. Functionality here calls not only for a democratization of artistic production whereby art would no longer be the exclusive property of a privileged few, but also for an expansion of the concept of art that would recognize all social actors' endeavors as artistic. Gramsci (2000: 321) explains:

Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a 'philosopher,' an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.

A brief overview of the initial stages of the Nuyorican poetry movement confirms how this literature comes to fit comfortably within this framework.

The movement started to take shape in 1975 when Miguel Algarín opened the now famous Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the city's Lower East Side (Hernández, 1997). Algarín's venture was prompted by the fact that his living room had gotten too small to fit the many poets who would flock to his house for readings. Poet Pedro Pietri says of these times:

We all used to go to Miguel Algarín's house, all these poets would congregate there: Jesús Papoleto Meléndez, Lucky Cienfuegos, Shorty Bonbo, my brother, Dr. Willy. We used to stay in his living room and recite poetry. We felt really good about it because at the time we didn't have a space, we didn't have an audience, we were all we had. It was exciting in the beginning; we were young, struggling artists. It was like Magic; everything was so important. (quoted in Hernández, 1997: 117)

Utilizing the city as its thematic center, their poetry, much like the conditions they were living under, was harsh and unrelenting, speaking of and against the many ills and injustices they experienced every day (Hernández, 1997; Flores, 1993; Barradas, 1998). According to Algarín, “for the poor New York Puerto Rican there [were] three survival possibilities. The first [was] to labor for money and exist in eternal debt. The second [was] to refuse to trade hours for dollars and live by your own will and hustle. The third possibility [was] to create alternative behavioral habits” (quoted in Flores, 1993: 135). Poetry here then presents itself as a survival strategy; as an alternate life ethic. Art in the Nuyorican context transcends the instruments necessary for its creation, it moves away from the page to encompass every aspect of the writer's life, providing him/her with the ability to change his/her social condition. The functional or liberatory character of this literature is glaring. It becomes blinding the moment one considers that it was written out of a need to communicate with their community. Because the poetry sought and even demanded an audience, writers employed a street vernacular in their works that was accessible to the rest of their Puerto Rican people. Any possible advancement or

liberation that could come out of the poets' artistic production was intended to be community wide. It is not surprising then that many came to consider the Nuyorican poet as "the prophet of the Hispanic and Latino community" (Luis, 1997:46).

This vision of the Nuyorican poet as prophet or spokesperson for the Latino community is very much akin to Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual." In Gramscian theory, the organic intellectuals are the "organizers, leaders, specialized individuals in conceptual and philosophical elaboration" working toward the liberation of oppressed groups (Gomez, 1987: 138). They serve as intermediaries between the masses and the ruling class. According to Gramsci, "every organic development of peasant masses, up to a certain point, is linked to and depends on movements among the intellectuals" (Gramsci, 2000: 309). Therefore, these figures are intricately linked to the people. They are able to immerse themselves in the social reality of marginalized groups and speak of it in solidarity. By way of this close relationship, the masses come to interpret their social reality from a more rational standpoint and develop a more coherent view of the world free of emotion and/or superstition (Gomez, 1997: 141) and the intellectuals for their part, are able to feel the people's troubles and ills as if they were their own.

This relationship of course takes time. According to Gómez (1997: 141), "Gramsci advierte que tal unidad es un proceso en el que se repiten continuamente momentos de ruptura y alejamiento, de incomprensiones reciprocas; de ahí que nuestro autor aconseja—el intelectual debe pasar del 'saber' al 'sentir' y la masa a la inversa, del 'sentir' al 'saber.' Nowhere do the Nuyorican poets appear so intimately linked to their community and thus exhibit the progression from knowing to feeling than in the proposed

aesthetic of their literary production. According to Algarín (1987: 163), this aesthetic is composed of three elements:

The first is the expression of the self orally and the domination of one language or both to a degree that makes it possible to be accurate about one's present condition ... and I think the first stops are always oral. The second reality of the Nuyorican aesthetic is that if we are to safeguard the future, we must create a dialogue among ourselves about setting up systems of protection and mutual benefits. The last thing about the Nuyorican aesthetic has to do with art: transformation before the public eye is a very important way of psychic cure. In other words the creation of places where people can express themselves-expressly created for that purpose.

Here Nuyorican literary production is presented as part of a larger social project. Poetry in the Nuyorican framework is a socially motivated practice that moves for both personal and communal change. Its production is inextricably linked to the social position of the community that produces it. Algarín (1987: 162) makes it crystal clear: "We create poems for ourselves; poverty keeps us away from the space and time that composing long prose pieces requires but that is changing too."

Algarín's statement makes no distinction between the circle of writers and poets and their community. Nuyorican poets do not see themselves as making up a different class or social group separate from the rest of the people. In this regard they differ markedly from Gramsci's organic intellectuals. In Gramsci's eyes, the intellectual, though dependent on the masses, does have to maintain a critical distance from them. He writes: "In relation to the people, they [organic intellectuals] are something detached" (Gramsci, 2000: 367). This is important for Gramsci since in his view the masses are similar to "an empty container that must be filled, the raw material that must be shaped and molded by the intellectuals" (Gomez, 1987: 113). These figures then are supposed to lead, to make sense of and speak for the community, but not actually become a fixed part

of it. Nuyorican poets, as organic intellectuals, break away from this original conceptualization. There is no physical or social distance between the writer and the community. Moreover, in the eyes of these writers, the community is at once the root of their work and its main character. It is not something to be filled up or molded, but rather something to uncover, to come to understand, to describe, expose and display.

A necessary ingredient for understanding this community's situation is the history of its migration to the U.S.

### **The Migration**

Puerto Ricans have been migrating to the U.S. since the 19th century. Their move has been motivated by a variety of personal, economic and political reasons. According to Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández (2001) "the trade of raw materials tied the ports of Puerto Rico with port cities in New England and New York. Those commercial links facilitated the mobility of Puerto Ricans between the island (a Spanish colony at the time) and the United States." The U.S. also harbored Puerto Rican exiles that opposed Spanish rule. In fact, according to Alvarez (1998) as early as 1870 there was a small colony of Puerto Ricans in New York City organizing for the Island's independence and there was already a joint revolutionary committee set up between representatives from Puerto Rico and Cuba. Consequently, the early waves of the Puerto Rican migration were composed of elite and/or politically and socially influential Islanders.

The upper class character of the migration changed, however, after the Island was colonized by the U.S. in 1898. Matos-Rodríguez and Hernández (2001) illustrate: "Although elite Puerto Ricans continued to come to New York, the majority of the immigrants worked as cigar-makers, sailors, domestics, garment makers or in other low-paying service jobs." The numbers mushroomed. According to Di Nubila (1997:41)

approximately 90,000 Islanders migrated from Puerto Rico to the U.S. between 1898 and 1944. Four-hundred thousand made the jump in the 1950s alone and although 253, 212 had made their way back from the states during the 1960s, close to 600, 000 had left the Island for the U.S. during that same period (Di Nubila, 1997). Reflecting on the move of more than half a million Puerto Ricans from 1945-1955 alone the Rector of the University of Puerto Rico at that time, commented on the immense significance of the migration for migrants and Islanders alike:

La emigración puertorriqueña de los últimos años constituye uno de los casos de traslación humana más significativos de la época y sin lugar a dudas uno de los sucesos más importantes de nuestra historia. Encierra impredecibles y en cualquier caso significativas consecuencias para el porvenir. Que en diez años se hayan mudado a los Estados Unidos más de medio millón de puertorriqueños es un hecho que además de afectar en forma perdurable la existencia individual y privativa de cada una de las quinientas mil personas afectadas se relaciona íntimamente con la vida, los problemas, las esperanzas, los ingresos de quienes permanecen en Puerto Rico. (quoted in Alvarez, 1998: 201)

The gravity of this exodus then was already palpable at the very time it was happening. Moreover, government officials constantly evoked its crucial role in the political and economic future of the Island. It was described as a necessity and was hurried along by way of government propaganda highlighting the Island's "grave overpopulation problem," its poor economic situation and the famine that was haunting many of the Island's poor (Alvarez, 1998: 201).

Scholars however have investigated and questioned how the Island government's push for migration coincided with the rise of the Nationalist movement in Puerto Rico (Alvarez, 1998)—a time marked by social upheavals and violent confrontations between nationalist supporters and police officials. There was thus a pressing need to do away and/or subdue such a threat to the colonial order. Government officials had to be weary of

what the Nationalist movement could do to hinder Puerto Rico's move toward industrialization. This massive exodus then was part and parcel of the industrialization process, functioning as an "escape valve" by which the government could channel its "excess" or "troublesome" population out of the Island at that time. The migration then was not only looked upon kindly by the Island government but was in fact aided by it through an aggressive advertisement campaign, cheap plane tickets and contractual agreements with North American businesses that sought cheap laborers (Di Nubila, 1997). Puerto Rican workers were lured to the states by way of the promise for a better quality of life. This is glaringly evident in the government issued postcards and ads which portrayed Puerto Rican families gathered around the television set enjoying a quiet evening at home (Matos-Rodriguez and Hernandez, 2001). This was the much-advertised "miracle" of the Puerto Rican migration.

### **Island Literature, Migration and Identity**

The migration's all encompassing character is evident in the literature produced on the Island during that time. Looking at the progression of Puerto Rican literature since its inception in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the translocation of Puerto Ricans to the United States has almost always been present. However, it must be noted that during the years of mass flight in the post-world war II era, the migration passed from the background to the center stage of Island narratives. Puerto Rican migrants became the leading characters in the works of several noteworthy authors like Jose Luis Gonzalez, Emilio Diaz Valcarzel and Pedro Juan Soto. Writes the critic Eugene Mohr (1982: xiii): "[migrants'] story was told by Island writers who visited the New York Colony and sometimes projected their own cultural concerns on men and women whose main preoccupation was simply staying

alive.” He continues establishing the position from which these authors were writing and to the audience for whom they were writing arguing that:

These writers are not completely objective chroniclers, nor do they see in the migration the same meanings and patterns that the migrants themselves perceive. They are middle-class intellectuals writing about the unschooled and socially marginal; they are writing for an audience that had had little contact with the migrants at home or abroad; they often view the migration within a framework of moral and cultural values that would have been but dimly recognized by hundreds and thousands migrants washing dishes and running elevators...” (Mohr, 1982: 26)

The fact is that the topic of the migration in the majority of Island literature at that time had more to do with what was going on in the Island than what was happening stateside. In other words, the migration served as a literary recourse by which Island authors could address the many social ills affecting the Island and stake their claim on defining who and what a Puerto Rican was. Consequently, in spite of the fact that many of these narratives were set in New York, the Island was the actual center of the narration. The idea behind having Puerto Rican characters in U.S. settings arose out of a need to establish Puerto Rican and North American culture as polar opposites. The many perils the U.S. Puerto Rican community suffered were then portrayed as the tragic consequences of living within a corrosive U.S. environment, characterized by its anti-Puerto Rican attitude and policies. American soil then came to be the death of Puerto Rican culture and Puerto Rican culture thus came to be defined according to a deep affiliation to the Island itself, to the Spanish language and to Catholicism (Rodríguez Cortés, 1997).

One could argue that Puerto Rican migrants were used in Island literature as mere pawns in the literary and academic debate over the status and future of Puerto Rican culture under U.S. colonial rule. They were vehicles through which Island scholars and

authors could vent their frustrations with the empire, all the while attempting to construct and promote a monolithic Puerto Rican identity.

The Island government was also very much invested in its own process of identity construction. According to Diaz-Quiñones (1993), the Island's official vision of what a true Puerto Rican was that of the light skinned Puerto Rican man, born and bred on the Island, and adept in all traditional ways of Island life, particularly the Spanish language. Moreover, Puerto Rican identity involves a refusal of all things foreign (meaning American) and requires a necessary shift to all things Hispanic (i.e. Spain as the motherland). This shift and refusal strategy, according to Diaz-Quiñones (1993), showcases a national identity that is crafted against both the dark skin Island Puerto Rican by way of his/her exclusion from the official tales of historical and political agency and the Puerto Rican immigrant, who in the words of the author became the Island's "other" due to this figure's alleged contamination during his/her experience in the U.S. (i.e. loss of language etc.).

Thus, national identity here depends on two immense historical silences: 19th century chattel slavery on the Island and the migration of 40% of Puerto Rico's population to the U.S. in the 20th century. Consequently, the push for a national Puerto Rican identity or for a clearly defined and maintained cultural essence or purity is almost always a push towards the Spanish, or more precisely, to the ideological remnants of the Spanish empire, which in and of itself silences a history of multiple languages and cultures that took form, place and agency on the island. As Diaz-Quiñones states:

Puerto Rico, como todo el caribe y América, es un lugar de complejas construcciones de identidades, resultado de la experiencia colonial europea, de la fuerte presencia de culturas Africanas y de las migraciones de corzos, franceses,

catalanes e ingleses en el siglo 19 y de la experiencia bajo el nuevo imperio norteamericano y la emigraciones puertorriqueños del siglo 20. (1993: 139)

Focusing one's attention on the Island's experience under the "new North, American empire," one could ask: how exactly is this Spanish-oriented identity maintained under U.S. rule? Diaz-Quiñones (1993) looks to answer this query by giving a brief account of the modernization process that took place in Puerto Rico during the 50s, 60s and 70s. In his view, the Island government, through the charismatic leadership of then governor Luis Muñoz Marín, established a rhetoric of endless progress and innumerable opportunities for the Island's peoples by way of the country's "alliance" with the U.S. The government's institutionalization of this pro-American rhetoric then led to the establishment of a legitimate middle class; to the contradictory asymmetries of upscale neighborhoods erected right next to urban ghettos; to the partnership between education and government; the promotion of the war and loyalty to U.S. interests and eventually to the equation of Puerto Ricanness with Americanness. In the words of the former Governor himself: "[Puerto Rico] es un país latinoamericano compuesto de buenos ciudadanos de los Estados Unidos" (quoted in Diaz-Quiñones, 1993: 141).

Evidenced in this statement, the official Puerto Rican identity was crafted to be more of a personality than a nationality so that it would not be at odds with the colonial state. Nationalism was given its own vocalized space in the colony and was thus stricken of any revolutionary prowess by the Island's own government. As Diaz-Quiñones (1993: 26-27) notes: "se quería una historia que uniera y no dividiera: una historia no conflictiva del pueblo puertorriqueño."

In this context it is possible to see how the violence (i.e. urban segmentation, Puerto Rican involvement in U.S. wars etc.) that drove this modernization process (Diaz-

Quiñónes, 1993) could be silenced. Moreover, it is possible to see how the exclusion of the then thousands of Puerto Rican migrants could remain unaccounted for in the country's official history when it affected so many families and communities. As Diaz-Quiñónes (1993: 147) states: "lo visible y lo enunciable no siempre coinciden y por eso, la emigración ha podido estar, simultáneamente, presente en la vida y ausente en el discurso." What remains, in the words of James Baldwin (1995), is a "terrible paradox": the language and culturally based exclusion of the now millions of U.S. Puerto Ricans, who identify themselves as Puerto Ricans juxtaposed against the near untouchable character of North America's military bases and complexes on the Island (Diaz-Quiñónes, 1993). What remains is the narrow yet distinct delimitation of what a "typical" or more precisely, a "genuine" Puerto Rican is: someone who possesses the language and the presumed knowledge of Island life to look and act cultured enough but also the necessary whiteness and middle class pedigree to not be threatening to American rule.

### **Nuyorican Poetry in Context**

As discussed above, the construction of Puerto Rico's national identity has primarily depended on exclusion tactics and practices set up against a rich and diverse community of Puerto Rican peoples. Rodríguez-Cortés (1997: 25) notes:

Las prácticas sociales de identidad cultural en la historia social de Puerto Rico no se refieren a una acción de solidaridad colectiva ni tampoco a un sentido de un destino común como pueblo, lo que pone de manifiesto la carencia de un proyecto colectivo de identidad cultural.

The efforts of both government officials and of Island authors to create, promote and defend a viable cultural identity, though markedly different from one another, are predicated on the marginalization of the U.S. Puerto Rican community. Both sectors have lacked the foresight to recognize how the Island's colonial status severed the Puerto

Rican people in two and with time constructed the severed parts as polar opposites to each other. The Nuyorican poetry movement must be examined within this context.

Thus, in an effort to understand the origin and development of the Nuyorican poetry movement, as well as its present incursion into the Island context, it is necessary to focus on the concept of national identity as it has come to be defined by Nuyorican writers in the face of their personal and communal exclusion both in the States and on the Island.

## CHAPTER 2 METHODS

For the purposes of this project, the poetry here analyzed is viewed as human or life documents. Blumer defines the human document “as an account of individual experience which reveals the individuals actions as a human agent and as a participant in social life” (quoted in Plummer, 2001: 18). As discussed in the previous chapter, the life of working class Puerto Ricans in New York finds expression in Nuyorican poetry. The poets serve as spokespersons for their community, using their writing as a mechanism through which their fellow community members can see themselves as unique social actors under particular social conditions. They give voice to their experiences in these documents and put that experience in context. In this sense, Nuyorican poetry can be looked at as collective life documents or life stories.

Granted, sociologists for the most part have not treated poetry as a ‘typical’ life story such as autobiographies, letters, journals, interviews etc. The artistic character of this writing form separates it from these other more conventional or traditional written confessionals. Nonetheless, Nuyorican poetry, given its immediate relationship with the community and its interest in speaking of the community’s ills and concerns in a readily accessible and vocal way, does confess. It gives testimony of the community’s life in the margins of both U.S. and Puerto Rican society. The writers have in fact lived through the poverty and despair that they talk about in their work. They inhabit the exact geographical spaces in which their poems are set. They are part of the same social class as the characters they present. Furthermore, poetry for the Nuyorican writer is not a vain

stylistic choice. Poetry writing in the Nuyorican context is a direct product of the specific social circumstances that envelop these writers. As discussed in the previous chapter, long prose pieces—whether fictional or autobiographical—was simply not an option when the founders of the movement started to produce their work. This confessional voice then came up from below in the only viable manner it could find.

The ‘up from below’ character of Nuyorican poetry enables one to view the genre as a descendant of the autobiographical type of writing that started to come out during the latter half of the late 18<sup>th</sup>/ early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This writing, according to Plummer saw “the working class challenging the middle class, women challenging men, slaves challenging oppression, the young challenging elders” (2001: 90). Plummer refers to these writings as ‘autobiographies from below’ and considers them to constitute a different autobiographical form from the work done by members of the dominant social groups. According to him, this marginal type of autobiography was “more of a collective exploration than just a private one. The author [was] somehow located as a member of a class, a gendered group, a generational group, an outcast group” (Plummer, 2001: 90).

Memory plays a key role in this writing. Plummer (2001: 233) states: “Life story work involves recollecting, remembering, re-discovering along with the active process of memorializing and constructing history.” Memory in the Nuyorican context is a collective affair. It is a socially shared experience. The poems function as memory sites where members of the Puerto Rican community in New York can find their history told and preserved. This is important considering both the Island’s and the United States’ disdain for this community as it is manifested in the silence in which the process and consequences of the Puerto Rican migration have been kept. Thus, the memorializing

done by Nuyorican poets in their work is very much a political practice. It is an affront to both the Island and mainland government. Moreover, it is an attempt to return this history, these memories to their community (Plummer, 2001).

This thesis will focus on the memory work done by Nuyorican poets Pedro Pietri and Willie Perdomo. It is important to note that only the authors' book length works and their respective translations will be considered for analysis. Full-length books, because they are set up and designed by the author according to a unitary theme or set of themes, function better as units of analysis than single poems. This thesis will thus examine Pietri's *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973), *Obituario Puertorriqueño* (1977), *Traffic Violations* (1983) and *Obituario Puertorriqueño/Puerto Rican Obituary* (2000) as well as Perdomo's *Where a Nickel costs a Dime* (1996) and *Postcards of El Barrio* (2002).

The analysis will be structured according to three main themes common to both authors' works. These themes are the city, Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican identity and the community. This analysis will enable the researcher to trace and highlight how the Nuyorican poetry movement has evolved during the thirty years since its inception and from that speculate as to the possible effects that Islanders' exposure to this literature may have.

CHAPTER 3  
PEDRO PIETRI: THE INTELLECTUAL ANGUISH OF BEING ORGANIC

To write about Pedro Pietri is to write about arguably the single most recognizable name in Nuyorican poetry (Barradas, 1998). The international successes of both his poems and plays along with his unique public persona have garnered much deserved attention from critics and readers alike. His work has influenced countless Puerto Rican and Latino writers like Roberto Santiago, Martin Espada and Willie Perdomo, who all testify to how upon reading Pietri's work, they gathered a sense of what it meant to be a Puerto Rican in New York. Santiago, for example, writes: "I read Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" and understood for the first time what it meant to live in poverty. There I was, living in the Taft Projects on 114th St. and Madison Avenue, but it wasn't until I read this poem that I truly understood the reality of my surroundings" (Santiago, 1995: xv). Pietri's work must be seen not only as serving as a literary foundation for the Puerto Rican and Latino writers of later generations but also as a poetic blueprint for the personal and collective identity of the Nuyorican community in general. His written word serves as a perfect starting point for the mapping of the Nuyorican poetry movement from its inception to its present situation and beyond.

It must also be said, however, that Pietri's work is unrepresentative of the movement in one respect. Up until recent years, he has remained the only well known Nuyorican poet on the Island. Barradas (1998: 143) writes "entre los llamados poetas neorricon, Pedro Pietri es muy probablemente el mejor conocido en Puerto Rico donde la obra de otros valiosos poetas nuestros que escriben en inglés desde los Estados

Unidos...es totalmente ignorada.” Barradas (1998) attributes Pietri’s crossover from the states to the Island to mainly three factors. First of all, up until the publication of Willie Perdomo’s work in 2002, Pietri was the only Nuyorican poet published on the Island in both Spanish and English when the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture published a bilingual edition selected poems in 1977. Second his most famous poem “Puerto Rican Obituary” has been staged several times on the Island in different productions. And lastly, Pietri has had the opportunity to come to Puerto Rico on ‘official visits’ to University campuses and the like to present and promote his work (Barradas, 1998: 144).

Pietri then is both exemplary of the movement and unique at the same time. More importantly, for the purposes of this thesis, he stands as one of the few and quite possibly the premier link that the Nuyorican poetry movement had with the Island at its beginnings and during the bulk of its development. An analysis of his work is thus critical for his poetry has served as a vital point of intersection between the Island and its migrant population. This chapter critically looks at the books *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973) and *Traffic violations* (1983).

### **Puerto Rican Obituary**

According to Barradas (1998), there are two major currents running through *Puerto Rican Obituary*: social and surrealist. The book in fact fluctuates between poems that are framed around and even fueled by the jarring specificity of the New York Puerto Rican condition and others in which “Pietri talks about some sort of urban Everyman that could be Puerto Rican or not” (Barradas, 1998: 144-145). These latter poems do not reference the working class experience but rather point towards and at times even step in a more “abstract and ample world” (Barradas, 1998: 144-145). It is this uninterrupted and easy fluctuation between a crude and seemingly inescapable realism and glimpses of the

abstract and absurd that gives the book its contextual and stylistic appeal. Furthermore, the two currents do often meet in poems that infuse the Puerto Rican working class experience with a nightmarish and at times nauseating quality, which clearly convey the poet's vision of Puerto Rican life in New York as overwhelmingly dehumanizing and senseless (Barradas, 1998).

It is necessary to treat *Puerto Rican Obituary* as very much a socially motivated work. The out-of-this-world character of the New York Puerto Rican experience that Pietri presents in this book is directly produced by specific social factors that Pietri seeks to uncover and attack on behalf of his community. Consequently, as Barradas states, "the explanation for the senselessness of his first book [is] essentially social" (1998: 149-150). One could then make the case that the poems in this book are influenced heavily by the poet's involvement in political and social movements, specifically with "El Grupo"—a collective of poets and musicians loosely tied to the Puerto Rican Socialist Party during the 1970s— and The young Lords (Matilla, 2000). This influence is visible in the moralistic tone that characterizes several of the pieces in the book in which Pietri warns his fellow community member to stay clear of drugs, politicians and salesmen. These poems are often filled with political rhetoric and at times read more like speeches and manifestos than poems. This is understandable considering that Pietri's poetry appeared in the politically oriented periodicals published by these groups and was read at protests and other like functions (Matilla, 2000).

Matilla (2000: 88) writes of Pietri's involvement with the Young Lords: "Pietri y otros poetas nuyoricans leían en actividades organizadas por el partido, donde participaban por igual escritores escapados del asedio reaccionario de los estadistas en la

isla.” The truth is that the poet found himself so deep in the organization that he even had to change a line in his poem “Puerto Rican Obituary” because it was taken to be offensive by the rest of the party. Matilla (2000: 86) recalls:

Pedro se vio forzado a cambiar el final de 'Obituario'; el Comité Central de los Young Lords creyó que era muy sexista (y lo era) aquello de 'Aquí the men admire desire/ and never get tired of the women' y lo publicaron en *Pa'lante* como 'Aquí the men and women admire desire/ and never get tired of each other.

A tension appears to lie at the base of Pietri’s early work between the political and the artistic. This tension or debate must always be kept in the center when studying Pietri’s work, specially when one takes into account his subsequent parting from this type of political organization precisely because of the personal control that he saw as being placed upon him and his writing. (Hernandez, 1997). Consequently, the poet’s early work must be seen and examined as harboring this tension and his later work as a reaction to the presumed lifting of that tension.

The following sections discuss three of the most salient themes in Pietri’s *Puerto Rican Obituary* and *Traffic Violations*.

### **Puerto Ricans in New York: The City as Killer**

One of the first things that strike you upon reading *Puerto Rican Obituary* is the complete and utter lack of movement in these poems. The people in Pietri's work do not walk down crowded New York streets. The only streets present here have dead ends. The dehumanizing character of the metropolis is first perceived in the tragic inability of Pietri's characters to move out; to find an exit and leave. There is an overwhelming feeling of entrapment in these poems that it is barely escapable through drugs. The poem “3170 Broadway” highlights the inability of drugs in getting the individual somehow lifted away from his/her chronic immobility. The poem reads: "you get off on the same

floor/ you got on/ like you have to get high/ on something else/ if you want to get/ to the floor you came down to from” (Pietri, 1973: ln.85-90)

This feeling of entrapment is further aided by both the characters' and the poet's proximity to death. The poems here do not simply speak of death but rather speak to it in a distinctively intimate manner. Consequently, the author on the hand portrays death as something outside the individual that is destined to come for him or her. This is evident in the poem “Notes on Solitude” where Pietri (1973: ln.23-30) writes "The wind/ smelled like a cemetery/ until death/ started a conversation/ with a face in the crowd/ then everybody/ learned how to smile/ again.” And on the other hand, death appears as something already inhabiting the people it's about to take, like in "The B-52 Blew" where Pietri (1973: ln.179-181) writes "And everybody you saw/ was already dead/ or about to die." Death is immediate and in some occasions there appears to be a much greater connection with death than with reality. The poem “O/D” reads: "You roll up your sleeve/ you see a cemetery/ located on your arms/ you are on the roof/ of a condemned building/ you are in the stairways/ of housing projects/ you are in the toilet/ of your apartment/ taking an imaginary shit" (Pietri, 1973: ln. 180-189)

There is no question that the poet's and his characters' relationship with death is caused by the city. Pietri does not mince words in presenting the city as a killer. It is an anguishing and relentlessly asphyxiating environment. Again, humanity has no space here. In "Monday Morning," he writes, "Everybody has bad breath this morning/ switchblade tempers anti-social eyeballs/ cemetery erections wash-and-wear headaches/ as downtown trains faint on top of them" (Pietri, 1973: ln. 23-26). This erasure of humanity is evident in the absence of proper names. Pietri's poems do not showcase

different personalities for they are premised on the city being the sole and domineering entity. Thus, proper names appear in only three poems out of the total thirty-seven:

1) The title poem of the book where five Spanish names are periodically listed for the effect of sounding as a daily obituary column. This only serves to highlight the character of the city as monster and the continual execution of New York Puerto Ricans: "Juan/ Miguel/ Milagros/ Olga/ Manuel/ All died yesterday today/ and will die again tomorrow" (Pietri, 1973: ln. 23-29).

2) The last poem of the book, "Para la Madre de Angel Luna," which is written entirely in Spanish and functions as a letter to the mother of one of the poet's, friends who died in Vietnam.

3) A short poem found towards the end of the book entitled "Tata" talks about the poet's 85-year-old grandmother who appears in the work as the only living person of old age.

This last poem is of great importance for it stands gallantly as a succinct threat of resistance. The poem reads: "mi abuela/ has been/ in this dept store/ called america/ for the past twenty five years/ she is eighty-five years old/ and does not speak/ a word of english/ That is intelligence" (Pietri, 1973: ln.1-9). By juxtaposing this character's survival against the many deaths—past, present and future—which appear in the rest of the poems, the social and political message in the book jumps to a completely different level. Neither the city nor the country, neither government nor death has an effect on this lady because of her presumed refusal to learn English. She appears undaunted, unpolluted and miraculously pure. The Spanish language thus appears in this poem as the prime representative of Puerto Rican culture and ultimately that culture serves as a solace for the New York Puerto Rican. The implicit message in this poem could then be interpreted

as being that only through a total and complete adherence to the traditions and ways of the Island can the New York Puerto Rican community survive. This interpretation however falters the minute one remembers that this message is being communicated in a predominantly English work by a predominantly English-speaking writer. Therefore, what is actually being communicated is the need for the preservation of a distinct Puerto Rican spirit amidst the threat of Americanization. The move here then is not towards the Island or toward the strict and exclusive maintenance of Island traditions, but rather a move toward inner core of the New York Puerto Rican so he/she can shelter him/herself from his/her present environment.

Consequently, the common conception that Nuyorican literature in general and Nuyorican poetry in particular has recurred to a mystified image of the Island as paradise or the Island as savior (Mohr, 1982; Guinness, 1999) is sadly misguided. While it is true that several Nuyorican works, particularly those of the founding years, have tended to present an unreal, parasidic view of the Island—one that keenly resembles that purported by canonical Island works (Barradas, 1998)—this mystification cannot be separated from the social and political context of both, the works in which it has been presented and the authors. The poet Martín Espada puts it in perspective: "This paradise was called Puerto Rico. I think that made sense. The mythology that grows up in the communities—that's paradise relatively speaking, that's paradise compared to here and in certain ways such as the weather, that's indisputable. Obviously it's not a paradise or else we wouldn't be here at all" (Steptoe, n.d.).

To think that a literary tradition so intimately linked with organized social and political movements bent on improving the conditions of Puerto Rican communities in

the U.S. and whose literary production has focused on exposing and criticizing the political machine that has marginalized those communities would turn to a such an uncritical vision of Puerto Rico is absurd. One cannot confuse the poeticized longing of a displaced migrant community for ignorance concerning the actual situation of the land that they were driven out of. Pietri's *Obituary* stands as an early testament of this.

### **Nuyorican Visions of Puerto Rico**

In Pietri's work—as we will more clearly see when discussing his second book—the Puerto Rican paradise is presented to the reader as an internal space; as having much more to do with a journey to the self than with any plane trip back to any island. *Puerto Rican Obituary's* deep-seated and passionate concern for the welfare of the community Pietri represents manifests itself in the form of an at times implied and at times blatant call for personal reflection. The author calls for a liberatory type of introspection that would make a return trip to Puerto Rico or a drug trip unnecessary. "Love poem for my people" is exemplary: "if you want/ to feel very rich/ look at your hands/ that is where/ the definition of magic/ is located at" (Pietri, 1973: ln. 16-21). The fact is that the poet's concern with the preservation of his Puerto Rican people's humanity and sense of self is too great and his critique of government structures too brash and steadfast for him to simply offer a physical exodus to a better place. As argued before, actual physical exit is not possible in Pietri. The only possible escape lies inside each community member. Case in point, the poems "The Old Buildings," "O/D" and "Poetry."

In "The Old Buildings" the reader gets one of the scarce moments of actual Puerto Rican community life in New York. The poem reads: "unity was happening/ whenever somebody/ cooked pasteles/ everybody in the building/ was invited to eat" (Pietri, 1973: ln. 6-10). For a minute, the city seems full of life. The Nuyorican community appears as

whole. The beauty in this poem, however, is quick to deaden as the poet bitterly states: "(city hall/ saw this harmony happening/ and got intimidated/ because there is nothing/ that frightens/ this government more/ than seeing people/ living and loving/ and breathing together/ so they decided to/ demolish the buildings/ that could have been saved by renovation/ and eliminate the unity)" (Pietri, 1973: ln. 13-26). Moments of shared beauty and visible happiness in the city are easily squashed in Pietri's mind. Similarly, in "O/D" a drug-induced escapist flight offers a temporary out. Pietri (1973: ln. 282-300) writes:

for a few seconds/ all the buildings from/ the hudson river/ to the east river/ become palm trees/ there is enough grass/ for everybody to walk on/ drums are heard/ thru-out the vicinity/ everybody was dancing/ elephants participated/ the wind was scented/ with coconut integrity/ for the first time/ in a long time/ it was smelling sweet/ everywhere you looked/ a rainbow was present

Again, the scene stands in direct opposition to all the others presented in the book. This particular one is even touched by the fantastical. The poet however is quick to bring one down, completely disarming this paradisiac scene by detailing the horrific trials of the junkie as he goes on trying to get his fix and ends up dead from shooting up rat poison. The poem continues: "you was known as the airplane/ that never left the ground/ regardless of how high you got/ you are gone and gone you are/ where pushers can no longer find you/ where life is a subject/ than nobody talks about anymore" (Pietri, 1973: ln. 355-361).

The only viable way out appears in the aptly titled "poetry"—a shorter piece that presumably takes the reader to the Island. It reads: " in ponce/ there is a beach/ without broken glass/ in the sand/ the ocean has/ twenty-twenty vision/ is safe to breathe/ on this beach/ there are no splinters/ in the wind" (Pietri, 1973: ln. 1-10). Here, poetry becomes Pietri's only personal pure space. To speak of an Island hundreds of miles away while

caught inside the metropolis cannot be taken as manifesting a simple and romanticized longing but rather as an attempt to center oneself and find some internal solace in the environment in which one is. Furthermore, the fact that in Pietri, this centering space is always presented as somehow linked with the Island itself and/or elements of its culture and considering Pietri's political orientations and affiliations, immediately politicizes this internal space. It is used as a direct affront against the U.S. government and culture; as a means by which the Puerto Rican community can forge, promote and defend their own identity in the States.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the title poem of the book, 'Puerto Rican Obituary' where Pietri brilliantly describes this internal place. The poem reads:

Aqui Se Habla espanol all the time/ Aqui you salute your flag first/ Aqui there are no dial soap commercials/ Aqui everybody smells good/ Aqui tv dinners do not have a future/ Aqui the men and women admire desire/ and never get tired of each other/ Aqui Que Pasa Power is what's happening/ Aqui to be called negrito/ means to be called LOVE

For Pietri the inner self is the only possible realm for an uncontaminated Puerto Rican identity. Notions of Puerto Ricanness then are limited to that inner space. They do not color the exterior. They do not extend past the individual. The only thing that is evident from the outside is the refusal to participate in and promote mainstream American life.

### **Traffic Violations**

*Traffic violations* is marked by the apparent depolitization of this personal space. No longer is the reality of Puerto Rican life in the States absurd and tragic, the entire cosmos does not make sense (Barradas, 1998: 150). Consequently, the mental-emotional space to which Pietri constantly alludes and escapes to stops being simply a threat to American society and becomes a threat against reality itself. Barradas (1998: 136) writes:

"No es la sociedad solamente sino el cosmos en sí que está estructurado de manera absurda, de forma en que la identidad de los seres es falsa." Pietri then wages war against everything around him. In each and every poem, the poet portrays himself as capable of breaking both social and natural rules. At times it seems that he is playing a game of cat and mouse with the world; constantly trying to see with how much can he get away with.

Barradas (1998: 135-136) notes:

Ahora el poeta quiere cantarse a si mismo como ser que rompe con las normas establecidas por la sociedad en que vive y que el poeta ve en terminos que intentan sobrepasar lo economico. El poeta no es ahora el cantor del obituario de los boricuas explotados sino el ser que destruye el orden intelectual establecido, el que va en contra el tránsito normal dictado por la sociedad, el que viola esa ruta predeterminada.

The depolitization of the space then lies in its apparent individuality. It lies in the poet's privacy and sole ownership of it. The causes of his discontent have stopped being social. The poet has even lost the moralistic tone of his earlier book. The many drug and alcohol references in this work do not serve to steer his community away from those substances. On the contrary, the speaker of these poems readily consumes them without guilt or consequence. One could then argue that Pietri in this book steps away from his role as community leader. He, as an organic intellectual, breaks his ties with the community. It could be argued that he leaves the New York Puerto Rican people to their own devices; to makes sense of the social conditions that encapsulate them on their own. From a Gramscian standpoint, this book could very well mark Pietri's refusal to further immerse himself in the troubles of his community—to feel as they do—and speak to and for them.

This apparent severing of ties however is not accompanied by the poet's alliance with the dominant classes. He does not break away from the masses to become a traditional intellectual. The upper class does take away Pietri from the people. They have

no hold on him either. It is as if he exists apart and separate from any type of social dynamic. The social conflict that characterized his first book is no longer there.

### **The Weight of the Community**

What does stay constant is the poet's actual, physical immobility—a theme which is now readily exploited to accentuate Pietri's ability of breaking with the intellectual and social order while literary staying inside his apartment. Pietri (1983: ln. 32-39) writes in 'March Hangover': "When I move I don't go anywhere/ Haven't left this block in years/ I pick up speed and stand still/ And relax without changing the subject/ That will bring forth another day/ To forget what was left undone/ After the smoke and rum/ Kept me laughing at everyone." Similarly, the poem "Community Work" reads: "daydreaming across/ the absentminded bridge/ to embrace shadows/ in another world/ the mind disappears/ the body stays here" (Pietri, 1983: ln. 1-6). The poet then presents himself to the reader as almost an untouchable, insurmountable entity. In contrast with his first book, Pietri does not appear to suffer from any ills whether they are social or physical.

Pietri's transformation, however, becomes illusory once the reader begins to look and poke at that image of his physical and in fact social immobility. The poet makes it clear that he is still in the same block. The city does not vanish from this book. Pietri marks it indelibly by making it seem absent at times and glaringly obvious at others. "Intermission from Tuesday" reads: "Fortune tellers predict nothing new/ Will happen around this neighborhood/ For those who were born to get nowhere" (Pietri, 1983: ln. 14-16). The social marginalization of the poor community in general and the New York Puerto Rican community specifically, then, while not taking center stage as in the first book, do serve as the indisputable backdrop for his second. For all his dazzling mental tricks Pietri confesses to be unable to wipe reality away. He states in "Intermission from

Monday": "have to leave the city/ when what you see is what you see/ and you don't see is what you don't see/ and the imagination is classified/ as excess luggage at the airport." (Pietri, 1983: ln. 20-24). Pietri is still unable to leave.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the poet's prolonged confinement is the image of death as an unrelenting overseer which was carried over from his first book. Death again is presented here as immediate, palpable—both summoned and feared. The poet then fluctuates between talking about death as a necessary break by stating "eternal life is very boring" (ln.23) in the poem "September Hangover" and outright wishing that nobody would pass on in "November Hangover" where he writes: "the most incredible sight/ For the human eyes to witness/ Is a cemetery going out of business" (Pietri, 1983:ln. 8-10). His most potent confrontation with death however takes place towards the very end of the book in the fourteen page long elegy "I hate trees." In this piece Pietri mourns the death of his brother, Dr. Willie. The poetic work reflects the vulnerable state in which the poet finds himself. This is evident in lines such as "this is one poem I never/ wanted to write in my life/ but darkness did occur twice/ & wrong numbers didn't exist/ the day his humor was missed" (Pietri, 1983: ln. 119-123). The poem is also important because it marks the end of the illusion created, fostered and maintained during the majority of the book. Whereas, up to that point, Pietri, while static, seemed almost untouchable, beyond the reach of reality, this poem brings him crashing down. Death then does what external factors and social circumstances could not do. It forces the poet to let his guard down and the communal element in his work resurfaces. In "I hate trees" he declares:

to forget that you didn't/ die alone is to forget/ that you didn't die at all/ There was also Maria and/ Maria and Mario or Maria/ and Mario and Maria or/ Mario and Maria and Maria/ who was 7 months pregnant/ under the influence of/ thunderbird or bacardi rum/ I dedicate this eulogy/ that you wrote to them too/

whose real names & dreams/ & ambitions I never knew/ give them my best regards/ in the night clubs of the sky/ they will never be forgotten/ by those who remembered they died (Pietri, 1983: ln. 315-332)

A thorough reading of this piece indicates that Pietri's illusory break from the social in *Traffic Violations* was in deed inevitable. He felt too much. The dire circumstances of his community did much more than inform his work. They hurt him. As an organic intellectual, Pietri was unable to keep a safe distance from the masses. It was all too personal. The writing then, in order for it to continue, had to develop a shield, a cover. *Traffic Violations* is the poet's attempt to establish the distance he could not maintain in *Puerto Rican Obituary*. The problem is that the high level of exposure and vulnerability present in the first work give the poet away in the second. They unmask him and the work, for all its dazzling intellectual tricks, ultimately exposes the unique anguish of an intellectual that would not and could not separate the personal from the communal.

CHAPTER 4  
WILLIE PERDOMO: NUYORICAN POETRY AS THE SOUNDTRACK FOR LIFE IN  
EL BARRIO

**Puerto Ricans in New York: The City as Home**

Willie Perdomo's poetry marks a return to the street. The city is always at the center of his work. Contrary to Pietri, the city is home for Perdomo and the poet speaks of it with utmost care and tenderness in order to showcase both its seedy and deteriorated conditions as well as the beauty inherent in its community. Perdomo's verses thus speak to and for the winos, junkies, 'abuelas' and children that crowd these streets with an immediate and almost palpable love that enables him to bring the people and their stories to the page without losing anything on the way. Perdomo then speaks the city and the city definitely speaks through him. It shines through and does so brilliantly. Unlike in Pietri, beauty is possible here. In the poem "Where I'm From," Perdomo (1996: ln. 36-37) writes: "Where I'm from it's sweet like my grandmother reciting a quick/ prayer over a pot of hot rice and beans." Moreover, the possibility of beauty for Puerto Ricans in New York does not rest in Perdomo's personal choice to focus on the lighter or more positive elements of life in El Barrio or in his ability to imagine and write about places different from where he lives. On the contrary, Perdomo's poetry is characterized by the poet's unique ability to create loving portrayals of Puerto Rican peoples in specific situations and places where love and beauty would usually be thought of as foreign. The poet explains in "The Making of a Harlem Love Poem": "-One day a little girl asked me if I wrote love poems. I said, Yes. I/ used to write infinite I-love-you-and-never-want-to-lose-

you-poems./ But now I write about scabs that chip off stone faces and fall on/ bleeding streets and think all the poems I write are love poems" (Perdomo, 1996: ln. 1-4).

Perdomo thus re-imagines the city markedly different from Pietri. While at times he seems at ease with his surroundings and on other occasions he is aching to break through and leave, the city never ceases to be home. Consequently, the city fluctuates between the background and center stage of Perdomo's work. And while it may overtake and overwhelm him in any particular poem, it does not eat him up. There is a definite emotional attachment between the poet and the city that allows him to survive. For Perdomo the streets are filled with life. Whereas in Pietri's work all the streets had dead ends and were frighteningly desolate, Perdomo's poems are filled with avenues. With people walking up and down the block and music blasting from almost every corner. The poem "Let me ask you something" reads:

Scent of indigo incense caresses me into a dream of kings/ and queens./ Manchild steppin' strong on the street with his fresh-out-of-the-box/ Nike 380s,/ Holdin' his head high he plexes his gold Nefertili medallion/.../Little queen in her stroller points to the discount toys/.../Did you hear the pow! Boom! Plah!/ Guns or drums? Take your pick. (Perdomo, 1996: ln. 6-26)

His poems function as a glaring and stubborn proof of life in the margins. He does not simply settle with chronicling the daily experiences of the people in these communities but challenges the reader to step into this world and see for him/herself. In the following lines he taunts and even threatens the reader: "Now-let me ask you somethin':/ did you hear all that while you was walking up 125th street?/Did you see all that while you was walkin' up 125th Street?/ Did you feel all that while you was walkin' up 125th Street?/ Or was you just on your way/ to pay/ the phone bill?" (Perdomo, 1996: ln. 35-41). Like in Pietri, there is a clear and definite move in Perdomo's poems to have

his community recognized and acknowledged. The difference lies in that in Pietri the move is motivated by the continual extermination of the members of that community and in Perdomo it arises more from a need to lay claim on that physical space as both joyously and painfully theirs. The evolution of the poetry movement and the community begins to be noticeable here. The Nuyorican community has grown its roots and Perdomo's work is a clear reflection of the fruits of this growth.

### **New Nuyorican Visions of Puerto Rico**

Important to note here is how the many music references in Perdomo's work, specifically those made to Salsa music, are used to get this point across. The references are not a simple recourse to create a particular poetic ambiance but rather function as key reminders and proof of the distinct legacy of Puerto Rican and other Latino musicians in the city. Furthermore, Perdomo's frequent naming of Salsa singers in poems such as "The day that Hector Lavoe died" and "Writing about what you know" from his Postcards of El Barrio collection sets up a parallel between the poet and the famous musicians.

Perdomo in fact claims to sing about the Barrio and its people and he claims Lavoe and others as his teachers. In "The Day Hector Lavoe Died" he writes:

She knows that I will stop to see the voice that helped me/ when I was trying to sing my own song about mi gente en el barrio,/ y la vida de las putas, los tecatos, y las brujas, los/ dichosos, los tiburones, los cantantes y los soneros, los/ bodegueros, los perros y las gatas, las matas en la ventanas/ de los proyectos and dare you to turn the other way. (Perdomo, 2002: ln. 8-13)

Salsa music thus appears in Perdomo as an indelible piece of evidence of Puerto Rican life in the city. As such the music permeates into every scene he describes. Salsa was there when his father beat his mother: "He would go kapow and that's where some of us learn to find the beat" ("The Day Hector Lavoe Died, ln. 70-71). It was there when the poet was dealing with his own drug addiction: "Your boys said the day would come when

you would go down like Hector Lavoe, Frankie Ruiz y La Lupe put together” (“Writing About What You Know,” ln. 45-47). It was there to inform his initial stabs at poetry writing: “The tempo for this journey is set by a round of glock shots ringing from the rooftops of Wagner projects, followed by a heavy, deep hip-hop jeep, thumping bass line with a stream of furious congas keeping rhythm” (“Creative Writing 1 Assignment: Sketches of Spanish Harlem,” ln. 2-6). And more importantly Salsa is there to mark the announcement of the coming of a new day: “There’s a disco ball/ spinning starlight/ on a new boogaloo/ tell Sonia/ that the bombs/are ready to drop/ that we got soneros/ ready to sing/ to those flowers/ that did not survive/ Operation Green thumb” (“The New Boogaloo,” ln. 1-11). Music is everywhere in Perdomo. You cannot escape it. And much like the Salsa icons he is so fond of, Perdomo sings/writes for every occasion.

None of his songs, however, are as intimate, as slow-paced and soft as those sung to and for his women characters, especially his mother. Perdomo’s depiction of women in his work is marked by an irrefutable, unrelenting and bitterly-sweet tenderness which gives these characters an out-of-this-world quality while still remaining deeply and at times tragically entrenched in third-world conditions. The poem “This is for Mamasita” from *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* reads:

I can see/ dry tears/ at the bottom/ of your hollow/ cheeks I/ heard you cried/  
twice today/ once when the/ sun came out and/ Carlito didn’t give/ you the ten/  
dollars he promised/ you for your wake/ up/ and then you/ cried real tears when/  
one of the guys gave/ Machito five/ dollars if he dared/ to ask you to suck/ his  
those were/ real tears I saw too/ tired for words I/ say give me/ life I love/ you  
when you/ return all the kisses/ I blow/ your way. (Perdomo, 1996: ln. 12-38)

With very few exceptions the women in Perdomo, young and old, have in some way or another been hurt and their injuries, directly or indirectly, have been inflicted by abusive men, or irresponsible men or perverted men or just simply no good men.

Consequently the gallantry and courage of women in Perdomo's work is highlighted by the description of men as "manchilds." Men do not grow in Perdomo. Rather, they "stumble into manhood," got to jail or otherwise mess up. They do wrong and leave. Thus, they are characterized for who and what they left behind.

It must be remembered that flight is a sin in Perdomo's work and with no exception flight is a masculine trait. Unlike in Pietri, Perdomo sees flight as possible for his male characters and they are damned on account of that ability. Positive male figures then are almost completely absent in his work. It is as if they simply did not exist. In their place, the reader finds complex and intriguing female figures like the poet's own mother who the poet praises in the opening line of "Unemployed Mami." The poem reads: "Eventhough she don't have a job mami still works hard" (Perdomo, 1996: ln. 1). The fact is that while men can be found standing aimlessly on the corners of Perdomo's poems, women are always at work. They are always active, even restless characters whose actions seem to be one of the principle steering mechanisms of their communities. One could even say that the life of the communities Perdomo describes is embodied by, preserved in and extended through his women characters.

Probing a bit more into Perdomo's poetic depiction of the mother-son relationship, particularly in the poems "Unemployed Mami" and "The Day Hector Lavoe died," one is able to see that this relationship opens some sort of cultural passage way by which the poet is able to tap into his Puerto Rican roots. In the poem "Unemployed Mami" the mother watches over the poet "as he runs into the street looking/ for images of Boricua sweetness to explode in his face" (Perdomo, 1993: ln. 5-6). The mother becomes more proactive in "The Day Hector Lavoe Died," where she directly links his son to the history

of Puerto Ricans in New York by speaking of their family's connection to the late great Salsa singer. Perdomo (2002: ln. 19-20) writes: "She starts her story about how Hector use to come to her/ house in the morning to pick up my uncle Lole who was a/ bad boogaloo conguero." She then proceeds to further cement the parallelism between her son the poet and the musical icon by warning him about his own drug use and how he could just as easily end up like Lavoe. The poem reads:

She gives me the answer by miming an injection into the/ crook of her elbow. But what she means to say is all that/ talent and if you keep messing around with that shit, the/ same thing is gonna happen to you because even though you/ not putting a needle in your veins, you still lock yourself up/ in your room and a die a little bit more every day. (Perdomo, 2002: ln. 35-40)

The mother stands as both watchperson and bearer of sacred traditions that are embedded in the family's oral history. Culture then is passed down directly from mother to son and though men are at the center of her stories, the maintenance and mobilization of the culture is only possible through her because she survived to tell the stories. Consequently, though male figures like Lavoe are revered and cited as crucial to the poet's self discovery, without the mother's connection to these men and the music they made, they would not be as meaningful to Perdomo. It is the mother figure who ultimately has center stage and harbors the indispensable link to the culture. The poet writes:

I clear my throat, take/ a deep breath and sigh cuz she fucked up my high with that/ same old story about talent left to dry, a small fortune wasted/ and all that coulda been in a world where the only thing left/ to sing about is a woman, putting on her nightgown, talking/ about the night she saw Hector Lavoe sing at the annual St./ Paul Mother's Day Dance and how he made her feel like/ she would never grow old. (Perdomo, 2002: ln. 73-80)

This image is similar to the one conveyed in Pietri's poem "Tata" in which the poet's grandmother appears to the reader as a solitary bastion of cultural affirmation and

resistance. As discussed in the previous chapter, Pietri's grandmother stood in direct contrast to the rest of the characters in his first book because she had survived. Consequently, the peculiar feminine ability to survive in both these poets' work is directly attributed to and responsible for the creation and maintenance of Puerto Rican culture in New York. The female gender is thus attributed a markedly strong character by both these authors that because of the always difficult and at times tragic circumstances that envelop them—the fact that others consistently die around them—are also portrayed as strikingly lonely figures.

Having said this, it should come as no surprise that death is not at all absent from Perdomo's work. In tune with Pietri's portrayal of Puerto Rican life in the city is Perdomo's use of death as a distinctively Puerto Rican experience. Here, as in Pietri, death is ever present. However, Perdomo's conception of death is different in that while his characters do take part in an intimate and constant dialogue with death—evidenced in the ceremonious pouring of liquor on the street in poems like "Funeral"—this dialogue is strictly private and personal. Whereas in Pietri masses of Puerto Rican workers pass on everyday and names are listed in order to drown out the singularity of the experience, Perdomo limits his obituaries to loved ones while also highlighting the violence prevalent in El Barrio. His poem "Funeral" for example mourns the death of his friend Edwin by confessing "It was the first time I saw Edwin wearing a suit" (Perdomo, 1996: ln. 1). The poet thus makes the experience unique to him and then goes on to place his friend's death within a troubling and tragic communal pattern. The poem continues: "I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I/ noticed that I went to more funerals than parties this summer" (Perdomo, 1996: ln. 4-5).

### **The Weight of the Community**

There is an unnerving sense of violence that underlies Perdomo's poetry. Lines like "After they bag me up/ the bullets will keep singing" from "Sangre en Harlem" (ln. 16-17) create a Pietri-like environment where the city keeps on living whether or not the people keep on dying. Moreover, like Pietri, Perdomo frequently recurs to the image of a physical and social violence whose perpetrators are known and made public by the poet. The poem "Where I'm from" reads: "Where I'm from, the police come into your house without/ knocking. They throw us off rooftops and say we slipped. They shoot/ my father and say he was crazy. They put a bullet in my head and say/ they found me that way" (Perdomo, 1996: ln. 21-24). The political and social oppression of the New York Puerto Rican community is very much present in Perdomo's work. The only discrepancy there is between Pietri and Perdomo as it relates to their portrayal of this oppression is that there seems to be no moralizing agent present in Perdomo's poetry. He does not preach to the community, rather he presents the different situations as he sees and feels them as true and leaves it up to the reader for interpretation. His main interest thus lies in depicting the complex character of a community that flourishes within a social dynamic that is based on the continual denial of its existence and the eventual demise of its humanity. Perdomo's art thus lies in skillfully and lovingly exposing these contradictions in lines like: "Friday night in El Barrio and love and death are standing on the/ corner smiling at you." ('Promises, promises' Perdomo, 1996: ln. 15-16).

It is important to note here, however, that while Perdomo's poetry does not border on the political rhetoric that some of Pietri's early work employed, like his predecessor, Perdomo offers no reconciliation between the community that he represents and the social order that victimizes it. For Perdomo, like Pietri, they are polar opposites and will

continue to be so. Both poets coincide in that social change is only possible within their own community; it is only feasible through the work of their people. This commitment to community uplift has been a mainstay in the Nuyorican poetry tradition and judging solely on Perdomo's work it appears that it will continue on that way. In this sense, there is not much separating Pietri and Perdomo's poetry. Both poets' works are built on and for the community that birthed them. Consequently, the differences in each other's poetry are a result of change in their community through time.

Having said this, the most significant progression from Pietri's Obituary to Perdomo's Postcards is perhaps the definite externalization of the Puerto Rican identity. Whereas in Pietri, the Puerto Rican essence, as previously discussed, was constricted to an internal space, in Perdomo this essence has broken out, colored its surroundings and can now be found all over the city. Contrary to Pietri, Perdomo's journey of self-discovery occurs in the streets, in a violent yet lively landscape where Pietri himself can be found preaching to young disciples. The poem "The New Boogaloo" reads: "tell Rosalia/ that the reverend Pedro/ is on the rooftop/ handing out passports/ because the spaceship casita/ is about to take off" (Perdomo, 2002: ln. 28-33). Perdomo, in this fashion, not only acknowledges his poetic foundations but two decades later has the courage and confidence to propose a different ending to Pietri's "Obituary." In the last lines of "The New Boogaloo," Pietri's character assures his young disciples "that this time/ we gonna die knowing/ how beautiful/ we really/ are" (Perdomo, 2002: ln. 84-88). This re-writing not only stands as testament to the survival of the Puerto Rican people in New York but also heralds the successful relocation of the center for production of Puerto Rican culture. With Perdomo, the city gets its own culture factory. Migration is no longer

mourned and the Island no longer stands as a requisite point of reference. New York Puerto Rican tradition is now rich enough to stand as its own point of departure. As Perdomo (1996: ln. 40-45) notes in “Nuyorican School of Poetry”: “Number halls/ behind bodegas/ next to casitas/ by botanicas/ keep history/ on the same block..” There is no need to look anywhere else.

Consequently, the poet's references to a Puerto Rican identity must be taken and seen as new and different from any manifestation or construct that had arisen on the Island. The culture has been home grown in the city and re-imagined to reflect the way of life, needs and desires of that specific community. To view it then as a mere transposition of Island tradition is to rid the Nuyorican tradition of its literary creativity and social agency. Furthermore, it must be remembered that the official definitions of Puerto Ricanness are not nor have ever been compatible with New York streets. Therefore, to acknowledge Puerto Ricanness as being alive and practiced across the shores is to acknowledge not a Stateside manifestation of Island life, but rather a people made Island in the States by both Puerto Rico and the U.S. who in the past thirty years were crafting a new nationality on the margins. And Perdomo's poetry is now the premier avenue through which that new nationality is crossing over to the two countries that reside off its shores.

The evolution of the Nuyorican poetry movement should now become glaring. In the 23 years that separate Puerto Rican Obituary (1973) and Where a Nickel costs a Dime (1996), the personal internal space that Pietri talked about as the only possible safeguard for working class Puerto Ricans in New York was busted out by Perdomo, stretched and made to fit over all possible members of that community. Perdomo's work stands firmly

on Pietri and expands it. This relationship between the two authors is important considering that according to Gramsci (2000), the most important task that organic intellectuals must carry out is to produce future intellectuals. That line of production—that intellectual heritage—is evident here. The two as writers have infused their work with the concerns of their community and through their work have given that community a proper name and an exact shape. They have spoken to it about its history. They have uncovered the distinct causes of its discontent. They have placed its troubles within the larger social context. And more importantly, they have mapped out a route for communal betterment and social uplift through poetry.

## CHAPTER 5 THE COMING PUERTO RICAN IDENTITIES

When one considers the type of Puerto Rican identity that the work of Pietri and Perdomo promotes—an identity not bogged down by political agendas nor confined to a set geographical location—and takes into account the traditional Island view of what a true Puerto Rican is, the increased exposure of Islanders to Nuyorican works is nothing short of a clash. Traditional Island identity constructions are beginning to collide with Nuyorican formulations of Puerto Ricanness and may very well lead Islanders to question their long held views. If the work produced by the emergent crop of poets in the Island is any indication of the future consequences of this clash, Island Puerto Rican identity is already being reformulated according to a Nuyorican framework. Furthermore, if with time these young poets manage to garner the critical acclaim and status of the established and even canonical Island writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they, like them before, could find themselves in the position of setting the basis for what the coming generations of Islanders will identify as Puerto Rican. Within this context the work these poets are doing now becomes terribly interesting and worthy of study.

It is thus crucial to ask: What exactly is Nuyorican about this new breed of Island poetry? One could initially answer that it's the writers' focus on the oral or performative character of their work that makes it distinctively Nuyorican. However, it is not so much that performance poetry is being actively practiced and staged on the Island for there is a fertile tradition of oral poetry in Puerto Rico. One could then argue that it's the combination of English and Spanish in the work. One could highlight the fact that writers

are using an Island form of code switching, infusing their poems with elements of the English language. But that also has a history in Puerto Rico. Lastly, one could point out the fact that poets are addressing the concerns and necessities of their specific communities and voicing out against injustice. But, as discussed earlier, Puerto Rican literature is historically intertwined with the political.

What makes these works Nuyorican is not simply a question of themes or style. It is the conscious and purposeful referencing of Nuyorican writers in these poets' works. Instead of basing their poetic manifestations on the canonical Island authors, young Puerto Rican writers are jumping off the identity constructions set in place by mainland writers. Urayoan Noel for example writes in his poem "Spic Tracts":

I've got no friends named Papo/ who hang around street corners/ "*Vaya, mami*" and "*Boricua one hundred per-/cent,/ represent!*"/ Don't even have a car/ to wash on Sunday afternoons/ away those NY/PR blues/ no homeboy convoy to loot Loisaida/ listening to la Fania/ "*salsa vieja por mi madre por la radio*"/.../I spend the summers at my aunt's/ in Hialeah./ I'm not down with the program/ and I never met Mumia/ still./ I have a past. (Noel, 2000: 14-41)

This poet's move to reference a separate and for decades marginalized taproot of Puerto Rican cultural expression signifies the defunct character of official identity constructions on the Island. His poetic manifestations make it glaringly obvious that these constructions are no longer viable. They have ceased to be applicable to his present experiences.

Furthermore, the poet's decision to define his own personal Puerto Rican identity against the parameters set during the three decades of Nuyorican literature as opposed to those set on the Island in the 20<sup>th</sup> century implies the de-centering of Puerto Rican identity. It signifies not only the evolution of the Nuyorican poetry movement but its status as a valid manifestation of what is Puerto Rican. Puerto Ricanness thus becomes

impossible to be set, fixed and limited to a particular geographical location. It begins to open up so as to house everybody.

Nowhere is this sentiment communicated as clearly and beautifully on the Island that in José Raul González's poetry. In a somber yet painstakingly tender tone, González proclaims the joy and pain of this de-centering when he states in the poem "Batacumbele means": "O talvez porque la hisla no reconoce/ el pecado desu historia./ Y quién sabe si es a causa de la similitud/ entre los cadáveres dela hisla y los de nuevayol" (González, 2000: ln. 6-9). He continues numbering the many ways in which the social conditions affecting marginal communities on the Island and in the states have further cemented the relationship between Islanders and the mainland community. He writes in "Nantan-Bai, Uno":

Escribo porque también viví en la ciudad de Nuevayol,/ porque también allá se están matando por el crack./ Porque también allá se están matando por la heroína,/ porque también allá existen cárceles,/ porque en las cárceles de allá también hacen tiempo/ cientos de puertorriqueños,/ porque también allá mueren/ chamaquitos que van a parar al río,/ que van a parar a los buzones, endonde aprenden/ a vivir como viven las cartas. (González, 2000: ln. 6-15)

His poetry thus functions as a call for the unification of colonized Puerto Rican people on both sides of the Atlantic. It is in fact a call to bonding, to a change in the relations between the Island and mainland communities.

If significant change is ever going to come, however, this call for an open house must be accompanied by a critical revision of Puerto Rican history, specifically of the migration. It is simply not enough to acknowledge that the migration occurred and continues to occur, but that it has shaped and affected every single aspect of Puerto Rican life both in the states and on the Island. Furthermore, it must be understood that Puerto Rican life has developed differently in each location according to the particular

circumstances and needs of each population. Consequently, what we have are not mirror images of each community across shores but rather distinct communal manifestations that arose from the same source and that suffer equally from the effects of colonization. To bridge the two communities then mandates the mapping out of the differences between the two and the reaching out through those differences. It demands a critical yet tender look.

It is this thesis' position that given the revisionist character of both Island and Mainland Puerto Rican literature, specially its poetry, and taking into consideration the Island's prolonged colonial status—the perennial dependency of the Island government on U.S. policies—literature appears as the preeminent space for this historical revision to occur. The possible Island adaptation of various elements of the Nuyorican aesthetic<sup>1</sup>—particularly its liberatory and multicultural philosophy—could very well produce and foster a new vision of the Puerto Rican. This vision would be one predicated on the positive contact with other racial/ethnic communities in the U.S., and thus free of venomous notions of cultural purity. Moreover, it could very well lead to a race conscious revision of Puerto Rican history and vindicate the Black Island experience as indelibly native and central to any viable process of identity construction; a vision of the Black Puerto Rican that does not essentialize, marginalize nor trivialize its character, presence and part in the forging of the Puerto Rican nation through time.

The Nuyorican aesthetic thus presents itself as a curative agent for Island culture. It presents us with the opportunity to revise and correct our past in order to almost

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<sup>1</sup> See page 11 for a description of the Nuyorican Aesthetic.

guarantee a more secure and just future for all of us. A Nuyorican way of thinking then enables Island Puerto Ricans to reach out toward its migrant community by standing firm right on top of the core of its Island past. It teaches us to look beyond by looking directly within.

Also, the Nuyorican aesthetic brings to the Island Puerto Rican a more nuanced view of colonialism. For years Nuyorican poets have been highlighting the Island's ongoing Americanization as it is manifested in Islanders' treatment of their Nuyorican counterparts (Hernandez, 1997). The refusal of the Nuyorican by the Island suggests a deep-seated and seemingly inconsolable self-hatred. The colonial regime divided the Puerto Rican self. Both the U.S. and Island elite have portrayed the migrant community as filthy, indignant and criminal, and middle class Islanders have bought into this portrayal and have grown to despise the migrant community and blame it for "the terrible view" white Americans have of Puerto Ricans. A Nuyorican framework thus provides the Islander with a way in which to learn to recognize white structures of racism and colonial oppression. The subversive possibilities of this unification process are endless.

To think Nuyorican means to think critically; to begin to see the interconnections between the subjugated status of the Island as a colony of the United States and the marginalized status of the U.S. Puerto Rican community as a racial ethnic minority in the U.S. It provides a lens by which to view and dissect the governmental and social structures that divide the two communities with the benefit of being independent of any formal political party. It thus promises a people-centered approach to political and social change.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Guillermo Rebollo-Gil was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He is the author of two published books of poetry. His work has also been included in literary anthologies of the Spanish speaking Caribbean. He is currently pursuing a PhD in sociology at the University of Florida, focusing on racial and ethnic relations.