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Colonial Figures in Motion: Globalization and Translocality in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature in the United States

ARNALDO CRUZ-MALAVÉ

ABSTRACT

This essay situates contemporary Puerto Rican literature in the United States in the space between two discursive implosions: the implosion of the 1970s attempt to found U.S. Puerto Rican literature by returning to a privileged Island origin, and the implosion of the utopian goal of establishing an independently controlled community (in the U.S.) or a sovereign nation (in Puerto Rico). Like other recent proposals on Puerto Rican cultural politics, most notably Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner, and Georas's "Beyond Nationalist and Colonialist Discourses: The Jaiba Politics of the Puerto Rican Ethno-Nation" in *Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*, the essay argues for this border condition as a space of possibilities. But unlike other recent proposals, the essay underscores Puerto Ricans' border condition as a space already occupied and intervened by global capitalism and identifies strategies, or what it calls colonial figures of motion, through which Puerto Rican cultural practices redirect and expand that condition. By focusing on the strategies of movement that Puerto Rican cultural practices have deployed, rather than deploying Puerto Rican cultural practices in the interest of a critique of nationalism, as others have done, the essay hopes to contribute to theories about Puerto Rican cultural agency within the present conditions of colonial migration and globalization. [Key words: Nuyorican literature and culture, globalization, translocality, colonialism, migratory flows]

Because they make doors out of pure
space
And you have to swing them open
So they know
You are around the wind
You are in the wind with your own
dance
You never know who stabs your
shadow full of holes
You gotta have your tips on fire
VICTOR HERNÁNDEZ CRUZ

[Y]a es hora de que al son de la plena baile[n].
MANUEL RAMOS OTERO

En el '98, para mis sobrinos Kiko, Gina, Steph y La Cuchicusa, y para mi ahijado Matt.
Para Edward Rivera, *in memoriam*, por el legado fecundo de sus “maromas.”

Nowadays, in our globalized world, hegemonic discourses seek not only to incorporate margins, they also seek to authorize themselves through them. Thus the border and border conditions such as the “Latino” experience in the United States have gone from being the limit of national discourses to being, in our global world, a figure for the very space of translations and translocations in which discourses that aspire to represent our times must locate themselves. It is not surprising then that famed Latin American writers, among others, desire nowadays to become *ipso facto* “Latino” authors.

In Puerto Rican theoretical discourses there has also been a notable migration toward the margins. From being a problem for a Puerto Rican national discourse (to be solved with the establishment of a future independent state) the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States has come to represent nowadays the very condition of possibility of Puerto Ricanness. But in 1974, shortly before the publication of their “anthology of Puerto Rican words and feelings,” *Nuyorican Poetry*, and at the height of what would later be baptized the “Nuyorican” poetic movement, Miguel Piñero and Miguel Algarín visited Puerto Rico in an attempt to found their literary expression in a common national “spiritual identity.” To their astonishment and outrage, Piñero, then famous as the author of the award-winning prison drama, *Short Eyes*, and Algarín, later co-founder of the performance space, the “Nuyorican Poets Cafe,” would not be accorded the immigrant son’s triumphant homecoming welcome; instead, they would be greeted with a word (previously not heard by them) that defined them, fixing them at a (safe) distance—in their place: New York Rican ... Newyorican ... Nuyorican. U.S. Puerto Rican literature, so often charged with a regressive tropicalism or essentializing nostalgia by Island critics, may be said to be born, or reborn, from this confrontation with a refractory origin, an origin that rejects and abjects. From the confrontation, Piñero would defiantly assert in a poem that “puerto rico 1974 / this is not the place where i was born” (*La Bodega Sold Dreams* 13), and would reclaim instead the “concrete tomb” of the Lower East Side, or Loisaida, and its spectral womb as his “home” (7). Algarín, for his part, would declare himself a member of a “tribe of nomads / that roam the world without / a place to call home” (*Nuyorican Poetry* 55), and later project himself from the impotent or *mongo* condition of rootlessness onto a future “liberated” space of subjective and national identification often prefigured in his writings in homosocial embraces:

I loved you
viejo negro
I would have slept
in your arms to weep
...
old man with the golden chain
and the medallion with an indian
on your chest
I love you
I see in you
what has been
what is coming
and will be (*Nuyorican Poetry* 56-57)

Piñero and Algarín's attempted return to their Puerto Rican roots "in search of spiritual identity" (*La Bodega Sold Dreams* 14) ends in what may be retrospectively read as a productive instance of disidentification. Confronted with the collapse of their past, Piñero and Algarín find, like Benjamin's historical angel, other means to propel themselves forward, to ground their expression: Piñero in the fierce embrace of a spectral and "queer" locality in all of its rawness, materiality, and abjection; Algarín in its utopian projection.

Years later, toward the end of the decade, another collapse would begin to register in Puerto Rican cultural practices in the United States: that of the future. The history of the various struggles that Puerto Ricans engaged in during the '60s and '70s in an attempt to transform, translate, or transfigure heterogeneous popular cultural and social practices into the telos of community control (in the U.S.) or national sovereignty (in Puerto Rico) is rich and complex (see for example Laó and Torres and Velázquez, eds.). Yet by the end of the '70s the assault of a globalizing U.S. economy that reduced state support of social institutions and privatized public space, thereby divesting communities, already impoverished by the flight of industrial manufacturing, of crucially needed communal institutions and resources, would, if not completely dissolve the dream of community control and national sovereignty, at least devalue it politically and defer it. In U.S. Puerto Rican literature, as I have argued elsewhere (Cruz-Malavé, "Teaching Puerto Rican Authors" and "What a Tangled Web!"), devaluation and deferral signal a transition from the decolonizing and demystifying aesthetics of early Nuyorican writing, best exemplified perhaps by Pedro Pietri's 1973 call to Puerto Ricans to "withdraw" from the self-hating addiction to the "empty dreams" promoted by "this dept store / called America" in *Puerto Rican Obituary*, to an aesthetics of translations, tropicalisms, and translocality, of cultural, racial, generic, and sexual entanglements. In the latter, the transcendent foundational space that grounded the dream of an autonomous self-referential community and nation, one might say, has been imploded.

Contemporary Puerto Rican cultural practices in the United States may be seen, then, to inhabit the space between these two implosions: that of origins and that of a certain future. Between them Puerto Rican cultural practices deploy figures of movement, tropical swaggers, perambulating struts, rhetorical acrobatic stunts or *maromas* (as Edward Rivera suggestively calls his characters' survival strategies in his coming-of-age novel, *Family Installments*) in order to emerge from a space of double deterritorialization and banishment. In a manner not unlike that of the stowaway or contraband land crabs in Luis Rafael Sánchez's brilliant, uproarious essay, "La guagua aérea" ("The Air Bus"), whose "tough, cocky, bullying gangersterlike swagger" down the "carpeted aisle of the air bus" (my translation, 24) breaks through the imposed silence of the modern colonial air route Puerto Rico–New York; or the Puerto Rican drag queens in "Paris Is Burning," whose protracted warlike struts down the runway break through the social invisibility of their lives to shimmer briefly in the gaze of the balls and in the film's image; or the performances of *plena* promoted by the vernacularly styled *casitas* in previously vacant lots in the midst of devastated urbanscapes in Loisaida or the South Bronx (see Flores's "Salvación Casita" and Aponte-Parés); Puerto Rican cultural practices emerge from their condition of banishment, deploying and displaying translational, translocal moving figures.

Movement, translation, translocality, and tropicalisms have become the mark of contemporary Puerto Rican literature in the United States (see Barradas,

Rodríguez-Vecchini, Flores, Flores and Yúdice, Sandoval Sánchez, Santos-Febres, Ramos, Marzán, Acosta-Belén and Santiago, López-Adorno, Aparicio, Ríos Avila, La Fountain-Stokes, Díaz Quiñones, and J. Arroyo). Examples of this translocal tendency are numerous: from Jorge Brandon's troubadour recitations of politically engaged poetry in traditional meter and subversive verse to Pedro Pietri's complication of street oratory through playful aporia and other rhetorical collisions in *Traffic Violations* (1983) to Tato Laviera's resignifying of contradiction through a syncopated aesthetics of reaccentuation in *Enclave* (1981) and *AmeRícan* (1985); from the universalizing avant-garde aesthetics of nationalist poet and activist Clemente Soto Vélez's *Caballo de palo* (1959) and *La tierra prometida* (1979) to Víctor Fragoso's minoritized revolutionary subject in *Ser islas/Being Islands* (1976) and Giannina Braschi's conquering cross-gendered *auteur* in *El imperio de los sueños* (1988; trans. *Empire of Dreams* 1994) and her radically dialogical author in *Yo-Yo Boing!* (1998); from Julia de Burgos's liminal speaking subject in *El mar y tú* (1954) to Manuel Ramos Otero's strategically assumed abjection in multiple geographic, generic, and sexual contact zones in *Página en blanco y staccato* (1987) and Rane Arroyo's productively dislocated poetic persona in *Pale Ramón* (1998); from José Luis González's and Pedro Juan Soto's localized representation of subaltern voices in *El hombre en la calle* (1948) and *Spiks* (1956), respectively, to Martín Espada's migratory documentation of alternative histories through a filmlike montage of subaltern testimonials in *Rebellion Is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* (1990) and *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* (1993); from Pedro Juan Soto and Piri Thomas's failed search for an autonomous space of national/racial belonging in *Ardiente suelo, fría estación* (1961; trans. *Hot Land, Cold Season* 1973) and *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), respectively, to Abraham Rodríguez's exploration of the possibilities of complicity and implication in *The Boy Without a Flag* (1992), *Spidertown* (1993), and *The Buddha Book* (2001); from William Carlos Williams's ironic and distant translations of his Puerto Rican linguistic heritage in *Yés, Mrs. Williams* (1959) to Victor Hernández Cruz's passionate tropicalizations of English in *By Lingual Wholes* (1982) and *Red Beans* (1991) and Pedro López-Adorno's neo-Baroque appropriations of the literary codes of Medieval and Golden-Age Spanish in *Concierto para desobedientes* (1996); from Bernardo Vega's grounding of his authorial voice in shared collective experience in his *Memorias* (posthumously published in 1977; trans. *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega* 1984) to Nicholasa Mohr's unveiling of the artist's "secret garden" or true self in *Nilda* (1973) to Edward Rivera's formation of his authorial self through a folk, *jaiba* poetics of parodic citation and carnivalization in *Family Installments* (1983) and Esmeralda Santiago's construction of a "hybrid" identity through performative mimicry in *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993; trans. *Cuando era puertorriqueña* 1994); from René Marqués's phobic exhaustion of the possibilities of migration in *La carreta* (1952; trans. *The Oxcart* 1966) to Luis Rafael Sánchez's uncovering, in colonial travel, of multiple routes for national, communal, and self-expression in "La guagua aérea" (1985; trans. "The Air Bus" 1992); from Miguel Piñero's fierce embrace of his local Loisaida in his anticanonically canonical "A Lower East Side Poem" (*La Bodega Sold Dreams* 1980) to the scattering of his provident ashes by the multiethnic performance artists of the new Nuyorican Poets Cafe in Algarín and Holman's anthology *Aloud* (1994) (see also anthologies by Barradas and Rodríguez, López-Adorno, and Turner), and Willie Perdomo's and Ernesto Quiñonez's recovery of the rich multiethnic histories, languages, and styles that intersect and energize their apparently devastated El Barrio locale in *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* (1996) and *Bodega Dreams* (2000), respectively. Ever since its abject

beginnings in the appropriated term Nuyorican in the early '70s, U. S. Puerto Rican literature has been then deepening its translational, translocal character, willfully bifurcating itself between the imposed colonial routes of global capital and the uncanny, uppity routes of deterritorialized homecomings.

Certainly translation, transculturation, and translocality are not recent phenomena in U.S. Puerto Rican cultural practices. However one may say that contemporary translational strategies in U.S. Puerto Rican culture have a different *sentido*, the Hispanicism designating both a difference in “meaning” and in “direction.” Translation no longer means what it did when Algarín, in his introduction to the first anthology of *Nuyorican Poetry*, fretted about the possibilities of turning “outlaw” street cultural practices (e.g., practices such as Spanish-English code-switching or Spanglish, characterized by their ability to “hustle” or “juggle” dominant social structures) into an “alternative street government” (10). As befits an anthologist, Algarín would end up affirming the “legalization” or institutionalization of street cultural practices (“legalize your ‘risks,’” 13): he would advocate for the Puerto Rican community’s control of its “geographical identity” (14) (“To stay free is not theoretical. It is to take over your immediate environment,” 12), even as he warned against a too hasty standardization of “Nuyorican language” that would “stunt its childhood and damage its creative intuition” (19).

Today U.S. Puerto Rican translational strategies have less to do with the attempt—hasty or otherwise—to metaphorically subsume subaltern cultural practices under a communal or national government. They do not seek to subvert the power structure of a given social space, taking it over and transfiguring it totally on the basis of a “geographical identity” between its cultural practices and its ideological state apparatuses. Instead, contemporary U.S. Puerto Rican translational strategies attempt to mobilize power relations in contextually specific social spaces, creating new moving figures and routes, transforming without transfiguring or transcending. If in the late '60s, Eduardo Seda Bonilla, the Puerto Rican anthropologist, denounced the apparently disorganized, multidirectional, and evasive character of Puerto Rican social practices as a sign of the Island’s pathological colonial heritage, or what he termed its *condición* “jueyera,” or, in English, its “crab syndrome” (*Requiem* 171-79), contemporary Puerto Rican cultural practices in the U.S. seem to revel instead, as Luis Rafael Sánchez’s “Air Bus” uproariously attests, in such a crabwise condition. Contemporary U.S. Puerto Rican translational strategies, one may suggest, are like the Puerto Rican popular practice of nonconfrontation and evasion in negotiating asymmetrical power relations known as *jaibería* (from the *jaiba* or mountain crab’s sidestepping forward movement), analyzed by the *político* Juan Manuel García Passalacqua and recently promoted by Ramón Grosfoguel, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, and Chloé S. Georas as a potentially transforming strategy for a “postnationalist” Puerto Rico (26-33): they do not oppose dominant structures frontally; rather, they deploy themselves laterally, in a movement that, despite its fitful, disjunctive character, is more than an avoidance of dominant restrictive manoeuvres. It is also a style, an art.

Sidestepping contrapuntally to dominant discourses, rather than taking over a territorially based center of power, seems nowadays a more fruitfully transformative strategy in a globalized world, as Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner, and Georas, among others, contend. Yet precisely because power in a globalized world is no longer territorially based, one can also suggest, U.S. Puerto Rican cultural practices are neither primarily concerned with sidestepping nor with opposing the demands of

territorial nationalist or territorial colonialist discourses. Instead their energies seem to be more principally directed toward what Néstor García Canclini has called, after Bourdieu, the “reconversion” of traditional knowledge and practices in a struggle over the *sentido* of a global postmodern culture (45) whose power resides between sites, as a master translator.

In its struggle with a traditional patriarchal and Hispanophile nationalism, contemporary Puerto Rican cultural criticism has frequently posited and celebrated an idealized form of unobstructed travel or nomadism, setting it against the exclusionary demands of territorial nationalist or territorial colonialist discourses. Yet as it privileges and deploys this idealized form of nomadism, contemporary Puerto Rican cultural criticism has run the risk of turning the diasporic experience merely into a figure for, or an instrument of, its struggle with a nationalism that is, by its own accounts, ineffectual and defunct, failing thereby to engage with that experience. For the experience that Puerto Rican cultural practices in the United States seek to redress and *rican* figure is not the territorial kind; it is rather a paradoxically “modern colonial” (see Pierre-Charles) condition that anticipates and parallels the very postmodern condition of contemporary transnational travel in which labor fluctuates between (ex-) colony and metropole along asymmetrically racialized axes (Grosfoguel, “Caribbean Colonial Immigrants” 282-83). As in Manuel Ramos Otero’s paradigmatic story on the aftereffects of the American invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, “Virir del cuento” (trans. “The Scheherazade Complex”), the “modern colonial” experience that Puerto Rican cultural practices in the United States seek to reconfigure is not a liberatory flight from territorial constraints but a certain mobility within abjection and markedness: aboard a ship, on his way to a Hawaiian sugar plantation to work as an indentured servant, Monserrate, the protagonist of Ramos Otero’s story, understands that his new identity as a “Porto Rican” is now defined by the mass relocation of workers along racialized routes that the new geopolitical remapping of the world, effected by the “Spanish-American” War of 1898, has brought about:

...I found out that on the same year the United States invaded Puerto Rico, 1898, they also took over Hawaii, and I could already tell we were jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. I’d never gone to school, but even an illiterate could understand, when those men traced their destiny on a battered and soggy map, asking us to look at the almost straight line that can be traced from Puerto Rico to Hawaii, passing just North of the so-called Panama Canal, that it was all going to be a canal from sea to sea ... I learned to read well enough to understand the words “Porto Rican” under the cartoon figure of a masked criminal, armed with a knife and a gun, that appeared in a Hawaiian newspaper, and to realize that “Porto Rican” spelled evil ... I’ve always said that I was born upside down. I had to leave Puerto Rico to learn to read and write in Spanish, and in Hawaii there were no more than a thousand Puerto Ricans, including the cargo I was a part of. No one suspected we were meant to be a threat to the other workers, and there were many of them: Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese... with premeditation the Hawaii Sugar Planters Association had sketched our image as petty thieves, lazy and disorganized but always armed and ready for a fight, gambling or liquor, with a fearful history of rebellion (52-53; my translation).

Set against the architectural metaphor with which José Luis González, the Puerto Rican writer and cultural critic, reimagined Puerto Rican culture as a sedimented “four-storied” edifice in his 1980s classic *El país de cuatro pisos* [The Four-Storied Country] (“Vivir del cuento” 55), Ramos Otero’s Scheherazade-inspired tale reconceives Puerto Rican writing, and by extension Puerto Rican culture, as we shall see in greater detail, as rhetorical strategies that delay, protract, and rhizomatically extend the imposed abject routes of colonial migration. Instead of a liberatory flight from territorial constraints, U.S. Puerto Rican cultural practices may thus be seen, following upon Ramos Otero’s paradigmatic tale, as describing rhetorical figures in motion that attempt to redirect, retard, and expand colonialism’s imposed routes of translocation and translation, which answer hegemonic routes with counterhegemonic moves.

How to intervene then in global capital’s master translations/translocations? How to redirect their *sentido*? How to redefine what counts for them as transfer points, both as source and as target? How to extend and historically and culturally deepen their routes of relocation? How to retard, as the strategies identified by Doris Sommer do in subaltern texts, their transparently swift travel to include other temporalities and localities? How to render, as Benjamin recommends (80-81), the target “foreign,” so that the source being translocated is translated but not translated away? How to participate, that is, in global capital’s modern colonial (or postcolonial) routes without being “equalized,” discarded, or effaced?

These are the questions that contemporary U.S. Puerto Rican literature and cultural practices insistently address. In the ’60s and ’70s Puerto Rican nationalist discourses in the United States attempted to transform what Gloria Anzaldúa has so poignantly described for Chicanos as a borderland condition of double expulsion, from Latin American and U.S. territorial discourses, into an enabling geographical identity. Today that interstitial space is increasingly being preempted as dominant discourses, theory included, migrate from their territorial centers. The Caribbeanization of the world (Clifford 173) may not then be an entirely celebratory phenomenon; it has not so unexpectedly a cannibalistic ring to it. To ward off such appropriating moves while participating in the flow of global culture, Puerto Rican literature in the United States deploys uncanny translational figures of motion. In the following pages, I will briefly turn to some of these.

The Adversarial Conjunction’s Pause

Any meditation on subaltern strategies deployed by contemporary Puerto Rican literature in the United States may well have to start with the inverted dictum of one of Manuel Ramos Otero’s stories: “Vencida pero jamás acorralada” [Defeated but never cornered] (“Loca la de la locura” 240; trans. “Queen of Madness”). Transposing the participles “defeated” and “cornered” in this perverse reprise of a homosexual tale of awakening, Ramos Otero frustrates the narrative’s teleological movement from confinement to liberation that is implicit in the more conventional saying, “Acorralada pero jamás vencida” [Cornered but never defeated], in order to suggest instead the possibility of movement within defeat. He proposes thus a movement that does not need to lead inexorably to liberation to be productively resistant. Separated yet linked by the adversarial conjunction *pero*, the two participles of Ramos Otero’s inverted phrase do not describe a fusion but an encounter, a counterpoint in which defeat, rather than being metaphorically transfigured or transcended, serves to fuel mobility.

Defeat—not the defeated but defeat itself in its most abject forms—is variously figured in most of Ramos Otero’s stories (see for example “Loca la de la locura,” “Vida ejemplar del esclavo y el señor,” “Inventario mitológico del cuento,” “Vivir del cuento,” “Página en blanco y staccato,” and “Descuento”) as the spectral, outcast condition of migrants, homosexuals, black, and female bodies. It rises out of social banishment, like the undead rising from disturbed ashes, to give testimonial, to seek vengeful redress. But narration’s ambivalent, weblike, Borgesian stratagems lie in wait to provide the testimonial subject both with a voice for self-expression and an “epitaph.” As the “leprous” character of “Vivir del cuento” ironically states:

And then, suddenly, a letter from the colony of Puerto Rico arrives in the leper colony of Molokai giving me back my humanity, for now I count as a character in a story, as an immigrant worker, as a Puerto Rican, as a leper, for now they are plowing through the incoherent rubbish of my history so that that plot that hasn’t yet claimed its tenant may lay claim to the epitaph that you have written for me (my translation; 68).

Most of Ramos Otero’s stories are postliberatory meditations, in which the necessity of self-expression is fiercely asserted as the cost of social visibility is made murderously palpable. They are also intricately-woven narratives, like the subaltern testimonials discussed by Sommer, constructed around pauses, digressions, etymological speculations, genealogical reconstructions based on the most minoritarian of objects, the most peripheral of traditions: a passing reference in one of Palés Matos’s poems (Marie Cafolé), a Chinese name found by chance in New York’s Spanish Yellow Pages (Sam Fat), “the stones from an African river passed down from [mother to daughter]” (“Página en blanco y staccato” 77), a coconut cup. As Monserrate, the Puerto Rican migrant to Hawaii, passionately claims in “Vivir del cuento”: “...the coconut cup [my mother] Flor María made for me... I still keep it and I’d rather not have breakfast if I can’t drink my morning coffee in it. That cup’s all my tradition” (62). They linger on the adversarial conjunction’s pause between defeat’s invisibility or “blank page” and social visibility’s murder or “staccato.” Like Scheherazade’s life-saving art, they turn the pause into a rhizomatic relay point that protracts the narrative and the subaltern subject’s passage into normalized sociality, momentarily cheating sociality of its prey and postponing death.

Ramos Otero’s early writing sought to break out of static discourses of subjectivity by privileging dispersion, mutation, travel, even dissolution (see “Concierto de metal para un recuerdo,” “Piel mutada,” “Alrededor del mundo con la señorita Mambresi,” and “Hollywood Memorabilia” in *Concierto de metal para un recuerdo y otras orgías de soledad* [1971]; see Cruz-Malavé, “Para virar el macho”; Ríos Avila, “Caribbean Dislocations”; Gelpí; Sotomayor; La Fountain-Stokes; and Arroyo). His later writing, already located within movement, in migration, assumes the routes of social visibility assigned to colonial migrants and other outcasts in order to retard, redirect, and expand them (*El cuento de la mujer del mar*, *Página en blanco y staccato* and the posthumous *Cuentos de buena tinta*). Thus, in what is one of the most intensely brilliant passages in all of Puerto Rican literature, Ramos Otero’s transvestite character, Loca la de la locura (or Queen of Madness) steps out of “Oso Blanco” State Prison in Puerto Rico, and as if she were walking in a New York drag queen ball, she pauses and turns the imposed route of social normalization and visibility, with its

concomitant repudiation (or “eviction”) of difference, into proliferating moving figures that trace other histories, other genealogies:

After breakfast they told me, Queen of Madness, the street’s all yours. It hurts to leave behind pieces of skin from this life of mine stuck to the walls of the cell. Another eviction notice. The home where I’ve lived in for so many years suddenly disappears ... The first gate opens up. There she goes, Queen of Madness, pure in soul. Yet tougher than a toothless old shark, gums scabbed from chewing so long on the termite-bitten wheels of her troubled destiny. The second gate opens up. The tenants of Oso Blanco jump up like tics to see Queen of Madness go by for the last time, she who sang them boleros in her cage of spite. The third gate opens up. Don’t get too close, this is no bolero; it’s Queen of Madness dancing to a resentful tango, her corns aching from waiting so long. The fourth gate opens up ... Ailing and nonchalant, Queen of Madness is walking out all alone, her memories entrenched in her worm-eaten dentures, anxious amidst loose skin and cuticles, with no double-edge razor to soften the unbearable forests of her underarms or her ham hock legs invaded by varicose veins, worried yet composed, filing wilted thoughts under her rusty bald head, dreaming that she was (still is) fresher than a head of lettuce, unaltered and faithful as a muse wrapped in magnificent chiffons and Gypsy flounces, hot and exotic, without a hint of a frown on her brow, paler than a jailed magnolia. The seventh gate opens up, and the afternoon light blinds Queen of Madness, now pinned to the precipice of her solitude, as my mother would say, may she rest in peace. All the way! (“Loca la de la locura,” 238; my translation)

Syncopated Reaccentuation

Ramos Otero redirects the routes of colonial travel and normalization through an aesthetics of pausing and digression; Tato Laviera does so through a practice of syncopated reaccentuation. Ramos Otero pauses, differs and defers, strikes a fearsome pose; Laviera skips a beat, altering, as do African-derived rhythms, from traditional Puerto Rican *plenas* to contemporary salsa and hip hop, through syncopation, the very system of accentuation that regulates value in hegemonic discourses. Like Bakhtin, Laviera understands hegemonic value to reside not merely, or even primarily, in the signs of a discourse but in its regulated movement or rhythm, which determines what is marked and unmarked, what counts as weak and as strong. His practice of reaccentuating the beat therefore can be a powerful strategy for the formation of alternative identities (see Zavala on Bakhtinian reaccentuation). Without altering the signs of a given discourse but by skipping its accented beat and displacing it toward unmarked linguistic elements, Laviera can turn hegemonic statements, as the titles of his books of poems, *AmeRícan* and *Enclave*, suggest, into productive sites for other subjective and communal affirmations. American can also be, through Laviera’s syncopated reaccentuation, productive of an otherwise invisible U.S. Puerto Rican agency: AmeRícan, or the syntactically full sentence “am a Rican,” as Laviera himself has proposed (Hernández 80). And “Enclave,” which suggests the colonial state of enclosure of a subaltern

community within a larger national order (Flores, *Enclave* 6), can also become, through reaccentuation, an imperative to reread that state syncopatedly: *en clave* (both “in code” and “in the key”), which is how the off-beat rhythmic pattern that organizes Afro-Cuban and U.S. Puerto Rican music is known.

Syncopation or its grammatical equivalent, syncope, which consists in skipping a phoneme, is, after all, Laviera’s recommended tactic for assimilation:

assimilated? qué assimilated,
 brother, yo soy asimilao,
 así mi la o sí es verdad
 tengo un lado asimilao.
 you see, they went deep . . . Ass
 oh they went deeper . . . SEE
 oh, oh, . . . they went deeper . . . ME
 but the sound LAO was too black
 for LATED, LAO could not be
 translated, assimilated,
 no, asimilao, melao,
 it became a black
 spanish word but
 we do have asimilados
 perfumados and by the
 last count even they
 were becoming asimilao (*AmeRícan* 54)

It is the syncope at the heart of assimilation’s translational process, the untranslatable missing “d” in *asimilao*, for example, that allows, rather than impedes, the subaltern subject’s assimilation. This willfully omitted, untranslatable element provides the subaltern subject with the necessarily differential leverage to engage in/with the translocational process of assimilation without risking disappearance or erasure, without forfeiting his or her agency. The “d” in *asimilao* disappears, but in its contracted form there remains an echo of that vanishment, and it is this palpable, underscored absence that makes cultural translation, or *asimilación*, possible by preventing Puerto Rican linguistic-cultural codes from being thoroughly absorbed by mainstream North American ones (“LAO no podía ser / *translated*, assimilated”). Syncope, then, is that indigestible residue—that radical difference or Lyotardian *différend*—that forestalls the synthesizing of cultural transfers into a single code, assuring thus the survival of negotiation itself, of that contrapuntal movement that is in Laviera’s work the process of *asimilación*. In his poem, Laviera identifies *asimilao* as a black Puerto Rican linguistic form (“déles gracias a los prietos / que cambiaron asimilado al popular asimilao” [54]), and whether he is dialectologically correct or not (the omission of the “d” in Spanish past participles is certainly standard in Castilian speech), his argument is pitched here not so much at the level of linguistic form as at the level of cultural practice. The signal contribution of Puerto Rican black culture to Puerto Rican culture in the United States, Laviera’s poem seems to demonstrate, is not merely the maintenance of specific cultural idioms but its insistence on a practice of engaging with assimilation by retaining untranslatable difference, by tactically deploying unassimilable traditional, premodern or minoritarian elements in order to negotiate and redirect assimilation’s translational process.

Clearly Laviera's literary project is heir to Jorge Brandon and Pedro Pietri's politically engaged "street" poetry. The aim of this poetry is to arrest its listeners with its metrically intricate verse (Brandon) and grotesque language games (Pietri) in order to awaken them from their alienated "colonized mentality" by invoking a utopian communal vision to which the poet's prophetic voice has privileged access. In Pietri's early classic, *Puerto Rican Obituary*, this process of awakening is metaphorically figured as an act of resurrection and redemption:

Here lies Juan
Here lies Miguel
Here lies Milagros
...
Never knowing
the geography of their complexion
...
If only they
had turned off the television
and tuned into their imaginations
...
[they] will right now be doing their own thing
where beautiful people sing
and dance and work together
...
Aquí Se habla Español all the time
Aquí you salute your flag first
...
Aquí to be called negrito
means to be called LOVE (134-38)

And in Laviera's most ambitious poem, "Jesús Papote," from *Enclave*, and his touching "migración," from *Mainstream Ethics (ética corriente)*, redemption continues to define the "street" poet's task. As in much Puerto Rican literature (in José Luis González's "Una caja de plomo que no se podía abrir," René Marqués's *La carreta*, Pedro Juan Soto's *Ardiente suelo, fría estación*, Edward Rivera's *Family Installments*, and Magali García Ramis's *Felices días, tío Sergio*, for instance) and popular song (in "En mi Viejo San Juan," for example, which is the subject of "migración"), redemption is consistently represented as the attempt to restore the migrant's dead or mutilated body to the wholeness of national belonging by returning it "home," utopian or otherwise (see Sandoval Sánchez).

Yet there is a striking difference in Laviera's reprise of the migrant poet's redemptive task. For one, Laviera's poetic voice, unlike Pietri's early prophetic I, does not assume a privileged, transcendent stance vis-à-vis an ostensibly "colonized" audience; on the contrary, Laviera's poetic personae in "Jesús Papote" and "migración" are deep inside abjection: one is the unborn fetus of a drug-addicted dying mother; the other, the wandering specter or *calavera* [skull] of a street artist. Thus the sometimes over-the-top quality of these and other poems by Laviera derives from his willingness to risk sentimentality and kitsch in order to accurately convey what is admittedly an impossible mission: to speak with a prophetic, transcendent collective voice from a state of social invisibility and banishment.

In the end, however, Laviera's fidelity is much rewarded: in tarrying with poetry's redemptive task, he finds new forms of redemption that are not mortgaged to a transcendent vision but are fueled instead by the syncopated movement of relationships in dialogue, by dance. Redemption in Laviera is no longer merely the business of a prophetic voice. It is the likely effect of a dialogical counterpoint, an Afro-Caribbean *sonero*, an African-American call and response in which the poet's unborn voice does not offer the ultimate solution but rather a question, a demand:

with your permission Mami
i ask for one gift one magi gift
inside these heavy odds
... i tell you
with pride that I am proud to
have been your son, to have come
from you, with the tenderness
of my grandmother's prayers,
with the silent love of all my
people, with the final resolution
of our nationhood, i am asking
for my blessings BENDICION
BEN ... DI ... CI ... ON ("Jesús Papote," *Enclave* 20-21)

And this demand does not have to be symmetrically answered but may be responded to in motion, syncopatedly, by skipping a beat:

she woke up she saw she startled she warmed she
protected she cried she broke the umbilical cord
she got up to follow the bells the bells the bells (21)

Refusing Signification

Ramos Otero and Laviera's subaltern strategies set out to resignify abjection through an aesthetics of pausing and syncopated reaccentuation. To a large extent the resignification of abjection in U.S. Puerto Rican literature has been, with the notable exception of Julia de Burgos's insistence on seeing herself reflected and refracted in the mirror of death (*El mar y tú*), a male affair (consider for instance the meditation on male subjection, impotence, and martyrdom that runs through the classic works of Thomas and Piñero to that of contemporary novelists Abraham Rodriguez, Emanuel Xavier, and Ernesto Quiñonez) (see Cruz-Malavé, "Toward an Art of Transvestism" and "What a Tangled Web!"). Among women writers (for example Mohr, Santiago, Carmen Valle, Luz María Umpierre, or Judith Ortiz Cofer) and in the portrayal of female characters, both in women's and men's fiction, an attitude closer to that identified by Flores and Yúdice in the poetry of Sandra María Esteves seems to prevail (202): a fending-off abjection takes the form of a double negative—the refusal to be refused or refuse, aptly represented by Esteves as an assertion of being, as in the title of one of her most suggestive poems, "Not Neither" (*Tropical Rains* 26).

Perhaps Edward Rivera's carnivalesque *bildungsroman* *Family Installments*, certainly the most accomplished novel by a U.S. Puerto Rican, and Esmeralda Santiago's revealing memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican*, best illustrate subaltern strategies whose

mobility derives not from resignifying but from refusing to identify with abjection. Central to both novels is a mutilated, martyred, or economically dispossessed father figure. Yet while the novels register the father's attempt to assume and metaphorically transcend his abject position through an idealized discourse of peasant values or *jibarismo*, it is the mother's voice—pragmatic, skeptical, metonymic—that drives the protagonists' journey into American society, their resources for negotiating the imposed routes of assimilation into American culture, and the novels' rhetorical styles.

In this sense the novels' opening scenes are both literally and literarily instructive. Contrasting the father's and mother's accounts of the family patriarch's death that opens and closes his novel, Rivera introduces the mother's preferred rhetorical tactic of grotesque degradation in resisting the father's attempt to universalize paternal abjection through representational synecdoche. This is the tactic that will later become the son's, and the novel's, primary rhetorical tool in negotiating the process of assimilation by degrading and carnivalizing it, and refusing thus to fully identify with its goals (see for example the chapter titled "First Communion"):

Xavier F. Alegría starved himself dead when my father, Gerán, his third child and second son, was barely five. That was Papi's version, and my mother's. Papi said it had been a common occurrence all over Puerto Rico —all over the world, as a matter of fact. Mami, who claimed she knew little about the world, said sardonically that there had been nothing unusual in Abuelo Xavier's crash-diet death. She said that 1919, the year it happened, had been a good year for meeting the All Merciful, but not an exceptional one. "I could tell you stories, Santos," she told me, "that would make the little hairs on your *fundillo* stand straight out." (13)

Similarly in Santiago's memoir the mother's refusal to elevate metaphorically her abject *jibaro* home—as do the *criollista* poem "Claroscuro" by Luis Lloréns Torres, which introduces the book; Jack Delano's sepia-colored photograph on its cover; and the *jibaro* songs and poems associated with the father—constitutes the protagonist's first coming-of-age lesson. She will later put this lesson to unexpectedly effective use in dealing with the process of assimilation into American society. Parodying perhaps the metaphorically hyperbolic beginning of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as Hugo Rodríguez Vecchini has suggested (147), the mother's first painful lesson will be to warn the protagonist not to let herself be lured by the search for metaphorically abstracted deep meanings, but to beware and be aware of surfaces:

We came to Macún when I was four, to a rectangle of rippled metal sheets on stilts hovering in the middle of a circle of red dirt. Our home was a giant version of the lard cans used to haul water from the public fountain. Its windows and doors were also metal, and, as we stepped in, I touched the wall and burned my fingers.

"That'll teach you," Mami scolded. "Never touch a wall on the sunny side." (7)

And indeed, a wariness of the search for deep meanings in abjection would seem to be the mother's advice as she asks the protagonist to close the eyes of a dead child in a floating shack over the fetid waters of modernization's ultimate dumping ground, El Mangle (El Fanguito), in what is certainly the most brilliant episode in Santiago's memoir (142-49). Evoking José Luis González's classic tale, "En el fondo del caño hay un negrito" [At the Bottom of the Channel There is a Little Black Boy], Santiago rewrites here González's black Narcissus myth by forcing her protagonist to stare death in the face, to touch it, while refusing to identify with it.

To touch, to stare, to perform while deferring identification's metaphorical telos is the mother's singularly creative legacy to the novels' protagonists. Orpheus plays the lyre; Aeneas wields the phallic golden bough; the mother, unarmed, recommends moving along meaning's variegated surfaces in order to pass through death. The lesson is heeded both by male and female characters as they traverse the social invisibility of migration. At the end of the novels, as Rivera's would-be writer protagonist prepares for his flight back "home" to New York City, after attending his father's burial in Puerto Rico (and the symbolic burial of his *jíbaro* past as well), he pauses and lingers over misquoted fragments of his Anglo-American canonical literary education and puns on them, keeping thus the ultimate signified of his identification with this ostensibly assimilationist culture at bay:

"turned to bones, I should wish to be laid to rest.." Was that it? Somebody's "Brown Burial"? "Earned Burial"? Maybe "Bourne Aerial.." Whatever, something silly, count on it. I'd brood about it on the flight back home. (299)

And Santiago's younger would-be memorialist self emerges from social invisibility toward the end of her book by literally performing her integration into American society as if it were an audition for New York City's famed High School of Performing Arts. By thus performing Americanness here, Santiago assumes the prescribed route to assimilation of the contemporary commercially successful "feminist" ethnic memoir (Sánchez González 158-9) while refusing to fully identify with it:

"Do you know what a pantomime is?" the woman asked. I nodded. "You and Bonnie are sisters decorating a Christmas tree."
[...] My family had never had a Christmas tree, but I remembered how once I had helped Papi wind colored lights around the eggplant bush that divided our land from Doña Ana's. We started at the bottom and wound the wire with tiny red bulbs around and around until we ran out; then Papi plugged another cord to it and we kept going until the branches hung heavy with light and the bush looked like it was on fire.
Before long I had forgotten where I was, and that the tree didn't exist and Bonnie was not my sister. She pretended to hand me a very delicate ball, and just before I took it, she made like it fell to the ground and shattered. I was petrified that Mami would come in and yell at us for breaking her favorite decoration. Just as I began to pick up the tiny fragments of nonexistent crystal, a voice broke in. "Thank you." (265-66)

In treating assimilation as pure performance, or as what Diana Fuss, following Fanon, has called mimicry without identification—or, better yet, mimicry that *exceeds* identification's logic (28)—both Rivera and Santiago may be said not only to critique the obligatory routes of assimilation but, more importantly, to expand on them. For in both of these stories—Christmas stories, stories of birth and rebirth—the metonymic displacement recommended by the mother as a survival strategy also clears the way for other temporalities and genealogies—temporalities and genealogies where such premodern legacies as the protagonists' paternal *jíbaro* past may now return deterritorialized, or as in the end of *Family Installments*, “Bourne Aerial” or aerial born (299).

Contemporary Puerto Rican cultural critics have sought to locate Puerto Rican agency, or empowerment, by defining it against the hegemonic territorial demands of colonialist or nationalist discourses. Yet, as Ramos Otero has so brilliantly reminded us in “Vivir del cuento,” the Spanish-American War of 1898 not only transformed Puerto Rico into a colonial territory of the United States; it also signaled the beginning of a violent process of globalized modernity that established certain migratory routes, dispersing and channeling populations along specifically racialized axes. One hundred years later Puerto Ricans continue to travel along these colonial routes, and their migratory colonial condition has not only not been settled, it has been generalized, giving Puerto Ricans the dubious distinction, in our present global economy, of anticipating contemporary transnational migratory patterns and flows.

It is from the context of this deterritorialized “modern colonialism” whose power resides between sites, as a master translator—and not from its territorial sort—that contemporary Puerto Rican cultural practices in the United States speak to us. For U.S. Puerto Rican cultural practices have not only not accepted passively the obligatory routes of colonial travel, nor reveled in the deterritorialized nomadism of unobstructed movement, nor retreated to the homey comforts of a paralyzing nostalgia. They have answered travel with travel, hegemonic routes with counterhegemonic moves. Seeking to redirect, retard, and expand modern colonialism's imposed translations and translocations, they have armed themselves, or in that suggestive Puerto Rican Spanish verbal expression in which resistance is a form of acting out, the body the ultimate weapon: *se ban armao*. Turning and pausing, or skipping a beat, or moving willfully along meaning's variegated surface, Puerto Rican cultural practices in the United States have not only sought to preserve specific idioms, they have also sought to extend Puerto Ricans' agency and joy—a legacy to pass on and to enrich.

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“Colonial Figures in Motion: Globalization and Translocality in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature in the United States,”
CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies XIV, 2 (2002): 5-24. “Lecciones de cubanÃa: Identidad nacional y errancia sexual en Senel Paz, MartÃ y Lezama,” in Enrico Mario SantÃ, ed., Cuban Studies 29 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1999), 129-54, and Revista de crÃtica cultural 17 (noviembre 1998): 58-67. “What a Tangled Web!: Masculinidad, abyecciÃn y la fundaciÃn de la literatura puertorriqueÃa de los Estados Unidos,” Revista de CrÃtica Literaria Lati Post-Colonial Literature in English. Introduction: Postcolonial literature refers to writing from regions of the world that were once colonies of European powers. The term refers to a very broad swath of writing in many languages, but the emphasis in this class (in an English department) is on writing in English. Many postcolonial writers choose to write in the languages of the former colonial power (i.e., English, French, Spanish, Portuguese), though this can be a source of serious disagreement. Moreover, much postcolonial writing is highly sensitive to how language is used, and by whom. Suleri has explicitly stated that her novel covers a history as it is a function of post-colonialism: “There is a post colonial inextricability between Indian history and the characters. This essay situates contemporary Puerto Rican literature in the United States in the space between two discursive implosions: the implosion of the 1970s attempt to found U.S. Puerto Rican literature by returning to a privileged Island origin, and the implosion of the utopian goal of establishing an independently controlled community (in the U.S.) or a sovereign nation (in. [Show full abstract] recent proposals on Puerto Rican cultural politics, most notably Grosfoguel, NegrÃn-Muntaner, and Georas' s "Beyond Nationalist and Colonialist Discourses: The Jaiba Politics of the Puerto Rican Ethno-Nation" in Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism, the essay argues for this border condition as a space of possibilities. Colonial figures in motion: Globalization and Translocality in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature in the United States. Arnaldo Cruz Malave. Centro Journal, 2002. The Role of Register in Spanish-English Code Switching in Prose. Laura Callahan. Bilingual Review, 2003. Puerto Rican Negro: Defining Race in Piri Thomas’s Down These Mean Streets. Marta Caminero Santagelo. Melus, JSTOR, 2004. Because England eventually took possession of the North American colonies, the best-known and most-anthologized colonial literature is English. As American minority literature continues to flower in the 20th century and American life becomes increasingly multicultural, scholars are rediscovering the importance of the continent’s mixed ethnic heritage. Although the story of literature now turns to the English accounts, it is important to recognize its richly cosmopolitan beginnings. When European settlers set foot in North America for the first time, they started a historical process that would