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MAKING THE DECOLONIZED VISIBLE: PUERTO RICAN POETRY OF THE LAST  
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# Making the decolonized visible: Puerto Rican poetry of the last four decades<sup>1</sup>

PEDRO LÓPEZ ADORNO

## ABSTRACT

This essay is a comprehensive synthesis of ideas regarding the aporistic relationship between subalternity and cultural visibility in the context of Puerto Rican literary production. In offering both a panorama and a critique of the decolonized poetic tradition of Puerto Rican authors, I first point out the obstacles faced by such authors and the strategies that they have employed to make themselves “visible.” The essay also glimpses at the contradictions between poetic visibility and the horizon of expectations of the reader of poetry. Other issues branching out of the discussion are: the problem posed by the dichotomy of oral and written poetry and the need for a pan-theoretical approach that would not homogenize the particularist texts available. Complementing this synthesis is the critical overview given of each decade’s major poetic environments and representative poets: from the essentialist cultural nationalism of 1960s poetics to the more fluid, transnationalist, and, in some cases, postmodern sensibilities of ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s poetics. [Key words: Decolonized poetic tradition; generational and aesthetic borders; essentialist cultural nationalism; literary production; grand narrative; particularist text; rhizomatic branching; Atalayista; Guajana; Nuyoricán]

# 1960-

# 1970-

# 1980-

# 1990-

## During the last four decades

of the 20th century the poetry of island and mainland Puerto Ricans continued expanding its ideological and aesthetic strength. Most, if not all, of the poets fortunate enough to be published realized that their work had inherited a decolonized poetic tradition<sup>2</sup> that can be traced to 19th-century poets such as Lola Rodríguez de Tió and Francisco Gonzalo Marín. In fact, one can argue that, from a cultural, literary, and artistic standpoint, an ongoing process of decolonization began to take place on the island from the 17th century onward. By the end of the 19th century one sees it reaching the degree of maturity necessary to generate what in the 20th century can be conceptualized as a transformative literary decolonization. This type of decolonization can be ascertained not only in the respective works of Rodríguez de Tió and Marín but also in their political conduct as they appropriated the inherited models of the Spanish literary tradition in order to change them via a distancing and differentiation that (in)formed the basis of their subaltern discourse. These two poets maintained throughout their lives and their respective works an ideology that sought the political separation of Puerto Rico from Spain's colonial rule. Writers, thinkers, and intellectuals who upheld this ideal were viewed as *separatistas* (Separatists) by the Spanish colonial government and were the targets of persecution. As a result, many went on exile. Lola Rodríguez de Tió and Francisco Gonzalo Marín were the first among generations of poets who have written part of their work while on exile.<sup>3</sup>

The tradition started by these precursor poets followed an evolutionary and, at times, a revolutionary path in the 20th century. In such a path, however, the prevailing governmental environment was one where the literary production of Puerto Ricans constantly encountered political, institutional, and ideological barriers that curtailed their possibility of reaching a larger readership nationally and abroad. In the context of Puerto Rican cultural politics, it was not until the 1960s that a more aggressive, proactive approach was taken by the poets themselves in order to pressure the colonial government and its institutions of culture to come up with solutions to the problems of sponsorship, publication, and dissemination of literature. Poets, both on the island and on the mainland, took to the streets. Reading in public spaces legitimized the notion that poetry was no longer the domain of a chosen few. In due time some of the poets gained the respect, recognition, and visibility that had eluded so many others in previous decades. But the story does not end there. This essay attempts to outline some of the major literary environments present from the 1960s to the 1990s and describes how the struggle for visibility, begun within the significant historical juncture of the 1960s, continues today.

### Towards a Pluralistic Critique

Historically, Puerto Rican poetry has had few sponsors. The process of turning creative energy into literary production has never been simple for island and mainland Puerto Rican writers. Their literary production has been, for the most part, ignored by publishers. The majority of the readers of literature seldom encounter writers of Puerto Rican heritage. To compound the problem most critics do not review or comment on the few books that actually become available. These factors, as well as political and economic ones, generated throughout the first half of the twentieth century an atmosphere of ignorance and indifference within the literary establishment in relation to the artistic and cultural contributions of Puerto Rican poets.

Although the most representative poets of the period between the 1920s through the 1950s came out of a background of avant-garde aesthetics, better known in Puerto Rico as “los ismos de vanguardia,” these literary movements did not have the lasting impact and visibility readers have traditionally associated with canonical Latin American poets of the same period, such as César Vallejo, Vicente Huidobro, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz, to name some of the most prominent. Therefore, the political, cultural, and economic climates of the 1960s through the 1990s sought to deploy a variety of strategies for obtaining patronage and recognition. These strategies covered a wide range of ideological and aesthetic concerns and were imbued with such nuances as the relative effectiveness of particular projects over the long term, their impact upon target audiences, and the potential canonical status of its participants. Some were generated by the island's main cultural institutions: the Ateneo Puertorriqueño, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, and the University of Puerto Rico Press. Others relied on the initiative of self-published poets and the creative alliances formulated by groups of poets that tended to cross generational and aesthetic borders. A recent example of this type of alliance was La Biental de la Poesía, a nonprofit organization of poets, writers, and artists of various tendencies and styles interested in the development of the nation's poetry. The group presented its project on October 26, 2002 at the Teatro Raúl Juliá of the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico. The poets read at the event, and a small but representative anthology of the group was issued: *Muestra de poesía nacional*.

What ought to be, then, the horizon of expectations of the reader of poetry when encountering this body of literature? Let us try a few responses to this question. First and foremost, Puerto Rican poetry is a transformational collage of voices, discourses, and ideologies that challenges us to look at it beyond ethnic, linguistic, aesthetic, and ideological borders. Readers must be in a position to explore, and ultimately integrate, aspects of previously unknown cultural artifacts into their own range of literary experience and competence without assuming that they have attained mastery over the particularist texts. Doris Sommer has published a book on the subject, in which she formulates a persuasive and scholarly argument against the universalist reading of particularist writing (especially the ethnically marked kind), because readers engaged in this type of practice usually miss the point of what they are supposedly interpreting. For Professor Sommer, respect is a reading requirement, and measuring literary worth on the basis of universalism shows how unilateral the interpretation of texts have traditionally been. Throughout the 20th century it was always easier for both informed readers and neophytes to incorporate partial interpretive strategies when reading and studying Puerto Rican poetry. The result of such a presumptuous habit of reading was almost always a one-sided view of a multifaceted phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>



One strategy that loomed high on the horizon of expectations of the reader was to view the individual work of the poet in relation to its proximity to (or distancing from) ethnic parameters of national identification and characterization. The dominant currents and/or movements arising out of such a critique created, in turn, the necessary labels that identified the particular poetic constituencies: *jíbaro* poetry; *negrista* poetry; Atalayista; *neocriollista*; Guajana; Nuyorican; poets of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, to name some of the most representative. *Jíbaro* poetry, for instance, is what Josefina Rivera de Alvarez called creole poetry expressed through the language of the peasant class. The oldest example of this type of poetry dates from 1820 (“Coplas del jíbaro” by Miguel Cabrera). Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries this poetic current had many practitioners, including avant-garde poets such as Juan Antonio Corretjer and Pedro Carrasquillo.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the major exponent of *negrista* poetry in Puerto Rico was Luis Palés Matos. The aims of its major practitioners throughout the hemisphere were to give a “voice” to historically, politically, and economically marginalized peoples of African ancestry. The problem here was that many of the poets giving blacks a voice were white, middle-class authors who shared the prejudiced and stereotypical views of the dominant culture.<sup>6</sup> But by the late twenties, another group of young poets and writers sought to distance themselves from the social, political, and cultural conventions of the time by experimenting widely and profoundly with language, themes, imagery, and rhythm. The group came to be known as the Atalayistas. In its radical defense of Puerto Rican independence, the group was closely allied to the nationalist ideals of Pedro Albizu Campos and his followers.<sup>7</sup> Another poetic constituency that first surfaced during the mid-thirties was the one following a *neocriollista* aesthetic. Although there were thematic parallelisms between 19th and early 20th century *criollismo* and 1930s *neocriollismo*, the latter displayed a new manner of contemplating the world and articulated a new textual and artistic sensibility toward the homeland. In fact, the first *neocriollistas* came from the Atalaya group: Graciany Miranda Archilla, Samuel Lugo, Luis Hernández Aquino and Juan Antonio Corretjer, among others.<sup>8</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s

most of the poets representing the *jíbaro*, *negrista*, *atalayista*, and *neocriollista* movements established their literary reputations and, therefore, continued writing and publishing books within the aesthetic parameters mentioned.

One major exception was the *transcendentalista* poets. The major poets of this group were all university-educated: Francisco Lluch Mora, Félix Franco Oppenheimer, and Eugenio Rentas Lucas. Their main focus was on the immanence and spirituality of poetic imagery as forces that reflect the resilience of the human condition in a world deep in chaos.<sup>9</sup> By the early ‘60s, a group of young poets studying at the University of Puerto Rico, fueled by socialist and nationalist causes around the world and feeling themselves inheritors of a revolutionary poetic tradition sparked in the 1950s by the poetry of Francisco Matos Paoli, Clemente Soto Vález, Julia de Burgos, Hugo Margenat, and Corretjer, created a magazine called *Guajana* and gave a literary and political voice to their generation.<sup>10</sup> The late ‘60s and early ‘70s mark our first encounters with the poetry of Puerto Rican authors, either born on the US mainland or transplanted there at an early age. This group is known as the “Nuyoricans.” The term “Nuyorican” describes the linguistic, aesthetic, and ideological axes Puerto Rican authors living in New York have been pursuing since the political and cultural awakening of the 1960s. It is an extremely loaded and complex construct (such as the term “Latino” is in other instances). According to Miguel Algarín:

The experience of Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York has caused a new language to grow: Nuyorican. Nuyoricans are a special experience in the immigration history of the city of New York. We come to the city as citizens and can retain the use of Spanish and include English. [...] The mixture of both languages grows. The interchange between both yields new verbal possibilities, new images to deal with the stresses of living on tar and cement.<sup>11</sup>

The most recent and significant poetic constituency has been the one known as “poets of the Puerto Rican Diaspora.” This label has been widely used since the early 1990s to identify poets who have lived in places like New York since the 1970s and whose primary medium of expression is Spanish. These poets cross various generational borders and blend a rich variety of aesthetic and ideological elements. Some of the major poets writing in Spanish in the U.S. are David Cortés Cabán, Marithelma Costa, Pedro López Adorno, Noel Luna, Juan Manuel Rivera, César Salgado, Alberto Sandoval Sánchez, Iván Silén, Carmen Valle, Lourdes Vázquez, and Alfredo Villanueva Collado.<sup>12</sup>

Another strategy was to privilege the poetic production written in Spanish while ignoring or negating the one written in English on linguistic, political, cultural, or aesthetic grounds. The island’s cultural elite staunchly defended the use of Spanish as the major indicator of national identity. This linguistic chauvinism lasts well into the 1960s because it was perceived as the main weapon in the struggle towards nationhood and political sovereignty. By doing so, the elite suffered from the protracted blindness of their linguistic dogma as they attempted to further their understanding and insight of the colonial condition. It actually created a cultural and ideological divide based on language between islanders and Puerto Ricans on the mainland, one that remains one of the major hurdles facing decolonizers on all fronts. There were many ideological ironies

when readers assumed this posture, since it revealed one of the traditional weaknesses of the national consciousness.<sup>13</sup> But authors and readers of the literature also encountered the situation in reverse: the poetry written in English by Puerto Ricans on the mainland was perceived as more politically relevant and progressive, aesthetically less restrained by the literary canons, more deeply rooted in the working class and in the oral tradition, and having more to say to the popular culture.<sup>14</sup> When looking at Nuyorican poetry in this context, two authors come readily to mind: Tato Laviera and Pedro Pietri. Poems such as “My Graduation Speech” by Laviera and “Puerto Rican Obituary” by Pietri highlight subalternity as a point of departure for a radicalized discourse. Laviera’s poem is a critique of how people from economically disadvantaged communities have been educationally short changed by a system that was supposed to make the American Dream reachable. Here are the poem’s first three stanzas:

i think in spanish  
i write in english  
i want to go back to puerto rico  
but I wonder if my kink could live  
in ponce, mayaguez and carolina  
tengo las venas aculturadas  
escribo en es spanglish  
abraham in español  
abraham in english  
tato in spanish  
“taro” in english  
tonto in both languages [...].<sup>15</sup>

In Pietri’s poem, the realities of poverty, exploitation, racism, prejudice, and self-hatred affecting Puerto Rican life in the United States give the narrator’s voice a platform from which to reassess the subaltern status of Puerto Ricans and to formulate changes. Toward the end of the poem the five individuals representative of the Puerto Rican community (Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel) are given a final admonishment:

If only they  
had turned off the television  
and tuned into their own imaginations  
If only they  
had used the white supremacy bibles  
for toilet paper purpose  
and made their latino souls  
the only religion of their race  
If only they  
had returned to the definition of the sun  
after the first mental snowstorm [...].<sup>16</sup>

These elements were supposed to make the poetry more revolutionary and liberating as compared to the poetry written in Spanish, regardless of whether the writings’ cultural milieu celebrated an island or diasporic setting. But the popular does not transform itself into a revolutionary discourse on the basis of sheer will. Sometimes the revolutionary discourse can be quite subjective and particularist in its surrealist, nationalist, and transnationalist parameters, as in Víctor Hernández Cruz’s *Tropicalization* (1976) or Pedro Pietri’s *Traffic Violations* (1983). We can all agree, however, that a revolutionary discourse needs expressive strength, linguistic integrity, a comprehensive vision, and an aesthetic direction rooted not in superficial mimicry, but born out of knowledge, maturity, and intensity of purpose found in poetry. As far as the poetry written in Spanish is concerned, some poets from the 1930s to the present have incorporated into their works a revolutionary discourse based on the remotivation of Renaissance, Baroque, Modernista, and Surrealist poetic traditions. Such is the case of poets like Francisco Matos Paoli, Graciany Miranda Archilla, Clemente Soto Vélez, José María Lima, Iván Silén, and Juan Manuel Rivera, to name but a few. In the work of Miranda Archilla, for example, the revolutionary ethos is linked to linguistic experimentation. One of his best books, in this regard, is *Himno a la caballa*, a work published in 1971 but actually written in the early 1950s.

The following is a representative excerpt from the book:

Hipocrénido auroro espumo  
zumbe crines salpicadas d abejas cola  
bautizada por orquetas florestas cascós  
semejantes a las campanas destelle pupilas  
como reverberaban candelarios sude astros relinche  
como relincharon los ríos en todos los prólogos  
al brotar cuando eran vírgenes pulso tierra existencia  
destilaban miel leche rocío cañutos pedruscos  
fermente júbilos enhorabuene las heridas tinaje cicatrices [...].<sup>17</sup>

The problem posed by a dichotomy where the oral was favored over the written or vice versa is obvious: depending on the side of the linguistic divide in which authors, readers or critics happened to find themselves, the creative direction, the literary interest, or the hermeneutic/interpretative stance was thus deployed. However, the critic/scholar of Puerto Rican literature and, in the case being highlighted here, of Puerto Rican poetry, must practice not only a stylistic, structural, post-structural or deconstructionist reading of the poetry in question but also attempt to incorporate Marxist, feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial theoretical frameworks into a literature continually nurturing itself on shifting paradigms and meanings.<sup>18</sup> The student, reader, or critic must liberate her/himself from hegemonic assumptions and begin to identify the multiple registers—lexical, literary, aesthetic, ideological, performative, and so on—that orient the poetry under scrutiny. The decentered subjectivities of the poetry must be reassessed if one is interested in understanding the thematic and ideological fields that (in)form the particular poetic practices of Puerto Rican authors.

As we enter a new century and a new millennium, it is culturally and critically fitting to consider the last four decades of 20th century Puerto Rican poetry as a

barometer of the multiplicity of causes and discourses present during the period and as a yardstick against which one can measure the relative merits, contributions, and accomplishments of the poetry coming out of Latin America and elsewhere. For a pervasive tendency has traditionally plagued the poetry written by Puerto Ricans: it is frequently taken for granted by those individuals and institutions that maneuver, manipulate, and shape the canon. An objective and theoretically pluralistic critique of Puerto Rican poetry can offer a better glimpse into the range and complexity of this genre and a framework from which to question and decolonize the canon.

### Son(g)s of the Sixties

In the 1960s, the literary group of young university students called “Guajana” is the one acknowledged as the most influential of the decade. The influence of this group was due to the publication of the magazine *Guajana*, its manifestoes and intellectual exchanges with continental and other island writers; its spirit of group solidarity, which gave it an aesthetic and ideological cohesion; and, as time went by, the books published by its principal collaborators: Marina Arzola, Andrés Castro Ríos, Angelamaria Dávila, Edwin Reyes, Vicente Rodríguez Nietzsche, Marcos Rodríguez Frese, and José Manuel Torres Santiago, among others.<sup>19</sup> The work of the *Guajana* poets also inspired and motivated others to launch their own poetry magazines. Such was the case of *Mester* (1967), under the leadership of poet Jorge María Ruscalleda Bercedóniz.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the ‘60s, Puerto Rican poetry, especially the one published and read on the island, was dominated by a grand narrative that politicized and secularized the language of the lyric poem while adhering, for the most part, to traditional poetic forms (the *décima*<sup>21</sup> and the sonnet being the most popular). This grand narrative, conceptualized in the literature as a revolutionary discourse against all forms of colonial oppression (especially the one exerted by the U.S. government since 1898), can be linked to canonical poets of previous generations, who considered the imposed *norteamericanización* of the island’s population as an affront to their sense of identity, to the broader Latin American poetic discourse of the ‘60s and its commitment to social causes, and to the anti-imperialist struggle and its identification with the working class. Representative Guajana poets such as Andrés Castro Ríos and José Manuel Torres Santiago clearly conceived their poetry within these ideological imperatives. The book, *Libro de glosas*, by Castro Ríos, addressed these concerns while adhering to the traditional *décima* form to reinforce the lyric subject’s allegiance to a nationalist agenda. The following excerpt from “Glosa VII” illustrates this point:

Ya verán los invasores,  
los nombrados asesinos,  
cómo los golpes vecinos  
le dan ciegos resplandores.  
Que vendrán tiempos mejores  
lo sabe el mucho trabajo,  
se cortará con un tajo  
las sombras de la memoria  
y nos cambiará la historia  
cuando el de arriba esté abajo.<sup>22</sup>

In Torres Santiago’s work, *En las manos del pueblo*, the *décima* was the quintessential poetic form used to commemorate the symbolic heartland of Puerto Rico: the town of Lares. Here is the initial *décima* of “Lares nuevamente”:

iAy! Si pudiera aplacar  
este dolor tan profundo  
yo transformaría el mundo  
en un inmenso soñar  
el sol podría igualar  
y deshacer las edades  
acabar calamidades  
y dar luz a la tiniebla  
y no dejar en la niebla  
llorar tantas soledades.<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, the metaphors, images, symbols, allegories, and heroes present in the work of Guajana poets pointed the informed and socially conscientious readers toward an ethics of national sovereignty and decolonization. In their particular case, the public reading, the photocopied poem, and the published book were all grounded on an essentialist cultural nationalism that owed a great deal to similar artistic, literary, political, and theoretical manifestations throughout Africa during the early ‘60s, when that continent entered its definitive process of decolonization from European hegemony.<sup>24</sup>

### The ‘70s Rhizomatic Branching

In the early 1970s, undaunted by the difficult task of publishing and distributing books in a social and political environment that seemed in direct opposition to it, poets and writers began publishing important literary magazines. The strategy of establishing literary magazines proved to be fruitful since it fulfilled the valuable mission of revealing the new voices and artistic currents that would not have found suitable venues. One such magazine was *Ventana* (1972–1977). Its founder and director, José Luis Vega, as well as Carmen Valle and Salvador Villanueva, soon became well known within island poetic circles.<sup>25</sup> *Ventana* incorporated a new discursive gaze into a poetic environment still dominated by 1960s poetry of social and political commitment. If precursor canonical poets such as José de Diego, Luis Lloréns Torres, Clemente Soto Vélez, Juan Antonio Corretjer, Francisco Matos Paoli, Julia de Burgos, and Hugo Margenat (from Puerto Rico) and César Vallejo, León Felipe, and Pablo Neruda (from Peru, Spain, and Chile, respectively) had influenced the poetic undertaking of *Guajana*, we had in the *Ventana* poets a more self-reflexive and subtle approach to the praxis of writing poetry and an engagement with such themes as love, politics, and poetry itself.<sup>26</sup>

The *Ventana* poets’ conscious departure from the politicized agenda of *Guajana* poetics also signaled a shift from the critique of grand narratives to the fragmented narratives of the individual. Poetry took a radical turn inward, but, paradoxically, this inwardness provoked a loosening of the strings that had guided 1960s poetic production.<sup>27</sup> By reaccentuating elements found in poets such as Clara Lair and Luis Palés Matos (from Puerto Rico) and César Vallejo and Nicanor Parra (from Peru and Chile, respectively), the poets of *Ventana* demonstrated that it was important to redirect the aesthetic conventions guiding both the language and imagery

(of a Surrealist and rhetorical bent) found in most Latin American poetry and legitimized by canonized writers. Vega and Villanueva were successful in achieving this by combining Vallejo's political angst with Parra's anti-Surrealist stance. The following short poems by Vega and Villanueva, respectively, illustrate how they incorporated lyricism into an antipoetry aesthetic. First the poem, "Recomendaciones," from Vega's *Signos vitales*:

Para librarse de lo bello  
tápese los oídos la nariz, los ojos y la boca  
diga malas palabras en el templo  
no toque la verdad  
no alimente los monos  
no llueva  
no fume  
no sol  
no respire  
no ame  
no viva/ váyase del país  
repita varias veces lo anterior  
para librarse de lo bello.<sup>28</sup>

The poem by Villanueva, "Algo parecido a un final," is from the book, *Expulsado del paraíso*:

Después de todo, así cantaba el gallo.  
Peleó en todos los frentes.  
Probó que el mundo era ridículo.  
Fue un perfecto trapecista.  
Y murió como todos:  
atrapado entre los aplausos del público.<sup>29</sup>

In Carmen Valle's case, she deliberately misread the literary legacy of the female poets she most admired. A characteristic of Valle's misreading is the confident, self-assured handling of erotic and love motifs in her work against the reticence and disillusionment found in the poems of Clara Lair. The last three stanzas of the poem "Me pregunto" gives us a glimpse into the clear and concise imagery and depth of vision found in Valle's work:

Quién beberá ajeno conmigo  
hasta volar el misterio del pájaro.  
Habrá quien arriesgue  
montar potro a pelo  
en el mar interno  
de mi isla secreta.  
Me pregunto: Habrá nacido  
quien vaya al último viaje conmigo.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, a rhizomatic branching of *Guajana's* grand poetic narrative can be seen in the works of Nuyorican poets such as Pedro Pietri, Louis Reyes Rivera, Tato Laviera, Sandra María Esteves, Miguel Algarín, José Angel Figueroa, and Jesús "Papoletto" Meléndez. In younger Nuyorican poets—Mariposa, Willie Perdomo, Nancy Mercado, Urayoán Noel, and Shaggy Flores come to mind, as well as in island poets such as Mayda Colón, Guillermo Rebollo Gil, and José Raúl González "Gallego," who have also acknowledged the influence of Nuyorican poets upon their respective works—the major framework of their poetic endeavor centers on the individual and her/his search for a liberating identity articulated from the margins of the social, historical, political, and economic displacements the respective subjects have had to endure.<sup>31</sup> In this scenario an important precursor of these poets is Frank Lima, a protégé of Frank O'Hara and associated, therefore, with the New York School of Poetry and its Surrealist, neo-Romantic, cosmopolitan, and campy undercurrents.<sup>32</sup> An interesting comparative analysis would be to look at the works of poets such as John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler alongside Pedro Pietri's, Víctor Hernández Cruz's, and Frank Lima's efforts and evaluate their relative influence upon poets coming out of the late 1980s and 1990s. Of course, other American poets play an influential role upon the Nuyorican poets and merit closer critical scrutiny. That is the case, for example, of poets like Langston Hughes, Allen Ginsberg, and Amiri Baraka.<sup>33</sup>

The 1970s, in fact, can be considered, when viewed from the perspective of its aesthetic and ideological achievements, an experimental domain that nurtured the emergence of promising voices that, decades later, are aptly represented on the international scene. Some poets, such as Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla, opened new thematic frontiers by incorporating in their works a feminist outlook that challenged the patriarchal and upper-class ways they had been born into. Their early writings appeared in a magazine they co-edited, *Zona de Carga y Descarga* (1972–1975), which served as a forum that brought together writers from different generations, such as Luis Rafael Sánchez and José Luis González, and the Cubans, José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy, among others. These writers, alongside a new generation of Puerto Rican writers such as Etnairis Rivera, Iván Silén, and Víctor Fernández Frago, to name but a few, broke ground vis-à-vis the predominant social, political, and cultural views of the time.

### The '80s/'90s Babelic Implosion

By the late 1970s and early 1980s the continued multiplication and diversification of poetic discourses created what I would conceptualize as a babelic implosion: a rift between the aesthetic maturity of poets and their sense of solidarity toward other poets closely related to their generational lineage. Groups of poets, from the so-called "Generación de la crisis" on the island (José Luis Vega, Aurea María Sotomayor, Yvonne Ochart, Joserramón Melendes, Vanessa Droz, Néstor Barreto, and Jan Martínez, among others), as well as the poets of the "generación soterrada" (Rafael Acevedo, Luis Raúl Albadalejo, Obed EDOM, Mayra Santos Febres, Edgardo Nieves Mielles, Daniel Torres, and Israel Ruiz Cumba, among others), to the poets of the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York writing in Spanish (Juan Manuel Rivera, Alfredo Villanueva Collado, Iván Silén, Carmen Valle, Lourdes Vázquez, Manuel Ramos Otero, David Cortés Cabán, Giannina Braschi, Pedro López Adorno, and Marithelma Costa, among others), crossed similar literary paths but rarely acknowledged or established ties with each other throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. A disheartening effect of this disconnection has been the lack of interest

and/or refusal to incorporate some of the poets listed above into the Puerto Rican literary canon. Most mainland Puerto Rican poets continue facing the resistance and indifference of many island writers and critics who have chosen to ignore their legitimate contributions. A recent anthology of Puerto Rican literature compiled by Mercedes López Baralt, *Literatura puertorriqueña del siglo XX: antología*, has caused much uproar among literary circles both on the island and on the mainland because of some unlikely inclusions (i.e., writers with no significant publications to their credit) and a number of exclusions (i.e., poets with significant publications, such as Giannina Braschi, Carmen Valle, Lourdes Vázquez, Marithelma Costa, David Cortés Cabán, Julio Marzán, Juan Manuel Rivera, and Pedro López Adorno).<sup>34</sup>

It seems ironic that, in an age of unparalleled technological globalization, there continues to be such a lack of communication between Puerto Ricans seriously engaged in the production and dissemination of literary culture. The literary implosion characteristic of the 1980s and 1990s has created the opposite effect one would have expected: instead of generating a closely allied network of island and mainland writers aiming for mutual visibility and recognition, it has generated a chaotic array of literary cells (some smaller, some larger) only interested in their individual endeavors. The cost of this literary disenfranchisement has been more acutely felt by mainland authors, but they have challenged the marginalizing strategies imposed on them. Some of these poets owe their publishing successes to the genuine interest of a handful of dedicated editors and publishers in Puerto Rico and to a few Latin American critics, publishers, and anthologists who critique their work and/or include it in their publications. A great deal of work, however, needs to be done in order to assure ourselves that their literary production does not go unnoticed.

The poets whose works date from the early 1980s to the late 1990s represent an impressive diversity of poetic sources, influences, and aesthetic and ideological interests. The poets' literary, cultural, historical, and political reaccentuations function as critiques of the boundaries of the poem and of the individual living on the margins. Beginning the 1980s with the publication of the magazine *Reintegró* (co-edited by Vanessa Droz and Liliana Ramos Collado), and culminating in the mid-1990s with the New York-based literary magazine of international scope, *Tercer Milenio* (1994–1997), co-edited by David Cortés Cabán, Juan Manuel Rivera, and Pedro López Adorno, readers of the literature witnessed not only the expanding decolonized gaze toward inherited poetic traditions, as in the works of younger poets such as César Salgado and Noel Luna, but also the gradual reckoning of the two sides of Puerto Rico's colonial condition. By the 1990s there is a greater commitment on the part of certain poets to bridge the gaps that traditionally kept them away from the mainstream literary establishments and from each other, a situation that increased the visibility and marketability of their literary production. But more can and must be done in the near future if the literary production is going to stand on equal footing with the literature of other communities and nations. Although the cultural, institutional, and governmental liaisons are fraught with incoherence and inconsistencies, today's Puerto Rican poets fully understand the power of their subaltern voices and discard silence as an option.<sup>35</sup>

The poetry written by Puerto Ricans over the last four decades is ample proof not only of the decolonized empowerment of its practitioners but also of their unquestionable capacity for survival.

// Most mainland Puerto Rican poets continue facing the resistance and indifference of many island writers and critics who have chosen to ignore their legitimate contributions. //



NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A working draft of this paper was delivered at the Lang Recital Hall of Hunter College on November 8, 2002. It was titled, “The Decolonizer Muse: Puerto Rican Poetry of the Last Four Decades.” My presentation was part of a poetry reading that included Lenina Nadal, Carmen Valle, Noel Luna, and Pedro Pietri.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “decolonized” keeping in mind that Puerto Rico has been subjected to colonialism for over five hundred years. In presenting the concept I find myself indebted to Frantz Fanon’s view that decolonization is always a violent phenomenon. It must believe in resistance and create change. Fanon’s following definition of decolonization crosses into my reading of Puerto Rico’s poetic production: “Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies... Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with grandiose glare of history’s floodlights upon them.” In Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), pp. 36–7.

<sup>3</sup> See Lola Rodríguez de Tió’s *Poesías* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1960) and Francisco Gonzalo Marín’s *Antología* (San Juan: Ateneo Puertorriqueño, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> According to Professor Sommer: “If learning makes the distance between writers and readers seem superficial or circumstantial, mere interference on the way to understanding, particularist writing puts circumstance to work, resurfacing the stretch and marking it with stop signs.... Limits of intimacy and access are not the same as the difficulty, ambiguity, or complexity that demand and reward interpretive labor. Limits should be easy to read as disruptions of understanding....” In *Proceed With Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. X.

<sup>5</sup> See Josefina Rivera de Alvarez’s classic, *Diccionario de literatura* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1970), vol. I, pp. 244–51.

<sup>6</sup> A good anthology dealing with this topic is Jorge Luis Morales’, *Poesía afroantillana y negrista* (Río Piedras: Editorial Universitaria, 1981). Other representative anthologies have appeared since the 1930s: Emilio Ballagas, *Mapa de la poesía negra americana* (Buenos Aires: Pleamar, 1946); Ildefonso Pereda Valdés, *Antología de la poesía negra americana* (Montevideo: B.U.D.A., 1953); Hortensia Ruiz del Vizo, *Poesía negra del Caribe y otras áreas* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1972); and José Luis González and Mónica Mansour, *Poesía negra de América* (México: Era, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> The most important Puerto Rican avant-garde movement was Atalayismo (1928–1943). Its co-founders and major poets were Graciany Miranda Archilla (1908–1993) and Clemente Soto Vélez (1905–1993). Other major exponents of the Atalayista aesthetic were Fernando González Alberty (1904–1997); Alfredo Margenat (1907–1987); Luis Hernández Aquino (1907–1988); and Samuel Lugo (1905–1985).

<sup>8</sup> In using the term *neocriollista* I’m following José Emilio González’s classic distinction between criollista and neocriollista aesthetics. See his *La poesía contemporánea de Puerto Rico/1930–1960* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1972), especially chapters I-III and IX.

<sup>9</sup> See Rivera de Alvarez, *Diccionario*, pp. 512 and 515.

<sup>10</sup> The origin of this group of poets dates from 1962. This is also the year of the first issue of the magazine *Guajana*. The solidarity of the group has remained constant for over forty years. (See also endnote 19.)

<sup>11</sup> In Miguel Algarín’s, *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1975), p. 15. Eugene Mohr, on the other hand, dated the origins of the “Nuyorican experience” from Bernardo Vega’s arrival in New York in 1916. See his *The Nuyorican Experience: Literature of the Puerto Rican Minority* (Westport: Greenwood, 1982). A similar term used to describe the transplanted Puerto Rican was coined by the poet, playwright, and painter Jaime Carrero in 1964: “Neorrican”. See his *Jet neorriqueño/Neorican Jetliner* (San Germán, P.R.: Universidad Interamericana, 1964). Juan Flores views “Nuyorican literature” as the third stage of Puerto Rican literature in the United States (from 1965 to the present) and points out how it combines autobiographical and imaginative modes of community portrayal while projecting itself in English, Spanish, and Spanglish. Consult his *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993), pp. 142–53. Another interesting handling of the term “Nuyorican” is to conceptualize it as a “reclaimed” term, as Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé does in his useful introduction to the literature, “Teaching Puerto Rican Authors: Identity and Modernization in Nuyorican Texts,” in *ADE Bulletin* 91 (Winter 1988), pp. 45–51. In my judgment, however, Cruz Malavé’s use of the term “reclaimed” is inaccurate because the group doing the reclaiming was not the group that first used the term “Nuyorican” in a pejorative way. What Puerto Rican authors on the mainland did was to reaccentuate “Nuyorican” by disabling its negative connotations and placing it as the mediating consciousness of the immigrant community’s specific social, political, historical, and cultural practices.

<sup>12</sup> The majority of these poets were anthologized in Pedro López Adorno’s, *Papiros de Babel / Antología de la poesía puertorriqueña en Nueva York* (Río Piedras: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> As described by Fanon, “National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been.” *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>14</sup> Thus creating a reformulation of José Luis González’s *plebeyismo* paradigm via a surface reading of the Nuyorican aesthetic that does not conduct an in-depth study of the work of any of its practitioners or of Puerto Rican poets who do not consider themselves exclusively or specifically Nuyorican in their poetic endeavors, such as Frank Lima, Víctor Hernández Cruz, Julio Marzán, Martín Espada, or Jack Agüeros. This interpretive vacuum has been gradually subsiding thanks to the excellent scholarship of critics such as Edna Acosta-Belén, Frances Aparicio, Efraín Barradas, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, Juan Flores, Ramón Grosfoguel, Frances Negrón Muntaner, Chloé S. Georas, Rubén Ríos Avila, Hugo Rodríguez Vecchini, and Alberto Sandoval Sánchez, among others. On “plebeyismo” see González’s, *El país de cuatro pisos* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1980), pp. 91–104.

<sup>15</sup> Tato Laviera, *la carreta made a u-Turn* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1984), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Pedro Pietri, *Puerto Rican Obituary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Graciany Miranda Archilla, *Himno a la caballa* (Valencia: Hontanar, Libros de poesía, 1971), #12.

<sup>18</sup> The need for this type of literary competence becomes obvious when one ponders, as Michael Dash has done, the complexities of the subject in Caribbean literature. He summarizes these complexities as follows: “In the radical questioning of the need to totalize, systematize and control, the Caribbean writer is a natural deconstructionist who praises latency, formlessness and plurality. In order to survive, the Caribbean sensibility must spontaneously decipher and interpret the sign systems of those who wish to dominate and control, The writing of the region goes beyond simply creating alternative systems to reflect the futility of all attempts to construct total systems, to assert the

powers of the structuring subject. It is not simply a matter of deploying Caliban's militant idiom against Prospero's signifying authority." In "In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London/New York: Routledge, 2004 [1995]), p. 335.

<sup>19</sup> The importance of this group of poets has been highlighted by the publication of two major anthologies that include some of their most representative work: *Hasta el final del fuego: Guajana/Tres décadas de poesía: 1962–1992* (San Juan: Editorial Guajana, 1992); and *Flor de lumbre* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Mester's literary project (1966–1970) attempted to capture both the political and the artistic vibes of the New Left. According to Rubén González, it presented itself as a cultural product that offered perspectives on how to enrich the national consciousness. See González's study, *Crónica de tres décadas/Poesía puertorriqueña actual* (Río Piedras: EDUPR, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> The *décima*, in all likelihood, was introduced to island culture during the early stages of Spanish colonization and, up to the beginning of the 20th century, was generally preserved and passed through the oral tradition. A seminal study that explores this subject is María Cadilla de Martínez's *La poesía popular en Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Imprenta Venezuela, 1953), especially chapter VI.

<sup>22</sup> Andrés Castro Ríos, *Libro de glosas* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1980), p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> José Manuel Torres Santiago, *En las manos del pueblo* (San Juan: 1972), p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Although the triumph of the Cuban Revolution is the crucial fabric of the ideological tapestry of Latin American political culture during the 1960s, I believe the link to African liberation movements, and the key role of their nationalist intelligentsia, is also pertinent here as it reflects an international paradigm that Puerto Rico's cultural intelligentsia was surely aware of. An excellent study of African nationalism is Ehiedu G. Iweriebor's "Cultural Nationalist Ideas" in *The Dark Webs: Perspectives on Colonialism in Africa*, edited by Toyin Falola (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), pp. 23–53.

<sup>25</sup> An acquaintance with some of the major books published by these poets will help the reader understand why I see in their writing a major shift or break from *Guajana* poetics. See, for example, Vega's, *La nata de los párpados. Suite erótica*; and *La naranja entera*; Valle's, *De todo da la noche al que la tienta*; and *Glenn Miller y varias vidas después*; and Villanueva's, *Expulsado del paraíso*; and *Poemas en alta tensión*.

<sup>26</sup> We are referring, of course, to the politically committed poetry of these authors and to the historical and nationalist references of their poetic projects. Examples here abound: de Diego's *Cantos de rebeldía* and *Cantos de pitirre*; Lloréns Torres' *La canción de las Antillas y otros poemas* and *Alturas de América*; Soto Vélez's *Caballo de palo* and *La tierra prometida*; Corretjer's *Alabanza en la torre de Ciales* and *Yerba bruja*; Matos Paoli's *Luz de los héroes* and *Canto de la locura*; Julia de Burgos' *El mar y tú y otros poemas*; Margenat's *Obras completas*; Vallejo's *Poemas humanos*; Felipe's *Antología rota*; and Neruda's *Canto general*.

<sup>27</sup> Thus Puerto Rican poetry of the 1970s and 1980s begins to acquire a postmodern sensibility that, in time, reaccentuated the various subjects, inflections, and spaces it was textualizing.

<sup>28</sup> José Luis Vega, *Signos vitales* (Río Piedras: Editorial Cultural, 1974), p. XV.

<sup>29</sup> Salvador Villanueva, *Expulsado del paraíso* (New York: Editorial La Ceiba, 1981), p. 62.

<sup>30</sup> Carmen Valle, *Glenn Miller y varias vidas después* (México: Premiá, 1983), p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> In both cases the cultural nationalism that gravitates throughout their poetry, in varying degrees of appropriation and in an array of juxtapositions, is also intertwined with identity constructs and dystopic perspectives that are retropicalized with a transnationalist twist in order to transcend the possible mediations of the dominant sector.

<sup>32</sup> Frank Lima was born in Spanish Harlem, New York, in 1939. His parents were Mexican and Puerto Rican. He lives in New York City. His poetry can serve as one of the links between island and mainland poets writing in Spanish and/or English. See "Frank Lima: The Poetry of Everyday Life and the Tradition of American Darkness," in Frank Lima, *Inventory/New & Selected Poems*, edited by David Shapiro (West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press, 1997). In regards to the New York School, consult Ron Padgett and David Shapiro's excellent, *An Anthology of New York Poets* (New York: Random House, 1970).

<sup>33</sup> Langston Hughes' poetry, central to the aesthetics and ideology of the Harlem Renaissance, has had a definitive influence upon Nuyorican poets. The reader should consult *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage, 1995). The long-lasting effect and poetic renewal that Ginsberg's book, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956) thrusts upon the America of the late 1950s and early '60s crosses into the early path-breaking works of Víctor Hernández Cruz's *Snaps* (1969), and Pietri's *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973). In the case of Amiri Baraka, one of the main leaders of the Black Arts Movement—I'm thinking of the impact his poem "Black Art" had on a generation of Puerto Rican poets who began their careers in the late 1960s and early 1970s: Pedro Pietri, Miguel Algarín, Louis Reyes Rivera, Jesús "Papoletto" Meléndez, and Tato Laviera, among others. See *Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1961–1995)*, edited by Paul Vangelisti (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> See Mercedes López Baralt, *Literatura puertorriqueña del siglo XX: antología* (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2003). The aforementioned poets had also been excluded from Alberto Martínez Márquez and Mario Cancel's *El límite volcado. Antología de la generación de poetas de los ochenta* (San Juan: Isla Negra, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> This is particularly true in the recent work of Carmen Valle, Lourdes Vázquez, and Giannina Braschi. Some of their books have been translated into English; in some cases, in a bilingual format. This practice follows a trend started in the 1960s, when mainstream publishers introduced renowned Latin American poets like Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz to American readers. See Braschi's *Empire of Dreams*; Valle's *Esta casa flotante y abierta/This House Open and Afloat*; and Vázquez's *Bestiary: Selected Poems, 1986–1997*.

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