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Mining the Meaning of Collective Memory and Imagination: The Construction of Identity in the Puerto Rican Diaspora

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Mining the Meaning of Collective Memory and Imagination: The Construction of Identity in the Puerto Rican Diaspora

Courtney Hooper’s project illuminates the relationship between cultural resistance, cultural production, and cultural identity in the poetry of Puerto Ricans in New York (“Nuyoricans”). Through textual analysis, informal interviews, and participant observation conducted in the South Bronx, this project is interested in how the descriptions of the island as “home” are used to mediate a cultural or ethnic identity, particularly amongst a people who do not live there, or perhaps never have. While the construction of an ethnic identity and a conceptual homeland in a diasporic community has been studied in past research, the intention here is to elaborate upon the themes that previous studies have noted and to add an element that is essential: that of the subject’s voice.

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Capstone Project 2006
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A diaspora is defined as a group of people dispersed from their original homeland. While providing a definition for “diaspora” is fairly simple, understanding the mechanisms and characteristics of which it is actually composed and the reasons for those elements is a complicated and truly consuming task. It requires the incorporation of a number of different disciplines, including psychology, Marxist philosophy, sociology, and linguistics. While a number of diasporas exist throughout all the world and thus their respective cultural make-ups differ greatly, all diasporas have particular currents running through them, allowing those who are separated geographically to feel unity both with each other and their homeland. The methods employed to provide this unity vary but ultimately strive to construct a cohesive cultural identity for its members. As I will discuss later, this constructive identity frequently does more to exclude than unify all members but its attempt, at least at the surface, is for all members to feel attached to their homeland and, consequently, each other.

Several different methodologies or schools of thought may be needed to understand the way diasporas function. First one must consider the placement of a new immigrant population with a shared culture or ancestry amongst a larger, culturally different population and their interaction. The immigrant population, the diaspora, is forced to choose between being absorbed into the larger population and perhaps losing its cultural identity or suffering the consequences—social, financial, and emotional—of refusing to assimilate. George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s principle of dialectics could be
applied here, in looking at the interaction of the diaspora within the hegemonic culture. The two are set in opposition and some synthesis must occur, according to Hegel. This does happen, as the diaspora is absorbed into the mass culture (witness the transformation of the Irish-American community throughout the 20th century). However, this dialectical synthesis seems to happen on two levels. The first, as I have just mentioned, happens between the diaspora and the hegemonic culture of its new land. The second tends to happen as a new immigrant group is set in opposition to the mass culture and the current diaspora. For example, resentment and bigotry towards Irish-American immigrants dissipated as other immigrants settled into the United States and as other minorities began to gain power and social prominence. Suddenly the Irish were absorbed into the dominant white culture and today are considered unquestionably part of the dominant racial paradigm.

In evaluating this dialectical sort of absorption and synthesis of one culture with another, one must be mindful of the diaspora being “absorbed.” It is not always a willing participant and quite frequently resentful and defensive towards such advances from the hegemonic society, as evidenced by the frequent displays of homeland pride and the vehement refusal to adopt the “new” ways of the dominant society. It is this motivation, in part, that drives such patriotism for and idealizing of the homeland propagated not by its residents but by those who have actually ex-patriated. In the homeland, one’s association with his or her country is understood and implied. Outside of that context, it becomes necessary for both the person’s own cultural identity and as a means of exhibiting for those around him or her that it is displayed proudly and vehemently so as to make a distinction between it and the surrounding dominant culture. It is virtually
impossible to pass through a minority-dominated neighborhood of New York or Chicago (the Bronx, Humboldt Park, Chinatown) without witnessing a flag of the expatriated country in the windows of most homes and businesses.

**Puerto Rican, Nuyorican, AmeRican?**

The term “Nuyorican” is often used to refer to Puerto Ricans living in New York City. While the word’s origin is a hybrid word combining “New York” and “Puerto Rican,” it is often used to refer to any Puerto Rican living on the mainland of the United States. Because there are virtually as many Puerto Ricans living in New York as in Puerto Rico itself, the dialogue of the Puerto Rican diaspora has remained very New York-centric. Often the entire mainland of the United States will be referred to by older residents of the island as “New York,” not because of ignorance to the correct location of which they speak but simply because it is a sort of Puerto Rican colloquialism. So much of the expatriated population is centered there that the mentality and language for the mainland is also centered there. Thus, while it may sound like a bit of a misnomer, a Puerto Rican living in Wisconsin or Connecticut might self-identify as “Nuyorican.”

Further, “Nuyorican” refers to an artistic movement among New York Puerto Ricans in the 1970s to produce art that reflected their cultural experience as Puerto Ricans living outside the island. Some attempts have been made to de-center the American Puerto Rican, like in Tato Laviera’s “AmeRican[,]” where the poet identifies himself less with New York and more with the Caribbean and Third-World peoples who reside all around the United States. This is a reflection of two things: first, to recognize that history has aligned these people in their shared backgrounds and also, to insert the
Puerto Rican in not just the New York society but in the U.S. dialogue and culture. Thus, while it is not the only term to describe Puerto Ricans in the United States, it is one that is very commonly employed to describe Puerto Ricans, including those living outside New York City.

* * * * * * *

Recently at a Japanese restaurant, I was seated next to a Puerto Rican couple who at the end of the meal asked where I was from. I explained that originally I grew up in Michigan but that I’d lived in Chicago for the last five years. Out of social propriety, I then asked where they lived. They responded that they were Puerto Rican. “So you live on the Island?” I asked. “Oh no, we live in Minnesota,” the husband replied. “Oh, how long have you lived in the States?” I asked. “About,” the two paused and consulted each other before she responded, “about fifteen years.” A discussion ensued about why these two would not define themselves as “Nuyorican,” that is, a Puerto Rican living on the mainland of the United States. They asked me what I thought to be the difference between Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans. I responded with my usual liberal cultural sensitivity answers like the language issue (some Nuyoricans speak only English), and other generalities that were certain not to offend. The woman, whose name was Juanita—which she pronounced “Ja-nee-tah,” not the Spanish pronunciation of “Wa-nee-tah”—said “It’s because Nuyoricans don’t have a country. They’re always trying to prove their Puerto-Ricanness. That’s why they have all those parades and t-shirts and everything."

It is in this context that the Puerto Rican diaspora (or Nuyoricans) is set. The culture of Nuyoricans will be the focus in this particular study in diasporic identity
construction. The Nuyorican community has maintained a home in the margins of society in the United States for decades, making it an unusual example of an immigrant population to never have made much headway in the move for assimilation, either by its own initiative or the urging of external or dominant society. Nuyoricans occupy a space unlike many other diasporic groups in that many in their homeland find no commonality with them. To Puerto Ricans, they are often considered not “Puerto Rican enough,” and within white American culture, they are certainly considered the Other. The political status of Puerto Rico is also cause for an inclusive cultural identity to be problematic and complicated. Puerto Rico is a commonwealth, defined as a “Free Associated State.” The term itself is contradictory. It is neither sovereign nor wholly subjective to the laws of the United States.

There is a certain psychology that develops in such a diasporic people, and even more so in a group that is not really “claimed” by anyone but itself, politically and culturally. As Carmelo Esterrich puts it, “the subject [Nuyorican] refuses to recognize the loss of his/her pleasure object [the homeland], thus avoiding any feeling of mourning.” This process, called incorporation in post-Freudian terminology, is characterized by a refusal to accept any substitution for this loss. The people of a diaspora refuse to accept their new location and culture or the “reality” of their homeland, putting in its place a fantasy version. As this fantasy is repeated in an effort to “confirm the presence of the object...what is really happening is the covering up of the fact that the object is lost forever.” For this process to be productive, the memory of the place must be fixed and unchanging, not allowing for cracks, as Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok call them, in the “crypt” of memory. It is due to this mentality, a sort of survival
mechanism for cultural identity, that the loyalty and love for the homeland often seem nearly obsessive. The diaspora is in a constant state of alert, maintaining the lock on the crypt of memory. For contradictory ideas, notions, or memories to penetrate might indicate the demise of that collective identity.

Where, Why, and How: Methodology

There are many sites in which this fantasy of homeland is reproduced and the arts are absolutely teeming with this repetition that falsely confirms the presence of the absent pleasure object; they are the locus of reproduction of the fantastical homeland. Paintings depict the fabled jíbaro, a Puerto Rican farmer dating from pre-American days, who would work his land, harvesting from the fertile ground of the products of the island sun. *Danza*, a type of dance original to the island, is usually associated with Spanish elegance and European “civilization.” Occasionally, it is said to have roots in the indigenous people, the Taínos, exemplifying the tendency to edit from Puerto Rican history the African elements and instead, elevating the efforts and accomplishments of the Spanish and Taínos. In *danza*’s depictions, we see the island depicted as being a part of the “enlightened” European tradition. Notably, the attribution of these elements to indigenous or Spanish culture may not be historically accurate. However, it is not accuracy or fact that inevitably shape the consciousness of a community or its folklore but rather, the general consensus at which that community arrives. While according to historians and the intellectual elite, *danza* probably is derived much more from African elements on the Island, much of the information that I found on the subject from less
academic sources attributed it to either European or Taíno influences. That aside, perhaps the best stage on which to witness the reiteration of this romantic dream of a homeland is in poetry. The mechanisms of poetry, metaphor in particular, make it ideal for dissecting the elements that support an idyllic image of “home.”

A considerable amount of study and writing has preceded my analysis of these works. While I respect these works and am indebted to their creators for the understanding they have provided me on the subject, I have found that one element has remained utterly neglected: the subjective experience of the non-poet Nuyorican. The process of art is not one-sided; art reflects life and life reflects art. The Nuyorican poet does not write in some Bohemian vacuum, inspired only by the thoughts and feelings provided by his or her own experience. The Nuyoricans not participating in this poetry movement are obviously still participants in an ongoing construction of themselves. We are discussing the production of a cultural identity, that is, one that defines the Nuyorican self for the community, not just the poet. The absence of analysis of the subjective experience of the “average” Nuyorican has handicapped analysis of identity construction up to this point. It was after having drawn this conclusion that in this project, I chose to include the musings and reflections derived from several interviews of sixteen Nuyoricans living in the Bronx, New York. The only criterion for involvement in the study was that the participant self-identify as Puerto Rican and every participant was a member of Intermediate School 216. The intent was neither to validate nor invalidate the descriptions and feelings that participants gave me regarding the notions expressed in the poetry. It was simply to provide a voice for the subject of my study. I felt that to simply analyze the poetry of this group was to study them as if they were organisms
under a microscope. My objective was rather that they be understood as a culture of individuals with both unique and collective feelings and experiences that are not only expressed in the “high art” of poetry but also in the simple vocabulary of an 8th grade student.

Identity is Mediated: Nuyorican Poetry

According to the Nuyorican Poets Café, one of the most forefront organizations in the dissemination of Nuyorican poetry and the movement as a whole, the movement began because “poetry [is] the vital sign of a new culture.” In 1974, Miguel Algarín, a Nuyorican poet, began hosting poetry readings that emphasized Nuyorican cultural consciousness in his living room in the East Village of New York City. Soon thereafter, it became clear that the poets were going to need more space, not only for themselves but also for their ideas. The Café’s mission statement asserts that its objective has always been to provide a space for artists whose work is under-represented in the mainstream media. It should come as no surprise that these under-represented artists felt that their culture as well was undervalued by the mainstream world. Thus, their poetry emphasized the cultivating of an identity for a marginalized people: Nuyoricans.

The poetry frequently draws on the space of Puerto Rico—the island itself—as a source for constructing an identity for Nuyoricans. The reasons for this will be analyzed at a later point but throughout the movement, the land is relayed as a place of origin, of metaphorical or intellectual birth, of provider and sustainer, and frequently, as a mother or nurturer. Through reading various poems, the reader becomes aware of a number of
different “Puerto Ricos” that exist in the minds of each poet. Consequently, the complex identity construction underway not only for the poet him or herself, but also for his readership, becomes increasingly visible.

Though the poetry discussed primarily supports a utopic image of the Island, the canon—so to speak—of Nuyorican poetry is also filled with unenthusiastic and downright hateful depictions of Puerto Rico. This matter, although not the subject of this essay, cannot be neglected. There are two, perhaps equally valid ways of looking at this issue. The first is to again apply another tenet of post-Freudian psychology and assume that this is evidence that introjection has occurred, in which the lost object (homeland) is filled with another substitute object, still preventing mourning for the lost object. In this model, one would be safe in assuming the new home, the United States, is positioned as the replacement object. In a complete reversal of the psychology that explains the repetitious fantasy of homeland, one could also examine this phenomenon. It is possible that the poet is still practicing incorporation, but that the two objects are reversed. The subject of the repetitious fantasy could be the new home (the U.S.) that has not been lost but actually, never gained. In a repetitious fantasy that extols the merits of the new home, the subject might become convinced that the utopic world that he has created does, in fact, exist.

Before examining the poetry, one must first consider why Nuyoricans would feel such a strong connection to the physical area of the island and need to attach such meanings to it. In this case, the land of Puerto Rico could be defined as a “field of care...a place that becomes meaningful as emotionally charged relationships between people find an anchorage at a particular site through repetition and familiarity”. These
places are areas to which the subject feels the greatest sense of attachment because they are charged with memories and associations, even if these exist only within the collective memory or imagination of the community. In the case of the Nuyorican poet, it is irrelevant whether the subject him/herself has ever set foot on the island because its presence looms so large in the collective consciousness that he/she is able to feel that sense of repetition and familiarity without ever having direct physical contact. For instance, many Nuyorican poets speak of the island in the context of stories told to them by their mothers as children. Further, with the passage from the mainland to Puerto Rico being relatively easy (because Puerto Ricans are American citizens), the constant circulation of Puerto Ricans between the island and the U.S. maintains the community’s dialogue regarding the island. Thus, it is regarded as the point of origin, giving a supplanted people a sense of place.

**Fields of Care: Poetry as the Site of Identity Construction**

This concept is exemplified in Miguel Piñero’s “This is Not the Place Where I Was Born,” (1980) a poem that illustrates the extreme contrasts between Piñero’s attachment to Puerto Rico and his disdain for New York City. In this poem, he recounts the “fantasizing images my mother planted / within my head— / the shadows of her childhood recounted to me many times,” of an island “where to be puerto rican meant to be / part of the land & soul.” These few lines are laden with meaning, necessitating dissection on many levels. First, Piñero points immediately to the island as his point of origin and denouncing any attachment to the mainland. The island is articulated as his home, especially as he makes reference to his mother’s childhood there. By situating his
mother's origin as the island, Piñero seems to align and liken the two, using his mother as a metaphor for Puerto Rico. In doing so, he communicates a sense of the island producing him, giving him life just as his mother did. He repeatedly discusses his birth there, but it seems less a physical birth than a spiritual one. Supporting this idea is Piñero's statement that being Puerto Rican means that one is part of the land and soul of the island. Here he is using the land to define "Puerto Rican-ness," conveying that the space of Puerto Rico flows through one's veins and creates the Puerto Rican character. It is also noteworthy that Piñero writes more about his hatred of New York City than about his love for the island. As Esterrich suggests, this could be viewed as a refusal to identify with the new location as that would require an admittance of the loss of the past home (45).xiii In accepting this loss, the subject is forced to fill the void with a substitute object, in this case the place of New York. These spaces are not merely places but symbols of character and identity. For Piñero to identify New York City as his new home would mean for him to associate himself as an American rather than a Puerto Rican, denouncing his cultural identity. As the island is such a cornerstone of Puerto Rican identity, Piñero likely feels it necessary to define himself as having no connection or attachment to New York (or to the United States for that matter) in order to maintain his sense of "Puerto Rican-ness."

In Tato Laviera's "Jibaro," (1985) he elaborates on the notion of land as the signifier of the Puerto Rican identity by drawing on the jibaro as the quintessential (and mythologized) historical Puerto Rican character and his connection to the land. Laviera, however, conceptualizes Puerto Rico very differently, connoting the island's provisional qualities. He writes,
el jíbaro mathematically
working the sun’s energies
nurturing every fruit to
blossom perfectly
singing about
the earth, la tierra
time after time, acre after acre,
year after year, the land provided.iv

Repeatedly, the land is described this way—as a feminine space—both by the colonizers and the colonized. For Nuyoricans, it is an expression of the land as fertile, being perpetually able to provide and sustain. Again, the land is represented as a maternal figure, first giving birth and then nurturing. Laviera’s representation of the land can also be viewed as utopian, conveying a sense that on the island, one could never want for anything, that the land would provide all of one’s needs. The poem harkens back to a past that was supposedly less complicated, one in which the jíbaro could thrive on his land and live peacefully. This reference is again intended to communicate the land as the foundation for the Puerto Rican identity of which the jíbaro has come to be the icon. In Laviera’s poem, the land is what has made the survival of the jíbaro possible. What must not be forgotten is that the jíbaro himself is a representation, a figurative embodiment of an idealized Puerto Rican character who thrived during a “better time” in Puerto Rico prior to American control. Repeatedly, it is the reaction of the colonized, according to Fanon, to draw on a romanticized past or land to “shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped”.v Thus in “Jíbaro,” one can read the land as sustainer of a glorious past that has come to represent national identity, especially by means of its opposition to the culture of the colonizer.

The insular landscape is often used as a means of validation and reaffirmation, representing something “real” and undeniable that gives credibility to a culture that is
often undervalued in the American society. In Victor Hernández Cruz’s “Islandis,”
(1989) the land is articulated as a validating force of Puerto Rico’s history. In the case of
a colonized society, its history is often viewed as beginning when the colonizers arrived
and having absolutely no impact prior to that moment. With “Islandis,” Hernández Cruz
seeks to dispel such notions and insert the land of Puerto Rico into the classical history of
the Greeks, usually considered the society responsible for the foundation of Western
civilization. In the lines,

Was the Carib isles
The ink in the plume
Of Plato—
In the philosophers mind
A sandy curve of coast
Stretching into red soil
And sky out into the lamps
Of the Gods\textsuperscript{vi}

Hernández Cruz asserts Puerto Rican land as being responsible for the widely praised
works of Plato and later, Homer. By coupling one history that is perpetually validated by
dominant (“white,” American) culture and another which is perpetually ignored,
Hernández Cruz attempts to give due credit to the land (and by extension Puerto Ricans
themselves) for great works of legitimized historical significance. Further, by suggesting
that the land has taken part in such a history, Hernández Cruz elevates the status of
Puerto Ricans, imploring them,

Declare ourselves
The kings and queens
of Poseidon
Weather crowns of
Bird gone feathers\textsuperscript{xvii}
Again, this shows the inextricable connection between the landscape and the development of a national identity. Not only is the land portrayed as more glorious and "historical" by being set in a different context, but also in doing so, Hernández Cruz suggests to the Puerto Rican community that they too are valid by way of the imagery of the island’s geography and its placement within this context.

Sandra Maria Esteves’s “Weaver” (1974) seeks to unify the Puerto Rican community by way of the land and its collective connection to it. Along with relying on the land itself for this connection, Esteves draws heavily on the colors that represent that land and the connotations and meanings of those colors. In the lines

Weave us a song of red and yellow and brown
that holds the sea and sky in its skin
the bird and mountain in its voice
that builds upon our graves a home
with fortifications
strength, unity and direction

Esteves informs her reader that the imagery of the land exists within every Puerto Rican which not only informs their identity but also creates a oneness amongst them. The colors live inside the people of Puerto Rico, held within them as demonstrated when she writes “that holds the sea and sky in its skin.” While she does write of a song of red and yellow and brown, she then anthropomorphizes the song, giving it skin. And what could she be anthropomorphizing it for except to link it to the Puerto Rican, to make the song and the spirit one in the same? The colors of red, yellow, and brown are set in opposition to the “colorless venom stalking hidden / in the petal softness of the black night.” The colorlessness and blackness are not represented as anything specific, but rather as something that would threaten the unity of a cultural identity. This helps solidify the notion of a binary; that there is a clear border surrounding the Puerto Rican community
and threats exist only outside of it. This exclusion must exist for Esteves’s poem to be
effective. It is intended to eliminate any in-fighting or tension in the community by way
of their mutual relationship to the land. Instead, it presses them to look to the blackness
of the outside world as the enemy. There is perhaps no force more unifying than the
notion of a common enemy, erasing any conflict that may exist within the group in order
to focus on the “bigger picture.” Even while she focuses on uniting the community
around one common enemy, Esteves’s notion of collective identity is unusual in that it
promotes inclusion and diversity within that identity, making reference to “a song for our
bodies to sing / a song of many threads / that will dance with the colors of our people.”
The many threads are representations of the “distinct” ethnic backgrounds that make up
the Puerto Rican identity, that being African, Spanish, and Taino (as well as the other
elements that comprise Puerto Rican culture that remain hidden from the dominant
cultural dialogue). Esteves does not seek to eliminate those differences in her attempt to
unify the community against its singular enemy; the unity does not come at the expense
of individuality, but rather as the result of it.

“Poem” (1974) by Victor Hernández Cruz is crowded with imagery of the
landscape, personified to communicate the connection of Puerto Ricans and their island.
He begins the poem, “Your head it waves outside / You are as deep and heavy as the
ocean.” This is the first time in the poems discussed that a poet has chosen to stray from
the boundaries of the island itself and equate the people to the surrounding water. This
choice is intriguing, as one has come to understand what is represented by the land but
not yet examined what is meant by the ocean. Hernández Cruz describes it as deep and
heavy and writes later that his subject’s head “is full of the ocean and / the mystery of the
sea shells / It moves like the waves.” If we know that the physical space of the island represents that which is considered “authentically” or originally Puerto Rican and the mainland represents assimilation and absorption into the Anglo sphere, I would argue that the ocean represents the space between those identities, the opposing forces pulling at and shaping a Nuyorican’s cultural self-image, and the ambivalence produced when making a decision between the two. Water generally implies and represents uncertainty and change. It is used by most poets to suggest the fear generated by a force stronger than oneself that can and will institute sometimes unwanted change. Thus, Hernández Cruz’s signifiers of these feelings are things that are inconsistent: waves that move and change and shift, sea shells full of mystery, a foreboding deep ocean.

The poet quickly settles back into the comforting space of the island, representing it as the site of birth and origin, as is seen so frequently. He writes, “Here is where our mothers are from / From this land sitting / All pregnant with sweetness / And trees that want to be the wind.” Again, it is noteworthy that in every mention of past generations or relatives originating in the island, it is only mothers to whom reference is made. Even more significant is Hernández Cruz’s description of the land as “pregnant with sweetness,” again connoting the land as fertile, feminine, and original. This exhibits another common symbol system in diasporic poetry. The colonized is represented as feminine and the colonizer is masculine. The island is productive, fruitful, but ultimately, the receptacle of external power. The colonizer is then aggressive and contravening, taking what does not belong to it. After establishing the island as the source of a Puerto Rican identity, he states

Here is where the journey started
And you laugh as tall as palm trees
And you taste as good as pasteles
You dance toward the silver of the stars
Everything moves with you
Like a tropical rain^{xx}

It is important to note that Hernández Cruz uses simile here rather than metaphor. Previously, most poems have relied on a direct association, a personification of the land within Puerto Ricans to create a national identity. However, in this case he simply compares the two rather than claiming them to be actually part of each other; the Puerto Rican laugh isn’t the palm tree, but rather it’s like the palm tree. The lines of the poem, “Here is where your journey started” and “Everything moves with you/Like a tropical train,” seem to make reference to the passage from the island to the mainland. The implication is that although these characteristics originated on the island and are the result of a heritage there, they are part of the soul of the Puerto Rican and thus cannot be removed or erased by immigration to the mainland. Hernández Cruz is asserting an idea recurrent in Nuyorican poetry: that Puerto Rican-ness is a thing intrinsic to the Puerto Rican body. It cannot be removed or reversed but is something eternal within Puerto Ricans.

Thus far, the poems discussed have defined origin in the island as being the cause for a Puerto Rican identity, but they have yet to define it. Tato Laviera’s “palm tree in spanglish figurines” [sic] (date unknown) personifies the land and its incarnation in the “spanglish” female body. He writes, “natural coconut rhythms / swaying soul essences / and latino salsa all / intertwine within her,” and later, he discusses the way the dancer exhibits “sensual slow movements.” Notable is his use of the word “natural,” a word that not only conveys these rhythms as being uncontrived but also, in a way, related to the land. What is “natural” is “God-given” and from the Earth. It is not the modernized,
industrialized and commodified Puerto Rico. The “coconut rhythm” the dancer exhibits is inherent in her body because she is Puerto Rican; the land from which she comes creates it. He defines her by the land: she is a palm tree, swaying with “soul essences” and “coconut rhythms.” Here he is not only defining Puerto Rican-ness, but also specifically *feminine* Puerto Rican-ness and using the gendered definitions and articulations of the land to characterize her. He defines her as tropical, sexualized, and mysterious, notably all characteristics that Anglos have used to define Puerto Ricans and constitute their otherness. Laviera has articulated this Latina as the desirable other, possessing a hyper-erotic identity. She is objectified and yet glorified, possessing in her body the elements of the island that are beautiful and pleasing. Also relevant is Laviera’s frequent use of Spanish in a poem dominated by English. According to Aparicio, these words function as “‘conjuros,’ as ways of bringing back an original, primordial reality—Puerto Ricaness—from which these poets have been uprooted in a political and cultural way.” By using phrases like “piñones was her face setting” and “mouth tasting like cangrejos,” Laviera conjures images as if pulling them straight from the ground of Puerto Rico. By not translating, it is as if he wishes not to disturb the originality of the words; that they exist within his subject in their Spanish form. Also, this use of Spanish is the poet’s attempt to reinsert himself (or in this case his subject) into his home by way of language. This is Laviera’s effort to make his female subject authentic, to give reason to why she defines *puertorriqueña*.

**Gendered Identity: The Puertorriqueña**

At this point, it is necessary to address the various problematic gender issues that work as the scaffolding in this construction of a Nuyorican identity. Certain definitions
of femininity and womanhood, specifically motherhood, are almost unquestioned
elements of Nuyorican poetry of this period. The characteristics given to women in art
and subsequently, those female characteristics that are used to describe inanimate matter
are troublesome and in reality, deserve a lot more investigation and scrutiny than I am
able to allot them here. Without portraying the poets (and culture, for that matter) as
pathological, there seem to be overwhelmingly two general categories for women in
Nuyorican poetry and one resounding motivation for them. The women are classified as
either mothers or sexualized creatures, and clearly, this dichotomy is not singular to the
Nuyorican poetry set.

When they are classified as mothers, they are valorized and glorified, providing
roots and authenticity to this Nuyorican identity. They are the literal mothers, as in
Piñero’s “This is Not the Place Where I was Born” and they are the metaphorical Mother
Earth, Mother Tongue, and Mother Nature. These women are tied so closely to the land
that the two are very rarely discernable. One’s mother is the land and the land is one’s
mother. She gives and sustains life. Virtually every description given to the land applies
in the reverse to the biological mother; she is “fertile,” “natural,” one’s origin. While
these descriptions appear to glorify the female subject, there is a troubling question
lurking beneath the surface: what is a woman when she is not a mother? Her value and
the attributes that make her part of this dialogue lie in her ability to procreate, her ability
to perform a task and not in herself. They are, frankly, a means to an end. They are not
subjects with inherent merit but rather the vessels for creation, the sites of production. In
this, they are objectified and allowed no importance simply as a participant in the
Nuyorican experience.
Similarly, the sexualized Latina of “palm tree in spanglish figurines” is an exclusionary identity created for the Puerto Rican woman. For one, she exists as a receptacle for the poet’s (albeit benign) sexual desire. This space carved out for the Latin woman is, I believe, quite a bit more pathological than is visible at the surface. The descriptions attributed to this “type” of woman seems to smack of the stereotypes often bestowed by a colonizer upon his colonized. Their white slave-masters considered African slaves hypersexual, both male and female. Puerto Rican women (and Latinas in general) are the caliente sexualized creatures of an eroticized island, an idea on which Frances Aparicio elaborates in her book, Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures. While this is the result of the colonizer setting the people of a newly acquired territory apart as the Other, it also seems to be a process of oppression, of degradation. In aligning this “Other” as hypersexual, the colonizer generally performs an eradication of human characteristics; the Other is now less than human, with animalistic sexual desires. These sexual desires are often accompanied by the depiction of the subject as a “brute.” Although this occurs far more frequently with the male subject, it is evidence of the dehumanization the colonized undergoes at the hands of his or her colonizer. There is a definite colonization occurring of the female figure in the sexualized depictions found throughout Nuyorican poetry.

There is a considerable resistance that exists to defy these two polarized, dichotomous, and exclusionary identities provided to Nuyorican women. Many female Nuyorican poets have chosen to write autobiographically about their femininity, providing a voice and agency to themselves and their surrounding community of women. They valorize many elements of womanhood, as exemplified in Esteves’ “Weaver,” she
is a creator, engaged in the timeless ritual of weaving, the blending together to create something new. But on the metaphorical level, she is an active participant in creating a unified Nuyorican body. While she uses the example of weaving, a decidedly feminine activity, it is revealed as an important process of social work and creation.

Lois Griffith takes a different approach to the subject of femininity in her poem “Chica” (published 1994, original performance date unknown). She writes about being the victim of rape, addressing the subject of this colonizing sex act. However, she views herself as harder, tougher than the predator who violates her. Her sexuality is out of this man’s reach. She writes:

The virgin question written on your tight whites
recalls illusions of romance gone stale
recalls speaking crude words
having to do with the price of fresh meat
[......................................................]
you let him hold it
being tough enough to give it up
give it out
hiding no part of yourself
jacked up in a hallway
on a doorknob in a hallway
on the sticks acced on the hallway
Give it up
not having anything to say
or words to call inside
the giving up
to change the beat in the heat.xxiv

While Griffith’s poem still deals with the subject of sexuality, it’s more a discussion of sexual desire itself. There is are two very key difference between Laviera’s definition of womanly sexuality and Griffith’s. For one, Griffith displays an undeniable control of her sexuality; she possesses it. It is out of reach for the man engaged in this act. In the lines “being tough enough to give it up/give it out/hiding no part of yourself,” Griffith
demonstrates the faith that she has in her own strength and how self-possessed she feels about her sexuality. It is no longer the object of an external figure’s desiring but a force over which Griffith displays control, even in the process of a person trying to rob her of that possession.

Griffith seems to be involved in a very important process with regard to the Nuyorican woman’s identity. While many other female poets address the subject of womanhood in Nuyorican society (Judith Ortiz Cofer, Sandra Maria Esteves), few do so with such directness and frankness as Lois Griffith. She seems to address the life and identity of the typical “street” Nuyorican; the poor, urban Nuyorican woman. In her poem “Ditty and Jitty,” (published 1994, original performance date unknown) she tells of two friends, Hard Sister Ditty Bop and Jitty Bop, Queen of Spades. Ditty and Jitty have keen awareness to their lives, their gender, their sex, and they take these things seriously, viewing them like weapons and past experience as a map of a war zone.

cop a disco box off a slow sucker
new on the scene
unaware of how keen
you have to be to be on the beat
with your dancing feet
if you want to hang
and not get banged up in a cycle moving fast
pre-guessing the next turn
never forgetting what you have learned
and tucked away in the hip
of your straight-legged jean machines.
No denying the streets are mean.
No denying we carry the baggage of where we have been.
Ditty and Jitty make etchings in time
the world they inhabit
rewards the slick way
they hustle-bop on the face of a dime
the bitter and brutal now in fashion
reject soft attitudes for those with more passion.
Here, Griffith manages to break down the dichotomy that allows a woman to be only passionate in the sexual sense or submissive to an authoritarian. Ditty and Jitty are “keen” on what they have to do to “hang and not get banged.” They have a feminist sensibility that is aware but not inhibited. They protect themselves but are not imprisoned by the dangers that await them as women in a violent, misogynistic city, country, and culture. They have assessed the situation, they know that the streets are mean, but they continue to inhabit their world anyway rather than be prisoners of their gender, sequestered in the protection of the domestic. Notably, Griffith is one of the only female poets listed as a “Founding Poet” in the compilation produced by the Nuyorican Poets Café of its finest work.

López’s Moments: A Timeline

In his essay, “Nuyorican Spaces: Mapping identity in a poetic geography,” Edrik López makes the statement, “If New York is real, then Puerto Rico is imagined.” It is at this crossroads that I posit my interview questions as well as my interviewees. My objective was to discover the negotiation necessary to include not only a real New York and a real Puerto Rico, but also the imagined places, respectively. Because we know that identity is not necessarily developed from the “factual” or “real,” I chose to delve into the subjective experience of these Puerto Ricans living in the Bronx. Each participant was given the same 30 or so questions and could skip any that he or she felt ill-equipped to answer. My suspicion was that I would find an entire identity, a mental world, that existed only on the margins; a home carved out in the space between New York and Puerto Rico. I expected many of the descriptions of Puerto Rico that López describes,
“the mythical birth-home…experiences and images a Nuyorican receives from Puerto Rico [to] carry with them the idea of Puerto Rico being an island paradise.” I also anticipated the abandonment of New York being described by interviewees, as in Lucky Cienfuegos’ “Piss Side Street” (published 1994, original performance date unknown)\textsuperscript{xvi}:

\begin{verbatim}
  piss staining lonely night street
gutless buildings hanging loose
[
yeah, bad doing studs peeking
through dark shadow alleys
polishing their desiring dreams
with empty butcher bucket knife eyes.
pushes the back of my mind
the empty desiring dream forward
the knife red stripes crying eyes
and all that remains
a graffiti design on a piss
side street.\textsuperscript{xvii}
\end{verbatim}

More than looking for which place the participants identified as home, I was interested in how they straddled the massive gap between the Island and the mainland identity. If they described New York as Cienfuegos’ does, how would they also explain their loyalty to the city? Would they have a loyalty to the city? Would a loyalty to the city be mutually exclusive with that to the Island? What I suspected was that the ambivalence between the two “homes” would create a certain duality or contradictory notion about each place.

In Juan Flores’ essay, “Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimilao”: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.,” he identifies four points, or “moments” as he calls them, in the Nuyorican process of assimilation into mainland society and culture. While Flores lists these moments as a chronology, he also recognizes that they do not always occur in this format or order. However, he identifies these moments in various poems from the Puerto Rican diaspora. In Edrik López’s essay examining
Flores’ essay, Lopez asserts that these moments are tied directly to space and that it is used to mediate these moments. We will see this moment exhibited not only by poets in their artistic use of metaphor and other poetic devices, but also in the unrehearsed answers elicited during the interviews with 17 Nuyoricans, varying in background and age, living in the Bronx.

“The first moment is the ‘here and now,’” López writes, reflecting upon Flores’ assertions. This moment is the immediate feelings of the Puerto Rican upon his or her first introduction to New York. He views New York as abandoned, desolate, hard, cold. This moment can be seen in many of the poems already discussed. It is a moment of fear and almost of repulsion. The city seems threatening and predatory.

Flores identifies the second moment in the Puerto Rican interaction with the space of New York as the “romanticized, idealized image of Puerto Rico.” This moment is probably the easiest to identify and is the focus primarily of my study up to this point. This moment is the one described in Derrida’s theory of the “crypt” of memory, discussed in Esterrich. The moment is made possible by an undisturbed, nostalgic memory of the Island home that is the starkest possible comparison to the Nuyorican’s present surroundings in New York. During this moment, the Nuyorican consciousness grows increasingly pluralist, now including a “recovery of the African and indigenous foundation of Puerto Rico.” These ethnic elements seem to surface in an attempt to mentally return to a time in Puerto Rico’s history before the Imperialism of the Americans and the Spanish and give voice to the under-represented, pre-European story of the island’s people.
The third moment is a return to New York in the mind of the Nuyorican, one in which he or she is incorporated into the space of the city. This is really the birth of the Nuyorican, the moment that he or she is no longer solely a Puerto Rican and is now of a sort of hybrid mind, existing wholly as both and yet neither. Until this point, he or she has been a Puerto Rican living in New York, now he or she identifies as a Nuyorican.

The fourth moment is the interaction with surrounding North American society. This is not the same as assimilation. The Nuyorican does not (necessarily) give up his or her traditions, identity, culture, or language. If anything, these elements often grow more pronounced and emphasized. However, it is in this moment that an exchange may begin between the North American and Puerto Rican cultures and people. The identity of the Nuyorican, according to Flores, has now been solidified.

Of course, very few things in the course of human life and cultural experience actually occur in such a separate and linear fashion. Having Flores’ “moments” in mind as I analyzed both poetry and interviews, I found that frequently, the subject was in a variety of moments, even within one poem or interview, respectively. One person might never experience a nostalgic, idealized image of Puerto Rico and another might never feel quite “at home” in New York. For the most part it seems that duality rules, allowing the Nuyorican to exist in many seemingly contradictory moments concurrently.

“*It’s big for a small island*”: Interviews

While these moments are set in a very theoretical framework, one that applies to the honed skill of poetry, I found that each moment was also demonstrated in the interviews I conducted. Moreover, I found there are transitory moments between Flores’s
moments. There are consistently moments of feeling “neither here nor there” in the subjects, creating a resounding harmony with the political status of Puerto Rico. It seems that the ambivalence of the island’s status and the Nuyorican’s cultural construction reflect each other and are left at a crossroads of eternal between-ness. This is the overwhelming feeling that I found expressed by participants in the interviewing process. Moreover, I found poetry within the interviews. One 11-year-old interviewee, when asked to describe the Island remarked, “It’s big for a small island.” In reviewing the interviews as well as my work up to that point, I found that this seventh-grade-educated girl had made a statement that could easily work as the thesis for both my work and that of the poets I had been studying. It was in these interviews that I found the subjects of poetry and identity removed from the ivory tower in which I had studied them and applied to real-life ends.

The effect of Americanization upon these Puerto Ricans living in the Bronx can be seen in a wide array of cultural scenarios, as was my expectation. They spoke English, listened to American music, held in high regard American celebrities and heroes, watched American television. They were completely immersed in American pop-culture. However, I also found that the presence of Puerto Ricans had also caused certain changes in the atmosphere of New York culture. When I asked the interviewees if they felt speaking Spanish was important, those who were members of the faculty and an older generation answered yes, because it was important to them to maintain the traditions and culture of Puerto Rico of which they felt language was a cornerstone. The younger students had a very different reason for Spanish to be held in such a high regard: it provided them with very important cultural capital, the advantage of being bilingual. In a
world where technology has made the space between us smaller and smaller, allowing
ternational business and relations to be conducted with ease, speaking two languages
certainly provides an advantage. But moreover, the presence of Spanish-speaking
immigrants to the United States has made it increasingly important that American citizens
give up their strangle-hold on monolingualism. Thus, Puerto Ricans (and other Spanish-
speaking peoples) have changed the landscape of the American job market not only to
include them and cater to them, but also to create a distinct advantage in what previously
contributed to their “otherness.” Certainly, this could be considered part of Flores’s
fourth moment, when the Nuyorican includes him or herself in the landscape of New
York.

It was in children that I most often found evidence of Flores’s first “moment.”
When they were asked to describe the Bronx to me as well as the best (and worst) things
about living in New York, the worst that were used most frequently were “cold,”
“crime,” “lonely,” and “busy.” By contrast, Puerto Rico was most often said to be
“beautiful,” “home,” (frequently by Puerto Ricans born in New York) and “warm.”
While both seem to focus on the physical appearance of the place, the notion of “home”
carries with it considerably more than simply origin. When asked exactly what that word
meant to them, interviewees defined “home” as “where my family is,” “where I belong,”
and “loving.”

When asked if one person could be “more Puerto Rican” than someone else, the
answer was consistently a qualified “no.” The knee-jerk reaction was to assure me, an
outsider, that Puerto Ricans aren’t “racist” as they dubbed it, but after some urging,
children and adults seemed to come to the same conclusion: it was not one’s “fault” if he
or she couldn’t speak Spanish, did not know Puerto Rican history, was not born on the Island, or did not display pride in his or her heritage. The person should not be blamed for that, but still, they would be deemed “less Puerto Rican.” The purpose in asking this question was not to search out some hidden prejudice amongst Nuyoricans but rather I felt that it might be the back door entrance to defining Puerto Rican-ness for these subjects. When they were simply asked “What makes you Puerto Rican?” the answers varied from “I celebrate my history” to “I speak Spanish and celebrate the culture,” to “I go to the parade every year,” to simply “I was born there [in Puerto Rico].” The answer was somewhat harder to come by for Puerto Ricans not born on the Island. Their immediate visceral response seemed a bit hesitant, as if I might call them out and say that they could no longer participate in the study if they did not provide the “right” answers. By evaluating the answers to the question of comparative Puerto Rican-ness, this response seemed thoroughly appropriate. When being born on the Island seems to be the only absolute answer for why a person is Puerto Rican, a person living outside of the homeland and not, in fact, born there has to participate in this gut-wrenching process of justifying his or her self-identification with an ever-changing cultural group.

There was an obvious generational variable that existed within my study. Knowing the 20th century history of Puerto Rico leant a considerable amount of understanding for me in analyzing and interpreting the answers, given the social conditions in which the interviewee came of age. The three participants who were born in the late 1950s expressed more “traditional” feelings about Puerto Rican culture, specifically that the culture—although they were generally unable to define it aside from its traditions, food and music—must be maintained and that Puerto Ricans must display
respect for their "country." They had little to say about the character of Puerto Ricans, but they had quite a lot to say about Nuyoricans. It was in these interviews that the problem of creating a unified body of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora became glaringly obvious. Although to a large degree veiled by a desire not to discriminate, this subgroup of Puerto Ricans in New York tended not to identify themselves with that other subgroup: Nuyoricans. One participant stated plainly,

"The way they [Nuyoricans] speak, the way they conduct themselves...they do a lot more code-switching, you know where they speak that 'Spanglish.'...I can tell when someone is really Puerto Rican because of how much they know about their culture and their traditions and...I don't know...the way they handle themselves is different."

Within this generation of participants, I also found more of what I observed in the poetry of the Nuyorican Movement: memories and experiences mediated by nature. One interviewee, when asked to speak about any of her memories of the Island spoke of her uncle who picked mangoes fresh from trees and put them in the freezer for her to eat each day. She also spoke of her cousin who told her that in Puerto Rico, "you always pack a towel, a swimsuit, and a change of clothes. Because you might see one of those beautiful beaches and have to swim, right then and there." In answer to the question "Can you tell me one memory of something that happened on the Island?" every respondent voiced some memory regarding land (beaches, forests, driving through the mountains) or nature (fruits, animals, palm trees). The geography of the Island clearly looms large in the collective memory of Nuyoricans, giving reason for its prominence in the construction of identity through poetry.
Two of the interview participants were of a generation born during the Nuyorican Movement of the 1970s and came of age in its wake. This timing seemed to have left a decidedly socially conscious impact on both interviewees, whose awareness of the project of Nuyorican identity construction was certainly peaked. When asked “How do you feel in relation to outside society, that is non-Puerto Ricans, in New York?” his answer actually took me aback. He said, “You don’t exist. It’s not even a feeling, you can just perceive and sense that a lot of white people pretend you don’t exist as a unique body. Because while Nuyoricans are at work trying to construct their collective ‘self,’ White America is still struggling to figure out where we fit.” This participant was born in Spanish Harlem and became active in Puerto Rican cultural advocacy groups in his late teens, a fact about which his parents—both Puerto Rican—were neither supportive nor proud. For him, it only added zeal to a cause about which he was growing increasingly passionate. His parents’ attitude reflected what he called “a colonized mind. They suffered from what I refer to as ‘post-traumatic slave syndrome.’ It’s this inability—an unwillingness—to identify with a group outside of the one in power. You’d rather try to blend with it.” With regard to his parents, he went on to say, “It doesn’t make them bad people, it doesn’t even make them less Puerto Rican or less proud to be Puerto Rican. They just don’t see Puerto Rican-ness as something you have to be actively involved with. They don’t see the need to create an identity. In their minds, and a lot of people’s minds, it just happens. But to me, it’s clear that without consciousness of what we’re constantly creating, it gets horribly off track or doesn’t move forward at all.” As the only person able to define “Puerto Rican-ness,” this participant remarked, “It’s being part of a reconstruction group. Brown people trying to rebuild an idea of themselves that might
never have been there to begin with...the most important thing for Puerto Ricans to maintain in the U.S.? A cultural memory, a collective memory. I think we all remember it, in this collective mind of ours.” Ironically, again there is that ambivalence, thoughts that appear contradictory. First he says that perhaps the idea that Nuyoricans have of themselves and the identity they’re trying to construct is something they’re trying to find that might never have existed previously. Simultaneously, he’s voicing an idea of a collective consciousness upon which all Puerto Ricans can draw in creating this identity. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It seems that both to poets and interviewees, there is a feeling of something lost, a missing element buried somewhere in that crypt of memory that, if only they could access it, would hold the key to this complicated process of self building. However, as Abraham and Torok claim, accessing this thing, that pleasure object, would cause the whole psychological framework to collapse. And so a Nuyorican person might easily feel concurrently that there is something missing and also that the thing must not, in fact, exist.

What both Flores and López seem to neglect, the former in suggesting these separate moments and the latter in his analysis of them, are the moments taking place in the space between. Ironically, it is consistently this space that the Nuyorican occupies, racially, politically, culturally, even “Spanglish,” the hybrid language of English and Spanish exists on the margins of two tongues. Not surprisingly, it was this state of ambivalence, of being neither here nor there and at once being both here and there, that was most often espoused by the interviewees. One interviewee, a particularly astute 14-year-old eighth grader born on the Island and raised in New York, said in describing her concept of home that it was simply where her family was. When I pressed her further,
asking “Is Puerto Rico your home then?” she answered no. “Is New York?” “No,” she answered, “my home moves. It changes, and usually it’s neither place.” The vice-principle of the school, in answer to the same question stated, “It’s hard to say, because here, I don’t feel assimilated but I don’t feel isolated either... Home is where the people I love are. In a sense, I have two homes. I have my home here, it’s where me and my daughters are, my husband. And I have my home back home.” The phrasing sounds odd initially, “my home back home.” But given this overwhelming psychic conflict many Nuyoricans feel about the complex subject of “home,” it being a transitory, fluid, and moveable place, it rings consistent with the shifting mentalities of a people on the margins of so many social spaces.

Undoubtedly, the most difficult part of the interviews was when I asked for a number of words—the exact number varied from two to six depending on the participant—to describe “the Puerto Rican character.” It is something intangible, and possibly for which there are no words sufficient. It was at this juncture that I realized the importance of poetry and its implementation of metaphors and mediating objects to a diasporic community. There is tremendous psychological tension on a dispersed people, unable to form a cohesive identity through ordinary methods because it lacks what many other cultures possess: a shared presence in one place. In an interview, a person is unable to verbalize the Puerto Rican character as resilient, proud, strong, permanent, and Other without sounding grandiose. Poetry allows not only for these descriptions but also provides a space for identity construction; a place to cultivate that which is indescribable through the use of the things that one knows. If one cannot define Puerto Rican-ness, he or she can at least liken it to something that both the poet and the reader know.
The Nuyorican community is posited at a unique crossroads of culture, race, gender, citizenship, and nationality. Within this culture, one may observe the complicated process in which in reality, each one of us is embroiled. Tato Laviera summed up the Nuyorican experience of marginality, ambivalence, and duality in his poem “Commonwealth.” Laviera writes,

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no, not yet, no, not yet
i will not proclaim myself,
a total child of any land,
i’m still in the commonwealth
stage of my life, wondering
what to decide, what to conclude
what to declare myself?
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Islandis by Victor Hernández Cruz

This is the taste of the
Guavas of Hesperides
That converted a sabor
Of eyes on loan from the sun.

Was the Carib isles
The ink in the plume
Of Plato—
In the philosophers mind
A sandy curve of coast
Stretching into red soil
And sky out into the lamps
Of the Gods.

Mayagüez plain Maya
Before the Castilian Quez—
Yabucoa the town’s name is
Singing
A stepping-stone to Atlantis—

Spectacular ships entered
The domain of Humacao
Guided by red corals
And the incense of gold
Navigational songs of the nymphs
Spiraling out of seashells.

Were the coquifs ten times
Louder in ages remote
Could they have been
The singing notes
That drove Homer’s sailors mad.

Did someone speak of Anacaona’s
Hairdo of braids weaved
With gardenias
Tainas threaded live cucubanos
Through their tresses
Sparkling lights through
The nights parallel to Hellenic
Theater girls dancing
In some Roman antiquity of
Cordova—
Let us bow our heads
In silence
Pushed back to the twilight
Of ideas
And with the next Venusian
Light to telegram into
Manatí
Declare ourselves
The kings and queens
of Poseidon
Weather crowns of
Bird gone feathers.
palm tree in spanglish figurines by Tato Laviera

slowly, as in son montuno,
she erases frustrated tears
from face to hand...she dances...

natural coconut rhythms
swaying soul essences
and latino salsa all
intertwine within her

ocean eyes followed
her bolero-slow sensual movements
in cha-cha turned sharp curves,
a mysterious cult
inside the feelings of
ancestral bomba and plena

the maunabo indian emerged from her lips

piñones was her face setting

eyes looking for turtle eggs
mouth tasting cangrejos
in madrugada’s solemnity

ocean eyes followed
interacting within
screaming above
searching underneath
her latin dance
her escape from the
tear that collapsed
into daylight’s hands
creating happiness
jíbaro by Tato Laviera

end of spring harvest
el jíbaro mathematically
working the sun’s energies,
nurturing every fruit to
blossom perfectly,
singing about
earth, la tierra,
time after time, acre after acre,
year after year, the land provided.
end of spring harvest,
el jíbaro’s guitar
on la carreta,
pulling, ploughing slowly
towards sunset,
towards la cena,
towards the afternoon breeze,
land, love, moon,
the lyrics emerged,
décimas in place,
the ever-present “lo le lo lai,”
and then, the song,
canción.
Poem by Victor Hernández Cruz

Your head it waves outside
You are as deep and heavy as the ocean
Night and day
Cabo rojo the stars
Day and night
Arecibo music in green
It rains Rain washes coconuts
The mangos they fall off the trees
In midights You hear them falling
Sunshine sol
Your eyes they become one with the light
It is early Early Early Early
And the rooster is early
Like a natural alarm
The music of the morning

Your head is full of the ocean and
The mystery of the sea shells
It moves like the waves

Moving outside the rhythms of life
Dawn birth deep in the mountains
Your eyes they move
In and out of the woods
They look for spirits

Here is where our mothers are from
From this land sitting
All pregnant with sweetness
And trees that want to be the wind

Walking through the little space
The trees make
You want to laugh
In this lonely night there is music
And you do
And you don’t stop
And the music is right behind you

Coquí Coquí Coquí Coquí
Here is where the journey started
And you laugh as tall as pa:m trees
And you taste as good as pasteles
You dance toward the silver of the stars
Everything moves with you
Like a tropical train.
Weaver by Sandra Maria Esteves

Weave us a song of many threads

Weave us a red of fire and blood
that tastes of sweet plum
fishing around the memories of the dead
following around the memories of the dead
following a scent wounded
our spines bleeding with pain

Weave us a red of passion
that beats wings against a smoky cloud
and forces motion into our lungs

Weave us a song
of yellow and gold and life itself
a wildgrowth
into the great magnetic center
topaz canyons
floral sweatseeds
in continuous universal suspension

Weave us a song of red and yellow and brown
that holds the sea and sky in its skin
the bird and mountain in its voice
that builds upon our graves a home
with fortifications
strength, unity and direction

And weave us a white song to hold us
when the wind blows so cold to make out children wail
submerged in furious ice
a song pure and raw
and attacks the colorless venom stalking hidden
in the petal softness of the black night

Weave us a rich round black that lives
in the eyes of our warrior child
and feeds our mouths with moon breezes
with rivers interflowing
through ALL spaces of existence

Weave us a song for our bodies to sing
a song of many threads
that will dance with the colors of our people
and cover us with the warmth of peace
This Is Not the Place Where I Was Born by Miguel Piñero

puerto rico 1974
this is not the place where i was born
remember—as a child the fantasizing images my mother planted
within my head—
the shadows of her childhood recounted to me many times
over welfare loan on crédito food from el bodeguero
i tasted mango many years before the skin of the fruit
ever reached my teeth
i was born on an island about 35 miles wide 100 miles long
a small island with a rainforest somewhere in the central
regions of itself
where spanish was a dominant word
& signs read by themselves
i was born in a village of that island where the police
who frequented your place of business-hangout or home came as
servant or friend & not as a terror in slogan clothing
i was born in a barrio of the village on the island
where people left their doors open at night
where respect for elders was exhibited with pride
where courting for loved ones was not treated over confidentially
where children’s laughter did not sound empty & savagely alive
with self destruction...
i was born on an island where to be puerto rican meant to be
part of the land & soul & puertorriqueños were not the
minority
puerto ricans were first, none were second
no, i was not born here...
no, i was not born in the attitude & time of this place
this sun drenched soil
this green faced piece of earth
this slave blessed land
where the caribbean seas pound angrily on the shores
of pre-fabricated house/hotel redcap hustling people gypsy taxi cab
fighters for fares to fajardo
& the hot wind is broken by fiberglass palmtrees
& highrise plátanos mariano on leave & color t.v.
looneytune cartoon comicbook characters with badges
in their jockstraps
& foreigners scream that puertorriqueños are foreigners
& have no right to claim any benefit on the birthport
this sun drenched soil
this green faced piece of earth
this slave blessed land
where nuyoricans come in search of spiritual identity
are greeted with profanity
this is insanity that americanos are showered
with shoe shine kisses
police in stocking caps cover carry out john wayne
television cowboy law road models of new york city detective
french connection/death wish instigation ku-klux-klan mind
panorama screen seems
in modern medicine is in confusion needs a transfusion quantity
treatment if you’re not on the plan the new stand
of blue cross blue shield blue uniform master charge
what religion you are
blood fills the waiting room of death
stale air & qué pasa stares are nowhere
in sight & night neon light shines bright
in el condado are puerto rican under cover cop
stop & arrest on the spot puerto ricans who shop for the flag
that waves in the left-in souvenir stores—
puertorriqueños cannot assemble displaying the emblem
nuyoricans are fighting & dying for in newark, lower east side
south bronx where the fervor of being
puertorriqueños is not just rafael hernández
viet vet protest with rifle shots that dig into four pigs
& sociable friday professional persons rush to the
golf course & martini glasses work for the masses
& the island is left unattended because the middle class
bureaucratic cuban has arrived spitting blue eyed justice
at brown skinned boys in military khaki
compromise to survive is hairline length
moustache trimmed face looking grim like a soldier
on furlough further cannot exhibit contempt for what is
not cacique born this poem will receive a burning
stomach turning scorn nullified classified racist
from this pan am eastern first national chase manhattan
puerto rico...
Chica by Lois Griffith

In front of Marian Bracetti Welfare Project
Hollywood agents are not looking for stars.
Chica
pepita of your mother’s
worries a youngblood’s eyes.
The virgin question written on your tight whites
recalls illusions of romance gone stale
recalls speaking crude words
having to do with the price of fresh meat.
Chica
pepita of your mother’s worries—
Démeló
commands a smashed pack of Newports from your back pocket
and your radio sound box
you let him hold it
being tough enough to give it up
give it out
hiding no part of yourself
jacked up in a hallway
on the sticks aced on the wallway.
Give it up
not having anything to say
or words to call inside
the giving up
to change the beat in the heat.
Chica
pepita of your mother’s worries
there is no stopping a desire’s dreams
that take the skies waiting for the deep of night.
Chica
pepita of your mother’s worries
you’ll get lost at the shooting gallery
or make love a playground on the stairwell
bringing back the bread and milk
your mother worries
what took you so long
so lately coming in the heat of the giving up
in the beat of the deep of night.
Ditty and Jitty by Lois Griffith

Hard Sister Ditty Bop
can’t turn in her pants
so tight
so straight and lean
that’s reflecting a look on her face that’s mean—
ooo-ah-ooo
There are those who’d like to make her
who’d like to take her
off in a dream in the arms of night
but hard Sister Ditty Bop is out and hot to trot
waiting for her best friend Jitty Bop
coming along now seem from afar
this Queen of Spades
in her knife-sharp creased
double-edged straight-legged blades
—Que pas Ditty?
—Ain’t nothing much happening Jitty.
—Girl, let’s take a stroll.
—Well, I’m down for some rock and roll.

Is this city ready for the switch
of one more blue-eyed Ditty
and the heady perfume
of one more brown-skinned Jitty?
Hard Sister Ditty Bop
and her best friend Queen of Spades Jitty Bop
write their names in the streets
cop a disco box off a slow sucker
new on the scene
unaware of how keen
you have to be on the beat
with your dancing feet
if you want to hang
and not get banged up
in a cycle moving fast
pre-guessing the next turn
never forgetting what you have learned
and tucked away in the hip
of your straight-legged jean machines.

No denying the streets are mean.
No denying we carry the baggage from where we have been.
Ditty and Jitty make etchings in time
the world they inhabit
rewards the slick way
they hustle-bop on the face of a dime
the bitter and brutal now in current fashion
reject soft attitudes for those now with more passion.
But no one knows better than hard Sister Ditty Bop
with her blue-eyed stare
and Queen of Spades Jitty Bop
with her midriff bared—
the doubled-edged blades
are just an illusion they cultivate
the double-edged blades
are just an illusion they cultivate
to satiate a need for acclaim
in a universe that takes no notice of street names.
Piss Side Streets by Lucky Cienfuegos

Weaving, bobbing, conniving
piss staining lonely night street
gutless buildings hanging loose
tiger rose and wild irish wine
turning winos ugly framing
designing their tiredness
drawings of human flesh
lying and people just glide
with a design and frequent smile
yeah, bad doing studs peeking
through dark shadow alleys
polishing their desiring dreams
with empty butcher knife eyes.
pushes the back of the mind
the empty desiring dream forward.
the knife red stripes crying eyes
and all that remains
a graffiti design on a piss
side street.