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López Adorno, Pedro

Making the decolonized visible: Puerto Rican poetry of the last four decades

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1960—

1970—


1980—

1990—

## During the last four decades

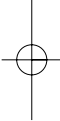
of the 20th century the poetry of island and mainland Puerto Ricans continued expanding its ideological and aesthetic strength. Most, if not all, of the poets fortunate enough to be published realized that their work had inherited a decolonized poetic tradition<sup>2</sup> that can be traced to 19th-century 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

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>



ne 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,

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

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, Angelamaría 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

(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 trapequista.  
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:

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 *Reintegro* (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



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 Vélaz (1905–1992). Other major exponents of the Atalayista aesthetic

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*

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