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Literature of Exhaustion: The Comic, Decolonial Politics and Healing in Pedro Pietri’s Puerto Rican Obituary

by

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Abstract

The critical reflections of this project will be divided into two sections. The first will be a critical analysis of Pedro Pietri’s *Puerto Rican Obituary*, which explores the conflict of resistance toward assimilation into the dominant culture of the United States that many immigrants experience. The second portion of my critical writing will focus on the therapeutic function Pietri’s expressive writing. A brief essay of my poetics, *Poetics of Struggle and Healing*, will follow the critical portion. The final portion will be my creative project titled *Minor Misfortunes*.

In a state of cultural discontinuity common to individuals who immigrate to the United States, does writing function as a source of linguistic and material liberation from the crisis of psychological trauma and material domination? How does the structure of my writing manifest my attempts at healing? This project is a continuation of these preoccupations, with a specific focus on Pedro Pietri as a representative of Latino poetics in the U.S., and my poetry, the creative project titled *Minor Misfortunes*, as a personal interjection into the discourse. Pietri’s poetics will be shown to deal precisely with the theorizing of power and identity, and writing as a healing process.

The second portion of my critical reflection will focus on the therapeutic function of writing. The assertions that will structure and link the work of Pietri, and my own writing are as follows: a) writing produces a space of linguistic liberation, which provides
refuge against material and metaphysical alienation, b) writing infused with urgent and
defiant energy serves a therapeutic function by activating instincts of self preservation
and self defense, c) writing offers relief from the affliction of psychic oppression, which
is a subtle and effective form of subjugation.

We will employ several key concepts and insights from Frantz Fanon’s *Black
Skin, White Masks*, as a theoretical foundation for the impact of colonization on the body
and psyche of the colonized, and we will also employ key terms and concepts from Henri
Bergson’s classic study of the comic, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic* to
analyze how Pietri’s humor exhausts these themes.
It seems appropriate that poverty, hardship, suffering and death would produce poetry that captures the exhaustion of the body, the spirit, and that critiques the dehumanizing conditions and social structure that produce that exhaustion. What is surprising to find is that this poetry can also revitalize the spirits of those who have died, and who still live in such conditions. However, this is the case with Pedro Pietri’s *Puerto Rican Obituary*.

In this early work, the Nuyorican poet, playwright and founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café scrutinizes the conditions encountered by the Puerto Rican immigrants in New York City who were absorbed into the permanent underclass by the social structure of the United States, as well as, the attitudes of those Puerto Ricans toward those conditions. Pietri’s scrutiny exposes and exhausts many facets of the colonizer/colonized relationship between the United States and the immigrant Puerto Rican community. Nevertheless, Pietri’s poetics, his employment of humor in particular, also aim toward a spiritual replenishment and renewal that is necessary for the survival of the individuals and the community afflicted with this form of colonization. This aspect of his writing reveals a concern with achieving a form of psychic healing at an individual and communal level (Algarin 92).

As an immigrant, a poet and performer in New York City, when I had my first literary encounter with Pietri’s *Puerto Rican Obituary* I instantly felt a kinship because I found many points of intersection between his work and my own. For example, Pietri’s employment of humor, reliance on oral tradition, irreverence, his use of all language at his disposal in order to form new creative patterns, his emotionally charged critique of capitalism, and his often politically charged confrontational tone were aspects of literary
production that I could identify in my own poetics. This realization both encouraged me and diminished my sense of literary and personal alienation.

My initial reading of *Puerto Rican Obituary* was that Pietri meshes oral tradition, literary realism, literary conventions and humor to emphasize the social function of literature (productive social critique) in order to engage in decolonial politics. What emerges in and through his writing is an oppositional discourse to the logic and material strategies of the dominant capitalist social structure that dehumanizes, exploits the labor, and perpetuates the oppressive living conditions of the Puerto Rican community in New York City in particular. Pietri’s attempt to accurately depict the exhaustion of the productive and life energies of his Puerto Rican community is a critical point of intersection with other immigrant Latinos/as. By witnessing and living through similar experiences ourselves we identify with the Puerto Rican experience in New York City.

As exhausting and depleting as life can be for Latino immigrants both physically and spiritually, it is surprisingly invigorating to see our experiences and conditions as they are represented in Pietri’s *Puerto Rican Obituary*. This was a bit of a mystery, since as Israel Reyes comments of Pietri’s work in *Humor and the Eccentric Text in Puerto Rican Literature*, “Cruelty, injustice and death are no laughing matters (112).” However, upon closer analysis of the laughter evoked by the text we perceive that Pietri’s idiosyncratic employment of humor to exhaust very serious and often depressing themes and conditions achieves, by contrast, an uplifting or invigorating effect on his readers/listeners. In other words, by combining humor with social critique the social corrective or social/spiritual function of laughter emerges (Bergson 3). Through these poetics Pietri is able to touch on or expose the human will to live in spite of absurd and
dehumanizing conditions, and to expose the human will’s desire to liberate itself from those harsh and oppressive conditions. Thereby, Pietri’s writing assists in diminishing one’s sense of alienation from our current cultural/historical context as well as from the trauma caused by our geographical dislocation. In the final portion of this critical investigation we will explore the elements of renewal or the restorative power of the text, which we will demonstrate is a complementary function and ultimately the love driven function of the Pietri’s work.

To state it concisely, Puerto Rican Obituary will be the primary focus of this critical part of my thesis project because as poetics of exhaustion it is ideal for an examination of the text/speech as social/literary critique, and in its ability to replenish spiritual vitality we will posit it as a type of poetics necessary to achieve psychic healing at an individual and communal level. The overarching goal of this investigation is to contextualize and reinforce similar preoccupations in my own poetics, which will be offered in the creative project of this thesis.

Exhaustion is one of the central terms in this investigation because it bridges the material and literary concerns of the literature under critical analysis with the personal and social affective impact of the literature. In other words, the term exhaustion will apply to Pietri’s critique of the material conditions lived by his characters in “Puerto Rican Obituary,” and will apply to the physical and psychological impact of those conditions, as well as to the decolonizing struggle of the Puerto Rican community, which Pietri engages in his life and his art. In this function the term contributes to a poetics that links the way in which the Puerto Rican community, like other immigrant communities, is exhausted via absorption into the dominant culture of the United States.
We will demonstrate through a close reading of the first and central poem in the book, “Puerto Rican Obituary,” how the nature of the absorption of Pietri’s Puerto Rican characters into the dominant culture is a hostile consumption of Pietri’s subjects by the capitalist social structure rather than a friendly or benign encounter between cultures. In order to support this contention, we will by exploring how exhaustion functions as a critique of the colonial capitalist social structure and its physical and psychological effects on Pietri’s Puerto Rican subjects in “Puerto Rican Obituary.” We will employ several key concepts and insights from Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks as a theoretical foundation for this investigation of how exhaustion impacts both the body and psyche of the subjects in Pietri’s poems.

We will also employ key terms and concepts from Henri Bergson’s classic study of the comic, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic to analyze how Pietri’s humor exhausts and transcends the conventional approach of literary realism that is expected in art that is rooted in personal as well as cultural struggles with poverty, oppression, physical and spiritual depletion and death.

Fanon makes the observation in Black Skin White Masks that, “for a man whose only weapon is reason there is nothing more neurotic than contact with unreason (188).” If the “contact with unreason” in this statement is read as the Puerto Rican community’s encounter with New York City’s absurd pace and the absurd demands that the capitalist social structure makes on its new cheap labor force (unreasonable hours, unreasonable weather, unreasonable short amounts of leisure), which would contrast the pace and demands made on the labor force on the island, we are then provided with an opening for understanding the physical debility and some of the behaviors, anxieties and attitudes of
Pietri’s subjects in the poem.

In the opening stanza of “Puerto Rican Obituary,” the laborious existence of Puerto Ricans in New York City is conveyed and stressed by the mechanized repetition of “They worked” (1) six times. Their work ethic is captured in their punctuality, and never taking sick or personal days. It turns out that they end up working “ten days a week” (1) while getting “paid for five” (1). This is a common type of exploitation of immigrant workers whose lack of proficiency in English, for example, limits their employment opportunities. Employers often take advantage of this vulnerability to further exploit their labor potential in order to make a profit, essentially forcing the workers to choose between working unreasonable shifts and hours or face unemployment. Pietri’s emphasis on the monotony of work puts to view how the capitalist social structure swallows up Puerto Ricans. Pietri also draws our attention to their response or attitude toward their conditions. Their maladaptive behavior is that they appear to be willing participants in the exploitation of their own labor by remaining silent “when they were insulted” (1) and by the aversion to striking “without permission” (1). By the end of this opening stanza we perceive that their exhausting undignified deaths, with no savings, penniless and in debt is a consequence of the exploitation of their labor, “They died broke/ They died owing/ They died never knowing/ what the front entrance/ of the first national city bank looks like” (1).

The second stanza reveals the names of the submissive subjects, “Juan/ Miguel/ Milagros/ Olga/ Manuel” (1). Rather than introducing his characters by their proper names in the first stanza, Pietri employs the generic plural pronoun “They.” This initial linguistic subjugation of their proper names in the language of the dominant culture
suggests the state of subjugation that the subjects occupy in their new environment. The use of commonplace names reveals the characters’ archetypal assignation. This notion is further supported by Pietri’s conflation of time. Their death, which also comes off as commonplace, “All died yesterday today/and will die again tomorrow” (1-2), is presented in a temporal pattern (past, present and future) that makes these notions of time indistinguishable from each other. Not only is Pietri’s cast given common names that equate to the archetype “everyman,” but they also function as recurring symbols in the poem that embody fundamental characteristics, such as passivity and mental slumber. This reinforces the archetypal function of the subjects, as well as, exhausts the physicality of death, which is the ultimate result of their condition.

Their legacy, mold in the archetypal sense, we learn is the continuation of economic oppression for their children, as their debts are passed on to the next generation, “passing their bill collectors/on to the next of kin” (2). Generations of disenfranchised Puerto Ricans like Pietri’s characters in the past, present and future share a single identity. This exposes the perpetuation of the permanent underclass that colonial capitalism requires and exhausts for its own self-interests, and establishes the context of class struggle that Puerto Ricans face. By shedding light on the permanent underclass Pietri also reveals the existence of a permanent ruling class. Here, Pietri engages in decolonial politics by presenting certain members of the Puerto Rican community (his subjects in the poem) as having been absorbed into this permanent underclass within the dominant culture of the United States as a result of the Puerto Rican Diaspora.

Pietri’s revision of the Puerto Rican work ethic in the opening stanza counteracts some of the colonial attempts to endow Puerto Ricans with inherent negative qualities, a
strategy of dehumanization that has been similarly employed by the dominant social structure to justify its exploitation of, for example, African Americans, Native Americans and in this case Puerto Ricans. Pietri’s representation attempts to counteract capitalist colonial logic that has (mis)represented these members of the Puerto Rican community as stereotypically lazy opportunists. As we will see later on however, for Pietri, the exhaustive death of his characters is not in vain, as he struggles to restore them as vital symbols for the survival of the community.

In response to the unforgiving conditions they encounter in New York City, some Puerto Ricans (and immigrant Latinos in general) develop an exaggerated estimation of the geographical and cultural traits of their homeland by consciously or unconsciously repressing the conditions that forced them out in the first place. The allusion to the biblical utopia, “All died/waiting for the garden of eden/ to open up again/ under a new management” (2), invokes the Puerto Rican utopia that Puerto Ricans chose to leave in search of better economic opportunities. However, it appears that for Pietri the comparison of Puerto Rico to the mythological utopia of religious doctrine is both a way of coping with the harsh economic conditions, as well as, an ironic cultural metaphor, distorted view of their geographical roots, which is why they die waiting for its grand reopening. It offers hope and escape from the physical and psychological suffering (Reyes 113), and by helping to endure these conditions it also functions as a flawed/defective response to colonization. This shared trait in Pietri’s characters is flawed/defective because its mechanical nature recalls the actions of a machine in a human, which is always a form of inalertness or absentmindedness (Bergson 6).

For many Latino immigrants who have ended up in New York City and can only
afford to live in its impoverished neighborhoods, the grass is not greener. When we consider this metaphor more closely, beyond its function as a necessary fantasy and coping mechanism, we detect an implicit admission of some sort of guilt. In the biblical text it was disobedience that led to the expulsion of the first human archetypes from paradise. Pietri’s characters can be seen then as accepting some or perhaps all of the blame for their current conditions, a deserved punishment for their ambition, leaving the island in search of better economic opportunities. Redemption for Puerto Ricans would then be achieved by returning (retiring) to Puerto Rico, where the body can be laid to rest. For many Puerto Ricans and Latinos though, death in New York precedes retirement, and the return is often achieved only posthumously.

Ironically, as a former Spanish colony and now a state in limbo, a commonwealth of the United States, Puerto Rico was not and is not the Garden of Eden, only perhaps symbolically. It is also unlikely that Puerto Rico will escape from the clutches of the United States, not peacefully at least. The irony of this reference then emerges; this fantasy, while it provides hope in enduring the inhumane conditions of capitalist colonialism in New York City, it becomes a flaw or defect in the minds and attitudes of the Puerto Rican community, who patiently wait like Narcissus for his own reflection.

We also note that here, Pietri begins to employ a comic device that evokes humor, inversions (Bergson 35). He inverts the Garden of Eden (lower casing it on the page), a symbol of hope, and equates it with something not unlike an amusement park where something reprehensible has taken place and must therefore shut down, but it will reopen once a more efficient or more responsible management company takes over. What
emerges as a result of this inversion is the recreation of the encounter between the natives and the colonizer.

The comic is the inversion, and laughter is achieved by literalizing the metaphor, hope that kills and the Utopia that is Under Reconstruction, but Coming Soon, and Under New Management. The humor serves as the social corrective in that it shames those Puerto Ricans afflicted with the same mental attitude of rigidity and inattentiveness (Bergson 27-28); it is fine to bear these miserable conditions because one day I will return to my true homeland, even if I have to sacrifice my entire life. The comic recalls the automatism (resemblance of the characters’ behavior to a machine) in those members of the community who rely on this mythical geographical fantasy or divine intervention to ease their existential oppression rather than taking action to change their conditions (Bergson 26-26). This use of humor also exposes, however briefly, the ideological complicity in oppressing between religion and the larger colonial capitalist social structure.

Pietri exhausts the American Dream by initially exposing it as a trap:

All died
dreaming about America
waking them up in the middle of the night
screaming: Mira Mira
your name is on the winning lottery ticket
for one hundred thousand dollars (2)

The comparison between the American Dream and a lottery reminds the listener/reader that because of the laws of probabilities the odds are never in one’s favor when one gambles on the lottery and because the outcome of lotteries has not escaped the contamination of greed and corruption, meaning that lotteries are always profitable
primarily for their operators and for the state. We are also reminded that, rather than fortune, one is more likely to partake in one’s own misfortune by misspending our meager earned salaries on a wager. Pietri reinscribes the American Dream as a false promise, which lures Puerto Ricans from colonial capitalism on the mainland only to recolonize them in New York.

This second stanza ends with the misdirected anger of the cast of subjects (an attitude that Pietri critiques, undermines and exhausts throughout the poem) turning on the communal merchants over the poor quality of food that is available for consumption in their poverty stricken neighborhood, “All died/ hating the grocery stores/ that sold them make-believe steak/ and bullet-proof rice and beans” (2). Here however, the accurate depiction of the material conditions is overshadowed by the surreal images of “make-believe steak” (2), and “bullet proof rice and beans” (2). The image captures the perversion/corruption of the organic production of food, and brings to mind our contemporary society’s ambivalence toward GMOs. The final line repeats/exhausts the three states of being interacting in the stanza, “All died waiting dreaming and hating” (2): waiting (an exhausted and exhausting state of mind and body), dreaming (both repressed psychic desire and mental defect resulting from deferment of desire), and hating (the emotional and physical response to subjugation).

Religious practice is generally accepted as a simple matter of choice, although in our society there is still social pressure applied to those who choose no religion. Nevertheless, people engage in religious practice “voluntarily,” and utilize it as a spiritual guide that promotes a peaceful existence and a rewarding afterlife. In many impoverished and well off Latino communities the traditional function of religion is as an institution
that provides a social or communal “safe” space to deflect alienation, and that provides occasional economic assistance for its members most in need. Admittedly, for many organized religion is their main source of spiritual guidance, and promotes healthy social behavior.

Pietri however, indicts organized religion as one of the dominant culture’s social institutions complicit in oppressing Puerto Ricans. He suggests a parallel between religious fanaticism and oppressive working conditions when he reproaches his cast, “Who never took a coffee break / from the ten commandments / to KILL KILL KILL / the landlords of their cracked skulls” (2). The absurdity of the break conjures up the routine of the workday and contrasts with religious practice. The stressed “to Kill KILL KILL” (2), is a belated, real time and foreboding reproach of the dead Puerto Ricans in the poem and in the community who over estimate the practicality of religious ideology, which encourages and promotes docile behavior. The “landlords of their cracked skulls” (2), a term associated with the economy, equates religious leaders with the ruling class, reinforcing the subtext of class struggle by reminding us of the owner/worker, master/slave, and colonizer/colonized dichotomies. Thus religion is revealed as an accomplice, a colonial capitalist tool of oppression that betrays the interests of those engaged in its fanatical practice by thwarting the survival instinct in Puerto Ricans and conditioning passivity in them in its place, resulting in impotence when their survival is threatened by the exploitation of their labor from the capitalist structure.

The humor and laughter evoked in these lines serve to intimidate and thereby correct in the living Puerto Ricans the attitudes (mental slumber and absentmindedness) that allow religious fanaticism to repress their survival instinct, a flaw that masks from
them how religion assists the colonial social structure by deactivating or dulling their instinct for self preservation (Bergson 16). This suggests that we decode the lines, “Dead Puerto Ricans/ Who never knew they were Puerto Ricans” (2), as a consequence of this dulling, and implies that a living and conscious Puerto Rican would not be so entirely invested in organized religious institutions as to remain passive and turn the other cheek as his/her life is used up. We observe here that Pietri employs humor as a weapon to decolonize the individual and the community.

Furthermore, Pietri reminds the living of an inherent spirituality (the notion that the mind and body are inherently sacred and must be respected) in their being by offering the alternative that they “communicate with their latino souls” (2). By critiquing his characters’ response to these oppressive conditions he points out their impotence against their oppressors, linking the maladaptive behavior to religious conditioning. Pietri’s response suggests that there is already an inherent morality resulting from simply being human, a sense of right and wrong, which rather than informing his cast’s decisions has been rendered lame by religious drilling. In contrast to organized religion, secular spirituality emerges as a more adequate guide for a response to the dehumanizing affront from the capitalist social structure.

The inhumane conditions suffered by the Puerto Rican archetypes are emphasized by the absurd comparison between themselves and the rodents, “where the mice live like millionaires/ and the people do not live at all” (3). The rodents are the millionaires and the scavenging, disease-transmitting pests are the humans. Once again, the humor is achieved through inversion and also transposition (Bergson 29). Pietri plays on the common misconception that many Latin Americans have of life in the United States, that
the streets are paved with gold. The inversion, the comic, is that the rodents not the humans enjoy the millionaire lifestyle. As in the previous stanza, where the subjects were not conscious of their Puerto Rican identity, the lack of consciousness that they are not alive merits ridicule, and laughter is the social corrective.

Pietri then exposes the institutional social structures that assist in conditioning the state of limbo (lack of social and economic progress within the dominant social structure) in his cast of subjects, and which exist outside of the poem. The lines, “Miguel/died waiting for the welfare check/to come and go and come again” (3), open to view the false charity welfare programs as an institutional tool for the perpetuation of the permanent underclass. The demeaning employment opportunities afforded to Puerto Ricans upon their arrival in New York are linked to the depletion of their life energies, “Olga/died waiting for a five dollar raise” (3), and shown to assist in perpetuating the exhaustion of Puerto Ricans on a generational level, “Milagros/died waiting for her ten children/to grow up and work/so she could quit working” (3), The glass ceiling that they encountered in the labor market is supported by the ideological discriminatory practices of the colonial administrative class, “Manuel/died waiting for his supervisor to drop dead/so he could get a promotion” (3).

We can glean from Pietri’s critique of the mental state of waiting that it is an inadequate response to ideological, institutional and material oppression. The alternative would be to act, to resist, since waiting depletes the body and mind of its vitality and ultimately proves fatal (Fanon 100). The rigidity or inelasticity of his characters’ bodies and minds is again attributed to their material conditions, which so thoroughly exploit Puerto Ricans in their attempts to meet their most basic needs that living is rendered
mechanical.

In death, as in life, the dead Puerto Rican archetypes and those that are dead yet living in the community are disadvantageously positioned in relation to the means of production. By juxtaposing the burden and indignities of death on the corpse with the burden of death on its loved ones Pietri reminds us that in a capitalist social structure life and death are economic conditions:

- Is very expensive
- Is very expensive
- But they understand
- Their parents understood
- Is a long non-profit ride
- from Spanish Harlem
to long island cemetery (3)

The ritualistic tradition of paying the dead their due respect is belabored by the travel time of transportation experienced by the loved ones of the deceased, and as in life, the dead suffer further indignities by having their flowers stolen, “and the flowers/ that will be stolen” (3) Furthermore, the “non-profit ride” (3), a term associated with the economy, puns on the driving force and ambition of capitalism, profit.

One of Pietri’s poetic techniques, anaphora, becomes apparent in the repetition of the cast of subjects and the conflation of time within the poem, and achieves a religious prayer-like chant at this point. It casts a spell on the reader/listener inducing a dream-like state that allows the poem to expose the absurdity of the unconscious trauma experienced by the subject of colonization. This psychological impact of diasporic trauma, as Fanon demonstrates in Black Skin, White Masks, is a self-negation of the subject’s identity as a unified self, the result of the encounter or arrival of the colonizer (97). Pietri is aware of this impact, “All died yesterday today/ and will die again tomorrow/ Dreaming/
Dreaming about queens/ Clean-cut lily-white neighborhood/ Puerto Ricanless scene” (4), and evokes humor in this most unexpected place.

Pietri’s idiosyncratic humor then aims to counter act/correct (decolonize) the mind by exposing their compromised human dignity and pride in order to restore it, and by ridiculing the absurdity in the psychic and physical desire of his archetypes to be accepted/assimilated by a dominant culture that prefers them absent, dead. The quasi-suicide attempt implicit in this self-negation is echoed in the last four lines, which emphasize the perversion of the subject’s logic and the triumph of the dominant colonizing culture: “Proud to belong to a community/ of gringos who want them lynched/ Proud to be a long distance away/ from the sacred phrase: Que Pasa” (4).

The dreams of his archetypes reveal a deeper absurd grotesqueness, which is the perverse desire in the poem’s subjects to occupy the seat or role of the oppressor, or “to trade places with the oppressor” (Fanon 98). Dreaming about the perfect home with “black maids and latino janitors” (5) reveals perhaps what is most grotesque in this desire, and the most threatening aspect of assimilation for the subject; the hidden desire to oppress others of your own cultural background or in a similar condition in relation to the dominant culture. Pietri implicates the media, declaring that these hollow dreams are, “the after-effects/ of television programs/ about the ideal/ white american family” (4), indicting that industry as a tool for implanting and reinforcing this perverse colonial logic into the psyche of his cast of colonial subjects.

Now Pietri turns our attention to the corrupting colonial capitalist ideology/logic of materialistic consumerism. The cast of archetypes is also afflicted with this pervasive condition that infects the subjects of the colonial capitalist social structure. Juan, Miguel,
Milagros, Olga, and Manuel are exposed to ridicule for their automatism in response to the temptation of materialistic desire prompted by colonial capitalism. In spite of their poverty and in spite of their of the social disadvantages, they have been duped by and contaminated with the artificial craving for material goods. Here again, Pietri employs humor and the laughter is the social corrective, since they conform to rather than resist, as self-preservation, the colonial-capitalist culture’s logic that exploits their labor and conditions them to spend their meager earnings at the company store. The induced desire and competition in his subjects for material possessions is exposed as a tool of enslavement for those deprived by the social structure of the opportunity to compete fairly. The oppressed underclass thus becomes a type of surplus value for the ruling class that profits from both their labor and their consumerism.

They died dreaming, dreaming of material possessions (cars, government handouts, trips/vacations/ jewelry, and winning the lottery). This is an ironic twist since they are a material possession for the elite ruling class. In exhausting their dreams as repressed/unfulfilled desire for material goods, Pietri provides the insight that although the economic system employed by a society should serve their social needs, what takes place under colonial capitalism is an inversion, a perversion, of this order; the subjects in this society (the elite ruling class excluded) exist to serve the needs of the economic system. For these subjects who conform to this inverted logic, to dream in this sense is to die. Pietri reclams them by metaphorically animating them in the poem as a way to combat colonization.

Pietri further develops this notion in through the lines, “They all died/ like a hero sandwich/ dies in the garment district/ at twelve o’clock in the afternoon” (5). The play
on the corpse as a cold cuts sandwich quickly devoured by the grinding capitalist teeth
“the garment district” (5), evokes witty humor and reveals Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga,
and Manuel’s banal existence in our necrophilic colonial-capitalist society, where even
the dead are efficiently consumed.

Under Pietri’s scrutiny even the liberal capitalists and their social safety nets are
implicated in institutionalized oppression. The implied degradation and disintegration of
the “social security number to ashes” (5) and “union dues to dust” (5) punctuate the
prayer-like spell cast upon us earlier, and remind us that neither religion nor social safety
nets like social security, which do not match the cost of living, and labor unions, who are
also complicit in the exploitation of labor by collecting dues and providing little in return,
can provide refuge or salvation from the colonial-capitalist social structure. By
scrutinizing the grass root supporters of the political Left as well as its social safety net
policies, Pietri expresses mistrust of the political elites, and perhaps suggests political
secularism as an alternative.

They knew
they were born to weep
and keep the morticians employed
as long as they pledge allegiance
to the flag that wants them destroyed
They saw their names listed
in the telephone directory of destruction
They were train to turn
the other cheek by newspapers
that mispelled mispronounced
and misunderstood their names
and celebrated when death came
and stole their final laundry ticket (5-6)

Pietri’s cast of subjects and the past, present and future generations of Puerto
Ricans like them function as symbols of the raw materials as well as the labor force in the capitalist mode of production, "They were born to weep/ and keep the morticians employed” (5). Pietri meshes the generations using the plural pronoun, so as a generation dies “Their” children replace them, just as “They” replaced “Their” parents before them. The depletion and consumption of Puerto Ricans from the permanent underclass is not just perfectly acceptable in colonial-capitalism, it is essential, since they are the recyclable raw materials for the funeral industry, a limb of capitalism. Pietri again subverts this logic by exposing its corruption of nature’s organic cycle of birth, growth, death and regeneration. Nature’s indifference toward humanity is impartial, and unbiased. Its cycle of life and death applies to all evenly. To be born Puerto Rican in New York in the context of the poem and into the capitalist social structure is to be born into the servitude of a system that exhausts and depletes the life and labor energies of the masses for the benefit of a few. To die is natural, even the members of the ruling elite die, but to be born dead and to live dead is not natural. It is absurd and grotesque.

The ruling class, the benefactors of capitalism, through the social structure promote capitalism as accessible and beneficial to all, and thereby free of manipulation and control of the few. Pietri’s cast of subjects, exploited and deprived of a dignified existence, represent the Puerto Ricans who only experience death and therefore, have fallen, are falling and will fall victims of the exploitative logic of this colonial-capitalist social structure, which demeans, dehumanizes and depletes its subjects, under the (dis)guise of the “natural” order of things. Again, Pietri implicates the news media represented by newspapers, which trained Puerto Ricans “to turn/ the other cheek” (6) and never even bothered to spell their names correctly. This institution is exposed as a
colonial weapon employed in the (mis)representation of Puerto Ricans.

The fact that “they were born dead/ and they died dead” (6) forebodes a grotesque outcome for those who do not resist assimilation and who are made in the mold of Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel; they will be still born. This compels a reiteration of an earlier observation with a slight revision; it is unnatural to be born dead to live dead and to die dead. Here Pietri punctuates the exhaustion of the body in the poem.

In this narrative poem, it is evident that Pietri borrows conventions normally associated with drama/theater to exhaust traditional notions of what is poetic. For example, Pietri stages conflicts that he and other Puerto Ricans face in order to expel the poisons and repair the damage that they produce. He also stages absurd scenes, like the following séance scene as a kind of comic relief to release some of the tensions that have been build up in the poem, much the way a playwright would. This dramatic technique exhausts the literary boundaries of what is considered poetic in a contemporary sense. The absurd humor in the scene is achieved through satire and parody, which function as critique and healing. Overall, the scene acquires a climactic effect within the structure of the poem.

Spiritualism in “Puerto Rican Obituary” stands in contrast to organized religion in that it is a cultural medium that transcends the boundaries of organized religion. Speaking to spirits is an aspect of Puerto Rican spiritualism that is practiced in spite of the fact that it is not condoned by organized religion and its various denominations. As parody, Pietri inserts himself into the poem and embodies the espiritista persona. This transformation allows the speaker of the poem to function as the spiritual vehicle that bridges the material world with spiritual consciousness. In a twist of irony, the poet offers his cast of
characters hope or ease from their suffering. Pietri’s parody here, serves to validate the social function of Puerto Rican spiritual traditions, which challenge the boundaries and hegemony of organized religion:

Is time
to visit sister lopez again
the number one healer
and fortune card dealer
in Spanish Harlem
She can communicate
with your late relatives
for a reasonable fee
Good news is guaranteed (6)

As satire (the social corrective) in this absurd and humorous séance scene, the “reasonable fee” that guarantees good news exposes the racket or commercial aspects of cultural spiritualism. The humor is achieved by reminding the reader/listener of the absentmindedness or inalertness of those who are duped by such transparently absurd scams of this sort. This element of spiritualism is revealed as fraud and as a close business partner of organized religion in repressing the subject’s survival instinct and working to protect the interests of the capitalist ruling class.

Furthermore, Pietri is not done exhausting the presence/non-presence of his cast just yet. As the refrain “Rise Table Rise Table/ death is not dumb and disable” (7) suggests, the conjuring of spirits of the dead serves a purpose; deaths speaks and is not “disable,” which implies capable of movement and assistance. The absurdity contaminates the listener/reader who may be prompted to ask, how is it that the spirits of the dead, that death, can speak and assist the living? The answer is obviously not the absent/non-response we find in the poem. That, silence, is an adequate response to the cynical pleas of the living relatives of Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel.
occupying the landscape of the poem. Silence is adequate because they share the same absentmindedness, reliance on the lottery, they share the same reprehensible flaw or defect that merits ridiculing, and will ultimately share the same fate, confinement to the void of the poem.

Pietri exhausts the fraud of commercial spiritualism as he does the fanatical adherence of organized religion. He repeats the mechanical inalrtness of the dead by exposing it in their relatives within the poem, and exhausts the boundaries of the poem by contaminating the reader/listener with the absurd scenario it contains. According to Bergson, repetition of scenes is also a comedic device employed in the theater (21-23). The comic is the mechanical supplication for the “correct number to play” (7), which we laugh at, searching for it in ourselves in order to correct. Thus we arrive at the answer or (non)response. What the dead have to offer from beyond the material world is cultural memory, the opportunity to learn from their (mis)handling of their problems.

In other words, their contribution to the living is always, stay alert, by which the living can develop improved survival strategies, informed by the experiences of the fallen, the dead. “Puerto Rican Obituary” becomes a highly self-reflexive text in this sense. It preserves an exhaustive cultural memory of the predecessors (both materially and spiritually dead and alive, laughed out of the culture within the poem, potentially always present in the community). This inversion, whereby the living (inside and outside of the poem) are educated by the dead (within the poem) who can neither communicate or move, is juxtaposed with the absentminded supplications of the living (within the poem) for, of all things, “the correct number to play/ Let them know this right away/ Rise Table/ Rise Table/ death is not dumb and disable/ Now that your problems are over/ and
the world is off your shoulders/ help those who you left behind/ find financial peace of
mind” (7), another gambling opportunity or easy way out, another symptom of
exhaustion. This achieves an absurdly funny moment because it is also a variation or
echo of other comic inversions with which we are familiar: the child scolding the parent,
the drunk in a bar lecturing the judge (Bergson 27).

The familiar yet impersonal cast, Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel,
return and the pronouncement of their eternal death is repeated, “All died yesterday
today/ and will die again tomorrow/ Hating fighting and stealing” (7). This time their
bodies are consumed with physical and emotional aggression and violence, symptoms of
exhaustion and stress brought on in part by their material conditions. Their economic
exploitation at the hands of the IRS and its minions has cast them into a state of
desperation, but this does not escape Pietri’s scrutiny. Rather, Pietri juxtaposes Statism,
or the State as religion (because it must be adhered to religiously) and organized religion,
further exhausting these bedfellows:

Practicing a religion without a roof
The old testament
The new testament
according to the gospel
of the internal revenue
the judge and jury and executioner
protector and eternal bill collector (7)

Institutions of the federal government are seen as sticking their hands in the pockets of
those with the least, a violation in which class struggle resonates.

At times Pietri adopts a confrontational tone that appears to address the colonizer
directly (for the first time in the poem), “Learn how to say Como Esta Usted/ and you
will make a fortune/ They are dead/ They are dead” (7-8), which then transforms into a
mish-mash of reprimanding disgust, contempt and anger in the acknowledgement of how
easy the Spanish dominant Puerto Rican communities (and many Latino populations in
the U.S. in fact) are duped by cultural impersonations, and often welcome the colonizer
who disguises his exploitative intentions behind a few Spanish words. The barrage of
repetition and alliteration:

who keep them employed
as lavaplatos porters messenger boys
factory workers maids stock clerks
shipping clerks assistant mailroom
assistant, assistant assistant
to the assistant's assistant
assistant lavaplatos and automatic
artificial smiling doormen
for the lowest wages of the ages (8)

creates a rhythmic pattern intended to awaken not only the living (outside the poem) to
the obvious fact that progress is impeded by the institutionalized racism of the existing
social structure, but also the dead, who would be reanimated if they decolonized
themselves linguistically, “stop neglecting the art of their dialogue” (8), and stop trying
“to impress” (8) the capitalist profiteers. The irreverence toward the dominant culture in
Pietri’s tone evokes humor. The comic is the familiar inversion, as Pietri, representing the
colonized subject, questions and scorns the morality of the colonizer.

Nevertheless, what kind of dead people are these that can be reanimated? There
can be no doubt left at this point that Pietri is consciously breaking with the tradition of
realism, and reminding us that we are in the space of the poem, the literary not the literal.
Thus the boundary between the poem and the listener/reader is further blurred, a form of
exhaustion. So too, has Pietri blurred the boundary between the material and the
metaphysical in the poem. Pietri’s serious and playful, playful and serious handling of
humor and decolonial politics achieves the surreal effect of exhausting the boundary
between the external and internal reality of the poem as well as that of the listener/reader.
This self-reflexivity of the text, along with Pietri’s employment of humor serve to
exhaust traditional literary realism in decrying social injustice in decolonial struggles.

Further fracturing of the Puerto Rican identity in Pietri’s characters is evident in
that they died hating each other because they did not possess a material object or
personality/social trait that the others had. In other words, they were jealous of each
other. Pietri consolidates the shattered/disintegrated identity of his cast into a trope. This
poetic effect is due to Pietri’s reliance on the poetic technique anaphora, which functions
by repetition requiring the alternating play of presence and absence of what is being
repeated. Thus far, rather than sympathizing with them for failing to recognize that their
hatred, resentment, anger, and jealousy are symptoms of their disenfranchised condition
within the colonial-capitalist social structure, and for failing to recognize that these
emotions are misdirected toward each other, we perceive both humor and absurdity.
Laughter here demands self-reflexivity as the social corrective in order to expel or
exorcise the defects that Pietri exposes in Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel, and
which may be present in our own attitudes. The cast of subjects can now be cast off from
the community along with their defects, which threaten the survival of the community.
Yet, of course they remain, in the poem, in the community’s cultural memory.

We see here, “And now they are together/ in the main lobby of the void” (9), that
they are now in a surreal chasm, which apparently has a “main lobby,” and which I would
venture to say is the poem itself. Pietri juxtaposes silence and enclosure as a vice for the
dead, “Addicted to silence/ Off limits to the wind” (9), mimicking a (re)internment and
reinforcing the end result of the physical exhaustion that they endured. Pietri meshes religious rhetoric with liberal capitalist phraseology, “This is the groovy hereafter/ the protestant collection box/ was talking so loud and proud about” (9), to exhaust the reminder that the authority of organized religion’s rhetoric like that of liberal capitalist political movements is nothing more than hot air. The “groovy” is the sales pitch for commodification of the afterlife in our social structure, a trap not unlike the false promises of the American Dream that lure individuals, only this one instills passivity and conformity even in life threatening circumstances with the promise of eternal recompense.

All that remains, to complete the proper burial is paying our respects:

Here lies Juan
Here lies Miguel
Here lies Milagros
Here lies Olga
Here lies Manuel
who died yesterday today
and will die again tomorrow
Always broke
Always owing
Never knowing
that they are beautiful people
Never knowing
the geography of their complexion (9)

They are not in “long island cemetery” (9), nor in the “void” somewhere outside of the poem and beyond the planet. Instead, Pietri achieves the effect of casting them out (of the community and the poem) and resituating them in a literary chasm, embedded as a trope within the structure of poem. It is here in this ambivalent condition/state of being, neither here nor there, present and absent, dead and alive, and in all conflated times (past, present and future) that the poem expresses its deepest sympathy for Juan, Miguel, Milagros,
Olga, and Manuel, who still posses an inherent beauty that they were impeded from recognizing and experiencing by their response to the colonial-capitalist social structure.
This portion of my critical investigation will explore writing as potentially forming a parallel between liberation and healing in and through Pedro Pietri’s Puerto Rican Obituary, an area seldom visited, keeping in mind that liberation and healing apply both to the writer and the reader or intended audience. Such an exploration is necessary because, in spite of the many insights that various analysts have provided around traditional literary concerns, little has been offered on the connection between life threatening, traumatic experiences that activate instincts of self preservation and self defense, and expressive writing that is endowed with an urgent and defiant energy, such as Pietri’s Puerto Rican Obituary, which I contend is too often (mis)read as purely political.

Obvious references and considerations present in Puerto Rican Obituary reflect that the conflicts of assimilation and the resistance to assimilation into the dominant culture of the United States are valid preoccupations for many writers, including Pietri. In the context of cultural domination, which Puerto Ricans experience, assimilation is perceived as a threat, while liberation mirrors a state of healing from that particularly painful experience. These conflicts are as much biological, historical, ideological, and political as they are psychological. Pedro Pietri's poetry lends first hand insight into these issues, and can be said to function not only as art as self-reflection, but also as art that is therapeutic.

The title, Puerto Rican Obituary, suggests the author's central preoccupation, the struggle against death. However, it is not with the obvious mortality that all of humanity shares that he is concerned, but rather with the forms of death that concern those who are similarly living in the turbulence of assimilation; spiritual,
cultural and psychological. As a result of this confrontation his poetry attempts to exorcise his pain and death. The realist tendencies and the voice generally directed at his people in his poetry suggest that he perceives his struggle and that of his people to be one and the same. It is also consistent from a cultural perspective of resisting assimilation into a dominant culture that is fatally and viciously individualistic. The book is called *Puerto Rican Obituary* not *Pedro Pietri's Obituary* because in his cultural lens there is little distinction between the individual, the immediate and extended family and his/her community. The attempt to exorcise these evils then, implies, at once both from within himself as well as from within his community.

In the previous chapter we established how Pietri's poetry demonstrates how the cultural domination that Puerto Ricans experience is fatal. It is a cultural domination that is imposed, both on the island and on Puerto Ricans in the United States, in New York City in particular, but not exclusively. The relation between the domination over the island and the consequential migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. is also an issue for a different investigation, but, as we will see, one that Pietri has reflected upon. This is apparent in one of the recurring themes in his poetry, the American dream, which as he depicts has been, for himself and his community, an intolerably harsh reality.

In spite of their hard work and sacrifice, many Puerto Ricans have generally been unable to partake in the American Dream, by which we mean unable to become self determining participants in the economic structure, nor have Puerto Ricans benefitted from the social structure in very much the same
way that African Americans and Native Americans have been denied reaping the fruits of their labor, and unlike other immigrants who, although they may initially encounter similar hardships, are soon enough accommodated by the dominant culture.

Pietri is engaged in a psychological struggle and so are his people, as evidenced by his experiences and observations. Writing poetry is in part therapeutic and liberating for him. It is the medium that "accommodates urgent emotions arising from the sense of alienation or cultural dislocation which threatens" his mental health as well as that of other individuals, Puerto Ricans "facing the material and cultural domination of an Anglo environment (Grandjeat 42)."

Simultaneously, writing poetry is a surgical tool that approximates healing. In a mediating role, specifically by allowing the reenactment of certain conflicts within the text, symbols convert experience into an expressive pattern, the arrangement produced in the linguistic process functions as a vitalizing pulse or resonance. This is crucial, as we will see, since the contention here that Pietri's poetry is therapeutic is based on both its attempt to exorcise pain and death, and to synthesize and energize. The interaction of form and content aim to charge or recharge, energize and stir up emotions via mimesis, in order to provoke mental and physical action (Grandjeat 36).

The book opens with the poem "Puerto Rican Obituary," which adequately fits the entire collection. From its very beginning, as we established in the
previous portion of this critical investigation, we encounter individuals who were hard working, self sacrificing and shared a similar exploitation.

There is a clear suggestion here, “All died/ dreaming about america/ waking them up in the middle of the night/ screaming: Mira Mira/ your name is on the winning lottery ticket” (Pietri 2), that the dream is an illusion, one that it is exploitative. There is also grief for these exploited people who were turned into self-deluded individuals in a society where the most likely dream to come true for them would be hitting the number. Also, the association between the American Dream and death is not accidental. Pietri's use of repetition, Anaphora, not only in this passage, but rather throughout the poem, establishes, in one respect, a pattern that mimics the repetitive monotony of their lives, while also reinforcing the notion that it is not just these individuals but, literally, the generations that they represent that are being consumed in this fashion. The names also serve a similar function, since, although they may appear to personalize and humanize the subjects, they recur as a refrain throughout the poem, but they are also familiar and common names. This suggests that everyone may know individuals like each of these characters, and that they represent the commonplace, the familiar, the mold rather than the exception.

In "The Broken English Dream" this theme is echoed again: “A liquor store here and a liquor store/ everywhere you looked filled the polluted/ air with on the job training prostitutes/ pimps and winos and thieves and abortions/ white business store owners from clean-cut/ plush push-button neat neighborhoods” (13). These images offer a panoramic view of the urban conditions that many Puerto
Ricans in New York City experience. The conditions, which have impacted generations of Puerto Ricans have been there all along, all too real and has predictable results, as the undertaker reminds us, “Vote for me! Said the undertaker: I am/ the man with the solution to your problems” (13). Pietri's images suggest not that this is simply the usual immigrant experience, but that a deeper psychological struggle is taking place, one over cultural domination.

Ironically, although Puerto Ricans have full U.S. citizenship, however, their culture and language differs from the dominant U.S. culture. Pietri exposes how these very issues determine social status, employment and education among other things, as he informs us that Puerto Ricans came to the United States, “To graduate from school without an education/ To be drafted distorted and destroyed/ To work full time and still be unemployed” (13). This raises all sorts of questions around the issue of how different groups of immigrants are received and treated in our society, especially those who, to begin with, are citizens.

The following excerpts from "3170 Broadway" illustrate other dimensions of our present theme, the last that will be discussed in this essay. Initially, Pietri appears scornful and critical at the victories over the souls of his people claimed by assimilation: “we hide inside our back pockets/ we swallow obsolete calenders/ we discover snow in our sweat/ we get bored with so much darkness” (55), “everybody has a headache/ in these human file cabinets/ known as the housing projects” (56), while at the same time he reveals his consciousness that this is an intentional practice, “isolation is the name of the game/ you do not know/ your next door neighbor’s name” (56).
Once again, the "promiseland" turns out to be or "has become the garbage can" (59). However, the more significant revelation is what is at stake for Puerto Ricans in the process of assimilation, the capture of culture and dignity, which are then co-opted and destroyed. This echoes Pietri’s frustrations in “Broken English Dreams,” where the desire and labor towards self-improvement is confronted with hostility from the dominant culture, “To the united states we came/ To learn how to misspell our name/ To lose the definition of pride/ To have misfortune on our side” (13). A kind of cultural ambivalence is also evidenced here. We see in this instance how what would appear to be an affirmative moment, the opportunity to pursue economic progress, is inherently one of self-denial, “To wait for income tax returns/ and stay drunk and lose concern/ for the heart and soul of our race/ and the climate that produce our face” (14) bordering on and generating self-hatred and therefore, death. Pietri has seen his people succumb to this process, he is aware that it generates self-hatred, that it manipulates and eventually destroys, slowly and painfully.

In the poem "Suicide Note from a Cockroach in a Low Income Housing Project," Pietri confronts and addresses, though not in a completely direct fashion, his own lows and helplessness, which is compounded by the awareness of the inescapability from his dismal conditions. However, it is obvious from the title that he employs humor in order to endure the psychological burden: “I hate the word/ I am depress/ I am deprive/ I am deprave/ I am ready to propose to the grave/ Life is too complicated to proceed/ Fate is the only medicine I need to feel good” (24).
On one level, the voice in the passage is of someone consumed with helplessness, on the verge of a breakdown, calling out for help and literally at risk of suicide. Being conscious of his consciousness and of the overwhelming magnitude of the problem appears to multiply his sense of hopelessness, and to justify suicide as the only way to stop the suffering, “ Seriously speaking/ I am seriously seeking/ the exit to leave this eerie existence/ My resistance is low and will not grow” (24). On another level, the title informs us, or reminds us rather, that this is not the voice of a person but of a cockroach, a socially conscious one at that. Yet, there is obvious seriousness behind the humor intended in suggesting that these living conditions are so bad that even the roaches are suicidal. Nevertheless, it is after all, a sense of humor that allows people to cope when facing extremely unbearable conditions. The opposite, taking life too seriously, may quickly or ultimately lead to self-destruction. Therefore, the desperation, the hurt and suicidal inclinations are transferred/projected onto the roach, who by acting out allows the poet to release the poisons in his body and defer taking his own life. The roach's identification with the poor and its association with the culture of poverty, “I am dejected/ I am rejected/ I am neglected and disrespected” (24), its consciousness of its perpetuators and of suffering it effects, “ever since these damn liberals got elected/ and corrected nothing really important/ I am starving/ I am no good at robbing/ I have no ambitions/ These damn housing projects/ are responsible for my nervous condition,” (24) reveal that it is a metaphor for what the individual and human life have been reduced to in this sector of society.
"The Dead Uniform" and "To Whoever It May Concern" follow the psychological pain, endured in his struggle against cultural subjugation to its expression in its lethal form, as anger. Pietri's anger is undoubtedly in response to the hostility that confronts him, that which there is no getting around or avoiding, except through surrender.

The uniform is an obvious reference to the policing apparatus that, as Pietri perceives and critiques, not only operates in favor of the dominant culture but co-opts and manipulates individuals, turning them against their people, and thus themselves; “and you have forgotten/ how to pronounce your name/ ever since you became/ a so-called civil servant/ for the state sick you are/ using that night stick/ and using that gun/ on your brothers and sisters” (72). The anger toward the abuse of power is evident in these passages. This anger provoked by the enemy results in aggression aimed at it. Thus, on the one hand, we see again how writing is a self-serving channel of release of toxic emotions, which is a form of therapy that prevents mental, emotional and physical breakdowns. However, this release of emotion not only targets the enemy, “you who trained us to mop yr floor/ will be cremated today/ we will not cry when this happens” (79), but is also directed at the reader/listener. Simultaneously, there is an attempt here to shake up, awaken or jolt the audience by stirring up energy that will catapult them into action against mental oppression. Stirring up energy that would stir up even more energy is a method of resisting subjugation.

In "Beware of Signs" Pietri also employs a more direct method of
communication with his community by transforming the metaphorical sign from an abstract signifier into literal economic traps, “Beware! Be wise! Do not patronize/ Garbage is all that they are selling you/ Here today gone tomorrow merchandise” (19). Here, Pietri warns and alerts people to exploitative tactics of the dominant culture by exposing cultural impersonations, “AND IF NOSOTROS/ NO LO TENAYMOS/ WE LO INVENTAYMOS” (17), that manipulate the trust of poor individuals in order to lure them into bargains that turn out to be shams, resulting in debt and further economic dependency. Perhaps there is also a suggestion here to act collectively, strategically as opposed to individual patronizing.

Further indication of Pietri's refusal to succumb to resignation and death is his desire to reach, to awaken and to suggest in order to effect change. If the lines discussed previously touch on healing from the economic exploitation, in those that follow below, from "Puerto Rican Obituary," Pietri refers to external representations and religion as similar agents of oppression:

If only they had turned off the television and tune into their own imaginations

If only they had used the white supremacy bible for toilet paper purpose (10)

Aside from the obvious grief that is sensed, the recognition that their eyes had failed to see through an illusion marks a transformation. We recognize that
ultimately, optimism is driving his desire, positivity rather than a nihilistic tendency. The "if only" is not a reproach but a post of awareness, the recognition of a realization and a reminder that we must learn from past experiences and move forward. It also hints at an alternative future. Pietri even offers a glimpse at a state of mind that already exists, and which expands the spaces and pockets of resistance leading toward that future in the following: “Aquí tv dinners have no future/ Aquí the men and women/ admire desire and never get/ tired of each other” (11).

The best way then of characterizing Pietri's endurance or desire is love. Love is the most important attribute of Pietri's poetry, and too oft the one least recognized. Awakening action and change are some of Pietri’s transparent goals or intentions, provoked by that desire characterized as love. It is self love, love of his people and life that compels Pietri to write, to resist domination and to desire and strive for freedom. Love provides the affirmative optimism with which he engages in the spiritual, cultural and physical struggle against subjugation and death. This is Pietri’s most enduring message, and what is most often overlooked, thereby generating inadequate assessments that distort Pietri’s poetry and similar works and the laborers who produce them. Pain, anger or other negative emotions are not the thrust of what they have termed protest, political or social realist poetry. It is rather love, an affirmative emotion, which is the energy flowing through Pietri’s poetry.

Form in Pietri's poetry also contributes to the psychological battle
waged against conflict, further establishing writing's therapeutic function. The liberating power of language is employed in the task of liberating the mind in a number of ways. The text is not only a mediating agent where certain conflicts are reenacted, but also a weapon through and with which the psychological battle is fought; "1. the physical sense through sound and rhythm, 2. the explicitly symbolic by using clear metaphors, 3. the implicitly symbolic by constructing linguistic structures that become metaphors for life processes/relations" (Grandjeat 35).

The strong rhythmic patterns, rhyme, sound effects, tempo and alliteration in the passages discussed above endow the text with a kind of physical forcefulness. Sound and beat therefore, are a method of energizing and revitalizing the mind, his own and his reader's. Through the content of his poems Pietri has already demonstrated concern about mental oppression, which is a more subtle and effective form of subjugation. Thus, now we see how form is a capable way of combating it. The rhythmic patterns also resemble the momentum of rushing words, a method of stirring up energy by loading language with emotion (Grandjeat 36-42).

The oral quality, the use of bilingualism, everyday speech and "incorrect" or "vulgar" vernacular as poetic discourse demonstrate Pietri's strategic use of words as weapons. Their value lays not so much in their beauty but in their strength. This may appear to be anti-aesthetic, but to characterize his poetry as such is an obvious over-simplification of the relationship between the aesthetic and the political since it erects a false divider between them. This strategic use of
language is also a way of combating and neutralizing prejudicial notions of privileged discourses (Aparicio 147).

While groups in our society continue to be threatened and exploited, and struggle with the conflict of assimilation, Pietri's poetry, when seen in this context, represents literature as a potential site, not only, of engagement in the reflective process but also, and as importantly, in healing. Not only is it a vehicle for releasing poisons within the body, but it is also a system of symbols organized in a way that transforms experience into a creative pattern. Conflicts are staged within the text allowing language to impact and restructure reality. This can alter perceptions of reality as well as one's perception to act on it. The text then becomes a bank of metaphors, a site where images, actions, fiction and fact intertwine and interact in a process of mental and social change (Grandjeat 42).
Poetics of Struggle and Healing

Born and raised in Honduras until the age of seven, I certainly experienced culture shock upon arriving in the United States. Spanish is my first language, but I am more dominant and fluent in English, to the chagrin of many Spanish dominant individuals I have met, and to the surprise of many English dominant individuals. I mention this as an illustration of an instance that taught me to occupy a space of not belonging, a space where I neither take offense at the disappointment of individuals with whom I share a perceived cultural connection nor take offense at the patronizing attitude that my English is as “good” as a native speaker. Why did I refuse to react to this rejection/acceptance dichotomy in a way that would win the approval of these individuals?

My parents’ divorce in Honduras prompted my mother to leave the country with her three children. Unfortunately, she exhausted all her savings buying corrupt officials in order to gain the appropriate visas and documents to leave the country. We arrived in Florida and a month later in New York City to a life of dire poverty. For years we were at the mercy of the only relatives we had in New York, my maternal grandmother and maternal aunt. Although my mother slaved in factories, my grandmother benefitted from my mother’s meager income, so she did everything in her power to keep us living in one room of her four-bedroom apartment. When my mother finally saved enough money we moved to a one-room apartment. The four of us lived in a rat-infested room with one bed, a stand up shower, but it was better because our grandmother and aunt were not there.

The extreme and dehumanizing poverty that we endured was in sharp contrast to the upper-middle class standard of living we were accustomed to in Honduras. Some of the imagery and sentiments imprinted, embedded and still pulsing in my poetry have
roots in these experiences. I despaired at the gangs, the violence, the drugs, the crime, the broken families, the predators, the poverty masked by false cultural and national pride, and the sacrificing absent mother (all unfamiliar to me). Yet, although I understood that the people around me knew no other way of preserving their humanity, to accept these labels as legitimate determining factors of my identity, even as a survival strategy or coping mechanism, was not in my constitution. Instead, I needed to protect and preserve the internal identity that experienced the poverty, that feared the gangs, the violence, the drugs, that understood the false pride, and that in many ways transcended that harsh external reality; I needed to provide refuge for the raw materials, product and surplus of my identity perhaps.

Throughout my high school years the poverty stabilized. We lived in a four-room railroad apartment in a different part of the same poverty ridden neighborhood. I was ashamed to invite friends from my school to my neighborhood, and needless to say my home. I attended LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts in Manhattan, as a Theater major. My peers were mainly Caucasian kids, who seemed to be far better off economically than I was. A new and more complex wave of shame, guilt and resentment enveloped me. Whereas, in earlier grades I managed to remain “invisible,” or at least blend in within the Bushwick ghetto, the change of environment made me feel exposed. By comparison, my vocabulary was limited, and my lack of experiences (travelling, relationships, experimentation with drugs) made me feel quite inadequate. Once again, I experienced not belonging, not fitting in. My senses however, memorized all with which they came in contact.
It was around this time when I began to write poetry. When we lived with my
grandmother and later in our own one room place, she told us stories as we huddled in
bed. The profound sadness of those times is mixed with fondness for her efforts, and I
attribute the narrative quality of a portion of my writing to my mother’s story telling
abilities.

While pursuing my B.F.A. in Theater at Brooklyn College I also worked as a
professional actor, but the typecasting in the industry and at the college disillusioned me,
so I switched departments and pursued my initial passion for writing. I discovered other
voices like mine, the NuyoRican Poets Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Martín Espada
and Pedro Pietri in particular. Their voices have encouraged me to reach further in my
understanding of myself as an individual and a poet. I also absorbed obscure voices that
cought my interest whenever and wherever I came across them, and I merged them with
my favorites from my traditional studies, among them: Shakespeare, Keats, Byron,
Robert Browning, Walt Whitman, and my favorite Emily Dickinson. In Spanish, the
voices of Borges, Pablo Neruda, Ruben Dario, and Nicanor Parra resonated in me like
childhood memories. I heard myself in these authors though they may not be heard in me.

While in graduate school at Albany I took a course on Writing and Healing with
Professor Jeffrey Berman. I recall being extremely skeptical of the notion that writing has
a therapeutic function. I was so overwhelmed by my experiences in my rough Brooklyn
neighborhoods that I had no point of reference for healing and spiritual replenishment
through writing, although now that I look back, I realized that my poetry in many ways
kept me from indulging in nihilistic behavior. Exploring these connections and having to
present my research in class, and listening to others work through their demons finally
touched a nerve in me. I realized that I was spiritually wounded and crippled, and consumed with anger and self-pity. Of course I tried to repress this acknowledgment, but it was too late. It took me years to accept this, but I think I would not have made this realization if I had not taken Professor Berman’s course. It helped me to adjust my reading practices in that I was able to understand why the Nuyorican poet, Pietri, appealed so much to me. I began to read through the strong emotions and confrontational tone, and began to recognize the self affirmation and spiritual replenishment that was the subtext of all this writing, that on the surface decried social injustice and dehumanizing material conditions.

This reminded me of the wear and tear that my mother endured, along with the countless good people who refused to neglect their responsibilities because their family depended on them. There is no way to escape suffering in impoverished neighborhoods, yet some people wake up every morning and fight the good fight. This is part of my struggle and goal through poetry, to reanimate, to activate and contaminate as many as individuals as possible, especially those who have succumbed to or are on the verge of succumbing to the exhaustion that our social structure produces in us.

As an immigrant, writing has been my process of working through the urgent need to contextualize my notions of identity and power resulting from my conflict of assimilation and resistance to the dominant culture. This project has been my attempt to unpack the complexities of these efforts, as conveyed through my expressive writing, a collection of poems titled Minor Misfortunes, as well as through my critical reflections on exhaustion in Pedro Pietri’s Puerto Rican Obituary. To this end, the collection of poems will be arranged in a way to reflect the tensions and evolution of my poetic
struggles with my notions of identity and power. The title is meant to underscore the neglect with which this vital population of our society is met, as well as to underscore the explosive energy and relentless quest for liberation in the cultural practices and the art that emerges from our underclasses.

“La Melancolía of the Good Life” reflects the desperate attempts of the Latino families, of my childhood in Williamsburg and Bushwick, Brooklyn, to hold on to traditional values and to escape total consumption by the capitalist social structure. I recall not seeing my mother for more than a couple of hours a day for many years because she was always working. The resentment that I felt toward her for her being absent was finally diminished through my maturation in writing the poem. What I ended up with is the understanding and compassion captured in the last two lines, “Come Monday / the viejos are back slaving in the factories.” This is the same kind of cultural ambivalence and healing that I find present in Pietri’s *Puerto Rican Obituary*, which on the one hand critiques the lack of consciousness and the impotence of the Puerto Rican community toward the capitalist social structure, while at the same time conveys the love that Pietri feels for his people and culture.

The exhaustion of the body as death, the struggle against death and against the meaninglessness of the deaths of the immigrant underclass, of which I was a part of is conveyed in “Versions of Flaco.” The poem tells the story not of Flaco’s ambiguous death, but rather of how his death functions as a symbol with his colonized culture and that of the dominant culture. Both consume the dead in their own ways. For the impoverished neighborhood, Flaco’s death is obscured and consumed as gossip, a source
for bragging and the subject of a popular song. In contrast, to the dominant culture Flaco is just another statistic, a stereotypical participant/victim of a drug war, although there is nothing to corroborate that narrative. The poem, like “Puerto Rican Obituary,” becomes a way to restore and reanimate Flaco, and thus the underclass that he represents.

Some of the poems that blur the boundaries of or blend exhaustion with decolonial politics include, “To these Whatever Nights,” “On the Eve of Pullin’ a Herb,” “Bomba,” and “Baby Flo.” In these poems, the youth, from whose perspective they are written, engage in very nihilistic behavior (they experiment with drugs and alcohol, escape their conditions by going clubbing, plan assaults, and resolve tensions with violence). At times, there is no awareness or consciousness, in these characters, that the conditions, which deplete their lives, are the product of the larger social structure. They live insulated from hope, potential and possibilities. When that consciousness is present it is accompanied by an almost physical sense of helplessness that suffocates them, often personified as the night. The characters in the poems are often “tight as bricks,” and the throbbing, pulsing rhythms in the neighborhood provide an anxious, spastic score for their physically and spiritually draining existence. I sense that I am depicting a Latino culture that has experienced further fragmentation and degradation than Pietri’s in Puerto Rican Obituary. Whereas Pietri’s characters are adults that have been infantilized by the dominant culture, the impact of inter-colonization, the extreme disenfranchisement, has struck these characters as a much younger age.

In the transition from exhaustion / decolonial into more strictly decolonial themes, street language predominates, since it accurately conveys the emotions which are channeled in and through the writing in order to shake up my intended Latino/a readers /
audience. “The Hit,” narrates a scene of domestic abuse, as a young man punctuates the end of a relationship with physical violence. The traditions of respect and love (of oneself and of a romantic partner) have been disrupted in these neighborhoods and have been replaced by sexual exploitation, indiscretion, dishonor and physical intimidation. “Yo-Uwannahang,” invites or rather dares others to join the character in the poem for a night of criminal misadventures, while at the same time conveys the spiritual chasm that has been produced in these youths by social and economic alienation and disenfranchisement. It also chastises cultural codes, recognizing that they are as alienating as the forced educational / assimilation weapons of the dominant culture.

In “Operation Just ‘Cause,” a voice emerges that links the military colonial practices of the United States in Latin America and around the world to the violence in Bushwick. The model of aggression and violence that we witness in the U.S. military as a way of getting what you want, or need in our case, is internalized and recreated as a means of survival and destruction in our slums. The reader / audience is also reminded that the reliance on God is futile, since if God goes against the wishes of the United States, “there’s a little something being planned for him too.”

In spite of the slight progress that has been achieved over the centuries in Latin America, racism, is also alive and well in the Latino communities in New York City. In “I Put the Question to My Niece,” I attempt to put this cultural defect into view in order to decolonize the community. The attitudes of the adults are targeted in particular, since they reinforce the evolving notions and attitudes of the young. Rather than employing humor, which is the general reaction of the adults toward my niece’s racist comment, I employ irony to invite reflection on the fact that Latino families are inherently racially
diverse. The meshing of indigenous peoples, Europeans and Africans is a common occurrence in Latin America. The social structure of the U.S. often reinforces and employs racial division as a divide and conquers strategy. This is what the poem attempts to counteract or derail, in order to prevent contamination from the American brand of racial divisions. There are tanned, dark and black people in many Latino families, and the word “black” has been reinscribed as a term of endearment. Racial divisions then function as a threat to the cohesion and stability of many Latino families, where, as Pietri put it, “to be called negrito / means to be called Love” (11).

My decolonial / comic poems, “Laughs,” “Foolishly Wonderful,” “Believe,” “Latino Hybrid Supreme,” and “She Woke Up Laughing,” employ humor to celebrate Latino/a identity and to jolt the minds of my readers/audience or both. Religion, chauvinism (machismo), hair texture politics and linguistic representations and stereotypes are scrutinized in these poems. Inversions of attitudes and wit are employed as comic devices that challenge flaws in Latinos/as, in members of other cultures in New York City, including notions held by the dominant culture. In “Laughs” language itself is poked fun at as the medium by which flawed ideologies are disseminated.

Included are a few exhaustion/decolonial/love poems that are meditative in tone, and that exhaust the boundaries of physical and spiritual romantic love, where the personal is affected by the social and vice versa. The scarring and debilitation of one’s self image by external forces informs or impacts the self in this arena as well. In “If She Gazes Back” romantic passion and desire are repressed by the omnipresence of the night. Rather than release of desire into action, there is a blast from without that suggests the implosion of desire. By contrast, release is achieved in “Atomic Love-Making,” but
rather than experiencing fulfillment an absence is conveyed. The exhaustion here is not so much in and of the act of love making, but rather of physical and spiritual presence in the act. The subtext of “Smoke Signals” is imagining a liberated self, much like in the ending of “Puerto Rican Obituary,” and loving without the baggage of a colonial identity.

The other poems included in the creative project have shed the “street voice” and are more lyrical and abstract in nature. These include: “Memory,” “Dissolution,” “Memories,” “Misbehaving Titles,” “Untitled Descent,” “Particle Storms,” and “These Days.” The social in these has moved from the foreground to the background, and the exhaustion is more spiritual and personal than physical and collective. It is my individual consciousness that labors to convey its exhaustion from its journey and struggles with alienation, with resistance, with death and its own self-consciousness.

Just as Puerto Rican Obituary seems to have impacted Pietri, who indulged other literary concerns and preoccupations later in his writing career, I think that writing the early poems exhausted the emotional, spiritual, psychological, physical and intellectual energy required in writing such poems. This process heals one in several respects. First, the negative emotions, experiences, and attitudes produced by the conditions that form the material for the poem are channeled into the poem, relieving one of the effect of those poisons in the body, even if just momentarily. That space/time allows for the surfacing of new creative energies and concerns that seek to find expression through writing, which has already proved successful in producing pleasure. Secondly, once the work is put forth to the world, it will reach other individuals who will identify with its spiritual message, and who will be affected by the work in such ways as to alter their consciousness and thereby their actions.
The language of the streets, the mixture of English, Spanish and their hybrids, Spanglish, were essential for depicting these conditions, this reality. One formal language could not approximate the communications carried out by the code-switching in Bushwick. The meshing of codes also assists in expressing the range of emotions and attitudes meshed in me and meshed in the community, and which establish the tone in many of my poems. These can be seen as frustration, alienation, anger, aggression, depression, desperation, and dejection on one end of the emotional spectrum, and more importantly as determination, self-soothing, comforting, self-defense, and spiritual alertness on the other.

The insatiable appetite of our social and economic structure to consume all that is human is a threat to everyone. Fortunately, Pietri’s *Puerto Rican Obituary* will contaminate others like me, and they too will continue to contribute their love, in their own way, to this task of spiritual replenishment.
Minor Misfortunes

by

Tito Núñez
on Sundays
after a big lechón dinner
and several rounds of coquito
los viejos stand in the kitchen
bragging for hours about kids
y come se matan in the factories
and somebody always gets drunk
and wants to dance with a married woman
the viejos break up the argument
and we get the husband and drunk to hug
so they become compadres again
then the viejas se ponen a bochinchar about the drunk for 2 hours
while we dance salsa y merengue, contra le pared
and we always dance one more after the last one
a couple of kids sleep on the sofa buried in coats
and after la tasita de café
las buenas noches are given
and everything starts to break up
come monday
los viejos are back, slaving in the factories
Versions of Flaco

Gloria: Yo, in the bodega they sayin que fue because Flaco did Shake’s wife
Shake killed Flaco

Being that Kenny watched
There’re 3 possible versions of Flaco’s death
2 granting Flaco behaves dead

Kenny’s girl’s, Lexi’s, version made it to Kizzy
whose cousins are tigeres
the ones who turned into that song que se pego
one we’ve been dancing to all summer

(first shot) tryin to yell

police, looking around - measuring angles - dusting here and there discovered version #4
wrote #5 on police report

Pupi: Lit’im up Kid!

(second)
DROP OF BURNING LEAD
ANXIOUSLY BURROWING
DRY MOUTH

The sixth version, the coroner’s, confirms the fifth
Flaco has been pretty quiet about the whole thing
Blast stops Shake’s trembling

El Diario ran a picture with eighth version
Muere Flaco en Guerra de Narco-traficantes

(third till end of clip)

skin swelling blood bursting barely out the door
sidewalk pulling down
In custody, Shake’s confessing a story a day
To establish multiple personality plea
Yesterday implicated Kenny

A version even landed on this page

Urgency to think

As Flaco keeps dying
even in war you’d get more sleep than we do, I said
night was tingling cool
the juice in our veins-pure ether
breath and sound ignite in the cold air like christmas sparkles
whap! baila el merengue en la ‘squina

Desorai,
jet black hair-red lipstick-4 sizestoobigjeans
says, look up guys-imagine the sky was a big frozen ocean
chill pass the blunt

somebody slips out of La Concha
the red-brick nite club on the corner
and NYC buildings, sidewalks and streetlamps
dance to voice of Santo Domingo
the palm tree-coconut rhythm blasts from the brass
bounces off leather
notes flip, spin, dip
poom! door closes

pass the 40, Corey says, heh heh heh heh heh-giggling like a horny little bitch
we all laughed
and our echoes ran and got stuck on the nervous leaves
of the hate addicted trees on our sidewalk
Cyn brung together her hands like to pray
and between her thighs slid them
ail who’s bissness is it who we get hi with or fuck? she says
you know, the difrense ‘sonly in my mind
I just hope when I’m dead, like we all going to be
no muthafucka’s gonna come and wake me up!
ok, shut the fuck up Cyn, dijo Elliot

then night got still
till sadness hummed out of the street
I wondered if time was the faded summer scent in the air
melting into me
or melting me
tight as bricks
we wait the night
slipping in sleepiness
forgetting
On the Eve of Pullin' a Herb

as we lamped on the curb
and the hole 9
there was blood in our eyes
distance in our fingertips
it was the way way late part of night in Bushwick
when time took a break
a breeze circled the same blocks
a stogy fog lifted
an' we saw each other layin' on cars again
where you been at
what'chu been up to
answered by hangin' an' chillin'
we wuz coolin'

and I thought about the eternal patterns
of people from Bushwick
destined for poverty and obscurity

‘t’s what we live
‘t’s how
it wasn’t our destiny though
it was Bushwick’s we concluded
but any good labyrinth has no exit signs
Bushwick’s as tight as they come
so a puff for public assistance lines
one for free summer lunch lines
they wuz chill
down with the thrill
Bushwick BBoys
be down ta kill for one of em
Arrival past twelve al
Merengue dance hall
Tambora-conga-palo-bajo beat
Güira, tss ktsstss scratch scraping sound
Which looking around
Has the crowd in profound dance
Color lights flicker
Mientras brass blasts from the speaker
For a second you observe the trance while outside
A trip to the corner for a dime
Bought Chocolate end of time

Storm of conga, trumpet,
Blinking piano chords
Drenched with trombon melody
Of unrepaired lyric love
Merenguero lashes out in new wit the eternal hit

Trompeta, horny cry,
Saxophone collisions slide
In turn hair teases lips, relaxes grips
Down waist hand slips
Break
Base bottom plummet
Into turn she whips
Y el Merengue dips

Chiki took a stop on the stoop
I wonder now of those who made him drop
Drip on the DL tip
Don’t forget to pack if someone’s gonna trip
There you go Papa!

Table to table unthinking
Still to drink
Flesh perfection
Risking
Esa noche her look entreated mine to solicit the dance
In my fingers hers
Along the crowded floor where you dream awake
Ojos negros de mi morena
Magically transport us
Into the dance into the place
Feeling the gravitational hold de tu piel, Negrita
Forever,
In 4 minute Merengues

No habian nubes ni deseo
Just Papito
Being
Papito
Heard a Pop
Smile turn to shock
As red drops from head plop
On the Pop Pop!

We were drenched with music when it stopped
And reaching the block
Ambulance lights lit our breaths
Tomorrow, another of those days
3 deaths loco—Papito, Chiki y Chocolate
A second of—no se que
Possibility
Everything else is just
Bomba
in the hip hop club darkness
lights flash
pinch new nerves
awaken muscles
raise an electric screen over eyes
trigger glands
cast loose chemicals
that numb the central nervous system

people jerk their bodies off
to sounds arranged for the specific purpose
of jerking the body off
in places with flashing lights
like

to all channels of the brain
only this message is transmitted;
I AM INVULNERABLE!

young girls taken off
take off to get fucked
giggle, moan, say nothing
silence is golden
I AM INVULNERABLE
girls’ brains tell them

Baby Flo
chillin’ wit’is posse
foot tappin’ the thin pulsing beat
body weightless, transparent
his black pearl eyes scope a half revealed ass in shredded shorts
the ass jerks one way
sways another
bounces up and spreads

lights flash
chemicals flood him
his gaze climbs her waist
it turns---and there
naked belly button!

it slips down to hints of white lace thongs
inside her pockets, skin
centers on the zipper
slides down the stitch
where the faded jeans press at her pussy
outline the part in it
thrust-sway-bounce-spread-THRUST!
I AM INVULNERABLE, he thinks
not noticing in her eyes
she has him
in his comfort boxers
slips her hand in front
smiles

an infinite stream of electrons-protons-neutrons
magnetize her firm creamy thighs
black pearl eyes settle completely
on her inviting glow
like oceans on the earth
hi, she said
what up, he say
my man’s comin’ back too soon, she said with her eyes
get busy for quick, he did
stepping into her
melting her into a smile as her hair spread out blissfully

his thin fingers penetrate her back pockets
grip her ass
to the bones
their electrons-protons-neutrons
form firm throbbing bulges
till thick saucy juices flow like lava in their bodies

why you sweatin’ ma girl, struck a voice
you a sucker that left an’ she like what she saw
I should bus’ you in yo face
let’s take it outside, they said
I AM INVULNERABLE, they thought

the posses mirror each other
the street in need of light
blue headlights sparkle on a bottle cap smashed into the pavement
Yo, I’m from South Bronx
no wonder you a sucker, suggests Baby Flo
he pulls out
pupils contract

you got it, says Flo
nah, from South Bronx, this is for you
the shot rang

a band of fatal lead electrons-protons-neutrons
bore a distinct hole in chest and heart space
once occupied by Flo’s own electrons-protons-neutrons
suddenly too vulnerable to stand
he collapses
OPERATION JUST ‘CAUSE
not all conditions are self imposed
TGN ©

just ‘cause homeboy
manny d, cara’e piña noriega
got crazy stupid in Panama
doin’ his al pacino scarface impression
Ju fok wih me, Ju fokin’ wih da bes’
just ‘cause he wanted to cut his own piece of the pie
man, U.S. don’t play that!
just ‘cause he wavin’ Uzies in people faces
like he down wit’ the boyz in Bushwick
just ‘cause U.S. say nobody like him anyway
just ‘cause
if U.S. plant some debbie does europe tapes
and some voodoo shit in his house
an’ say the du’e was buggin’
ain’t nobody in their right mind gonna question it anyhow
just ‘cause U.S. soldiers can kill crazy thousands
of no name, nobody, never had it-never will
poor indian and black ass panamanians
and pretend like they kill’t at most, they said, maybe—500
just ‘cause a year later
when they find the missin’ thousands hangin’ out in mass graves
the new panaregan gov’ment ain’t gonna say JACK!
‘cause U.S. ‘ill probably be gettin’ busy
buyin’ international support to righteously overthrow
a crazy-camel-jockey-arab somewhere in the middle east, like
Iraq
let’s suppose
just ‘cause if somebody say, YO! I Ain’t Buyin’ This!
U.S. ‘ill probably spread rumors he a commie
next morning he be the headless commie
stinkin’up the canal
just ‘cause god work for the U.S.
and if he quit and send down his wrath
there’s a little somethin’ being planned for him too
uwannahang with me
uwannahang with me
tonight
in the back seat of '71 ON THE RUN
so you could know
I know what you already know
know about the hole
where only colors move
wanna hold the gun or
control the gas
as we pull up
a little nervous, a little anxious
and very broke
first like spirits, then like businessmen
here to collect
so RUN YOUR SHIT!
and if you got nothing we gonna fuck you up
and if we take it
we ain’t gonna walk away leaving you untouched
and the screams
we gonna laugh about it later
and how the gun made you fart
we gonna laugh about it
as we discuss how to do it better
uwannahang with me
till morning comes up in our hole
where we don’t read García Márquez
cause the sun only comes up once a day
and we try to sleep off our solitude
come at night
cause we spend afternoons
trying to see how Tom Sawyer/Macbeth and Achilles are Latinos
since our Spanglish insults the real:
tortilla con sal, tamales, arroz and goya bean eating, pasteles and taco making, sopa de verdura, frijoles negros, pernil, lengua, asopa’o, mondongo, platano frying, ceviche de pulpo eating, salsa/merengue/cumbia/punta/tango/jibaro dancing, orale, primo, vaya saying, god cursing—except on Sundays, proud to be come mierda Hispanics

Yo, Uwannahang!
when she approached out of the cold light
this icy night
his boys would think of him coaching her
    “get busy-don’t stop-move your tongue”
and the detail, where/when-the usual
did she kiss or lick-eyes open/closed
they would think of filling her mouth
the way he never did
he’d told them how far down she slid
they would watch her figure
and since they had it bigger
she would have triplets
he just chilled by the corner phones
said nothing, stood still
she had to salute
and not get all cute around the fellas
the bitch used to say
    “I’m a champion right baby,
    com’on what else we gonna try”
he’d told them
back then when he thought she was fly
now he was about to wreck her
things weren’t working out

as she approached
his boys were thinking
when this is over
she’d be another hit
just give it
a week

as she offered the kiss
he did not miss
his boys laughed, he dissed
her girls were mad pissed
she stood down crying
eyes closed
cold light, icy night—phone rang
    “Yo, take this, is Edgar”
he thought he was her first
but she’d been hit before
I PUT THE QUESTION TO MY NIECE

pause in her eyes
reminded me she was five
but the question was age appropriate
tv didn’t wait to insinuate what is right
she knew she was bright
adults bless her eyes, so clear/tan claritos
her limp golden hair
the child, being quick, let in society
learned
they make me hold hands with black kids in school, she said
our attention derailed
from here and there came the
-but what’s wrong with that mamita?
-I don’t like black people
eyes looked for approval
childish honesty read as charm
amusing the grown ups
the harm done to her irked me
brought her into my arm
put the question to my niece
-does that mean you don’t like grandma?
hoping it wasn’t too late
LAUGHS or where my dream went when the tv interrupted
and consciousness returns but I stay in bed trying to dream or
The Computer Has a New Hobby or:
TGN ©

I'm not supposed to say something meaningful
since not meaning is full of meaning
these words don't mean a thing
I have a dream
I pray allegiance to the Burger Kings of America
I have a thing
this computer is good: has all this crap and junk
you will be happy if you charge it on your credit card
do you want to look like a skinny
washboard stomach caucasian
you can't
but buy this red bending pole and strap today
today dear woman
I forgot your stare
and my family
there's so little feeling in the mind

I'm supposed to make something enter arresting interesting
to put in a book
to be art rhymes with fart
I'm not supposed to say I'm supposed to
but before dawn I'll deny myself three times
I have never dreamt
but before that I had a dream
I went to a Ferlenghetti poetry recital
he read terrible poems well
then another poets came: Batman and Robin
he's smarter than Ferlenghetti all thought
but to me, he read the same poems
if you don't know these poets
fine; you don't have to know them
just what they did
with language

words collide to form piles of bullshit
that sound like nothing but always smell like dung
listen to this word crash into piss
get this I'm dogging you in the head sensation
get on the head you dogging I'm this sensation
that one day this nation
will be artificially intelligent
I had a virtual dream in which I woke from a dream
and went to Brooklyn
enjoyed eternal afternoons in poverty
the following lines
are cut ups of imaginary thoughts drawn randomly from your pockets

enjoy free racist education
free racist enjoy education
resist free racist education
educate free racist for free
enjoy educating free racist

you are not allowed to think I mean something
not allowed to care
you are only two feet what you are permitted to judge
you are wise-potato chips are good
the laughs embraces lugubrious text
you are so robotic: the bionic man is in awe
you are bionic and pubic
your are awe
contemporary, study free form language
form free language or you will be held in contempt
do you want to be your own boss?
home at work; today start
tapes buy these or seminar to my come
credit card your to it charge
self-determination means

I think I can
I can I think
I think can I
Can I think I

the main idea should be reflected in the structure
titles function as conveyors of that idea or structure
the world cannot be represent
in a room are three entities
a tv, a dream and a subconscious
each busy in its business
if you accelerate a noun a hundred times the speed of light
and accelerate a verb in opposite direction
the photo of the crash reproduces the origin of the universe
another way of saying
bell blasts on perverse stare in the midnight tomb
watery hollow deep caves running out of tears to love

ridicule strength sublime
essence always evaporates
before you think
this should remain as is
it flaws and errors
are intentionally in-Nate
FOOLISHLY WONDERFUL or I COULDN’T HELP MYSELF
TGN ©

things are wonderful
I am happy
things are wonderful and I’m happy
I am so fucking happy
Oops
I am going to stop cursing so fucking much
so you could be happy
and my happiness sispossed to be
makin’ you happy
things are wonderful
I feel wonderful
I am filled with wonderness
I wonder how much you will compliment me
for this wonderful poem
this is the best poem ever written
I didn’t write it
I don’t write
I don’t even speaky inglish
anyway
I’m not talking to you
‘oño! pa’ que sepas que yo no juego
okay, I’m kidding
kidding?
I never kid
this is serious
important
like when
so you know it’s important but
don’t tell me it’s not important
I will kill you
I kill
I’m one of those killer types
you don’t want to see me with your daughter
or your sister
and if your wife is sleeping with another
it’s me
I am Latino passion
you know me
I’m famous
everybody on my block knows me
done a lot of research there
received the equivalent of four ph.ds
in chillin’ on the stoop, cartel business & management,
arms & automobile acquisition & distribution
o, you believe now
you are happy
you are right you think
deep down he’s like the others
things ARE wonderful

so fucking foolishly wonderful
i’d now gladly throw
all of you who want unity
into a giant melting pot
of course it means you will die
thumbs up, terminator style

this fool who can’t accept
that I’m the smartest person in the universe
will assassinate me
but by then
my cure for death will be public
it’s believed that a saint can help hit the number
that after you’ve spent $5000 to win $50
you should light a candle to that saint
so it can bring you more good luck
it’s believed that all those sundays in church are going to pay off
some day
that a great white fella shepard
will slide down the whitest beam of light you’ve ever seen
in his white robe
surrounded by little blond-blue-eyed italian angels
with white feathery wings
and you’re all going to go BAAAH! BAAAH!
and the great white shepard guy
will walk you all to that place
on the paradise pamphlets handed out in the street
the one with the wide green meadow
with the forest on one side, lake in the background
sea gulls smiling
little billy playing horsy on a lion
the sun burning so brightly it would kill
if it hadn’t been for the miraculous ozone layer comeback
anyway, it’s believed that’s where you’re going
to live happily ever after!
as the bearded shepard homeboy looks on

hey, it’s believed you are sheep

it is believed you are stupid
that you really did fall for that
phony spiritual leonardodavinci

last supper eating
three for the price of one
father, son and ain’t got the nerve to name the holy bitch story
it is believed you are
you know
inferior, stupider
“cause you let them take you from your land,
kill you, beat you, sell you
let them teach you the language of pain
let them take your land
so they could make this u.s. of assholes place
which is the place to be
so you can see
that what is right
depends on if you’re white

it is believed you don’t know
your color and language are not cursed
don’t know
first they branded the shepard du’e into you
killed you again
till you say, yeah yeah he’s cool
till you hung
a couple more times
after sowing their plantations for a couple of hundred years
for just a beating
it is believed you forgot your history

by mistake
that your art was melted down to make crosses
believed you forgot that
they wondered if you had a
soul

believe?

think I wanna hang around to meet him
in the late 70s I had a afro
but I shoulda said a baldy
cuz brothers, pulling back,
said, nah!
touching my pushback with their eyes
thinking, get the fuk outta here!
not phased, I add on like persuasive essay
word! I had a 7” fro
an’ as my fingers reach for the picture
ma homey threatens he knows a expert of doctored photos

half hour later we wuz on jerry curls
had those too, picture in hand,
1981-all summer
after that ma hair got much props
“tha’s some serious Spanish hair”, ma homey said
Latino, I corrected
speakin’ Spanish don’t make you Spanish like
speakin’ English don’t make you English
’sides it’s top of the line Latino Hybrid Supreme

pulling out the album,
here’s ma sister sporting Native American braids
here she go 6 years later, Diana Ross era
check out ma big brother’s DA an’
ma oldest sister as Marsha Brady
they wuz buggin’
knowing how to steal attention, ma homey said
yeah, but I don’t see any dreads, twirling one of his own
“why don’t you pull outta your magic album
a picture of your big head in some hybrid supreme dreads?”

this time the laughter hurt.
an’ hating that I’d opted for the fade over dreads
4 or 5 years ago, when they were big up here
I looked up an’ with deep humility said,
nah, I never had dreads,
but check out my mother’s back in the day
she woke up laughing because
he was a man and all this time
she had believed in the concept of Man
masculine, king, beast, Bárbaro!
sleeping like a big GooGoo Man
she sat up watching
till giggling grew from thinking
since it can be remembered or imagined there's been
The Man!
who could lift things,
like rocks,
The Man could talk and say things
like, I'm better
and The Man believed things that The Man said
she imagined the exact moment when the man said WO-MAN!
how big man's eyes got
happy with Man
she tried to cover her laughter with right hand
"Man" the concept is thousands of years old now
Older than the bible
and thinking about all the time and effort it took Man
to write "Man"IFESTOS
like bibles
required that she use both hands
that's when the man next to her in bed flipped his head over
like a pancake
and moved his fingers like finishing a song on the piano
so anything but
Man; the myth.
she laughs
because laughter has the fastest growth rate of all things
and two palms, ten fingers, and a wedding ring
couldn't hold it in her
he was asleep
she woke up laughing and
wondered when he'd wake up
RAIN
TGN ©

it rained all day
smelled delicious, felt melancholy
a short round man, reddish-brown face
told me as we waited for the bus that
it was a good day to be in bed
with the neighbor’s wife

PATRIA
TGN ©

once and for all
no more of this patriotism garbage
I throw up when I detect in people’s tone:
my country’s better than yours
world leadership status motivates me to shit
why don’t we get the message
we’re all just one people
one race
Hondureños!

LLUVIA
TGN ©

bajo lluvia y relámpagos el día
estaba delicioso, lleno de melancolía
un chaparro redondito, café-trigueñito
me dijo mientras esperábamos el bus que
el día era pa’ estar echado en cama
con la mujer del vecino
IF SHE GAZES BACK
TGN ©

I wait till there is no daylight
    sensing
    the night
cocked back ready to spring

    and in the same moment

    bringing me
    into    its

    its

    its

I wait till there are    just bits
of your smell
    like ghosts
    haunting my senses
    tripping me
    taunting my racy imagination
    wait

    sedated under leaves orange

    red-plated
    winter's cemetery stillness
hovering on the floor
    to miss you also

    wait/wait/wait
    more
    to empty my passion

    sensing    night-locked    blind universe

    irradiates    me

    silent black
right before
climbing you a fourth time
and forcing my claws through your tangled hair
and sliding my tongue along your slippery, sweat-salty, beady skin
Einstein crept naturally into mind
and left with thought swiftness
the incredible space that separates us
separated us
I was no longer brown
you
just blurry, with my sperm inside you
few seconds, and you were solid again
sprawled out on cold moist sheets
sexually drugged
limp beside me
Smoke Signals

as the night drinks
thought sinks
lights blink train’s late
in bits that bite
streets & faces form
around me things melt as I sit
till like a candle lit
you storm into this slate
and send me circling time and fate
till I stop believing time
stop thinking it is late
would I recall the hour and place
and somehow think
details to be the thing itself
and would I sing
if in some sleep we kissed
and in the blink came face to face
if this night lay on your hips
would your glance ask me
to ready my lips as I your hair untangle
it’d be understood I’d let my kisses dangle
from your fingertips
would you with me take second trips
to that sweet sweat
make each other wet to bake
it’d be a good mistake
to sleep and wake as strangers
to meet and play having met
You, an Arawak Queen
me not this me a Warrior Sumu
a zambo cinnamon spirit
free! this Me! The Apache who
filled your skies in the Carib with the simplest cries of love
in Smoke Signals
DISSOLUTION
TGN ©

there’s a fold
where this has all happened
in precision with seasons
having nothing to do with weather

mere reflection of it weathers me
or so I’m compelled to argue

for as things happen
I’m slipping to others
and with greater difficulty
I try to bring myself back
from thin air

one horizon slices the bleeding sun
runs into our veins

yet another horizon
absorbs all that bleeds and runs

but there's no horizon no running,
no sun no deliverance
something
untamed by motion
without missions
and to no end
births desire for the end

within infinity
there must be ends
but trails catch my eye
particles born to life
to sight and sound
for all things we perceive
are but trails

rain
left my memories in an empty space,
where I travel to remember
my existence, my illusion

confusion is an art
and so I'm never gone
but forms
form presence
and presence begs recognition
yet all things tend toward dissolution
even the germs of reluctance
I roam the streets
dead tired
even spirits have left me to my own devices
the truth is I don't believe in spirits
cardboard people surround me
it's nightmarish
no one shall say I'm afraid of intimacy
I spent last night reviewing my list of worries
it turns out I made no changes
and I'm not sure why, but it worries me
that's how it is these days
in all I see only the rot
yet it doesn't evoke anguish in me
as it is, there's cause for nothing these days
not even complaints
we should all drown in silence
or even better, a cocktail of venom
perhaps I'm exaggerating
I've been accused by many of being sour
by the way, I have no regrets
and to top it off, words have gotten me nowhere
furthermore, thoughts are bothersome
I should pursue something practical
but I'm preparing to take on the virtual flu
these days there's no remedy for these days
the weather is cloudy, sunny or both
it rains, snows; essentially things
remain the same
Particle Storms
TGN ©

some silence falls around
echoes of coldness shine in dark eyes
sprinkled on polluted rivers of tenements

something false invades the wind
and every letter is contaminated
with tenses and phonetic apathy

in the act of killing, one person
feels alive
in conversation
thoughts are born and die
however profound the moment
it slips

some kind of light spreads
blanketing the horizon in the blood
of the most primitive birth or murder
I give it the red it gives me
the air glances back in colors
with the luster of dead languages

something cold
creeps
pale, bloodless, erecting an enemy
for stars

in all things
it performs its profession
separation
all things put to mind are set adrift
crackling in liquid fire
whose sparkles

glitter the dark when eyes blink
thoughts descend cold and crystallized

but In one's mind all's calmmm

like stars They dot a clear imaginary universe

as if alone

like snow they last and as light

stillness radiates

do they thaw, or I?

from spaces between the voices,

where will I be then, or voices, cousins of light?

Laughter

where sun particle tracks go

There

a talent in mapping traces

where all things present vanish

things that resist their own fingerprints

NonSense

footprints of a longing

left to me

shifting the night before the Night

and

flickering sparks of thought

Where it goes

lifting memories from the bank

untitled descent

TGN ©
Misbehaving Titles

TGN ©

1
if I feel I need to mean
to mean I need to feel I mean
or do I fail to mean
is meaning failing this or you
is this the man who thought
or a page with words
or you processing mathematical grammar
a grain of infinity
or you
or u
or yew

2
purpose for the purpose of eyes
coiled line the length of a period
two points plus the shortest distance
dissolve in the pool of mind
not search nor retreat
ever in the occupation of ever
let me see
speech to its provider!

3
as if I fathered every woman, child and man
their distress like a cyclone through my organs ran
as if I were the son of every woman, child and man
their native cries bloom like wild colors on my peacock fan
as if I were the ghost of every woman, child and man
their tan’s filed in my genes

4
orbiting most recent modes
a satellite of the latest standard
flighty, broody, testy
caught in the web of codes
nothing
blank
silence
indifferent is the page to ink
indifferent the ink to thought
even if it’s armed and targeting
A Fragile Place
TGN ©

love is a fragile place
ever bearing and destroying
resonates in our ears
the light of our light
from the all-nothing
awakens us
till we are driven mad or sane
makes a poem or song now and then
that we never live to read or hear
completely

it’s a fragile place

well rehearsed before we came
to be
touching more only reminds
how little we touch
though it weighs on us
struggles, passions, victories and failures
would be neutralized by fantasy and dreams
if they were not the shadow ghost of life

a fragile place
that’s imposed its will
and will not go
though we refuse it
our senses
and deprive it
of any sense
Poetry Lies to Me
TGN ©

friend, colleagues, family, self-
Are lies that for some unreason I won't try to justify
the weather entertains and distracts me
watching snow fall fascinates me;
the stillness comforts
Allows me distance from the liars
reminds me of me
the lies have infected me and the infection is killing me
Death awaits me
I move toward death
slowly, between gestures and conversations
between glances and thoughts, gratifications and disappointments
Slowly I inch up to it standing in its gravity
and I’m close, so close to the silence
Death is something to try
like flavors of ice cream or restaurants
Something escapes from my thoughts advertising vacancy of spirit
it misbehaves like a nomad
From without or within the signals arrive
do they find me by mere random proximity
or do I attract them like magnets do metal or death me?
All this while keeping an eye on the road
drinking coffee and fumbling for a cigarette
on my way to some thing or other
where I’ll meet up with this one or that one
and do this or that
only to return here or there
ultimately for no good reason.
there’s a picture in my imagination
a spitting image of now,
magical in that I can step into it
I wander about
like an aimless ghost
sun sets and sun rises
and all moves ahead of me
Works Cited


