

NUYORIQUEÑAS IN THE HOUSE:
PERFORMING IDENTITY THROUGH HIP HOP, POETRY, AND THEATRE

by

PATRICIA E. HERRERA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre
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Abstract

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Patricia E. Herrera

Adviser: Professor David Savran

This project is a genealogical analysis of Nuyorican performance activism in New York City over the last fifty years. This research contests that there exists a historical memory embodied by the union of poetic, performative, and political traditions within the Puerto Rican and Nuyorican community. I pay close attention to how and what the ethnic/racial body performs in a range of demonstrations and manifestations that are specifically by, of and about Nuyorican culture-makers, their communities, and their place in the larger American social body.

The dissertation first traces the oral traditions of Nuyorican poetry back to *declamadores*, *lectores*, and the protest traditions of political organizations between the fifties and sixties, such as the Puerto Rican National Party, the Young Lords Party, and the Black Panther Party. In particular, this chapter examines the alternative public spaces that the Young Lords create in posters, demonstrations, songs, dances, poems, and plays as a protest strategy to mobilize the Puerto Rican community from social awareness to social action to social change.

The second chapter further expands on a genealogy of performance that was

formalized by the emergence of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the seventies. I provide an artistic and cultural production history of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe by considering the theatrical and performative staging of Latino/a identities coming out of the Cafe during the post-Civil Rights struggle.

The next two chapters focus on contemporary Nuyorican practitioners, Caridad de la Luz, Mariposa, Nilija Sun, and Aya de León, who by fluctuating between performance genres, construct a feminist platform on which they can document, reflect, contest and re-imagine the histories of dissident communities. These artists in particular, transform the written word into living corporeal texts by embracing hip hop, poetry and theatre.

I conclude by venturing some observations about how the Nuyorican performance aesthetic has evolved into a universalizing model of identity, which approaches community as a network of social relations imagining and creating social kinships, literary affinities, and cultural affiliations. Such a strategy makes visible passageways that can potentially gather, connect, and incite people towards a greater social consciousness.

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Introduction:

Politics and Performance of Identity

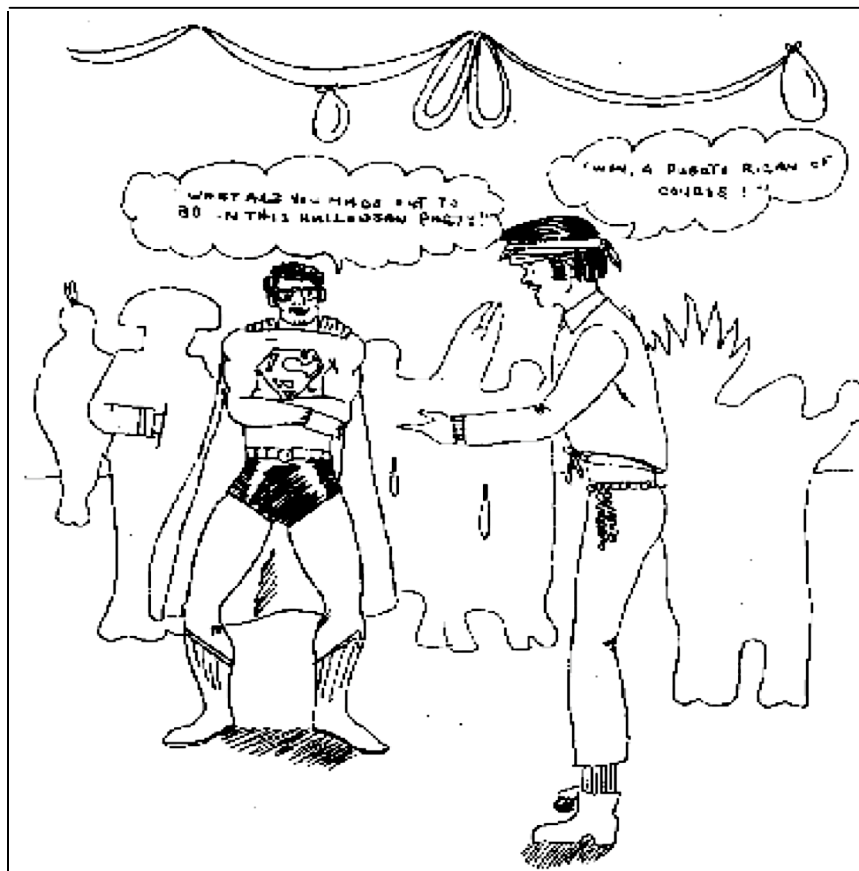


Figure 1. Comic strip in *Notes on NeoRican Seminar* (1975)

This humorous drawing created by Jaime Carrero, a Puerto Rican poet living between New York and Puerto Rico during the sixties, was printed in *Notes of NeoRican Seminar* (1972). He captures a conversation between two men in costume at a Halloween party. One of them is dressed as Superman. He wears a cape, utility belt, boots, and a muscle chest jumpsuit with the signature logo patch on the front chest. The other person's costume, however, is not as recognizable. He wears a bandana; a long sleeve shirt tucked under a wide belt, high water pants, and ankle boots. Unable to identify the costume,

Superman asks, “What are you made out to be in this Halloween Party?” and the unknown figure responds, “Why, a Puerto Rican of course!”

What is humorous about this scenario is that there is nothing about the costume that is identifiably Puerto Rican. What is so Puerto Rican about the bandana, a long sleeve shirt, high-water pants, and ankle boots? I suppose he is dressed as a *jibaro*, a peasant, but from the outset the so-called Puerto Rican costume is nothing but generic. There are several social commentaries embedded in this drawing. Superman is a mainstream fictional character that follows the scripted story of combating evil and rescuing good. A Puerto Rican, however, is a real person, and his costume is supposed to mark his national and ethnic identity. The visual and performative language of the body, however, is simply unrecognizable to Superman or the uninformed American eye. Carrero suggests that just as there exists a script for aspiring Superman impersonators, there is also an ascribed social script for Puerto Ricans. Some viewers will laugh at Superman’s ignorance of Puerto Rican corporeal signifiers, while others will laugh at the familiarity of the performed ethnic identity. It is unclear, however, whether the character in the drawing is impersonating a Puerto Rican or performing himself as a Puerto Rican man.

Intrigued by the social commentary of this drawing, I cordially invite you to join me in full costume to celebrate Halloween! I am curious about the costume you will wear. I myself have never been a Halloween advocate; however, having a three-year old child gave me a reason to participate. Fascinated by the world of superheroes and super villains, my son aspires to be Batman. Instead, I convince him to be a bat and me, a mother bat, of course. We are excited about the new plan but I can’t help but wonder

how long before I must once again dissuade him from performing the role of Batman, Spiderman, or Superman. In this highly volatile period of war, I find it quite troubling that weapons and fist fighting captivate him. “Why don’t you tell Spiderman to talk with Dr. Octagon?” I tell my son or better yet, “Wouldn’t it be great to create your own super character?” He nods his head and continues to “boom” and “bang” the evil Dr. Octagon.

My son’s obsession with superheroes and super villains makes me uneasy. While the laid-back mother in me trusts that in due time my son will know that his mimetic staging is only a comic drama and not real life, the academic in me believes that he is performing a social script of masculinity and violence. Superman is symbolic of the many socially scripted roles that construct identity. At such a tender age my son inadvertently performs, and quite successfully I might add, the role of the male figure conquering and saving the world. The script of Superman is an American classic. The smug and slightly arrogant stance of Superman in the drawing relays contradicting ideas about his identity; his muscular torso, crossed arms, and plià stance is both confrontational and withdrawn, stern and nonchalant-- overall a portrayal of the stereotypical rigid and fixed American masculinity. For the Puerto Rican, the narrative is quite different.

At the height of the seventies, when this drawing was published, Puerto Rican radicals from both the island and the states gathered in San Germán, Puerto Rico for the *Neorican Seminar* to discuss their social roles and interventions. Given the colonial-status of Puerto Rico, the history of circular migration and displacement, and the place of Nuyoricans, the reclaiming and affirmation of Puerto Rican culture becomes a conscious act meant to awaken the collective memory of the community. The Puerto Rican impersonator caught in mid-conversation responding, “Why, a Puerto Rican of course!”

is indicative of how Puerto Ricans are perceived as Other especially when they might be articulating and claiming their cultural heritage.

In many ways this drawing pokes fun or gets at many of the central themes and questions of this dissertation. As conveyed in the drawing, the politics and performance of identity play a vital role in understanding the individual, the community, and society as a whole. The body, as witnessed in the drawing, can be a source of evidence for understanding social, cultural, and political activity. Since this project analyses various bodies of work from literary texts to performances, this close reading considers the presence and absence of cultural signifiers on the body and in the written text. I use the body, in its various forms, as a master text that reveals what is otherwise hidden in consciousness. Thus, I pay close attention to the ways people mark the body with histories. The questions I grapple with in this project stem from the body in order to address notions of individual and communal identity. What are the visible and invisible markers written on the body? What are the possible meanings and expressions conveyed through the body? How does reading the performing body inform the way we understand the individual and the community? And in turn, how do corporeal ways of knowing inform and shape performance genres such as hip hop, poetry, and theatre?

This project examines the ways the body functions as a site of resistance against domination in the performance strategies of four Riqueña¹ performers, namely Caridad de la Luz, Mariposa, Nilaja Sun, and Aya de León. These women push the boundaries of hip hop, poetry and theatre, and simultaneously stretch the boundaries of Latinidad. They

¹ These performers understand that their gender, race, and residence among other social factors shape their Puerto Rican identity. I use “Riqueña” (Rican), instead of ChicagoRican, NuyoRican, or West Coast Ricans, to acknowledge the many ways Puerto Rican women can identify themselves.

rely on the performance traditions of social change from the Nuyorican Movement of the seventies and the hip hop era of the eighties to produce a sense of identity, community and nationhood. As women from New York and Los Angeles, two central metropolitan areas, Luz, Mariposa, Sun, and León embody the urban margin while also evoking the tropics. In their performances, they cross and re-cross geographic boundaries of the United States and the island of Borinquen trying to make sense of who they are and where they come from. They draw from the history of Puerto Rican activism, the oral traditions and practices of *lectoras* and *declamadoras*, the performative aesthetic of Nuyorican poetry, and various hip hop art forms. Moreover, they call into being a range of identities: from racial identities to ethnic identities, from identities of social or economic class to gendered identities, from generational to religious and/or spiritual identities. In a series of autobiographical and biographical representations these artists perform identities that transcend and transgress social boundaries. Portraying the multiple identities of an individual becomes a way of understanding the self and critiquing the communities to which one belongs. In so doing, they remember their experiences and remind others of their own experiences, thereby creating affinities among various communities.

I argue that these solo performers strategically marry hip hop, poetry, and theatre to create hybrid performative genres that resist the conventions of theatre and structures that oppress people of color. The union of these performative genres is an essential element in the making and re-making of the individual and communal identity of Latinos. While poetry gives the artist the written word, the performative art form of hip hop demands that the live body put the word into motion. Theatre offers the performer a stage

to recall and reenact the self in the midst of crisis, transformation and reconciliation. At the same time, an audience is both a participant and witness to those re-enactments of self and community. Fluctuating between performance genres, Latina hip hop solo performers construct a platform on which they can document, reflect, contest and re-imagine the histories of dissident communities. Their performances utilize protest traditions of the Nuyorican Movement as well as political organizations such as the Young Lords Party, the Black Panther Party and the Puerto Rican National Party. Female artists in particular have embraced hip hop, poetry and theatre as a means to make visible the individuals and communities who are responding and reacting to social marginalization. They tap into the performance traditions of the Nuyorican to promote social change and a gender-specific sense of identity, community and nationhood by transforming the written word into a living corporeal text. Before examining the practices of these women, however, it will be necessary to briefly consider the place of Latinas in American history, theatre, and performance.

The Politics of Latino and Latina

Galvanized by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Puerto Ricans affirmed their rights as citizens and protested against the unjust treatment of their people, for although they were Americans by law, they were treated as second-class citizens. The urban landscape of New York City became known as the “promised land” of Puerto Ricans and with it came the making of a self-created identity and movement, the Nuyorican Movement. However, Nuyoricans realized that to attain political power they needed to join forces with other Latin American ethnic groups and consider their

common problems and experiences in relation to the larger society. They came together in solidarity to question the integrity of the nation's democracy and to protest against the unequal relations of power between white Americans and people of Latin American descent.

During the 1970s, there were two prominent labels of identification used to unify the voices of various Latin American ethnic groups: Hispanic and Latino. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, these labels carry a specific history that reflects the evolution of American identity politics during the 1970s. In *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*, Suzanne Obler explains that as early as 1970 government agencies nationally disseminated the term "Hispanic" for statistical purposes. "It has since been adopted for self-identification by various sectors of the population with ties to Latin America in several regions of the country."² In contrast, "Latino" emerged as a self-chosen form of naming that offered a "progressive alternative to the state-imposed bureaucratic label Hispanic."³

Although the origin of the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" may establish some understanding of why people identify with one label over another, there are also generational, economic, and political factors to consider. For example, recent immigrants may refer to themselves as Hispanics because of their close ties to Latin America, while first or second-generation Americans usually refer to themselves as Latinos due to a closer relationship with the United States. Some Hispanics also distinguish themselves from Latinos by aligning their racial and cultural self with the white, pure Spanish

² Suzanne Obler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

European culture. They see themselves as direct descendants of Spaniards, while Latinos are more conscious of the colonial relationship and instead identify as *mestizos*, descendants of Spanish colonizers and indigenous people. This power dynamic also plays when considering the economic social status of Hispanics and Latinos. Hispanics are perceived as upper class and conservative, whereas Latinos represents the working class and liberals. Throughout history these terms at times are clearly distinguishable and incompatible, while other times they are conflated and used interchangeably. Since this study focuses on the history of individuals with ancestral roots from Latin American living and/or born in the United States, the term “Latino” is most suitable.

Although the term “Latino” represents multiple experiences, the “o” ending in Spanish is a linguistic convention that signifies the masculine gender. In this project I use the gender-inflected term “Latina” to privilege the female subject who is claiming her position within a collective identity. This term acknowledges that there exists a political and cultural movement of women in the United States that does not necessarily identify with the feminist movement because it often focused on the needs of white women. In the early 1980s, Latinas and other women of color began to distinguish their experience from that of the universal woman. This issue was brought to the surface after the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, which invoked a collective identification of women of color. In this anthology, Latinas, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans gave testimony to how they were systematically excluded from the dominant culture and from white academic, feminist discourse.⁴ Thus, to use the term

⁴ Moraga and Anzaldúa call women of color Third World Women in the United States. As such,

“Latina” is not simply to resist gender inequalities but also to understand one’s womanhood from a post-colonial perspective. In her introduction to *Latina Performance Traversing the Stage*, Alicia Arrizón underlines this aspect of her identity. She powerfully explains that,

Chicanas, like many other Latinas in the United States, perceive themselves as part of a mother culture that has been “raped”: violated by the order of colonialism and cultural tyranny since the sixteenth century when the Spaniards invaded Mexico and other nations in Central and South America and the Caribbean.⁵

By rooting her identity within colonialism, Arrizón reveals that the sexuality of Latinas, whether heterosexual or lesbian, is closely tied with internal and external forms of domination and regulated by colonial and patriarchal systems. Like Arrizón, Latinas break the silence of the oppressed, claim public agency always from the margins, and resist the colonizer and the dominant Anglo society.

It is with this historical context of liberating the communal self from the oppressor that Latina theatre and performance emerge. As Arrizón explains “Latina theater and performance may be understood as bringing together the subject of a post-Spanish colonial history in relation to the multiple entities subsumed within the term Latin American and within the categories of ethnicity, race and sexuality.”⁶ Given this, theatre and performance art serve as exemplary cultural vehicles for Latina self-

they bring to the forefront the faces and voices of minority women and establish what is known today as Third World Feminism. In the introduction of *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains that Third World Women strive to form coalitions among women who politically oppose the sexist, racist and imperialist structures of power (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 7.

⁵ Alicia Arrizón, *Latina Performance Traversing the Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

expression. During the 1990s there was an emergence of Latina performers. Besides the practical financial reasons for doing solo-work, performers like Nao Bustamante, Coco Fusco, Marga Gomez, Laura Esparza, Monica Palacio, Carmelita Tropicana (Alina Troyano), Alba Sánchez, Janis del Valle and many more, have also chosen to put their bodies on stage and enact their selves for political reasons. Cherríe Moraga refers to the act of speaking out from the experience of the body as “theory in the flesh.” Their Latina bodies serve as evidence that they have survived to tell their stories. When they require members in the audience to listen, feel, and witness their enacted selves, they contribute to a collective act of identity making. Their Latina bodies signify the possibility of starting a revolution, one that attempts to transform Western hegemonic social structures.

As hip hop performances, the works of Luz, Mariposa, Sun, and León are informed by the four fundamental elements of hip hop: graffiti, break dancing, deejaying and emceeing. At the same time, how do these performers express their Ricaness within a hip hop theatrical context? They identify themselves as Latinas while also asserting their Puerto Rican identity. Luz and Mariposa perceive their Puerto Ricanness in relation to the cities in which they reside. They call themselves New York Ricans or Nuyoricans. On the other hand, León and Sun see their blackness as a significant component of their Puerto Ricanness. León identifies as a west coast Afro-Rican and Sun as an east coast Afro-Rican. How do these women of color define and develop the self? What are the social and political implications when an individual uses labels such as Latina, Puerto Rican, New York Rican, and/or Afro-Rican? And how is the self invested in the building of racial/ethnic community? Given that these women of color face economic, racial/ethnic and gender oppression, the use of these labels is a political act that

contributes to the formation of identity and community. In their performance the audience witnesses Latinas as women who are not limited to racial or ethnic markers but shaped by a network of social factors. On stage these Riqueñas are able to break free from the hegemonic tropes of representation by seamlessly interweaving the performative aesthetics of Nuyorican poetry, various oral practices and traditions, and hip hop forms into their story telling and presenting the co-existence of several identities in their Latina Rican selves.

Are You Legit? Nuyorican Doing the Hip Hop Thing

Scholars such as Tricia Rose, Houston Baker, Robert Kelley, and Todd Boyd acknowledge the presence of Latinos in hip hop, but Juan Flores's landmark book *From Hip Hop to Bomba* and more recently, Raquel Rivera's *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*, fully explore their participation. To dismiss the ways in which Puerto Ricans and African American identities and artistic expression have intersected is to neglect a crucial aspect of cultural history. As Rivera argues, Puerto Ricans have infused their cultural artistic expression in genres commonly identified as African American such as jazz in the early twentieth century, doo-wop and rhythm-and-blues during the 1950s, and boogaloo and Latin soul during the 1960s and 1970s. Now in the twenty-first century, Puerto Ricans are intimately involved with hip hop, an art form usually perceived as African American.

The transethnic interaction among African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Afro-diasporic groups exists because these communities share the cultural legacy of exploitation, oppression and colonization. They share a history of perseverance, one that

has earned them the right to belong in the United States. How each group struggled to attain a sense of belonging differs, however. For Puerto Ricans, there is a sense of national in-betweenness as they are citizens of the United States and residents of Puerto Rico. As a result of the Spanish-American War (1898), the annexation of Puerto Rico, and its subsequent status as U.S. Commonwealth, Puerto Ricans have a bi-national identity. Furthermore, it is often the case that Puerto Ricans experience an ethnic/racial in-betweenness, since blackness in the United States is usually understood through the African American experience. Puerto Ricans are often not associated with blacks and are left out of the discussion of the African diaspora in the Americas. In comparison to other Caribbean people, Puerto Ricans had a harder time assimilating into the African American and hip hop community because they were caught between being Puerto Rican and black. At times they might be considered visibly too black for the Latino community or not culturally black enough for the African American community. The result is that the ethnic/racial/cultural boundaries between Puerto Ricans and African Americans are at times fluid and cannot always be easily established. Other times boundaries collapse and categories fuse as in the case of Afro-Latinos who acknowledge their blackness in relation to Africa and Latin America or United States.

African Americans, however, imagine their nationhood and ethnicity despite the physical absence of a nation. There isn't a place called "Africa America" comparable to Puerto Rico. Although the term "African American" implies a cultural reference to Africa, it is not necessarily home. The term, instead, recalls the displacement of Africans from their homeland and the history of slavery in the United States. What does home really mean for people who have been displaced and enslaved throughout history? As

W.E.B Du Bois explained, for African Americans home is a “negro nation within a nation.”⁷ Political activists in the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Black Panther Party used this rhetoric throughout the twentieth century. Both the long history of sanctioned discriminatory laws in the United States, like the Jim Crow laws between 1890s and 1960s, as well as the strong nationalist pride among blacks sharing a common worldview, prompted various movements and organizations to endorse a black separatist ideology. For example, the Black Power Movement called for the “partitioning of the United States into two separate independent nations: one to be a homeland for whites and the other to be a homeland for blacks.”⁸

In 1974, however, when Africa Bambaataa founded the Zulu Nation, the face of “a negro nation within a nation” transformed. Bambaataa believed that gangs played a fraternal role in the lives of many urban teens and that these teens used hip hop as a medium to express their street life experience. Instead of perpetuating the gangster life of crime and violence, he organized a collective of DJs, breakers, graffiti artists, and homeboys from various ethnic and racial communities. Whereas the notion of “a negro nation within a nation” separates blacks from whites, members from the Zulu Nation used hip hop to create a nation driven by African Americans and people from other Afro-diasporic groups striving to reform racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment in America.

In her interview with Puerto Rican hip hop artists DJ Ill (William Fratacci), DJ Herc and DJ Charlie Chase, Raquel Rivera explores how their identity, the places they

⁷ W.E.B Du Bois, "A Negro Nation Within the Nation," *Current History* 42 (June 1935): 265-70.

⁸ John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 134.

perform, and the art form they master determine whether they are considered legitimate participants of the hip hop world. DJ Ill remembers that when he performed in Brooklyn the audience assumed he was not a good hip hop DJ because he was Puerto Rican. Similarly, Chase was perceived by Brooklynites as an outsider despite the fact that he was a native South Bronx Puerto Rican. Despite the rich cultural activity among various Afro-diasporic groups in the South Bronx, when DJ Ill and DJ Chase performed in Brooklyn people questioned their authenticity and presence in the hip hop culture as they were Puerto Ricans doing what Brooklynites believed was an exclusively black or African American practice. On the other hand, DJ Herc's experience was quite different. The audience welcomed him because they assumed that since he was visibly black that meant that he was African American when in fact he was a Jamaican raised in the South Bronx. The audience determined whether an artist was authentic by checking out their ethnic and racial background. In this case, DJ Herc's blackness upstaged his ethnic identity making it possible for him to "assimilate" into two communities: the African American and the hip hop DJ community.

For all three cases, ethnicity and race played a major part in the way the hip hop community received DJ Ill, DJ Herc and DJ Charlie Chase. While many questioned DJ Ill's and DJ Charlie Chases's hip hop authenticity because they were not racially black, DJ Herc was perceived as a legitimate hip hop participant because he was black. Puerto Ricans are often erased from hip hop history because sometimes they do not visibly embody black racial markers. This troubling ethnic and racial erasure makes it challenging to see the existing and potential transethnic interactions among communities of color, especially between blacks and Puerto Ricans.

Latina Solo Performance

The field of theater and performance has expanded as scholars increasingly reference the work of Latina solo performers. For a decade now much attention, rightfully so, has been given to the work of Alina Troyano, Marga Gomez⁹, and Monica Palacio, Latina solo performers of the early 1980s. Currently, there are three foundational books that set up powerful theoretical frameworks to read Latina solo performance. José Muñoz's pioneering book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1998), argues for a survivalist theory of disidentification, which allows for nonwhite, queer, and poor audiences to strategically reclaim exclusionary, normative representations. Alicia Arrizón in *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (1999) uses notions of representation, self-representation, and *mestizaje* to examine the work of Latina solo performers. And Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach's *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theatre* (2001) examines the making of transcultural subjects in Latina solo performance. Their work has affected the way other scholars in theatre and performance studies understand race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, and therefore deserves attention.

Muñoz closely examines how queer identity is performed in photography, film, and performance art, particularly in the works of James Van DerZee, Robert Mapplethorpe, Issac Julien, Richard Fung, Vaginal Crème Davis as well as Marga Gomez and Alina Troyano. He calls attention to the ways queer cultural workers have

⁹ Note that Marga Gomez does not put an accent on the "o" in her name. Often times the presence of an accent in a name inflects the relationship between one's Latina identity and the Spanish language. In this case, the absence of an accent is indicative of how Gomez's Latina identity is primarily U.S based.

used the survival apparatus of disidentification as a way of transgressing heteronormative social institutions. They create affective connections and identifications with certain facets of a character or a narrative while simultaneously disavowing others. This practice of resistance, as Muñoz posits, fosters the making of a “worldview” vision, one that creates worlds for queers of color and other minoritarians to fully live and participate in.¹⁰ He introduces his book by way of describing his experience of the performance piece *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay* (1992). He recalls the moment when he identified with Gomez’s process of disidentification. It was then that he came to “understand the power and shame of queerness.”¹¹ Intrigued by the voice of David Susskind on television when she was eleven years old, Gomez joined her mother who was watching the interviews of “lady homosexuals.” They were disguised in wigs, raincoats, and sunglasses. As Gomez remembers, they mesmerized her but she hid her sexual curiosity and desires by simply putting on that homophobic mask.¹² Muñoz reflects upon this moment, as it is too often the case that minorities must work around and through phobic practices. Gomez consciously separated herself from the stereotypical representations of lesbians in front of her mother, yet those same images generated a homosexual consciousness that has both seduced and empowered her, thus creating a world that is “not reigned by sanitized understandings of lesbian and gay identity.”¹³ Muñoz also situates the work of Alina Troyano in the production of making community.

¹⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 200.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

Her camp style, *chotería* and *chusmería*, negotiates various performance traditions and identities: lesbian, Cuban, and North American, among others.

While Muñoz is interested in the mechanisms that queers of color use to carve out their individual and collective identities, Alicia Arrizón in *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (1999) recovers a Chicana dramatic history and production that adds to our understanding of subject formation. She devotes the beginning of her book to the work of actor, comic, and performer La Chata Noloesca (1903-1979) and playwright and novelist Josephina Niggli (1910-1983). Her recovery project offers scholars a continuum of traditions for studying the field of Latina performance. She puts the past in dialogue with the work of contemporary playwrights and performance artists including Laura Esparza, Milcha Sánchez-Scott, Dolores Prida, Josefina López, Monica Palacios, and Alina Troyano. Her careful analyses of the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in their work reveals the multiple moments of negotiation Latinas confront. She explores the notion of self-discovery and examines how performance art provides a medium through which “women of color act upon their racialized and sexualized bodies as a metaphor to disrupt and challenge the dominant systems of representation.”¹⁴

As persuasively analyzed by Arrizón, performance artists Carmelita Tropicana, Marga Gomez, Laura Esparza, Monica Palacio, Nao Bustamante, and Coco Fusco stage the self because as women of color, as Latinas, they are historically excluded and alienated from white America. She underlines self-reflexive strategies apparent in Palacios's *Latin Lezbo* to demonstrate how self-transformation becomes central to her performance piece. As Arrizon states, it is “a coming-out story not as a public

¹⁴ Arrizón, *Latina Performance*, 136.

announcement of a previously hidden fact, but as a revelation of the *process* of finding her self. *Latin Lezbo* presents self-examination as a metaphor for visibility and empowerment.”¹⁵ With Alina Troyano's work, Arrizón focuses on the ways she resists the monochromatic representations of sexuality and nationality by consciously choosing not to fetishize the Latina body.

Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach's *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theatre* (2001), a companion to their anthology *Puro Teatro: A Latina Anthology* (2000), is the most recent book dealing with Latina theatre and performance. They argue, “that theater and performance are the ideal cultural locations to examine transculturation,” that is, how Latinos merge with and diverge from the cultures of the Américas.¹⁶ They closely examine six plays that developed the field known today as Latino theater: Portillo's *The Day of the Swallows* (1971), Fornes's *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977), Prida's *Beautiful Señoritas* (1977), Sánchez-Scott and Blahnik's *Latina* (1980), Cherríe Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* (1984), and Chávez's *Novena Narrative*. They argue that although these productions emerged at different moments in history, when they are put in dialogue with each other one can map a canon of Latina theatre and chronicle the political consciousness of the Latina subject and her community. In addition to providing dramatic analysis of plays, they also pay close attention to the solo performances of Marga Gomez, Monica Palacio, and Alina Troyano and show how these pieces articulate the self as transcultural subject.

¹⁵ Ibid., 141.

¹⁶ Alberto Sandoval Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach, *Stages of Life Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theater* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 33.

Methodology

The increasing visibility of Latino productions demands scholars, like myself, to address the function and importance of Latino theatre and performance. Given the range of cultural, religious, and geographic backgrounds, as well as the experiences shaped by ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and class, it would be simplistic and essentialist to come up with a single definition for Latino theatre and performance. Instead, it is my responsibility, as Alberto Sandoval urges, to look at this “octopus with many legs.”¹⁷ Latino theatre and performance is comprised of myriad tentacles that house the multiple genres, styles, aesthetics, histories, politics, and ideologies of its organizations and practitioners. Among the many tentacles, I focus on Nuyorican productions that manifest off and on the stage including plays, performance poetry, and hip hop solo performances.

During the nineties, the union of hip hop, poetry and theatre became an essential element to the making and re-making of the individual and communal identity of Latinos. My initiation into the hip hop solo performance scene occurred when Rubí Theater Company, Inc., a company co-founded by three other artists and educators and myself, participated in the inaugural NY Hip Hop Theater Festival in 1999. Ever since then, I have interacted with a number of hip hop performers and informally spoken to them about their work. As a way of continuing to explore the genre, I conducted a series of interviews to intimately engage with the performer’s work on- and off-stage. This project is then written from the perspective of an informed insider observing and participating in what has been identified by commercial theatre as hip hop theatre.

To understand the social, cultural, and historical context of Nuyoriqueña hip hop

¹⁷ Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, *José Can You See? Latinos On and Off Broadway* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 103.

solo performers, I also did archival research on political manifestations and artistic cultural events during the Nuyorican Movement. I specifically focus on the performative productions of the Young Lords Party and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. I also gathered reviews of contemporary hip hop productions, analyzed the performance texts, and attended the performances themselves. Given that the personal, historical and performance events that I am examining rely on full-bodied experiences, this project necessitates an interdisciplinary approach informed by cultural materialism, feminism, ethnographic and critical race studies to read the narratives of Nuyoriqueña practitioners as a distinct mode of individual and communal representation.

I turn to Nestor García Canclini's theory of cultural hybridity to explain the hybrid nature of Latina hip hop solo performance as a postmodern phenomenon. The feminist theoretical framework of Alicia Arrizón, Coco Fusco, Cherríe Moraga, and Judith Butler is useful as they historically and culturally locate woman as both a discursive and embodied construct performing acts of resistance and survival. Since these political acts inevitably blur the difference between theatre and cultural performance, I invoke Diana Taylor's *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin America*. The wide variety of cultural performances Taylor includes, from Carnaval to women's use of spectacle for political organizing to the *casita* culture, demonstrates the flexible and unpredictable relationship between theatricality and performativity.

In order to analyze how Nuyoriqueña hip hop solo productions challenge the boundaries between theatre and performance, poetry and theatre, the realities of the performer and the realities of their communities, the identity of the performer and the

embodied fictional characters, I apply Leigh Gilmore's theory of autobiographic narratives and Paula Moya's post-positivist realism theory. Keeping in mind Alberto Sandoval's understanding of be(long)ing, Stuart Hall's notion of becoming, and Juan Flores' discussion of the Pan-Latino imaginary, I finally establish how Nuyoriqueña hip hop solo performances establish links among the self, community and the larger American social body.

Organization of Dissertation

The first chapter, "Performances of Dissent: The Young Lords Party and The Nuyorican Movement," considers the alternate public spaces of resistance, including posters, demonstrations, songs, dance, poems, and plays, that the Young Lords created. These expressive spaces make visible the collective performances of affect produced by Nuyoricans. I examine how the Young Lords used the intersection of poetry and performance as a protest strategy to mobilize the Puerto Rican community from social awareness to social action to social change. I argue that in the midst of negotiating with daily circumstances, the Lords inevitably produced affective performances of race, gender, and ethnicity that acted out and exposed the feelings and conditions of colonialism their community experienced. These scenes rendered a performative language, style, and practice of affect that sustained the Nuyorican individual and the Nuyorican community. What the spectator witnessed, then, were moments when Latinas/os performed the radical desire to belong. Generating these feelings, I argue, was a political performance stratagem used by the Young Lords throughout the Nuyorican Movement to make visible the social role of Latinos in the history of New York City.

The second chapter, “The Nuyorican Poets Cafe: Productions of Space, Place, and Identity,” maps out a genealogy of performance that continued to expand in the seventies. Drawing from the protest traditions of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party in the fifties, the Young Lords Party in New York in the sixties created a performative language that was developed and formalized by the emergence of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the seventies, the focus of this chapter. The overarching continuum that exists from one decade to another is the political connections of poetry and performance that influence and artistically inspire contemporary solo performers. I provide an artistic and cultural production history of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe by examining the theatrical (conscious) and performative (unconscious) staging of Latino/a identities coming out of the Cafe during the post-Civil Rights struggle. I argue that Nuyorican poetry relies on a performative transethnic interaction among African Americans, Latinos and other Afro-diasporic groups.

The third chapter, “NuyoRiqueñas in the House: Feminist Performance Strategies of Sandra María Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa,” through an in depth examination of female autobiographical performances presented between the seventies and nineties, works to reinsert the history of women into the Nuyorican Poetry Movement. I argue that Sandra María Esteves intentionally marries poetry, theatre, and hip hop to not only represent her Nuyorican identity, but to also counter patriarchal dominance. In so doing, she forges a performative tradition that is later implemented by Nuyorican *poetas* (poet) La Bruja and Mariposa.

The fourth chapter, “Staging Afro-Latinidad: The Work of Nilaja Sun and Aya de León,” addresses the complexity of what it means to be black, Latina, and female living

on the east or west coasts. Paying close attention to Nilaja Sun's *La Nubia Latina* and *Black and Blue* as well as Aya de León's *Thieves in the Temple: The Reclaiming of Hip Hop*, I tease out the strategies by which these performance artists make their work inseparable from the meaning of place and identity in America.

The practitioners I am studying come from several performance worlds—performance poetry, the hip hop scene, solo performance, and other forms where text, movement, and sound may not necessarily begin with a script, a story-line, a staging context or a production team. The productions of these Nuyoriqueña hip hop solo performers eschew linear narratives, operate through juxtaposition and collage, and resist the production of fixed or single meaning or reading position. This study positions the works of Luz, Mariposa, Sun, and León as political acts directly responding to social injustices and thereby sparking consciousness in communities of color. What alternative constructions are created when ethnic/racial performances begin inter-ethnic/inter-racial dialogue? How do performers and performances work and circulate within particular theatres and communities? By examining the intersection of politics and the performance of identity, I hope to construct a genealogy of Nuyorican performances from the Young Lords to contemporary hip hop solo performers. Creating such a map allows us to see a historical continuity of the Nuyorican performances as a political tool for community building. This Nuyorican body generates theatrical and performative qualities that are at times difficult to separate. That is, there are theatrical choices that are sometimes conflated by cultural expressions, which ultimately alter our understanding of the various productions at work. To untangle these complicated connections, we begin with a historical backdrop and navigate between the geographical borders of Puerto Rico and

New York to understand the intricate political environment before, during, and after the Nuyorican Movement.

Chapter 1:

Performances of Dissent: The Nuyorican Movement & the Young Lords Party

This chapter focuses on the voices of dissent that used poetry as a way of expressing identity during the Nuyorican Movement. When approaching poetry as a form of activism and resistance the body becomes visibly present. In the case of Nuyorican poetry, the body constantly migrates between geographic borders, cultures, traditions, and languages. It is the inherent corporal motion of traversing boundaries, be they real or imaginary, that makes Nuyorican poetry a socially and politically charged art form. As Frances Aparicio notes, “[it] loudly belied the myth of the American Dream and denounced the subhuman conditions to which Puerto Ricans have been submitted since their massive arrival in the 1940s.”¹⁸ Such was the emergence of the Nuyorican Movement, a period of a New Awakening, *El Nuevo Despertar*. There is no real consensus as to when the Nuyorican Movement started or ended, but it is generally known as a period of cultural, artistic, and political awakening led by second-generation Puerto Rican youth living in New York City during the late sixties and early seventies. This movement of artists, educators, activists, intellectuals, students, and working class people cultivated a form of radicalism generally concerned with the civil role of Puerto Ricans living in New York and addressing issues of social justice.¹⁹ Together, the body, language, and act of remembering the past created a performance of affect that sparked

¹⁸ Frances Aparicio, “From Ethnicity to Multiculturalism: An Historical Overview of Puerto Rican Literature in the United States,” *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures*, ed. Francisco Lomeli (Houston: Arte Público, 1993), 26.

¹⁹ For the purposes of this project, I use “Puerto Ricans” to refer to individuals born and raised on the Island of Puerto Rico, whereas the term “Nuyorican” refers more specifically to the generations of Puerto Ricans born and/or raised in New York City.

the Nuyorican community into political consciousness.

Counter-Acts: P'acá y p'allá, Bregando, and Performing Affect

As newcomers who often experience feelings of alienation and double consciousness, being physically in New York yet still emotionally attached to the umbilical cord of the motherland, Puerto Ricans seek to make new spaces. These alternate public spaces created by marginalized communities, as James Clifford and Paul Gilroy describes, are “forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference.”²⁰ By using what Lisa Sánchez González refers to as a *p'acá y p'allá* (back and forth and all over) dialectic and diachronic strategy, Puerto Ricans living and/or born/raised in New York create physical, temporal, textual (written/corporeal) or imaginary Nuyorican spaces that move in, out, between, and across the geo-political border of Puerto Rico and New York, the linguistic border of Spanish and English and the legal status of citizen/immigrant.²¹

The shuttling back, forth, between, and beyond is a coping mechanism used by Puerto Ricans in the United States to find, reclaim, and affirm the colonial diasporic experiences of their community. This history of diaspora begins with the Spanish-American War of 1898, which established a colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. After the U.S. seized political and economic control over Puerto Rico, displacement was sustained over many decades, pushing Puerto Ricans from the Island to

²⁰ James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 309.

²¹ Lisa Sánchez González, *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (New York University Press: New York and London, 2001), 168.

the States and producing multiple Puerto Rican communities co-existing throughout the United States.²² As a diasporan community, Puerto Ricans developed a collective identity defined by a *p'acá y p'allá* (back and forth and all over) strategy where memories/myths of the homeland and the lived tensions of separation and entanglement depict Puerto Ricans *en la brega*--resisting, surviving and forging ahead.²³

In his provocative collection of essays *El arte de bregar*, Arcadio Díaz-Quñones points out that “Los puertorriqueños siempre están en la brega” (Puerto Ricans are always resisting, surviving and forging ahead).²⁴ By exploring how cultural and political activists are *bregando*, Díaz-Quñones defines “not so much a national trait or idiosyncratic linguistic twist, but a performative, expressive mannerism that reveals the intricacies of contemporary colonial reality.”²⁵ *Bregando* with colonialism, Díaz-Quñones tells us, is part of the historical continuum of Puerto Ricans in the Island and the States.²⁶ If the reality of Puerto Ricans is that they are *en la brega*, constantly

²² The colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico opened doors for American companies to develop business in the Island. However, there were several political and economic disturbances that triggered the Puerto Rican diaspora. With the Great Depression of 1929, many of the American corporations retrenched their operations and devastated Puerto Rico's economy forcing many to leave their homes in search of financial opportunities. The implementation of Operation Bootstrap in 1948 was yet another economic failure as it resulted in the migration of a great number of laborers to the mainland in the 1950s and 1960s in search of employment. This industrialization and urbanization policy encouraged rural Puerto Rican families to abandon their agricultural plots and work for American businesses in the Island or in the States.

²³ James Clifford, “Diasporas,” 305.

²⁴ His essays illustrate how artists and political leaders throughout history are *en la brega*. Included in this group is the leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalists Party Pedro Albizu Campos; Judith Ortiz Cofer, the Puerto Rican writer raised in New Jersey; the visual artists Lorenzo Homar and dancer-choreographer Gilda Navarro. Note that all translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine. See Arcadio Díaz-Quñones, *El arte de bregar ensayos* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Callejón, 2000), 19.

²⁵ Juan Flores, “Reclaiming Left Baggage: Some Early Sources for Minority Studies,” *Cultural Critique* 59 (2005): 203.

²⁶ In his first chapter, “De cómo y cuándo bregar,” Díaz-Quñones illustrates in great depth the many usages of the word “bregar.” He emphasizes that *la brega* goes hand-in-hand with colonialism as well as modernity. Together these cultural and political forces invent and define the Puerto Rican identity.

confronting, dealing, and persisting with their everyday struggle as colonial subjects, then we must consider how this colonial reality is imagined, transferred, narrated, and performed in the lives of Nuyoricans today.

It is not so much the context of the protest that I am interested in, but how and what the ethnic/racial body performs in demonstrations that are specifically by, of and about Puerto Rican culture-makers, their communities, and their place in the larger American social body. As José Muñoz suggests in “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*,” we need to “move beyond notions of ethnicity as fixed (something that people are) and instead understand it as performative (what people do).”²⁷ He argues that since Americans put great value on whether a person enacts and embodies an “official” citizenship, there exists a culture of performing national affect. The same system that grants natural or naturalized citizenship, however, often displaces Latinos. For instance, although Puerto Ricans were granted citizenship with the passing of the Jones Act of 1917, they do not have equal access to voting during the presidential elections. However as citizens they were drafted into the United States army to fight in the First World War. This ambiguous predicament is the

La colonia, *la brega*, y el deseo de modernidad llevan vidas paralelas. Entre las tres se ha ido tejiendo una relación profunda durante un largo período. Por más que se pretenda lo contrario, el horizonte colonial ofrece una resistente continuidad: es estrictamente complementario de la modernidad puertorriqueña. Tanto la humillación colonial como las formas de *bregar* con ella son las constantes históricas que marcan la vida puertorriqueña en la isla y en los Estados Unidos. Los poderes culturales y políticos de esa dominación han definido en buena medida incluso las formas en que se ha imaginado -y narrado- lo nacional (86). [The colony, *la brega* and the desire of modernism run parallel lives. Over the years, an intricate relationship has developed among the three. Although colonialism is said to be the opposite of modernism, it is indeed complementary to Puerto Rican modernity. Colonial submission as well as the various ways of *bregando* with colonialism is part of the historical continuum that marks the lives of Puerto Ricans in the island and in the United States. These cultural and political forces have even defined the ways in which one has imagined and narrated nationalism (86).]

²⁷ José Muñoz, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*,” *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000): 70.

reason Norma Alarcón describes Latinos as “identities-in-difference,” individuals who are constantly resisting and countering systems that neglect to accept fully their social existence.²⁸ One of the ways Latinos counter the performance of national affect is by perceiving the world through “affective difference,” creating what Muñoz refers to as “emotional performances of self that constitute Latina/o difference and survival.”²⁹ This affective performance theory makes it possible for scholars and critics like myself to read/feel Latina/o drama and performance through “a structure of feeling,”³⁰ whereby emotions are read/felt as “the active [interpersonal and social] negotiations of people within their social and historical matrix.”³¹ In light of this, I situate the Nuyorican and Young Lords phenomena within a “structure of feeling.” In addition to the diverse social and cultural backgrounds (age, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, nationality, and race) that this Latino community confronts, they inject into American history performance strategies of affect and resistance.

The Young Lords “En La Brega”: Protest as Performance, Performance as Protest

Among the many political organizations shaping the Nuyorican Movement, the Young Lords Party stands out as one of the exemplary groups of the time. This chapter considers the alternate public spaces that the Young Lords created in posters,

²⁸ For an in depth discussion on identities-in-difference see Norma Alarcón, “Conjugating Subjects in the Age of Multiculturalism,” *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 127-48.

²⁹ Muñoz, “Feeling Brown,” 69.

³⁰ Muñoz is further expanding on the idea of “a structure of feeling,” which was originally coined by Raymond Williams who suggests that experiences and feelings must be placed in a social and historical context. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 133.

³¹ Muñoz, “Feeling Brown,” 71.

demonstrations, songs, dances, poems, and plays to make visible the collective performances of affect produced by Nuyoricans constantly *bregando*. In particular, I examine how the Young Lords used the intersection of poetry and performance as a protest strategy to mobilize the Puerto Rican community from social awareness to social action to social change.³² I argue that in the midst of being *en la brega*--pulling and pushing, dealing and negotiating with daily circumstances--the Lords inevitably produce affective performances of race and ethnicity that act out and expose the feelings and conditions of colonialism their community experiences. These *en la brega* scenes render a performative language, style, and practice of affect that sustains the Nuyoricans individual and the Nuyoricans community. What the spectator witnesses, then, are moments when Latinas/os perform the radical desires and feelings of be(long)ing, which I believe was a political performance stratagem used by the Young Lords throughout the Nuyoricans Movement to engrave the social role of Latinos in the historical memory of New York.³³

³² In the spring of 1970 the New York Young Lords Organization (YLO) became known as the Young Lords Party. Under the approval of “Cha Cha” Jiménez, the founder of the Young Lords Organization (YLO) in Chicago, Pablo “Yoruba” Guzman, David Pérez, “Mickey” Miguel Meléndez and Felipe Luciano started a chapter in New York City. The New York chapter outgrew the central branch and gained so much national attention that members requested to split from the YLO because of its ties with gangsters. Unlike the YLO in Chicago, the chapter in New York included people from all walks of life, from former college students to mothers to factory and hospital workers to ex-addicts, ex-alcoholics, and ex-convicts to former gang members who became socially and politically conscious. The Lords’ initial central committee included Pablo “Yoruba” Guzman and David Pérez, who were at the time students from Old Westbury College; Juan Gonzales, who was studying at Columbia University; Felipe Luciano, who was attending Queens College; and Juan “Fi” Ortiz, a street youth from El Barrio. Committed to the future of the organization most of these Lords decided to dedicate their time solely to the organization and ended their studies. There are a number of sources that document the history of the Young Lords Party. Some of the most popular primary sources include: *Caribe* 7, no. (1983): 4, a photographic narration of the history of the Young Lords; memoirs of former Young Lords including “Mickey” Miguel Meléndez’s *We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with the Young Lords* (2005) and *Palante Young Lords* (1971), a collection of essays by Young Lords with photographs and narration by Michael Abramson; video documentaries *¡Palante, Siempre Palante!* (1996) and *El Pueblo Se Levanta* (1971). Also the Young Lords’ website (www.younglords.info/links.html), launched on April 15, 2005, includes more recent interviews with former Lord members.

³³ Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez layers this word with multiple meanings as it literally encompasses

I posit that despite the temporal separation, there exists a continuum of performative aesthetic, style, and form between the Young Lords Party and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. From the parades and insurrections staged by the Puerto Rican Nationalists to the street demonstrations of the Young Lords to the acts of resistance off and on the pages of newsletters, these political organizations served as a conduit for Latinos to stage their identities in theatrical and non-theatrical settings. The result was a mode of performing identity and community that crystallized a local discourse and aesthetic vital to the development of the Nuyorican community. I read the Young Lords' protest demonstrations as a living performative practice and socio-cultural act of resistance that is still in the process of formation and continues to be enacted by contemporary Latina hip hop solo performers.³⁴ In doing so, I disinter what Marvin Carlson refers to as the "real meaning in the praxis" and examine what triggered these Latino-based protests, how it was created, justified, and revised as well as how it exists and operates within the Nuyorican culture.³⁵ In this spirit, I map out what Joseph Roach refers to as "genealogies of performance" and begin this project by charting some key moments of political production where poetry and performance intersect across the geographical borders of Puerto Rico and New York in the time before, during, and after

the ever-present feelings of belonging, being and longing experienced by many Latinos. See Alberto Sandoval- Sánchez, *José Can You See: Latinos On and Off Broadway* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 171.

³⁴ For further discussion on approaching Latino social movements as a process in formation see Roberto P. Rodriguez- Morazzani's essay "Political Culture of the Puerto Rican Left in the U.S.," *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, ed. Andrés Torres and José Velázquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 25-47.

³⁵ Marvin Carlson, *Performance* (London: Routledge, 1996), 95.

the Nuyorican Movement.³⁶

Living in One's Skin: Labels of Identification

The Young Lords de- and re- construct words, images and gestures as a way of learning to come into an identification that is both part of and apart from the social fabric of New York. In his essay “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” Stuart Hall recalls the fond memory of his son learning colors to explain the process of self-identification. As a way to begin discussing race with his child, Hall told his son that he was black, but his son innocently corrected him and told him he was brown.³⁷ His anecdote demonstrates how individuals come to live in their skin and how the process of identification is mutable depending on where the eye/I stands. While his son identified himself based on his knowledge of colors, Stuart placed him in the system of Othering, whereby the visual markers of an individual are automatically inscribed with social meanings and histories. For Puerto Ricans the system of Othering relies on the signification of visual markings that are also embedded in the history of colonialism and the diaspora. As David Colón reminds us, “The Other is the other of nationhood—being the lack of sovereignty in the person of the self that embodies all kinship relations, from the nuclear family to the House of Windsor to diaspora to continental ethnic identity.”³⁸

³⁶ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); “Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World,” *Performativity and Performance*, eds. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (London: Routledge, 1993), 45-63, and “Theatre History and the Ideology of Aesthetic,” *Theatre Journal* 1, no. 2 (1989): 155-168.

³⁷ Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 41-67.

³⁸ David Colón, “Other Latino Poetic Method,” *Cultural Critique* 47 (Winter 2001): 269-270.

Precisely because of their colonial and diasporan history, Puerto Ricans often *bregan*, negotiate, the presence and absence of selfhood and nationhood.³⁹

Given the history of Othering, colonialism, and displacement, it is important then to root and route (á la Paul Gilroy) “Nuyorican” in a diasporan context. Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, two avant-garde poets of the early seventies, who explore new ways of writing, speaking, feeling, and seeing to their identity as Puerto Ricans in New York, coined the term “Nuyorican.” This label of identification articulates the double awareness of a community that experiences, remembers and desires between, across and within the geopolitical borders of New York and Puerto Rico. As Algarín puts it in the introduction of *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings* (1975),

The experience of Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York has caused a new language to grow: Nuyorican. Nuyoricans are a special experience in the immigration history of the city of New York. We come to the city as citizens and can retain the use of Spanish and include English... The mixture of both languages grows. The interchange between both yields new verbal possibilities, new images to deal with the stresses of living on tar and cement.⁴⁰

The release of *Nuyorican Poetry*, co-edited by Algarín and Piñero, popularized the term “Nuyorican” by featuring Puerto Rican poets who were born and/or living in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. At the time of its publication, the urban renewal projects in the Lower East Side were gradually forcing many non-white working class people to move. Inevitably, the poets brought to the forefront their past and present experiences of

³⁹ Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones explains that *bregando*: “No es una forma de ser. Es una forma de estar y no estar, un tipo no preciso de lucha, una negociación entre la ausencia y la presencia” (20). [It is not a form of being, but it is a form of existing and not existing. It is not exactly struggling, but negotiating between absence and presence.]

⁴⁰ Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, *Nuyorican Poetry: Anthology of Words and Feelings* (New York: William Morrow, 1975), 15.

displacement. The term “Nuyorican” emerges at a time when Puerto Ricans who were living and/or born in New York were *bregando* with multiple layers of displacement. As native New Yorkers or native Puerto Ricans living in New York they were not only forced to move from the Lower East Side, their biological and/or residential homeland, but they were in a sense re-experiencing the same colonial displacement of Puerto Ricans in the early twentieth century. These experiences of displacement were further complicated by their rejection by (or from) their idealized or longed for homeland, since they were not welcomed in Puerto Rico because of their “lack” of ethnic authenticity. They were either perceived as imposters for “pretending” to be Puerto Rican or as traitors for leaving their homeland in the first place. For Nuyoricans, therefore, *bregando* is bounded by the social oppression they encounter in New York City as well as the colonial history that their people lived through and its repercussions.

As a result of New York Puerto Ricans *bregando* with the systems of Othering, colonialism, and displacement, they created several labels to define their identity. “Nuyorican” is one that has been frequently used despite its shifting historical connotation, both negative and positive. Among island Puerto Ricans “Nuyorican” was used as a derisive term to demean mainland-born or raised Puerto Ricans. By the same token, the term became a way of performing bi-national affect and bicultural pride of both Puerto Rico and New York. We should, however, also keep in mind the interventions of other labels of identification that have help defined the Puerto Rican community in New York. Long before Algarín’s and Piñero’s creation of the epithet “Nuyorican,” Jaime Carrero, the chairman of the Arts Department at the Inter American University of San Germán in Puerto Rico, first coined the term “Neo-Rican” in his poem

“Jet Neorriqueño/Neo-Rican Jetliner” published in 1964. Carrero Latinizes “New York Rican” by using both the Spanish and Latin language to explain the social context of a new and unique migrating group. Like Algarín and Piñero, Carrero literally invents new terms that express the social experience of the community. However, while “Neo-Rican” is a label of identification that gradually crosses the geographic boundaries of Puerto Rico and New York, “Nuyorican” remains in the States.⁴¹ Despite the different histories and meanings behind these labels, all of these poets take artistic license with the English and Spanish languages to create terms that reaffirm the identity of Puerto Ricans experiencing New York City.

Carrero and his colleague Robert Muckley began to notice that there was a growing population of Puerto Rican students returning to the Island who had been educated in New York and were creating different linguistic and artistic forms. While Carrero witnessed the artistic expressions linked to the social realities of Puerto Rican students who immigrated to New York and returned to Puerto Rico, Muckley found that those same students could not be placed easily in Spanish classes with monolingual North Americans. It becomes clear that the term Neo-Rican is representative of the cyclic migration of Puerto Ricans experienced either from the Island to States and back or from the States to the Island and back. During the late sixties and early seventies, this type of migration affected the Spanish-teaching profession. Educators believed that instead of having a large enrollment of “native” speakers in remedial Spanish, separate courses were necessary for bilingual speakers so as not to inhibit the learning process of regular

⁴¹ In the most recent years, the works of Nuyorican poets have influenced most notable young poets from the Island and have therefore redefined notions of Puerto Rican identity. See Guillermo Rebollo-Gil’s “The New Boogaloo: Nuyorican Poetry and The Coming Puerto Rican Identities.” Masters Thesis, University of Florida, 2004.

foreign language courses nor introduce inappropriate speech habits.⁴² In 1972, the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese commissioned a report with suggestions on what native speakers in Spanish classes should learn. This, however, did not guarantee an increase in a student's overall language proficiency. After a summer institute held in the summer of 1978 in Las Cruces, New Mexico, Spanish teaching professionals discussed how preconceived notions of native Spanish speakers in the United States as illiterates interfered with the teaching and learning process and decided to re-evaluate the materials in their syllabi. They saw the value of integrating Puerto Rican and Chicano writings as well as Latin American and Spanish writings to discuss the complexity of bilingualism and the range of language appropriateness.⁴³ Although in the past immigrants were considered to be "Americans" when losing traces of their ethnic heritage, including their language, now the education system encouraged the idea of preserving and maintaining the language of specific ethnic groups in the United States. This bi-cultural and bi-lingual sensibility helped educators, like Muckley and Carrero, to understand that students experiencing a cyclic migration had an inherently different sense of identity.

⁴² Guadalupe Valdés, "Teaching Ethnic Language in the United States: Implications for Curriculum and Faculty Development," *ADFL Bulletin* 11 (March 1980): 31-35. For more discussion on how educators were responding to the population of native speakers in Spanish during the nineteen seventies see A. Bruce Gaarder et al., "Teachings Spanish in School and College to Native Speakers of Spanish," *Hispania* 55 (1972): 619-31 as well as the anthology *Teaching Spanish to the Spanish-Speaking: Theory and Practice*, eds. Guadalupe Valdés and Rodolfo García-Moya (San Antonio, TX: Linguistics Department, Trinity University, 1976).

⁴³ Guadalupe Valdés and Richard Teschner received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities to organize an eight-week summer institute. This project brought together eighteen university educators who redesigned their courses to enhance the learning experience of native speakers in Spanish courses and who were committed to implementing it in their universities. Valdés and Teschner later went on to co-authoring *Spanish for the Spanish-Speaking: A Descriptive Bibliography of Materials* (Austin, TX: National Educational Laboratory, 1977) and *Español escrito: curso para hispanohablantes bilingües* (New York: Scribner's, 1978). See Valdés, "Teaching Ethnic Language in the United States: Implications for Curriculum and Faculty Development," *ADFL Bulletin* 11 (March 1980): 35-36.

Attuned to the current debates in the profession, Muckley came to the conclusion that he had to teach Spanish as an ethnic language and develop material specifically for the Puerto Rican population who immigrated to New York and returned to the Island.⁴⁴ He noticed that this group had re-appropriated the Spanish language to reflect their cyclic migration experience. Interested in this subculture, Carrero and Muckley organized the “Neorican Seminar” on April 10, 1972. Guest speakers, including Bronx Democrat Herman Badillo, columnist Juan Manuel García-Passalacqua and members of the Young Lords, shared their views on the matter at hand.⁴⁵ In this event art and politics intersected as people within the Puerto Rican community began to analyze the meaning of “Neorican” through case studies or expressive art forms such as poetry, vignettes, and drawings.

Notice that the hyphenation that was originally in Carrero’s poem “Jet Neorriqueño/Neo-Rican Jetliner” disappears. As is evident in Carrero’s poem and José-Angel Figueroa’s “211 d/latin soul & hip language,” which were both published in the *Notes of Neorican Seminar*, the hyphen between “Neo” and “Rican” emphasizes the interrelations between two cultures as well as the creation of an alternative identity that stands between New York and Puerto Rico. Carrero, in his poem, asserts his Neo-Rican

⁴⁴ Robert L. Muckley, *Notes of Neorican Seminar* (San Germán, P.R.: Universidad Interamericana, 1972), 2.

⁴⁵ It was quite appropriate to invite Herman Badillo and Juan Manuel García-Passalacqua to the conference. At the time, they were both important political figures in New York and Puerto Rico, respectively. Badillo, for example, held office as a Bronx Borough President, Congressman, and Deputy Mayor of New York City. He became the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York during Giuliani’s administration. He recently published *One Nation, One Standard: An Ex-Liberal on How Hispanics Can Succeed Just Like Other Immigrant Groups* (New York: Sentinel, 2006). García-Passalacqua is a renowned lawyer, writer and political analyst who assisted governors Luis Muñoz Marín and Roberto Sánchez Vilella, both of the Popular Democratic Party of Puerto Rico in the seventies. Dissatisfied with the political party, he left and became a television producer in Puerto Rico. He continues to host radio programs at San Juan’s WKAQ as a political commentator.

identity by making a distinction between Puerto Ricans from the island and those from the states.

I was born in New York new blood.

I was born in New York

I'm not a Jones Act Puerto Rican

yeah?

I am a Neo-Rican man new flash.

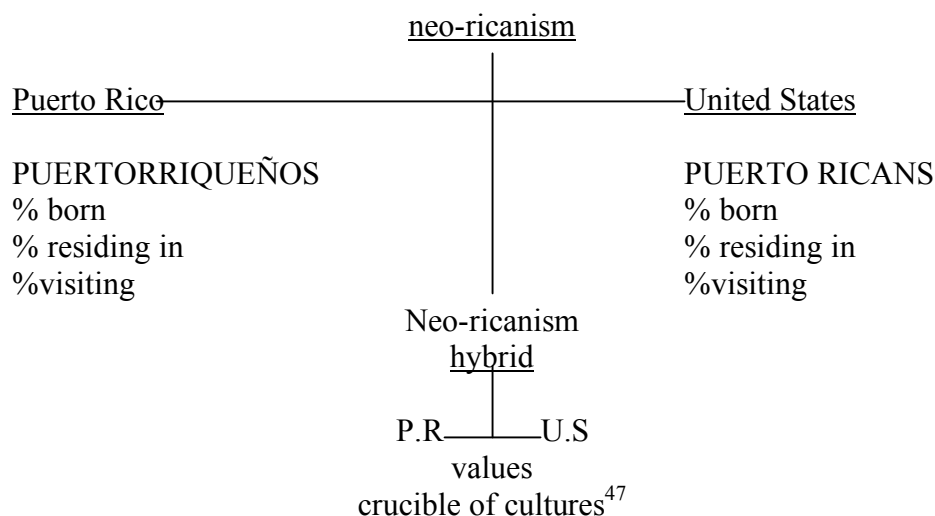
yeah?

I know what I know no Jones Act man.

yeah?⁴⁶

As opposed to those Puerto Ricans who became naturalized citizens under the Jones Act, it was the natural rights of Neo-Ricans to remain Puerto Rican even if born in New York. Similarly, in Figueroa's poem, he literally and visually captures the intersections between Puerto Rico and the United States.

⁴⁶ Muckley, *Notes of Neorican Seminar*, 49.



This diagram illustrates the making of not only a new identity, but also a new culture. The geographic boundaries that separate the islands of Puerto Rico and New York City collapse as the fluidity, interconnections, and fusions between these two cultures and places create a new way of being and living, the making of neo-ricanism. Carrero's and Figueroa's poems suggest that the coming together of two disparate cultures and histories creates a new identity that will over time be recognized by all. The move from "NeoRican" to "Neo-Rican" is therefore a natural one since history makes it difficult to untangle the intimate intercultural networks that co-inhabit the everyday practices of Neoricans.

This is especially illustrated in the documentation of the Neorican Seminar in which speakers conflated the term "Neorican," which was first applied to native Puerto Ricans who were raised in the States and were now returning to their homeland, to New York Puerto Ricans. In the conference, however, panelists used the term interchangeably with Puerto Ricans born in the States and had no intentions of returning to Puerto Rico. In doing so, I believe this seminar, bridged the stories of Puerto Ricans

⁴⁷ Muckley, *Notes of Neorican Seminar*, 70.

who experienced a lateral migration with those who experienced a cyclic migration. Puerto Ricans from the Island who traveled to the States and later returned were learning about the experiences of Puerto Ricans who remained in the States or who were born there.

In a televised interview conducted by Carrero and Muckley, Badillo discussed how general factors distinguished the experiences of Puerto Ricans from Nuyoricans. He noted that some of those living in New York were born and raised in Puerto Rico and immigrated to the States as adults, while others immigrated as young adults. Then there were those who were born in New York and only dreamt of Puerto Rico. He encouraged people to consider the distinctions among these generations of Puerto Ricans living in New York. Despite these differences, however, Badillo argued that all Puerto Ricans, in the States and on the Island, should equally collaborate in the making of their community.⁴⁸

Badillo's understanding of the term "Neorican" is in juxtaposition to the Marxist view of two Young Lords: Juan Ramos Cruz, Vice President of the Ministry of Defense from Philadelphia, and Pedro Rodríguez, Cosme Cuadro of Defense from New York. The Young Lords stated that social class, rather than cultural or generational factors, played the crucial role in understanding Neoricans.⁴⁹ As community organizers from Spanish Harlem, one of the most neglected neighborhoods in New York City, the Young Lords understood that the economic status of a group of people was a determinant factor in the way the U.S. government treated Puerto Ricans and Neoricans. While Badillo

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 29.

localized the term “Neorican” to New York, the Young Lords moved away from constraining the term geographically and referred to the local metropolitan area of New York and Philadelphia as well as the national context of the United States. In addition to nationalizing the term, the Young Lords considered and promoted a cyclic rather than lateral migration history of Puerto Ricans. To them the return to the Island was a cultural responsibility and a way of reclaiming their past given their history of diaspora. They themselves were models of this as they returned to open a branch of the organization in Agaudilla, Puerto Rico.

Despite the various interpretations, the terms “New York Rican,” “Newyorican,” “Neorican,” and “Nuyorican” tend to show how working-class Puerto Ricans from the Island or the States *bregan* with alienation as they construct the familiar in unfamiliar and sometimes unwelcoming territories. This is illustrated in “Notes of Neorican Seminar,” a pamphlet designed by Carrero documenting the discussions, lectures, and interviews of this event. In it, he also includes a series of poems, graphic art, collages, newspaper clippings and comic strips created by him and other members of the community. Although Carrero explicitly states on the front cover of the pamphlet that it is not a comic book so as to not detract from the seriousness of the Neorican Seminar, he captures a slice of the Neorican life by using comic book iconography. He illustrates how Neoricans simultaneously transform the Spanish and English language. He draws a kid holding a bat and hollering: “Hey Johni, bamos a la yarda a jugar.” The name Johnny and yard are Spanglishized into Johni and yarda. However, the use of “bamos” instead of “vamos” and “jugal” instead of “jugar” are specific dialectical traits of Puerto Ricans and Caribbeans. The social challenge of not having enough money even to pay rent is humorously

conveyed by the daughter who yells out the window to her father: “Hey pops, el landlord esta en el rufo esperando que tu llegues de la marqueta pa’ cobrarte el bill “(Hey pops, the landlord is on the roof waiting for you to come back from the market to charge you for the bill).” The struggle of standing between two worlds, that of New York and Puerto Rico, is tragically portrayed by a troubled man who sits at the edge of the sidewalk wondering “Quien @#* am I??” “(Who @#*I??).”

Carrero’s use of comic book iconography underlines the social identity of Neoricans. To Carrero language appears to be the signifier that marks the body as Neoricans. The juxtaposition of the characters and the written dialogue attempts to link the word to a body, albeit a pictorial representation, but nonetheless one that is specifically claiming a Neoricans identification. In this way, the drawings of people along with the written text speak out from the page capturing the readers/viewers. The written speech patterns along with the comic book figures of people implicate the body, and thus create a performative moment where the reader witnesses Neoricans *en la brega*. It is crucial to point out these emerging performative spaces because they serve as sites of identification for Puerto Ricans living in New York and as such help us plot the performative traditions throughout the Nuyoricans Movement.

The similar yet distinct labels of identification ascribed to Puerto Ricans who have experienced the States tend to accent a place, language and/or culture, which in turn reflect the dynamic relationship that exists between the self and the community throughout the sixties and seventies. “New York Rican,” for example, stresses the Puerto Rican cultural identity in relation to the local geographic borders of New York City, while “Neoricans” emphasizes the new linguistic possibilities, sociological development

and artistic creations within the community of Puerto Ricans that live not only in New York but also in the entire nation. In contrast, terms like “Newyorican” or “Nuyorican.” attempt to collapse and fuse the geographic, linguistic and cultural borders between Puerto Rico and New York City. Depending on how the speaker perceives him or herself in relation to both the Puerto Rican and the American community, the term changes. Just as the self/community is in flux or in the process of becoming an identifiable person or group, the term and its meaning also change.

Poetry and Performance: The Protest Traditions of The Young Lords Party

Since Nuyoricans were *bregando* with different systems of power, the Young Lords Party was intentionally established to serve and protect their community by making visible their daily struggles. On July 26, 1969 urban activists announced to the entire Lower East Side community the founding of the Young Lords Party. This news was made public during a rally at Tompkins Square Park, which commemorated the attack on Moncada Barracks in 1953 by a group of Cuban revolutionaries.⁵⁰ Following the public announcement, Felipe Luciano performed his poem, “Jíbaro, My Pretty Nigger.” It is worth citing the poem in its entirety because it illustrates how Luciano, by performing his poetry, creates a platform in which expressive artistic modes of self-representation intersect with the Young Lords’ political agenda.

Jíbaro, mi negro lindo
De los bosques de caña, cacique de luz.
Jíbaro, my pretty nigger

⁵⁰ On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro along with a hundred and fifty men assaulted the Moncada Barracks, which was the main provincial garrison of Fulgencia Batista’s armed forces. Although the revolt failed, Castro earned recognition as a leader for opposing the Cuban dictator.

Father of my yearning for the soil
 The land the earth of my peoples.
 Father of the sweet smells of fruits in my mother's womb.
 The earth brown of my skin,
 The thought of freedom time butterfly through my insides.

Jíbaro, my pretty nigger
 Sweating bullets of blood and bedbugs
 Swaying softly to the strum of five-string guitar
 Remembering ancient empires of sun gods and black spirits.
 And things that were once so simple.
 SO SIMPLE

How times have changed men
 How men have changed times
 Unnatural screams the wind, unnatural

Jíbaro, my pretty nigger-man
 Fish smells and cane smells and fish and cane smells
 and tobacco and oppression
 Makes even God smell foul.
 As foul as the bowels of the ship that vomited you up
 In the harbor of a cold metal city to die
 No sand no sand no palm trees
 and you clung, you clung
 To the slimy ribs of an animal called the marine tiger.
 In the name of the Father, the son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.

Jíbaro, did you know you're my nigger?
 I Love the curve of your brow
 The slant of your baby's eyes
 The calves of your women dancing,
 I dig you!
 You can't hide!
 I ride with you on subways
 I touch shoulders with you at dances
 I make crazy love to your daughter Yeah!
 You're my cold nigger man.

And I love you cause you're mine
 And I'll never let you go.
 And I'll never let you go.
 You're mine nigger and I'll never let you go.
 Forget about self
 We're together now
 and I'll never let go!

Hm Hm Never, nigger!⁵¹

One way of serving and protecting the community is by returning to cultural icons, like “jíbaro” and “nigger,” which are loaded with cultural and political meaning. In this poem Luciano intentionally juxtaposes the term “jíbaro” and “nigger” to suggest the duplicitous historic and political connotations of these terms. Although debatable, many believe “Jíbaro” is a term deriving from two root words “jiba” and “iro” in the Taíno language: “Jiba” meaning forest and “iro” meaning man or men, describes the working-class agricultural land tenant, sharecropper or field worker. Given that by the 1940s many landowning elites were displaced by colonialism, they relied on cultural icons like jíbaro to authenticate their Puerto Rican identity.⁵² Ironically, rural white Puerto Ricans claimed a term that once denigrated peasant field workers. It especially became a widely recognized national symbol when Luis Muñoz Marín implemented the silhouette image of the *jíbaro* in profile wearing a straw hat as the emblem of the Popular Democratic Party of Puerto Rico.⁵³ This moved the term and image of the *jíbaro* into a political discourse of collectivity as the image neutralized notions of race and thus brought Puerto Ricans from all walks of life together.

Twenty-nine years later Felipe Luciano utters this word in his poem at a rally to officially announce the inauguration of the Young Lords Party. He not only invokes the archetypal myth of the people but then also links it to nigger, a derogatory term used to

⁵¹ Felipe Luciano, “Jíbaro, My Pretty Nigger,” *Right On*, Collectibles, Last Poets Group, compact disc, 1994.

⁵² For a thorough discussion of the appropriation of *jíbaro* by the elite see Lillian Guerra’s *Popular Expression and National Identity in Puerto Rico: The Struggle for Self, Community, and Nation* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998).

⁵³ For a detailed study of how Luis Muñoz Marín manipulated the image of *el jíbaro* to fit the campaign discourse of the Popular Democratic Party see Nathaniel L. Córdova’s “In His Image and Likeness: The Puerto Rican Jíbaro as Political Icon,” *El Centro Journal* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 171-91.

refer to black people. The juxtaposition of these trans-nationalized and trans-temporal terms along with Luciano's identity as an Afro-Nuyorican man addresses some of the problematic politics of authenticity and internal racism present in the community. As a black man, Luciano was affiliated with the African American community precisely because at times he was not perceived as Puerto Rican. Given this conflicting experience, by employing cynicism he reclaims his Puerto Rican folk roots by calling upon *el jibaro*. That is, his first stanza upholds the national symbol of *jibaro*; however, by the third stanza he displaces that cultural pride with the "foul smell" imposed by the colonizer or the slave owner who negatively perceived *jibaros* and black people. Curiously, Luciano persistently displaces the coerced foulness by joining it with the word "pretty" on several occasions. The union of these words, "Jíbaro, my pretty nigger," taps into the identities of Luciano's past in the presence of others. While he traces his African, Taíno and Puerto Rican lineages, he creates a space where one can contemplate the past in relation to the present in hopes of collectively constructing a future. The constant juxtaposition of *jibaro* and nigger along with Luciano's visible Afro-Nuyorican identity creates what I will refer to as a retro/intro/prospective space. Here the performer and the community use language and the senses as a mnemonic tool to connect with the memory of past.

Since music and food are an important part of the Nuyorican culture, Luciano's performance poetry fills the intro/retro/prospective spaces with images of sounds and smells that make New York City his homeland in spite of his feelings of alienation and displacement. In his poetry he utilizes the senses of hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and feeling to summon the past and connect with his *jibaro* and African cultures. His poem describes the sweat oozing from his body, as he dances to the music made by a five-string

guitar. Perhaps he thinks of the *cuatro*, a ‘guitar like’ instrument used in the tradition of Puerto Rican folk music or maybe he suggests the banjo, a typically five stringed instrument, which originated in Africa. The ahistorical five-string guitar allows the audience to remember the ancient empires of sun gods from Latin American, North America and Africa. The open ended musical and spiritual options flavor his poem with a *p’aca y p’alla* dialectic that allows Luciano to co-exist in multiple geographic memories: Puerto Rico, Africa and the United States.

Just as Luciano uses soundscapes to restimulate the audience, he also triggers their olfactory nerves when he presses on the utterance of “Fish smells and cane smells and fish and cane smells and tobacco.”⁵⁴ Due to diseases brought to the Islands by the Spaniards in the 1500s the Taíno population had drastically declined.⁵⁵ Consequently, Africans and other Caribbean natives were imported to Puerto Rico as early as the sixteenth century to work in the sugar cane and tobacco plantations. The aroma of sugar cane and tobacco serves as a mnemonic strategy to reconnect the olfactory experiences of Taíno and African slaves with the present oppressive odor of garbage accumulating due to the neglect of the Sanitation Department to consider El Barrio as a pick-up spot. In this poem Luciano reclaims the lost diasporan histories of Puerto Ricans and Africans, magnifies the affinities between the Puerto Rican and black community, and makes

⁵⁴ “Restimulate” is a term used by women-centered organizations like the National Latina Health Organization and Casa Atabex Ache—House of Womyn’s Power to describe how the ritual of telling and sharing ones experience triggers another person to recall her own feelings about the issue at hand. Both organizations practice emotional release work as part of the organization’s internal and external programming.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the factors that triggered such a downward spiral of the native population into extinction read Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997) and David Stannard, *American Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

alliances with communities sharing similar, if not the same, histories of colonization and slavery.

The Transethnic Relationship Between Latinos and African Americans

Many of the historical accounts of the sixties tend to exclude the Nuyorican Movement.⁵⁶ This lack of attention, I propose, has two causes. The first rises from the uncertain classification of Puerto Ricans as citizens or immigrants. There exists a sense of national in-betweenness as Puerto Ricans are technically Americans yet are often perceived as foreigners. Due to the Spanish-American War (1898), the annexation of Puerto Rico, and its subsequent status as U.S. Commonwealth, Puerto Ricans often struggle between two (or more) national identities—American, Puerto Rican and Nuyorican.⁵⁷ In this sense the Nuyorican Movement is seen as an immigrant

⁵⁶ Take for example, Ron Robert's and Robert M. Kloss's *Social Movements: Between the Balcony and the Barricade* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1974); Sohnya Sayres's, et al *The 60s Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Godfrey Hodgson's *America in Our Time* (New York: Random House, 1976); Todd Gitlin's, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987); William L. O'Neil's, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Books, 1971); Milton Viorst's, *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960's* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); and Annie Gottlieb's, *Do You Believe in Magic? The Second Coming of the Sixties Generation* (New York: Times Books, 1987). These texts provide us with an in depth study of the time but do not weave the Nuyorican Movement in the history of the sixties. For collections that discuss the Puerto Rican Movement and its impact on American history see editors Andrés Torres's and José E. Velázquez's *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998) and Jorge Duany's *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ There are several Nuyorican poets who address the condition of being neither here (in New York or the United States) nor there (in Puerto Rico). For instance in *Ode to the Diasporican*, Mariposa writes: "What does it mean to live in between/What does it take to realize/that being Boricua/is a state of mind/ a state of heart/ a state of soul...;/No nació en Puerto Rico/Puerto Rico nació en mí! [I was not born in Puerto Rico/Puerto Rico was born in me!]" ("Bronx Bronxña," 7-8). Sandra María Esteves' famous poem "Here" which was published in *Yerba Buena* also affirms her Nuyorican duality.

I am two parts/ a person

Boricua/spic

Past and present

Alive and oppressed

...and robbed of a cultural identity (New York: Greenfield Review, 1980).

Reverend Pedro Pietri deals with his dual identity in a similar manner. Like many Nuyorican poets, he too embraces his multiple identities constantly in flux. In 1979 he founded the Puerto Rican

phenomenon, and therefore, it is not surprising that it has received little coverage in social movement scholarship.

The second cause for the lack of attention is the local aesthetic and local style Puerto Ricans used in New York to forge the Nuyorican Movement. The creation of Spanglish, the use of poetry and oral tradition as a political strategy as well as the fusion of sounds, gestures and ways of being from the urban environment were distinctive local elements that helped develop a Nuyorican discourse. Because of its local specificity the Nuyorican Movement tends to appear so different as to be alien and unrecognizable to those outside this cultural milieu. This geo-ethnic-specific movement differs drastically, for example, from the Black Arts Movement, which as David Lionel Smith points out, had several points of origin and produced a national black discourse linked to the various local responses throughout the United States.⁵⁸ The Nuyorican Movement, on the other hand, emanated from the local needs of Puerto Ricans living in New York who simultaneously maintained and interacted with a Puerto Rican national discourse.

Since Latinos and African Americans were confronting similar social challenges and social injustices, this study considers the transethnic interactions between these two communities during the Nuyorican Movement. In many ways the black social movements of the sixties served to inspire the Nuyorican Movement. The political awakening of

Embassy as a way to reinforce the dual citizenship of Puerto Ricans. Members received a passport that documented their migration into and out of the state and the mainland. The passport includes Pietri's poem entitled "Manifesto: Notes on The Puerto Rican Embassy." "What do we want? What every human being wants! The right to dance *La Plena* whenever we please,/Like dignified human beings of tropical brilliance/Who time after time their fine minds have proven,/That you can be in two Islands at the same time/Dancing to supernatural down to earth rhythms from/Solitary jukebox from the past, present & future!"

⁵⁸ David Lionel Smith, "Chicago Poets, OBAC and the Black Arts Movement," *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*, ed. Werner Sollers and Maria Deidrich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 253-64.

many young Puerto Ricans living in New York was sparked when they interacted with other “freedom fighting” communities. Iris Morales’s memories as a community activist and Deputy Minister of the Young Lords are useful here.⁵⁹ She looks back at her political progression and describes how she made bridges among various communities and established interethnic relationships between Puerto Ricans and African Americans.

My political awakening began while I was in high school. I learned that the U.S. government forced Native Americans to live on reservations and interred Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II. Through some school friends, I attended youth meetings of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and I marched in demonstrations against the Vietnam War... Later when I entered City College, I joined ONYX, the African American student organization; there were no Puerto Rican or Latino organizations on campus. I studied African American history and especially the teachings of Malcolm X. As the number of Puerto Rican students increased on campus, we organized the first Puerto Rican group called Puerto Ricans in Student Activities (PRISA). During this time, I was also working as a teacher in the Academy for black and Latin Education (ABLE), a storefront school on 105th Street and Columbus Avenue. Several African American men from the neighborhood created the school; we had attended school together and knew the neglect of the public school system first hand.⁶⁰

Morales highlights the intense political urgency of the sixties. For one, the Civil Rights movement exposed the pervasive problems of racism in American society and politicized many Americans to fight against it. People of color, students and women joined in solidarity in an attempt to create a stronger political voice that questioned the nation’s democracy and protested against the unequal relations of power between people of color and white Americans. The urgent need to secure equality and end discriminatory

⁵⁹ Iris Morales later produced *¡PALANTE, SIEMPRE PALANTE!* (1996), a video documentary about the Young Lords.

⁶⁰ Iris Morales, “*¡Palante, Siempre Palante!*: The Young Lords,” *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 211.

practices in other marginalized communities pushed Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, women and students, among other groups, to launch independent social movements in the late sixties and seventies.

As is evident in Iris Morales's account, a strong political voice for Puerto Ricans and Latinos did not come into full force until the late sixties. In part, this was because a large number of Nuyoricans did not enter the university until the development of such programs as the City University of New York's SEEK Program (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge), College Discovery initiatives, and the State University of New York's Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). As they set out to achieve their educational goals, they found that there were many social barriers to overcome. Even while Puerto Rican settlements in New York grew from *colonias* to *barrios*, from small settlements to large enclaves, the socioeconomic progress of the community remained negligible. Puerto Rican and Nuyorican youth continued to face discrimination as they did not always receive adequate schooling or job training, and they remained in low paid, low status occupations. Like Morales, many Nuyorican students initially became immersed in the Civil Rights movement and later formed student organizations such as the Puerto Rican Student Movement (PRSM), Puerto Ricans for Educational Progress (PREP) and the Puerto Rican Student Union (PRSU), which specifically addressed the injustices confronted by Nuyoricans and the movement for the independence of Puerto Rico.⁶¹

⁶¹ In 1970 the PRSU reached out to their community and joined forces with the Young Lords to organize the first national conference of Puerto Rican students. Together they advocated for admission recruitment programs, retention services and curriculums that acknowledged the Puerto Rican and Latino population. The political work of PRSU and the Young Lords resulted in the launching of departments for Puerto Rican Studies and the founding of El Centro, The Center for Puerto Rican Studies of the City University of New York. For a more detailed history of various Puerto Rican political organizations that

The absence of Latino organizations actually encouraged Nuyoricans and other Latinos to search for other communities into which they could fit and with whom they shared social affinities. Morales was able to build bridges and create alliances with several black political organizations because they shared a legacy of exploitation, oppression, and colonization. Morales's involvement with both the NAACP and SNCC introduced her to a number of political strategies used by black activists. From sit-ins to marches to legal action with court cases, Morales rehearsed or was, at the least, exposed to tactics that centered on the presence of the body moving between two opposing political perspectives--segregation and integration.

The NAACP, for example, attacked inequality by legally expanding the rights for blacks through the court. This organization embraced the idea of integration among whites and blacks as early as 1909, at a time when racial inequality and segregation were accepted as normal American social practices. Their stance for integration won national attention in 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Morales was also a part of SNCC, the organization primarily led by black students dedicated to overturning segregation. They aimed to provide young blacks with a stronger political presence in the civil rights movement. SNCC took part in the 1960 sit-in movement, joined with activists from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in the 1961 Freedom Rides, and organized voter registration in the rural counties of Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. Continuing the

emerged during the Nuyoricans Movement see Morazzani's "Political Cultures of Puerto Rican Left in the United States," Andrés Torres's "Political Radicalism in the Diaspora—The Puerto Rican Experience," José Velázquez's "Another West Side Story: An Interview with Members of El Comité-MINP," Basilio Serrano's "¡Rifle, Cañon, Escopeta!": A Chronicle of the Puerto Rican Student Union," and Iris Morales's "¡Palante, Siempre Palante!: The Young Lords" in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

fight for blacks to vote, in 1965 SNCC led a march to the state capitol of Montgomery after members faced violent opposition when attempting to register voters. Consequently, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed, guaranteeing all Americans the right to vote, regardless of race.

Morales's involvement with the black community inevitably guided her political and educational path as she studied African American history and the teachings of Malcolm X. His writings, which denounced white racism and called for black pride, served as a stepping-stone for Morales and other Puerto Ricans to understand their experience as racialized people in the United States. Both the African American and Puerto Rican communities were deeply affected by the assassination of Malcolm X. His death in 1965 fueled many black activists in SNCC to pursue a new leadership. From the beginning, SNCC had a similar political agenda to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) but was an independent identity. With Martin Luther King as its first president, SCLC practiced nonviolent protest as the sole method of resistance and put the issue of morality at the center of the civil rights movement. However, SNCC leaders believed that SCLC was taking all the credit for the work that was being done in the black civil rights movement and expressed doubt about the effectiveness of nonviolent protest.

In 1966, led by Stokely Carmichael, members of SNCC who were inspired by the black separatist rhetoric of Malcolm X took over the organization and began to cast out white members. Carmichael issued a call for Black Power, which advocated for black racial dignity and self-reliance and the use of violence as a legitimate form of self-defense. By 1966 the Black Panther Party was established in Oakland, California.

Members passionately upheld and promoted black Power and launched the black Power Movement. Although SNCC and the black Panthers cooperated in organizing rallies, SNCC membership often disagreed with the policy of violent confrontations and finally expelled Carmichael in 1968, the same year that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Once again, Morales witnessed the black body performing between segregated and integrated political paradigms and saw it forced to choose between non-violent and violent approaches. This split marked the distinct political strategies practiced by the black community. While many believed that nonviolent protest was the best method to achieve social justice, Morales and others thought it conveyed a complacent willingness to compromise with whites and, therefore, argued for a separatist and militant approach.

Given the intersections between the Puerto Rican and African American community, it was a natural progression for some Puerto Ricans to come to agree with the political stance of Malcolm X. Often times he spoke at rallies held in East and West Harlem, where Puerto Ricans gradually became familiar with his philosophies. Morales explains, for instance, that the founder of the Young Lords Party, “Cha Cha” Jiménez, was directly influenced by the politics of the black Panthers.

Cha Cha, a soft-spoken and unassuming leader, told us that the Young Lords were originally a street gang that developed in Chicago during the 1950s to protect neighborhood territory. Cha Cha, a member since 1959, had been in and out of jail for petty offenses. In jail, he met Fred Hampton, the leader of the Chicago black Panther Party, who introduced him to political ideas. They talked about the movement for black liberation and discussed building unity between blacks and Puerto Ricans. When Cha Cha got out of jail, he returned to his neighborhood and organized the Young Lords to protest the city’s urban renewal plans that would have uprooted the Puerto Rican/Latino community. It was 1968, and the gang, while protesting urban removal, was transformed into the

Young Lords Organization (later the Young Lords Party).⁶²

Modeled after the black Panther Party, the Lords developed a thirteen-point platform that suited the political needs of Puerto Ricans. It called for the self-determination of Puerto Ricans on the Island and liberation of all Third World people in the U.S, equality for women and elimination of male chauvinism, opposition to American military and capitalist/imperialist activities, and support of Socialist revolution. Similar to the black Panthers, the Young Lords created a central committee that followed the military infrastructure of the Panthers. It was initially composed of all men, including Felipe Luciano, Deputy Chairman, Juan Gonzáles, Deputy Minister of Defense, and Juan “Fi” Ortiz, Deputy Minister of Finance. In addition to using the Panthers as a model, the Young Lords created strong bonds of solidarity with them. In the spring of 1969 the Lords marched in solidarity in the Panther 21 rally to protest against the arrest of Bobby Seale and twenty other Panthers. The Lords also publicly announced their support in their bi-monthly newsletter, *Palante*. Pablo “Yorúba” Guzmán, Minister of Information, for example, urged readers to join the Panthers’ protest against the death penalty for Bobby Seale.⁶³ To them the Panthers were their *compañeros* because they too were revolutionaries fighting for the liberation of colonized people.

As evidenced in Iris Morales’s anecdotal narrative and Felipe Luciano’s performance poetry, the Young Lords Party developed an organizing style that centered the ethno-racialized body in action as always resisting, surviving and forging ahead, *siempre bregando*. As the performance and dance scholar Sally Banes argues in her

⁶² Morales, “¡Palante, Siempre Palante!,” 212.

⁶³ Pablo “Yorúba” Guzmán, “Bobby and Latins,” *Palante* 2, no. 2 (1970): 4.

Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body, “To create community seemed to demand the presence of a body politic, not only in the metaphoric meaning of a consensual community, but literally in the sense of a political body—a person rendered political by physically taking part in the life of the collective enterprise.”⁶⁴ Returning to the Young Lords’ coming out function where Luciano performed “Jíbaro, My Pretty Nigger,” his ethno-racialized body together with the spoken word rendered a performative practice maintained by the use of visual, audio and olfactory signifiers. He evoked the past and created a sense of home despite being away from home, what Henri Lefebvre refers to as “representational spaces.”⁶⁵ In these spaces people not only narrated the everyday social practices of the community but also became sites where community gained social consciousness, took political action into their own hands, and created utopian possibilities.

Luciano transforms his poetry into a corporal text by titillating the senses. Sounds, odors, flavors, and the physical contact of material objects transport the audience and the performer in retro/intro/prospective scapes that allow the viewer and the viewed to explore and critique his or her cultural roots. These trans-temporal reflective spaces allow the performer and the audience to see, hear, feel, taste and touch existing and possible ethnic and racial intersections and collaborations among Latinos, black and Native Americans. Felipe Luciano’s poetry punctures the boundaries between the text and performance by creating two distinct yet conflating performative moments: (1) the

⁶⁴ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 39.

⁶⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 33.

embodiment of his text and (2) the manipulation of words and linguistic speech patterns and expression that spark a visceral experience of the historic past. In effect, the Young Lords used the rich history and language of the Nuyorican community to create a space for the physical, material performance. Additionally, this performance space also functions as a site of reflection, venturing into the past so as to make sense of the present and pave the way for the future.

By the time the Young Lords converted the vacant storefront on Madison Avenue between 111th Street and 112th Street into their headquarters, Puerto Ricans had already begun the process of making representational spaces. In the 1950s East Harlem was renamed *El Barrio*. The area between 111th Street and 116th Street on Park Avenue became known as *La Marqueta*, a Puerto Rican shopping mecca consisting of *botánicas*, *cuchifritos*, record and music shops, bakeries, travel agencies, telephone and mailing services as well as other urban amenities.⁶⁶ The streets were covered with signs in Spanish, English and/or Spanglish for *bodegas* and restaurants. Afro-Caribbean music from *salsa* to jazz became part of the soundscape of *El Barrio*. The mouth-watering aroma of *lechón*, *plátanos*, *arroz con habichuelas* and other traditional Puerto Rican foods became the odor of the city.

⁶⁶ For a discussion on how Puerto Ricans created representational spaces in *El Barrio* see Luis Apontes's essay "Lessons from El Barrio" in the collection *Latino Social Movements: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives*, eds. Rodolfo D. Torres and George Katsiaficas (New York: Routledge, 1999), 43-4.

Performativity in the Visual Iconography of the Young Lords

The Young Lords continued to use visual iconography to develop trans-temporal reflective spaces and representational spaces. “Mickey” Meléndez remembers that posters of revolutionary heroes including Albízu Campos, the first president of the Puerto Rican National party, Ramón Emeterio Ernesto Betances, an abolitionist leader of the Puerto Rican independence movement in 1868 during the colonial regime of Spain, Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, Ho Chi Minh and Ché Guevara covered the walls and the storefront window of the Young Lords’ office.⁶⁷ The photographs of Michael Abramson and Hiram Maristany demonstrate how the Lords decorated their office with images of political activists.⁶⁸ The images of these historical leaders direct the viewer’s attention to revolutionary acts of the past that created a sense of home for many Nuyoricans who felt disconnected from their ancestral home.

The image of Albízu Campos by Puerto Rican visual artist Antonio Martorell was displayed in the storefront window of the Young Lords’ headquarters and published in their newsletter.⁶⁹ This captivating lithographic poster of Campos’s body invites us to remember and reflect on the history of Puerto Rico. There are three similar superimposed peripheral images of Albízu Campos gradually decreasing in size. The third and smallest image of Campos is a close up of his face behind bars. Campos wears

⁶⁷ Meléndez, *We Took the Streets*, 103.

⁶⁸ See *Palante Young Lords* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971) and *Caribe* 7(4).

⁶⁹ *Caribe* dedicated two issues to Hiram Maristany’s photographic exhibition of the Young Lords Party, which was presented at the Caribbean Cultural Center in 1983. The picture of the Young Lords’ headquarters with Martorell’s image of Campos can be found in *Caribe* 7, no. 4 (1983): 29. This image was first featured in *Palante* 2, no. 3 (1970). Maristany’s photographs were recently exhibited in “El Barrio: Puerto Rican New York” at the Museum of the City of New York during spring 2005. This exhibition was organized by Kathleen Benson, curator of community projects, in conjunction with the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College.

his usual attire, a black suit with a bow tie. His arm is slightly raised, perhaps suggesting that he is holding up a power fist. On the two largest images, scenes of the Jayuya Revolt of 1950 and the attack on the House of Representative in 1954 are inscribed on his arm. In the upper right corner above Campos's head, the poster reads "PARA QUITARNOS LA PATRIA PRIMERO TIENEN QUE QUITARNOS LA VIDA" (IN ORDER TO TAKE OUR NATION FIRST THEY HAVE TO TAKE OUR LIVES).

This statement by Campos acknowledged the patriotic act of Hiram Rosado and Elias Beauchamp. These two members of the Nationalist Party retaliated against the chief of police, Colonel Frances Riggs, who had given the authorities the order to open fire during the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party parade at the University of Puerto Rico on October 24, 1935. As a result, five demonstrators were shot dead and many were injured in what is known today as the Massacre of Río Piedras. Soon after, Rosado and Beauchamp were executed for assassinating Colonel Riggs. Campos, however, generated a "performance of national affect" as he constructed a site of liberation by commemorating Rosado and Beauchamp as heroes for putting their life on the line for the independence of their Island and their people.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ For a historical account of the nationalistic acts led by Albizu Campos see Antonio Stevens Arroyo, *The Political Philosophy of Pedro Albizu Campos: Its Theory and Practice* (New York: New York University, Ibero-American Language and Area Center, 1974); Juan Rodríguez Cruz, *Pedro Albizu Campos: un asomo a su vida y su época* (San Juan, P.R.: Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe en colaboración con el Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1994); and Nélica Pérez and Amilcar Tirado, editorial committee, *Pedro Albizu Campos, 1891-1965* (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1986). The film *The Nationalists*, dir. José García Torres, editor Israel Ortiz, written and narrated by Pablo Cabrera, Realidades, 1973 is also a useful source.



Figure 2. *Pedro Albizu Campos*, 1969. This poster was created by Antonio Martorell at the Taller Alacrán (Scorpion Workshop). He depicts key moments of dissent organized by the Nationalist Party resisting against the United States' domination of Puerto Rico. Reprinted from the Young Lords Party's newsletter *Palante* 2, no. 3 (1970).

Campos's performance of national affect is vividly illustrated in Martorell's image as it documents how in the 1950s the Nationalists responded to the colonial situation with recurring, violent, life-threatening acts. The Gag Law of 1948 in the Island and the McCarran Act of 1950 in the States criminalized any public advocacy related to the independence of Puerto Rico. While the passage of the McCarran Act outlawed the activity of any Communist Party in the States, the Gag Laws targeted members of the Nationalist Party and Communist Party in Puerto Rico. They were placed under surveillance and FBI agents raided a number of their homes. Given the political climate, Martorell's piece explores how the Puerto Rican political body responded to mandates that outlawed even the raising of the Puerto Rican flag. He records and restores the moments when Puerto Ricans were *bregando* with political repression. Interestingly, notions of *bregar* move away from what Dorris Sommers explains as the Puerto Rican art of *jaibería*, "the knack for avoiding fixed and dangerously head-on positions, advancing sideways like the weak but wise crab" to more confrontational subversive acts.⁷¹

The Gag Law and the McCarran Act bred a violent form of resistance and triggered several nationalist uprisings in the Island and mainland. On July 1950, President Harry Truman signed Public Law 600, which declared that Puerto Rico was a commonwealth of the United States and not a colonial territory. Many Puerto Ricans in the Island were opposed to this mandate as it set the stage for permanent U.S military and

⁷¹ Doris Sommers, *Proceed with Caution (When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 132. Although the political demonstrations of the Young Lords were indeed confrontational, the mediums used to meet the needs of the Nuyorican community took on a sideways approach as they strategically moved in, out, and between the private/public and local/national spheres. Their political efforts therefore fostered Puerto Rican cultural pride and catalyzed the creation of cultural institutions such as El Museo del Barrio, the Association of Hispanic Arts, Inc., and Puerto Rican Studies programs at colleges and universities.

economic control. On October 30, 1950, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party executed their plan of action against this mandate attacking the police station, cutting the telephone lines, and burning the post office in Jayuya. Soon after, Blanca Canales led Nationalists to the town square, raised the Puerto Rican flag, and gave a speech declaring Puerto Rico a free republic. The Nationalist Party physically took control of the town for three days before the United States National Guard attacked. *El Grito de Jayuya* or the Jayuya Revolt, as it is known today, marked a moment in history when Puerto Ricans put their bodies in life threatening situations as a way of retaliating against the political repression of the time. Martorell's poster of Campos becomes an illustrative record of this moment, as he stenciled on the lower left corner JAYUYA 30 DE OCTUBRE DE 1950 and covered Albízu Campos's arm with scenes of the Jayuya Revolt. People carry guns, others are injured, and some raise their power fist. A building is on fire, possibly the police station that was burned during the event. Martorell's poster restores the living memories of the past and recreates the "performance of national affect" during this insurgence.

The retaliation against Public Law 600 was not limited to Puerto Rico. A couple of days after the Jayuya Revolt, two members of the Nationalist Party, Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola, invaded Blair House in Washington, D.C, and attempted to kill President Harry S. Truman. Their attack resulted in the killing of Secret Service guard Leslie Coffelt and the wounding of another guard, Donald Birdzell. Torresola was shot to death and Collazo was immediately arrested and sentenced to life in prison. Three days later, Albízu Campos, the leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, as well as three thousand other supporters were arrested in response to the Jayuya Revolt and the Blair House attack. Albízu Campos was found guilty of seditious conspiracy and sentenced to a

total of seventy-two years in La Princesa Penitentiary in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Albizu Campos's imprisonment did not stop the spirited resistance of the Nationalist Party. In 1954 Lolita Lebrón with three other Nationalists, Andrés Figueroa Cordero, Rafael Cancel Miranda, and Irving Flores, led an attack on the United States House of Representatives in Washington D.C. They fired thirty shots and wounded five lawmakers. Lebrón and her comrades were charged with attempted murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.⁷² Martorell, in the second image of Campos, also depicts this insurrection. Engraved on Campos's arm is the scene of Lolita Lebrón pointing her gun at the assembly of lawmakers as the Puerto Rican flag flies on the horizon. Interestingly, Martorell depicts two women leaders of the independence movement. Martorell literally imprints the history of Puerto Rican female activism on Campos's body.

In his poster commemorating Campos, Martorell uses Campos's flesh to map the history of the Puerto Rican body *bregando* with colonialism. Understanding the resisting body in action is an important part of this reading as the U.S suppressed Puerto Rican activism. When part of the town of Jayuya was destroyed, news of this retaliation was prevented from spreading outside of Puerto Rico. It was referred to as an incident between Puerto Ricans. The performance of the body in dissent on Martorell's poster generates retro/intro/prospective spaces allowing viewers to see from a distance the continuum of political activism across multiple temporal frames—the past (1890-1965, the years Albizu Campos was born and died), the present (1969, the year Martorell created this piece), and the future (the contemporary viewers who continue the legacy of

⁷² With the Blair House attack, Lolita Lebrón was perceived as a terrorist. When Lolita Lebrón was pardoned after serving twenty-five years in prison, Carlos Romero Barceló, Governor of Puerto Rico, publicly opposed it as he believed it would only encourage terrorism.

resistance). The performance of the body in dissent restores the history of Puerto Rican activism: the political repression, the acts of resistance, and the moments of liberation. Viewers experience the Puerto Rican body in dissent undergoing a cycle of presence, destruction and reincarnation: from birth to the proclamation of freedom and liberty to insurgencies to imprisonment and finally to death for one's country. The Puerto Rican body in dissent, however, is born and reborn as Martorell remembers the history of resistance of the 1950s and creates this piece as homage to Albizu Campos. Similar to the performative strategies of the Young Lords, Martorell uses the body as a terrain to hold, map and disseminate history. He reincarnates Campos's legacy by using visual iconography that commemorates him and the various insurrections led by the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party.

As a result of the Jayuya Revolt, the attack on Blair House, and the incursion into the House of Representatives in the States and the Island, the Nationalists received life sentences. These charges were a way of publicly announcing to Puerto Ricans that the United States remained a colonial authority figure. If Puerto Ricans displayed any acts of resistance or nationalistic performances aligned with the independence of Puerto Rico, the public understood that the consequence would be life in prison or death.⁷³ This

⁷³ There are several sources that confirm that Albizu Campos was "systematically killed." He was in and out of U.S. prisons for 25 years. While in Princesa prison, Campos repeatedly charged that he was the subject of human radiation experiments. It was revealed later that the U.S. was allegedly experimenting with radiation in the Princesa prison. After his death, Campos's body was examined and showed signs of torture by radiation confirming that he was one of the unfortunate prisoners to be experimented upon without consent or warning. For more details on this issue see Pedro I Aponte Vázquez, *¡Yo acuso!: tortura y asesinato de Don Pedro Albizu Campos* (Bayamón, P.R.: Movimiento Ecuménico Nacional de Puerto Rico, 1985); José Benjamín Torres, *El proceso judicial contra Albizu Campos* 2a. ed. (San Juan, P.R.: Editorial Jelofe, 1979); and *Tortura de los presos políticos en Puerto Rico: denuncia elevada a la Organización de los Estados Americanos* compilado por Partido Nacionalist de Puerto Rico, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (La Habana: La Secretaría, 1952).

realization engendered the fear of being arrested or assassinated and ultimately silenced the people to the point that the history of Puerto Rican activism was in many ways communally forgotten.⁷⁴ This coercion produced a historical amnesia that altered the national identity of many Puerto Ricans during the late fifties and early sixties. As Roberto P. Rodríguez-Morazzani describes in his essay “Political Cultures of the Puerto Rican Left in the United States,” political repression is “a multifaceted phenomenon whose principle goals are to destroy the individual as a political being and to affect the individual as a person by severing links with family and other valued groups.”⁷⁵ Martorell’s portrait touches upon the political repression of fear and silence in the last and smallest image of Albízu Campos where we only see a bodiless face behind bars. Death and silence, however, is then again replaced by the courageous stance of Campos orating words of liberty, “PARA QUITARNOS LA PATRIA PRIMERO TIENEN QUE QUITARNOS LA VIDA.”

These powerful words touched the next generation of Puerto Rican radicals living in the States as they recovered from their historic amnesia. When Pedro Albízu Campos, the leader of the Puerto Rican National Party, died on April 21, 1965, the various acts of resistance staged by him and the Nationalist Party were not part of the historic memory of

⁷⁴ Although there was not a massive disappearance of people in Puerto Rico like there was in Argentina or Chile, Diana Taylor’s analysis of Argentinean communal forgetting offers another way of looking at the Puerto Rican experience. In *Disappearing Acts*, she argues that under president Menem’s leadership, nation-building was not solely based on commonality and shared experience, but communal forgetting. He set up a political system that was based on an authoritarian institutional framework. Functioning similar to the military, he eradicated those who acted against his ruling and warned students and protesters that the danger of political violence was not over. If they continued to overuse their free right, Argentineans could experience another wave of abductions and disappearances (16).

⁷⁵ Roberto P. Rodríguez Morazzani, “Political Cultures of the Puerto Rican Left in the U.S.,” *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, ed. Andrés Torres and José Velázquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 31.

many Nuyoricans. Nuyorican radicals of the sixties and seventies, therefore, were left with the responsibility of raising political consciousness, organizing, and mobilizing the community. In 1968, for example, Puerto Rican and Nuyorican college students appropriated the legacy of Campos and formed an organization named after him, La Sociedad de Albízu Campos, the precursor of the Young Lords Party.⁷⁶ The Young Lords began to actively learn about the legacy of Pedro Albízu Campos and other revolutionary leaders. The Rules of Discipline of the Young Lords required all members to attend political educational classes and “read at least one political book a month, and [read] at least two hours a day on contemporary [issues].”⁷⁷ The Young Lords offered free community workshops every Tuesday evening that focused on the history of Puerto Rican activism.⁷⁸ They also conducted classes where members educated themselves in groups on the liberation movement. They read essays or books by Albízu Campos, Mao Tse-tung, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevera and Ho Cho Minh to reclaim their history of resistance, action and liberation and discuss how they could presently implement revolutionary tactics in their community.⁷⁹ In spite of his rigid definition of Puerto

⁷⁶ Morazzani, “Puerto Rican Left in the United States,” *The Puerto Rican Movement*, 39. Also see Meléndez, *We Took the Streets*, 82 and Michael Abramson, *Palante Young Lords* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 8.

⁷⁷ The “Rules of Discipline of the Young Lords Party” was frequently published in the last section of the *Palante* newsletter, where the subscription, staff, and central committee information was also provided.

⁷⁸ The first time the Young Lords publicized the community workshop was in *Palante 2*, no. 10 (1970). From then on every issue included a hand-written announcement in Spanish that read “Vengan a las clases de educación política para la comunidad cada martes a las 7:30 de la tarde” [Come to the educational political classes open to the community every Tuesday at 7:30pm].

⁷⁹ In *We Took the Street*, Meléndez points out that the Lords were not simply a bunch of youngsters looking for adventure, but a group aware of the global and local oppressions of third world communities. “First we decided to educate ourselves. We read books on how Mao Tse-tung had unleashed the revolutionary forces in China, and on Ho Chi Minh’s strategies to liberate Vietnam—anything we thought would help us. Toiling at our studies, we developed a good sense of what the people needed and how to proceed in order to succeed in political struggles...or so we thought” (93).

Ricans, which excluded many of the young U.S. born Puerto Ricans, Campos continues to be revered to this day as viewers witness, reflect, remember and venerate his image on their altars.⁸⁰

As with the educational classes and workshops, the past was reborn in the protest demonstrations of the Young Lords when marching in honor of those who sacrificed their lives for the cause of liberation. On October 30, 1970, the twentieth anniversary of the Jayuya Revolt, the Young Lords organized a “Free Puerto Rico Now” march to the UN. Starting at the People’s Church in *El Barrio*, the Lords marched down Lexington Avenue where they met with the black Panthers. Approximately ten thousand people marched commemorating the Jayuya Revolt and the other insurrections that occurred between 1950 and 1951. On March 21, 1971, the Young Lords joined the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party in Ponce, Puerto Rico, in remembrance of the Ponce Massacre, which occurred on March 21, 1937 when Nationalists were fired on, despite receiving a municipal permit to protest against the incarceration of Albizu Campos. With a jury of seven Puerto Ricans and five North Americans, Campos was originally found not guilty of overthrowing the government. However, Judge Cooper called for a new jury, this time ten North Americans and two Puerto Ricans, and a guilty verdict was achieved. Michael Ambramson, a photographer who documented the political activity of the Young Lords Party, vividly remembers that “The Lords who marched [on March 21, 1971 in Ponce, Puerto Rico] were feeling chills and at points [they] felt like crying when [they] thought about all the people who had fought and died so that [their] struggle could move forward.

⁸⁰ Quiñones, *arte de bregar*, 95. For a more detailed discussion on the semi-religious reverence of nationalistic figures see Luis Gilberto Collazo, *Espacio para Dios: desde Albizu hasta Julia de Burgos* (San Juan, P.R.: Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico: Fundación Puerto Rico Evangélico, 2001).

And how strong [they] will have to be to win.”⁸¹ The act of marching collectively conjured up the past by calling up the memories of the dead Nationalists. In doing so, the Young Lords created a social performance memory of the twenty-one unarmed marchers and bystanders who were killed and the two hundred others who were wounded for liberty and justice more than forty years earlier.

Reincarnating the Past: The Performative, Performance and Poetry

I believe that the process of reincarnating the past was a political tool used by the Young Lords to raise consciousness and to create an understanding that the Puerto Rican experiences in and out of the Island were a product of the history of colonization. On the cover of the *Palante* newsletter on Friday, October 16, 1970, life after death reverberates in the drawing of Jesus Christ holding a rifle with a slogan that reads “Cristo era un Young Lord” (Christ was a Young Lord). In the same issue, the Young Lords printed the slogan “¡Liberación o Muerte!” (Liberty or Death) in bold with an image of a rifle over the Puerto Rican flag. Juxtaposing these visual iconographies illustrates how the process of reincarnation was indeed a way for Nuyoricans to *bregar* with colonialism, establish their identity and develop their community.

In reincarnating the past, Nuyoricans also reclaimed physical spaces that represented and reflected their culture and experience. As Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, colonial practices are based on spatial ordering and mapping; therefore, anti-colonialism is oriented towards claiming and reclaiming geographical and cultural

⁸¹ Michael Abramson, *Palante Young Lords*, 158.

spaces.⁸² In the summer of 1969, the Young Lords Party started their first initiative, the Garbage Offensive.⁸³ The Lords pushed the Nuyorican body from social action to social change by reconstructing a physical space that was unwanted by the larger American society but inhabited by their community. Confronted with the excess garbage overflowing throughout El Barrio and the lack of cooperation from the Department of Sanitation to pick-up garbage on a regular basis, the Lords mobilized the community to take action against this inhumane living condition. The Lords went to the Sanitation depot at 110th Street between Second and Third Avenue and requested brooms, and after being turned down they helped themselves. After sweeping the streets and bagging the garbage, they returned the cleaning supplies. They did this for several Sundays, until they realized that the trucks now were not picking up any garbage at all. The Young Lords first thought that sweeping the garbage into the middle of Third Avenue would block traffic, but this did not work. Motorists simply moved the garbage back to the sidewalk. The Lords then re-swept stockpiles of garbage into the middle of Third Avenue and burned it.

As neighbors, motorists and other bystanders witnessed or joined the “collective cry of ‘¡Basta ya!’—‘Enough’ [Already]!” a private local experience was transformed into a public national crisis as the incident was widely televised. This became known as the Garbage Offensive.⁸⁴ Eventually this performance forced the Department of

⁸² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

⁸³ In *We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with The Young Lords* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), “Mickey” Miguel Meléndez vaguely remembers how the Lords came up with the name and suggests that they probably learned it from the Vietnamese who identified any type of political or military program action as an “offensive” (101).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

Sanitation to provide the services that the community of El Barrio rightfully deserved. Augustín Laó, in his essay “Resources of Hope: Imagining the Young Lords and the Politics of Memory,” writes that “This great sweeping-out became an act of decolonization, a form of humanizing the living space, a way of giving back dignity to [the neighborhood], by taking it back.”⁸⁵ Cleaning up the garbage was a way of reclaiming their residential area and furthermore it served as way to stage an anti-colonial performance. The resisting communal body in action unveiled the unequal power relations existing in the neighborhood while at the same time taking control of the space it walked through, worked in and lived in.

The Lords were not only able to build community and self, but also to shake up, socially intervene in, and disrupt community. “Sometimes,” Shannon Jackson observes, “performance [is] the mechanism of social constraint, and sometimes performance [is] about making community, and sometimes it [is] about breaking it.”⁸⁶ In his memoir of his time as a Lord, “Mickey” Miguel Meléndez recalls the final scene of the Garbage Offensive-- “Every single Young Lord threw a match. Every single person of our community who had helped threw matches. In a matter of minutes it was like an ancient ceremony, with flames aiming high into the skies, reaching to touch our gods...Indeed it was a theatrical operation.”⁸⁷ This “ancient ceremony” did not solely imagine but also enacted a utopia of unity. As Michael Foucault explains in his essay “Of Other Spaces,”

⁸⁵ Augustín Laó, “Resources of Hope: Imagining the Young Lords and the Politics of Memory,” *Centro Journal for Puerto Rican Studies* 8, no. 1 (1995): 37.

⁸⁶ Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 161.

⁸⁷ “Mickey” Miguel Meléndez, *We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with The Young Lords* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 105.

while utopias are imagined spaces that simultaneously reflect, contest and invert culture, heterotopias are physical counter-sites that enact utopias.⁸⁸ Just as Sally Banes positions the Village as a heterotopia of the nation in the early sixties, I consider East Harlem as the heterotopia created by the Young Lords through the performance of affect produced when they are *bregando* with social oppressions. This performance of affect endowed the Young Lords and the community with a sense of nationhood, reclaiming the once neglected space as their home. As Diana Taylor thoughtfully puts it, “a public spectacle is a locus and mechanism of communal identity through collective imaginings that constitute nation as an imagined political community.”⁸⁹ The performative protest traditions of the Young Lords made visible and audible a Nuyorican presence that ultimately marked the history of American politics with identity- and community-making possibilities. Their demonstrations and take-overs used the collective bodies performing in action to foster utopian imaginings and trigger the metamorphosis of the neighborhood from an abandoned space to a representational space to a heterotopia. The once neglected neighborhood becomes more than just a representational space where identity and culture are reflected onto the built environment, but rather a heterotopia, a physical space that houses the performing body enacting and realizing utopian possibilities.

The Young Lords continued to develop heterotopias by taking over the Hispanic Methodist Church in *El Barrio*. They wanted to start a free-breakfast program in the neighborhood. Since there weren't any spaces large enough to hold such a program, they attempted to convince the church authorities to lend them the space. On December 7,

⁸⁸ Michael Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 24.

⁸⁹ Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's “Dirty War”* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1997), ix.

1969 the Lords tried to address the congregation, but the Reverend of the chapel had already planted undercover cops who beat and arrested some of Lords. Two weeks later the Lords took over the facilities and established “La iglesia del pueblo” (the People’s Church). As documented in the film *El Pueblo Se Levanta* (1971), a sense of utopia was performed and enacted as a large homemade banner was proudly displayed in the front of the church and two armed Lords dressed in military uniform continuously kept watch. The Lords reinforced a sense of security and protection with their revolutionary dress code of field jackets, combat boots and purple berets on which were pinned buttons that read “Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazón” (I have Puerto Rico in my heart) along with an image of a raised power fist over the map of the Island.

The film documents clothing drives, breakfast programs, a liberation school, political educational classes, a day care center, free health programs and nightly entertainment conducted by the Young Lords in the People’s Church. In celebration of their successful take over people sang and danced to “Qué bonita bandera” (What a Beautiful Flag) played by Pepe y Flora Flores, created theatrical vignettes and performed poetry. In the theatrical presentation the children re-enacted the police brutality the Young Lords confronted when requesting a space at the church to start a free breakfast program. A young performer by the name of Augie introduced the play and fiercely stated: “Our people are poor and you know damn real nobody want to be poor. This play is going to show how the pigs react when the people take control over what belongs to them and liberate.” He then became the Young Lord character and declared, “We want the breakfast program. We do not want to destroy the church.” Children playing the role of the cops then attacked him. The scene ended with Augie encouraging the crowd to

sing “Power to the People, People,” which echoed in the People’s Church and created an atmosphere of strength, unity and empowerment.

Having been raised in this church, Pedro Pietri took part in the takeover.⁹⁰ Armed with his words, he debuted his poem “Puerto Rican Obituary” to a congregation of people who had gone beyond simply imagining a space of liberation and were actually creating a heterotopia. Even if there were interlocking social forces preventing Pietri and other participants from bringing useful resources into the neighborhood, his poetry allowed them to distance themselves from the system of colonialism and reflect upon the present situation of self-ownership. In his poem he cynically ponders:

So this is America
land of the free
for everyone
but our family
So this is America
where you wake
up in the morning
to brush your teeth
with the home relief
the leading toothpaste
operation bootstrap
promised you you will get
everytime you buy
a box of cornflakes on the lay-away plan⁹¹

He questions how Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans can actually be free when they are colonial subjects in the land of opportunity where promises of financial stability are never met, but broken and replaced by programs that exploit them and prolong their colonial

⁹⁰ Young Lord Party, *Palante* 3, no. 13 (1970): 16.

⁹¹ Pietri’s performance can be viewed in the video *El Pueblo Se Levanta* or the poem “Puerto Rican Obituary” can be found in *Palante* 2, no. 11 (1970): 17-18. In addition, the *Monthly Review*, “El Pueblo Se Levanta,” 56(2) June 2004, also indicated that Pietri first read “Puerto Rican Obituary” in 1969 at a rally in support of the Young Lords. A CD recording of this poem can be found in *Loose Joints*, Folkways Records Album No. FL 9722, 1979.

dependency on America. Like the poetry of many Nuyoricans, Pietri's poem portrays the community *en la brega* and as such, he also creates a "performative and expressive particularism" of imaginings. He ends the poem "Puerto Rican Obituary" as follows:

Juan
 Miguel
 Milagros
 Olga
 Manuel
 Will right now be doing their own thing
 Where beautiful people sing
 And dance and work together
 Where the wind is a stranger
 To miserable weather conditions
 Where you do not need a dictionary
 To communicate with your hermanos
 Aqui se habla espa[ñ]ol all the time
 Aqui you salute your flag first
 Aqui there are no dial soap commercials
 Aqui everybody smells good
 Aqui t.v dinners do not have a future
 Aqui wigs are not necessary
 Aqui the men admire desires
 And never gets tired of his women
 Aqui Que Pasa Power is what's happening
 Aqui to be called negrito
 Means to be called LOVE.⁹²

The "aqui" (here) in this poem firmly declares the range of possibilities that can be and are being realized in the People's Church. Pietri's poetry, whether it reflects on the colonial situation or imagines spaces like the Puerto Rican Embassy, reveals the Puerto Rican or Nuyorican self *en la brega*. These moments of dealing and negotiating with social oppression create utopian possibilities that can potentially destabilize hierarchical

⁹² *Palante* 2, no. 11 (1970): 17-18. Also note that I do not orthographically correct the word "aqui" to "aquí" because I read the absence of an accent as part of the condition of many Nuyoricans who attempt to learn and/or relearn the Spanish language and who intervene in the reconstruction of Spanglish and the deconstruction of Spanish and English language.

structures. Pietri attempts to circumvent or temporarily escape the colonial state of Puerto Rico by imagining a world without oppressive structures for himself and his community. The escape is not so much a running away from the situation but a call for an expressive way of creating a utopian space of complete acceptance and liberation. The state of selfhood and nationhood, therefore, is not an actual, tangible place, but a utopia that must be collectively imagined, desired, and created by Nuyoricans, Latinos, and the multi-colored generation.

Although the Young Lords survived only from 1969 to 1975, during this short period they made visible how the Nuyorican community was *bregando* with social injustice. In doing so, they created affective performances of race and ethnicity and generated a collective desire for mobilization that maintained and reinvented the historical continuities of the community. The collective participation of the Nuyorican body in resistance invoked a performance tradition started in Puerto Rico by groups such as the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and later transplanted to New York and implemented by the Young Lords Party and performing poets from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.

In the following chapter, I will continue to develop a genealogy of Latina hip hop performance by looking at the early performance history of the Poets Cafe to discuss how the performative protest traditions of the Young Lords Party shaped the style, form and aesthetic of the Poets Cafe, which in turn laid the groundwork in content, style, and technique for contemporary Latina hip hop solo performers.

Chapter 2:

The Nuyorican Poets Cafe: Space, Production, and Identity

Richie playing the maracas
 is the universe becoming fluid
 and the Nuyorican Cafe
 floor becoming platform
 for the shape of art
 to mimic so that the artifact
 becomes direct message
 no symbols of
 but the very thing itself

--Miguel Algarín, *Mongo Affair*

Upon entering the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, I was enchanted by La Bruja's words and mesmerized by the way she used her body as a vehicle to remember her mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, and friends, people who become characters in her play *BoogieRican Boulevard* (2001). This embodied enactment of real people is a practice that can be fully understood if experienced through flesh. How is identity, language, and locatedness transmitted and negotiated through the embodied practices of the performer and the Cafe, a place of social and artistic habitation? In his poem "New Year's Eve," Miguel Algarín's situates the Nuyorican Poets Cafe as a site of artistic production where practitioners blur the conventional boundaries of representation and reality. As Nuyorican poets, their work are not representations of their experiences but are life itself. In this way, the Cafe is a place where the stage or the world of poetry, theater and performance is both the life of the poet as well as the life of the spectator. The poet, who is at once a performer, a spectator, and a member of the Nuyorican community, speaks of, to, and about "the poor New York Puerto Rican." It is the poet's responsibility, as Algarín declares, to create "alternative behavioral habits" and invent "a new language, a

new tradition of communication.”⁹³ The poet/performer/spectator experiences and survives the trials and tribulations of being a member of a working class group attempting to break away from the colonial reins of the United States. The poet chronicles the daily struggles of many Nuyoricans, etching on paper as well as performing on stage and throughout his life a familiar yet new language specific to the community. This new language mediates the symbiotic and contradictory relationship between performance and real life experiences, the self and community, and art and politics while also evoking a sense of home longed for by many Nuyoricans. The role of the poet/performer/spectator also becomes the creation of mediations that resist and subvert colonial, economic, and social oppression.

While in the last chapter I highlighted performative moments of dissent when Nuyorican organizations mobilized the community from social awareness to social action to social change in the sixties, this chapter demonstrates how the historical lineage of this performative tradition continues to expand in the seventies. It has been passed on from one generation to another: from the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico in the fifties to the Young Lords Party in New York in the sixties to the founding of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the seventies, the focus of this chapter. The theme that persists throughout these transitions is the connection of poetry and performance to politics which influences and artistically inspires later performance artists.

This chapter pays close attention to the way spaces, places, and identities are constructed as a way of preserving the history and collective memory of the Nuyorican community. More specifically, this chapter probes how the Nuyorican Poets Cafe served

⁹³ Miguel Algarin, “Introduction: Nuyorican Language,” *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings*, Algarin and Miguel Piñero eds. (New York: William Morrow, 1975), 9.

as a space for producing identity and community. Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, co-founding poets of the Cafe, crossed paths during a period when there were few available cultural, political, and artistic venues they could call home. While the urban experiences on the street and in prison were the site and topic of production for Piñero's theatrical and poetic pieces, Algarín worked in provisional spaces that were rented or generously provided by Joseph Papp and Samuel Rubin.⁹⁴ A permanent physical space did not materialize until the establishment of community organizations like the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. The opening of the Cafe in 1973 created a novel sense of home. It is not so much the physical space but the collective making of poetry in the Cafe that generated this hominess. Nuyorican poetry remaps and concretizes home through a structure of feelings and desires of belonging. The poet performs affect through the poetic word, the language and the body, which serve as spatial markings that reveal the process of making and remaking identity. Edrik López's idea that "Nuyorican poetry is obsessed with space" and "that space is the central discursive tool answering questions of national identity" is pertinent to my argument.⁹⁵ He analyzes the production of Nuyorican spaces in relation to the poetic works of Lucky Cienfuegos, Víctor Hernández Cruz, Martín Espada, Tato Laviera, Pedro Pietri, Miguel Piñero, and Rosario and Aurora Morales. In this chapter, I expand on this concept of spatial production as a way of constructing a home away from home. I take pay close attention to how the aesthetic of Nuyorican poetry is closely linked to the ways spaces are claimed, reclaimed and transformed from imaginary to

⁹⁴ Samuel Rubin was known for his entrepreneurial socialist vision. He was the founder of Fabergé Perfumes, which he sold in 1963. He used that money to establish the Samuel Rubin Foundation dedicated to fighting economic social inequalities and he purchased several buildings in New York City suited for theatre and cultural events.

⁹⁵ Edrik López, "Nuyorican Space: Mapping Identity in a Poetic Geography," *CENTRO Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 205.

cultural sites of remembering.

The Birth of The Cafe

Although most of the historical narratives focus on Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero as the founders of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, I am interested in braiding the moments of encounter between and among various practitioners from different vanguards including Joseph Papp, Marvin Camillo, and Samuel Rubin, among others. Given the multiple forerunners, it is important to approach the origin of this organization as a birthing process that does not occur with one person but with a collective. Precisely because there are divergent birthing narratives of the Cafe, it is important to consider the existing gaps and connections between what occurred historically and what is remembered in order to reconstruct the history of artistic productions during the Nuyorican Movement.

In 1973 Miguel Algarín began conducting El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop in conjunction with Joseph Papp, who provided the group with a studio at 4 Astor Place.⁹⁶ That same year Papp became the producer of *The Family*, which was at the time the resident company at Riverside Church in Upper Manhattan. *The Family* was a theater group of mostly former prison inmates who put their passion into acting rather

⁹⁶ As this project attempts to reconstruct the artistic production history of Nuyoricans, it is important to document and analyze the moments when the terms “Nuyorican” and “Puerto Rican” are used interchangeably and often conflated. In the introduction of *Nuevos Pasos: Chicano and Puerto Rican Drama* (1979), Nicolás Kanellos and Jorge A. Huerta, refer to the group as the Nuyorican Writers’ and Actors’ Workshop (viii). On the other hand, Algarín in a *New York Newsday* interview conducted on December 5, 1990 and later in the “Afterword” of *Action: Nuyorican Poets Cafe Theater Festival* (1997), calls it El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop (132, 538). In suggesting that it was a Nuyorican workshop, Huerta and Kanellos affirm the existence of a group identity that by 1979 had already developed. Algarín, however, calls the workshop Puerto Rican because the group convened during the early seventies during a time when Puerto Ricans living in New York were undergoing a process of self-identification. This period is a transitional moment for Puerto Ricans who were coming into their identification as Nuyoricans experiencing being in both or in neither New York nor Puerto Rico.

than engaging in criminal activities. Marvin Camillo, the director of the group, was also a theatrical workshop facilitator in Sing Sing, the correctional facility where Miguel Piñero was serving time. Camillo inspired Piñero to write *Short Eyes* while he was incarcerated.⁹⁷ As soon as he was released he became part of The Family. Piñero's *Short Eyes* spoke to the struggles and conditions members of the company faced while in prison. Their input was invaluable as the improvisational work of the group assisted with the revision of Piñero's script. Piñero was later recognized by the theatre world with his play *Short Eyes*, which was an Obie-winner and recipient of the New York Drama Critic Award for the Best American Play of the 1973-1974 season. The play is set in a detention facility with predominantly African American and Latino prisoners. When officials bring in Clark Davis, a white middle-class young man convicted of raping a young girl, inmates attack him. Among the inmates, molesting a child is an immoral act they cannot tolerate. However, Juan, one of the oldest prisoners, listens to Davis's story and personally gets to know him. Davis confesses that he is pedophile but that he does not specifically remember the incident he is sentenced for. Knowing that there is not enough evidence to charge Davis for this act, Juan must decide whether he snitches on him or lets him walk free. In either case, there is a fatal consequence because inmates are killed for snitching or for molesting a child. The other prisoners, however, are not sympathetic and kill Davis before Juan makes his final decision.

On the one hand Piñero humanizes the felons by portraying them as victims of a system that alienates individuals because of their sexual orientation, class, race, and nationality. On the other hand he shows how they are also criminals and murderers who

⁹⁷ "Short eyes" is prison slang referring to a man that sodomizes little boys.

easily pass judgment on others based on their ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality. This play speaks of similar if not the same social structures that dictate the lives of individuals who are not part of the prison system. The blurring of life in and outside prison makes Piñero's work politically relevant, as it is the treatment and conditions faced by inmates that restimulate the experiences of oppression experienced by many people of color.

One of Papp's representatives introduced Piñero and Algarín and this initial encounter led to a long lasting working and familial relationship.⁹⁸ Although Piñero was in negotiation with Papp about the production of *Short Eyes*, he joined Algarín's workshop and their first theatrical piece was titled *Apartment 6D*, a compilation of the stories gathered from the group along with excerpts of poems from Algarín's recently published translation of *Song of Protest* by Pablo Neruda.⁹⁹ Algarín attributes the success of *Apartment 6D* to two reasons. First, in this work the group linked the politics of everyday life to poetry, theater and performance. The script was not a traditional dramatic text, but one that relied on poetry and the anecdotes of the people involved in the workshop. To the group, their poetry was theatrical as it chronicled the performance of everyday life. The idea was that characters naturally existed in their everyday life and their lived experiences informed the creation of the performance piece. Like many experimental theatres of the sixties, such as the Living Theater, Open Theater and Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Theater Lab, El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop was politically committed to the fight against social injustice and rejected traditional theatre

⁹⁸ Miguel Algarín and Louis Griffith, eds., *Action: The Nuyorican Poets Cafe Theater Festival* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 539.

⁹⁹ This piece featured Héctor Rodríguez, an eleven-year old boy who later wrote his own play *Hoe Stroll, Lonely Lives*. See John C. Miller, "Hispanic Theatre in New York, 1965-1977," *Revista Chicana-Riqueña* 6, no. 1 (1977): 40-59.

practices that emphasized plot, character, the text or directorial authority. However El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop was substantially different in that the group was personally invested in the livelihood of Latinos. The connection between politics and art is crucial because during the sixties many experimental theatres were committed to using theatre and performance as a political tool but they were not necessarily invested in using it for the cause of marginalized communities.

Second, *Apartment 6D* united the body with the act of telling one's experiences. That is, the live body on stage was used to remember, embody, and enact one's experiences. In the foreword to *Action*, Algarín describes how he trained performers to embody words. As part of the workshop, a two-hour kung fu class was conducted before even going into the text. This was to prepare the body for the mind. "If they are not in sync with each other, actors end up battering arms around or mouthing words that are disconnected from the body language."¹⁰⁰ The actor essentially "internalized a script and integrated the dialogue with the body movement."¹⁰¹ Algarín encouraged performers to use sound and movement, in essence their bodies, to generate emotions. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the live body in performance becomes a fundamental element in the Nuyorican aesthetic.

Prior to meeting Piñero, Raymond Barry, formerly from the Open Theater, also came in contact with El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop. Barry saw the group doing a warm up and was intrigued by how Algarín's training approaches were similar to his ideas of creating theater. Soon after, he began assisting the group with

¹⁰⁰ Miguel Algarín, "Afterwords," *Action*, 538.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 540.

direction of the piece. Together, Algarín and Barry guided the actors to look into their own stories as way of making theater. What seemed to be at first a fifteen-minute story became a thirty-minute narrative that was then condensed into symbolic actions for the stage. Under their directorial wings, *Apartment 6D* was produced. Although credit is often given to Algarín and/or Piñero as the principal figures, it is clear that this piece was collaboratively created by everyone in El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop. Since the playwright, performer, and director are responsible for the production from its moment of inception to the end, it is crucial to pay attention to the collective making of this piece; it breaks away from the idea that one person holds authorship. My goal in emphasizing the idea of theatre as a collaboration is to de-center the conventional theatre hierarchy descending from the leadership of the artistic director and to acknowledge the various people involved in this process, especially Nuyorican female practitioners such as Soledad Barreto, Maria Landa, and Michelle Macau, who are frequently left out of this history.

As a result of a budget cut by Papp, El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop lost its space at 4 Astor Place in 1975. With this turn of events Algarín and Piñero turned to the urban folks and the streets as a place that would inspire and eventually be the site and object of theatrical production. Having already experienced the prison system and worked with Marvin Camillo, it was not unusual for Piñero to work with a population of youth who were perceived as delinquents and outcasts. As Piñero and Algarín walked around Forty-Second Street and Port Authority, then an area known for street crimes and porn theaters, they invited young runaways, drug users and/or prostitutes to participate in their new theatre project. For them theater became a way of

escaping the harsh realities of street life by simply remembering and sharing their stories.

In February 1975, this group became known as the Young Family. They produced two shows that were featured as part of the Nuyorican Theater Festival and performed at the Space for Innovative Development, then an unused theater space in one of Samuel Rubin's buildings located on 36 Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues.¹⁰²

Sideshow, the first theatrical piece was developed with the participation of Hector Rodríguez, one of the actors in the Young Family, who in an improvisational exercise incorporated a street scene he had witnessed. Like many of the members in the group, Rodríguez could not read or write and, as a result Piñero transcribed his ideas.¹⁰³ This play portrayed a day in the life of ghetto youths living in the Lower East Side. The second show, *América Conga Mania* by Lucky Cienfuegos, depicted the life of a street-hustling poet who is stabbed to death while playing cards.¹⁰⁴

By 1975, Piñero and Algarín had developed a strong artistic relationship. The term "Nuyorican" was also already part of their production vocabulary as they featured their theatrical works as part of the Nuyorican Theater Festival. The drive and passion of poets to share, write, and grow extended outside of El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors'

¹⁰² In *Action*, Algarín refers to Rubin's unused theatre space, but does not mention the given name (540). In the *New York Times* review of *Conga Mania* (February 19, 1975), the theatre is referred to as the Space for Innovative Development.

¹⁰³ If Piñero in fact transcribed the play, as Carlos Morton states in "Nuyorican Theatre," then Hector Rodríguez should be recognized as the playwright. However, Piñero takes credit for writing this play. To complicate matters, Algarín in a PBS website project called "Shattering Silences," lists *Sideshow* as a play he directed and co-wrote. The Young Family narrated and acted out real life stories that were then used for the stage. Piñero dramatically structured the improvised scenes from the group. Algarín then gave it a directorial touch. Again, it is clear that creating this play was a collective process. This play was not created in isolation and it was the skills of each of these poets and theater makers that brought *Sideshow* to the stage. Carlos Morton, "Nuyorican Theatre," *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Mar., 1976): 43-49.

¹⁰⁴ There are conflicting accounts of these performances. In a *New York Times* review, Mel Gussow states that *Sideshow* was produced before *Conga Mania*, but in *Action* Algarín remembers it happening the other way around.

Workshop. Informal happenings occurred in Miguel Algarín's apartment until 5am in the morning. Each time they met, readings were held and new poets were invited to join. Eventually, the apartment was too small a space to hold the collective gatherings, not to mention that they conflicted with Algarín's teaching schedule, as a professor of English at Rutgers University. The network and support system that this group provided demanded a bigger and more formal space for poets to gather. As a result, in 1975 Algarín began renting Sunshine Tavern, an Irish bar that had recently gone out of business. Located at 505 East Sixth Street between Avenues A and B, this space became known as the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.¹⁰⁵ In 1978 the Cafe moved to 236 East Third Street between Avenues B and C, where it still stands today. By 1982 the collective purchased the building from Ellen Stewart, founder and director of La MaMa Experimental Theater Club.

¹⁰⁵ Once again, there are conflicting accounts of the year the Cafe opened, ranging from 1973 to 1976. In his essay "Hispanic Theater in New York, 1965-1977," John Miller notes that in 1973 the Cafe produced its first work, *Olu Clemente*, a play written by Miguel Algarín and Tato Laviera. However, in the description of *Olu Clemente*, Algarín states that the play was produced by Joseph Papp's New York Public Theatre and presented at the Delacour Theatre in Central Park. The Cafe is not mentioned at all. One can infer that by 1973 the Cafe was founded, but a physical location did not exist. The following readings chronicle the Hispanic theatrical activity during the seventies. *Revista Chicana-Riqueña* 6, no. 1 (1977): 54. In the "Introduction," *Nuevos Pasos: Chicano and Puerto Rican Drama* found in *Revista Chicana-Riqueña* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 151, eds., Nicolás Kanellos and Jorge A. Huerta. See also David Berreby, "His Cafe is 'Alive' With the Spoken Word (*New York Newsday*, Wednesday, December 5, 1990, 130.

Nuyorican Poets and Poetry Reclaim the Lower East Side

In addition to resolving the practical issue of comfort, Algarín's decision to find a permanent space is loaded with political significance. The Lower East side is historically known as a contested terrain, as it became a home away from home for many Latinos, immigrants and other minority poor-to-working class groups. The increasing number of Puerto Ricans migrating to the States along with the economic stagnation of the seventies was one of the main reasons Irish and other European residents moved out of the Lower East Side. The fact that the Irish Tavern went out of business and later became the Nuyorican Poets Cafe illustrates the ethnic transformation of the neighborhood. The Cafe then is a repository of inter- and intra-ethnic history especially since poets like Amiri Baraka and Louis Reyes Rivera discuss how the Irish Cultural Renaissance served as a model for African Americans and Latinos to forge their own movements.¹⁰⁶

Faced with the rise of interest rates, fuel costs, and other operating expenses, some landlords committed arson as a way of salvaging what they could from unprofitable buildings. Other landlords, knowing that the foreclosure process took over five years, abandoned their buildings but continued to collect rent from tenants even when they were living in deplorable conditions. Miguel Algarín attests to the neighborhood's deterioration as he recalls that around 1972 "there were about 21 empty buildings on Sixth Street between [Avenues] A and B."¹⁰⁷ Finding a physical space for the artistic collective then meant that Nuyorican poets were making themselves and their work more

¹⁰⁶ See Amiri Baraka's poem "In Tradition," which was privately published in 1982 and then republished in *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader* ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth P, 1991). Louis Rivera Reyes discusses the influences of the Irish community in Carmen Dolores Hernández's *Puerto Rican Voices: Interviews with Writers* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 119-136.

¹⁰⁷ "His Cafe is 'Alive with the Spoken Word'," *New York Newsday*, December 5, 1990, 132.

visible to the public by actively reclaiming buildings from abandonment and reversing the deterioration of the Lower East Side.

Faced with this housing crisis, Reverend James P. Morton together with a small group of urban planners, architects, policy makers and community activists came together in the fall of 1972 to discuss how these abandoned properties could be turned over to poor “urban homesteaders” who were interested in redeveloping these buildings. In April 1974, the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board (UHAB) was developed to provide low-income people with the tools to build and run limited-equity housing cooperatives.¹⁰⁸ UHAB offered various training workshops in bookkeeping, construction, and contracts as well as provided seed money, legal advice, building permits and architectural plans.

Among the many collaborators involved in this project, Philip St. Georges, an Urban Fellow assigned to the city’s housing department, worked with the Renigades, a Harlem street gang, to convert abandoned buildings into limited equity co-ops.¹⁰⁹ The inclusion of Harlem residents mobilizing their community is an essential part of this historical narrative because it is the political drive of proletariats that helped establish the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. As Algarín documents it in *Nuyorican Poetry*, “To stay free is not theoretical. It is to take over your immediate environment. Who owns the building in which you live? Find him out, then deal directly... The Renigades of Harlem, an upper Manhattan street clique, are juggling with contractors, electricians, plumbers. They learn

¹⁰⁸ UHAB insists on a limited-equity cooperative because it restricts the value owners can obtain from stocks at sale thus keeping housing affordable for low- and very low-income households. On the other hand with cooperative corporations, the residents share ownership of housing through the stocks they hold. Resident stockholders receive a proprietary lease for their apartments and pay a monthly maintenance fee. When residents leave they sell their share(s) of stock and not their unit.

¹⁰⁹ The Urban Fellows Program started in 1969 to provide college graduates with the opportunity to work first-hand in the public sector in New York City. Fellows tackled contemporary issues in public policy, urban planning and government operations.

skills as the needs make themselves felt, so that as the work on the building grows so do the native skills of the members of the Renigades.”¹¹⁰ Like the Young Lords who wanted “community control of [their] institutions and land,” Algarín understood the importance of creating spaces that serve the needs of the community. He refers to the act of recuperating and constructing spaces as a simultaneous internal and external process. As the buildings are being renovated the people too are reinvigorated with hands-on skills that further sustain the community.

These skills were passed along when the Renigades worked together with the Dynamite Brothers, a street gang from the Lower East Side, to teach them how to take housing matters into their own hands. The Dynamite Brothers learned “how to own, manage and repair” the buildings in their neighborhood.¹¹¹ Algarín highlights the collective endeavor, which, as discussed earlier, he practices artistically as well. Curiously, among the many ideas that the Young Lords put into practice, “[t]here are certain principles that are fixed and unchangeable...First, is collective leadership, not individual leadership.”¹¹² It was the collective work of the Renigades during 1974-1975 that attracted a great deal of media attention, and the favorable publicity encouraged sponsors to support urban renewal projects. As a result, other programs like Adopt-a-Building on the Lower East Side, for example, received funds in 1977 to rehabilitate abandoned buildings.

¹¹⁰ Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero eds., *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings* (New York: William Morrow, 1975), 12.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹² Young Lords Party, *Ideology of the Young Lords Party* (Bronx, NY: Young Lords Party, 1972), 2.

Since Algarín makes a point to discuss the process of making spaces by and for African Americans and Latinos in the anthology *Nuyorican Poetry*, he suggests that art is entrenched in the politics of identity and community. For Algarín the act of claiming and owning abandoned buildings goes hand in hand with the production of poetry and theatre. He states:

The next day the Renigades continue their work and the Dynamites initiate their construction. The work at first is slow and there is no existing language to express the feelings and work to be done. Language and action are simultaneous realities. Actions create the need for verbal expression. If the action is new so must the words that express it come through as new. Newness in language grows as people do and learn things never done or learned before. The experience of Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York has caused a new language to grow: Nuyorican. We came to the city as citizens and can retain the use of Spanish and include English.¹¹³

In using their own hands to renovate deteriorated buildings, Nuyoricans materialize the desire to have a home. Home now exists not solely in the mind but as an actual physical space reclaimed and reconstructed by Nuyoricans. Just as volunteers in the rehabilitation movement used their hands to rebuild new homes, poets must also use their hands to write and document the new language. To feel at home Nuyoricans must create a new language that expresses and reflects their experiences. Algarín, however, encourages Nuyorican poets to use their entire bodies to concretize a place called home and make sense of the feelings and desires of belonging. The rehabilitation movement then is not solely about the transformation of buildings but the creation of new words and a new language that has the potential to sustain, maintain, and mobilize the Nuyorican community.

In the midst of recovering abandoned spaces, poets re-construct spaces that often

¹¹³ Algarín, "Introduction: Nuyorican Language," *Nuyorican Poetry*, 9.

reflect the urban culture while also holding on to and romanticizing Puerto Rico. Amina Muñoz's poem "puerto rican graffiti" in *Nuyorican Poetry* demonstrates how she has etched her Nuyorican identity and community in the Lower East Side.

sit in my '57 Cadillac
 with your john's bargain store blouse,
 bubblegum sticking to your frizzies,
 and bare feet smelling of bacalao.
 little anthony and tito puente sing
 through black sweat—
 aquí viene the coquito man
 aquí viene superman
 who does the cha-cha-cha
 and lives in the white house.
 broken bottles in the street
 shine like diamonds at our feet.
 Beer smells wine smells rum smells
 cover the night like lace
 at a first communion.
 an imported tropical breeze
 goes up your nose disguised
 as a sudden whiff of florida water,
 a giant cockroach is saying his bedtime rosaries
 but los jíbaros de la calle
 keep on hanging out
 of a four-door metal space ship
 temporarily grounded on e. 112 st.
 ready to take off any minute
 to become
 the first spics on the moon.¹¹⁴

Similar to Felipe Luciano, the first Chairman of the Young Lords Party, and other Nuyorican poets, Muñoz uses her senses to transform the landscape she inhabits. She completely adorns the urban landscape with cultural sensory signifiers. The way the *poeta* perceives the world stems from the island. Feet odor smells like *bacalao*, codfish.

¹¹⁴ Amina Muñoz, "puerto rican graffiti," *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings* (New York: William Morrow, 1975), 107.

Agua florida (Florida water), cologne used for spiritual cleansing, good luck, peace of mind and protection, feels like a tropical breeze. People hanging out late at night are *jibaros de la calle*, working-class field laborers gathering in the streets of the Lower East Side. Puerto Rico resonates throughout the poem. And as such, Muñoz's poem constructs a space where multiple identities and geographic locations co-exist. The "alternative" spaces are created by using a linguistic dialectic that allows the poet and the reader to be here in New York and there in Puerto Rico.

On many occasions, Nuyoricans have attempted to preserve these self-constructed physical and literary spaces. Despite their hard work, however, the process of gentrification has forced artists, community organizers and residents to move from these spaces interrupting the social and artistic production of the Nuyorican community. To use a space is one thing, but to maintain it as one's own over decades is an ongoing battle. Charas, a Lower East Side community center was started in 1965 to serve the poor- to-working-class community with cultural, educational and housing programs. It dealt with the controversy of ownership as they were evicted on December 27, 2001.¹¹⁵ Similar to the poets of the Cafe, community organizers who were part of Charas took part in restoring the Lower East Side. In 1979 Charas moved its operation to P.S. 64, a six-story school building located on East Ninth Street that had been abandoned by the city for nearly four years. What was once a space for education had become a neglected, vandalized, drug infested social space. With the help of Adopt-A-Building Inc. and an

¹¹⁵ Information on Charas can be found on their website www.charas.org, which has not been updated since 2003. According to the website, six gang-members who first started out as the Real Great Society founded Charas in 1965. Initially Charas worked with R. Buckminster Fuller and his staff adapting the geodesic dome for various housing, cultural, and environmental uses in poor communities. The result of this implementation is documented in Sy Moterl's *The Improbable Dome Builders* (New York: Drake Publishing, 1973).

all-volunteer staff, Charas was able to rehabilitate this building, finally naming it El Bohio Cultural and Community Center. This space became the home of Bimbo Rivas, Jorge Brandon and El Teatro Ambulante, a street theater group of talented writers, directors, and performers. Throughout the eighties and nineties there were many attempts to raise funds to buy the building Charas rented but there was little response from the city until it was suddenly auctioned to Gregg Singer for \$3.15 million in the summer of 1998.

After three and a half years, Charas was evicted. As an act of civil disobedience, activists rehearsed a lock down performance to be held on the front steps of El Bohio Cultural and Community Center. This staged event attempted to resist the process of gentrification by protecting a local community center that housed many social and artistic programs. However, because authorities arrived before activists left the building, they had no choice but to block off the first floor of the building. In an interview Susan Howard, a leader and defendant of the Save Charas Committee, explains that the group planned to lock down by using “four-foot-long cylinders made out of steel, chicken wire and red, white, and blue duct tape.”¹¹⁶ The protestors chained their arms to each other from the inside of the cylinder creating a human barricade. Interestingly, performance enters into this act of resistance as residents gathered around the building to witness the eviction. Written on each cylinder was the word “community,” a reminder to everyone, including the cops dressed in riot gear, sheriffs and other authorities, that Charas had united people for over twenty years. Even in their last performance, Charas continued to hold on to the chains of unity.

¹¹⁶ Documentation of this incident can be found in the periodical *Tenant/Inquilino* 32.1 (January 2002). This is a bilingual journal in Spanish and English that informs tenants of their legal rights.

In light of the long battle faced by Charas and other organizations like the Clemente Soto Vález Center, on Suffolk Street, honoring the Puerto Rican nationalist and poet, Clemente Soto Vález (1905-1993), Algarín's decision to become sole owner of the building the Nuyorican Poets Cafe was renting was indeed a political move on the organization's part. The Cafe's continued existence is as much a political feat as an artistic one and an astute practical, business move, especially when taking into account the urban renewal projects of the eighties, which eventually replaced abandoned buildings with newly constructed homes. The intention of the real estate industry was to attract more middle-class professionals to the neighborhood. Despite the exodus of many low-income families to the outskirts of Brooklyn and the Bronx, this community never ceased to create spaces for self-expression. As Pedro Pietri states in his renowned poem "The Puerto Rican Embassy," "Everyone's imagination is a sovereign nation!/Freedom of Expression has no boundaries to impede."¹¹⁷ Even when cultural spaces, like Charas, are forced to move out of a physical space, Pietri affirms that the mind as a site of resistance is difficult to control or destroy. The Nuyorican Poets Cafe is one space still able to maintain itself as a site of resistance, both physical and metaphysical.

The Cafe as a Liminal Performance Space

The change of locality from a studio space to a living room salon in Algarín's apartment to a Cafe shifted the oral and literary practices of Nuyorican poets and playwrights. The multiple functions as well as the intimate nature of these spaces impact

¹¹⁷ Juan Sánchez, *Puerto Rican Equation: Puerto Rican Artists Ponder 100 Years Since the 1898 Invasion* (New York: The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College of the City University of New York, 1998), 13.

how art is produced, transmitted and received. The Cafe is a lounge for people to buy a drink, relax, and have a casual conversation. In the general seating area candles flicker on small round tables creating a cozy atmosphere. This area is also an art gallery and a dance floor. If it gets too crowded, there are more seating options upstairs amongst the stage lights. The fourth wall illusion of theater is not upheld in this setting as the stage lights and the sound booth are not concealed but instead integrated into the environment. The actual performance space consists of a slightly raised small platform. Its close proximity to the audience encourages the performer and the spectator to break away from theatrical formalities. While it is often the case that in a conventional theatrical space the audience disappears in the darkness when a play begins, in the Cafe both parties can see each other and are forced to interact and acknowledge each other's presence. A sense of intimacy is already built in to the physical nature of the Cafe and pervades the audience, the performer, and the works of art. Precisely because the physical space is multi-functional and adapts to many types of performance stages, it features an array of experimental works and works-in-progress from slams to open mics to plays, songs, dance, musical pieces, and one-person shows. Intimacy, however, transcends the multiple functions of the space and the range of artistic forms featured.

Given the physical and artistic heterogeneity, the Cafe is an ideal liminal site of hybrid cultural mediation. The term "liminal" is a nexus in which there is convergence and co-existence of varied forms and concepts: cultural traditions, histories of colonization and conquest, artistic genres and practices, and temporal and spatial spaces. The Cafe is one such space. The physical space itself is liminal as it serves as a lounge, performance space, dance floor and music hall. Moreover, the audience also occupies a

liminal space because individuals negotiate different artistic genres, cultures, languages, and traditions. The artists and spectators mediate the public and private, the formal and informal, the autobiographical and fictional, and poetry and theater.

The groundbreaking work of Homi Bhabha, Néstor García Canclini and Diana Taylor provides us with a theoretical framework to unfold the layers of cultural expression produced by the Puerto Rican community in New York City. In the *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha approaches hybridity as a process that creates an ambivalent, indeterminate third space of cultural production and reproduction. In this space individuals and collectives disrupt the narratives of colonial power and the dominant culture and articulate hybrid narratives that interact and negotiate with multiple, at times contending, national and cultural constituencies to establish alternative social structures and political agendas.¹¹⁸ Canclini, who discusses hybridity in terms of modernity and post-modernity in Latin America, argues that such a lens will allow scholars “to analyze the crossings of indigenous and colonial legacies with contemporary art and electronic culture.”¹¹⁹ While the crossings that Canclini refers to are specific to time and space, Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* also reminds us of the colonial legacies inherent in this term. As she explains, often hybridity is used interchangeably with *mestizaje*, a term that emphasizes the racial and cultural mixing of indigenous and European people. For this reason, she carefully untangles the points of confluence and emphasizes where both terms diverge.

Although the origins of both words denote the act of crossbreeding, hybridity was

¹¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 53-6.

¹¹⁹ Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 3.

first used in a scientific context in botany to describe the engineering of a new species. While the hybrid species is consciously grafted, in most cases it cannot reproduce. Without the external motives of genetic manipulation, the hybrid species becomes extinct. The scientific approach to hybridity drastically alters notions of production, as its existence is dependent on “add-ons, accumulation and juxtaposition.”¹²⁰ Because the hybrid human, on the other hand, could reproduce and because this would contaminate the white race, the term was used to denigrate and alienate people born out of miscegenation. *Mestizaje*, on the other hand, was a self-chosen word describing the bicultural feelings and experiences of *mestizos*, people of indigenous and European descent. One of the most effective ways the colonizer exercised power was by physically or sexually violating the body into submission. This violent act allowed colonizers to claim ownership not only of the land but its people, especially the women. The production of *mestizaje* therefore is inseparable from miscegenation and the history of conquest and colonization. Whether consensual or not, *mestizaje* is not lost as it always appears in and through the live body. Taylor clearly distinguishes both terms: “Whereas *mestizaje* tells a *history* of domination, rape, and reaffirmation, hybridity connotes a *process* of social categorization.”¹²¹ This history, as Silvia Spitta suggests in *Between Two Waters: Narratives of Transculturation in Latin America*, will vary depending on the national and regional engagements with *mestizaje*. That is to say, that *mestizaje* is experienced differently depending on the specific local history of a place.¹²²

¹²⁰ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 101.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹²² Marilyn Grace Miller, *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin*

Since this project deals with the evolution of identity formation, we must consider how the politics of geography between here and there play out in the making of Nuyorican identity. Transculturalism is another term that informs the development of Nuyorican identity across geographic borders. Coming from Latin America, this term was used by Fernando Ortiz in *Cuban Counterpoint* during the 1940s to explain the binary cultural interchanges that occur when different cultures interact with one another. Transculturation is a three-stage process consisting of the intake and practice of a foreign culture, which then displaces or denies one's own culture so as to make room for a new cultural phenomenon.¹²³ Ortiz's theory counters the work of U.S anthropologists in the 1930s, such as Ralph Linton, who examines cultural changes through the lens of acculturation. In this case, transculturalism is a problematic term for the Latin Americanist because it suggests the erasure of the culture, traditions, and practices and the assimilation of immigrants into the American culture, similar to the melting pot theory. In her study *Between Two Waters: Narratives of Transculturation in Latin America*, Silvia Spitta expands on the phenomenon of transculturalism by examining it as a complex process of cultural, literary and linguistic re-creation directly emerging from the cultural shock and the violence of colonization.¹²⁴ Transculturalism then becomes an important term to bring into this dialogue as it embraces the idea that Latinos neither completely embrace nor deny one culture over another but create alternative expressions.

Since I am discussing the cultural phenomenon of Nuyoricans, terms like

America (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004).

¹²³ Fernando Ortiz Fernández, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).

¹²⁴ Silvia Spitta, *Between Two Waters: Narratives of Transculturation in Latin America* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1995), 2-3.

mestizaje, hybridity and transculturalism are important to consider because these labels of identification have been used to describe Latinos. Each term, however, carries its own colonial baggage. Given their geographic proximity to the U.S., the colonial histories of Puerto Rico and Mexico will differ from each other and from other Latin American countries. For example, the Mexican usage of *mestizaje* does not necessarily include African ancestry in the racial mixture. Contemporary scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Marta Sánchez, however, draw attention to the African presence in the mixture. Ignited by the discovery of gold found in California, the United States believed that it was its manifest destiny to expand westward and proceed with any territorial acquisitions. This doctrine promoted the annexation of Western United States, which led to the Mexican American War (1846-1848). The Treaty of Guadalupe formally ended the war and guaranteed Mexicans who remained on the northern side of the border U.S citizenship with all of its attendant rights. The government, however, breached its agreement by violating the clauses that guaranteed respect for the cultural autonomy and material property of Mexicans living in the United States. Practically overnight, people's citizenship changed from Mexican to American without their knowledge.

Just as the colonial history of Mexico has shaped Mexicans' and Chicanos' understanding of their identity, the present colonial state of Puerto Rico also informs Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans. Although sharing histories of colonization, Mexico and Puerto Rico have a distinct relationship to the U.S. With the Spanish American War (1898) the colonial owners of Puerto Rico changed from Spain to the United States. In 1917 the Jones Act made Puerto Rico a U.S Commonwealth and granted Puerto Ricans a dual national identity. Unlike Mexicans, Puerto Ricans are American citizens by birth.

Their American status, however, did not prevent Puerto Ricans from being treated as second-class citizens in the United States. In the eyes of many white Americans, Puerto Ricans were colonial subjects who immigrated to the States.

How then does *mestizaje* and hybridity function when examining the productions of a community that is still subjected to colonialism and yet performs its American or non-American status? For Nuyoricans the terms *mestizaje* and hybridity must expand or perhaps converge and conflate to include a history of people under colonial rule who have a sense of being neither here (New York) nor there (Puerto Rico) as well as belonging to both. In the broadest terms Latinos are a by-product of the Spanish colonization, and thus, they can be considered as having a New World/post-colonial/mestizo/hybrid identity that embodies three races: the European, the indigenous, and the African,¹²⁵ and at times three languages: Spanish, English, and Spanglish. In *The Cosmic Race*, José Vasconcelos, a Mexican philosopher and educator from the 1920s, refers to this racial fusion as *la raza cósmica*. He believes that people will fuse and mix into one race and eventually become one people. He writes: “It is clear that domination by the whites will also be temporary, but their mission is to serve as a bridge. The white race has brought the world to a state in which all human types and cultures will be able to fuse with each other.”¹²⁶ The danger in Vasconcelos’s theory is that when people in power co-opt and monopolize notions of *mestizaje*, they homogenize each Latino

¹²⁵ Although some scholars such as Coco Fusco, Martha E. Giménez, Gladys M. Jiménez-Muñoz, among others, argue that Latinos have a tendency to marginalize their African and indigenous roots and celebrate their Hispanic heritage, this project shows that contemporary Nuyorican performers reclaim their racial identities using elements of Hip Hop as part of their performative strategy.

¹²⁶ José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 9.

ethnic/racial group and dismiss its distinct history.¹²⁷ With this in mind, this project highlights the collective strategies that Puerto Ricans have used to mark their identities and communities. My goal in mentioning these theories of identity is to move away from limiting Nuyorican expression as either anti-colonial, hybrid, *mestizo* or transcultural and to look at the liminal space Nuyorican expressions occupy, where identities and communities simultaneously perform acts of bricolage and mediation.

Perhaps another way to approach this issue is to look at the way the Nuyorican body functions as a liminal site for performing and expressing layered identities that intersect and collide with notions of *mestizaje*, anti-colonialism, post-colonialism, and transculturalism. Racial and ethnic specific organizations that emerged in the sixties and seventies, like the Cafe, often sidestepped street labels in seeking to build community. Although the term “Nuyorican Poetry,” used in the first anthology, explicitly excludes poets from other backgrounds, the Cafe has never practiced this restriction. The desire to express poetry through the performing body in the Cafe transformed the term Nuyorican from a culturally specific label to a more elastic label of identification. Over the years the Cafe went outside its Hispanic/Latino identification and welcomed works of African-American, Asian American, and Canadian artists to name a few. As Maria Damon describes in her essay “Avant-Garde or Borderguard: (Latino) Identity in Poetry,” “the main body of poets who participated in Cafe activities were not only Puerto Rican but

¹²⁷ This is most evident in what I refer to as the *raza cósmica* ads. The 1999 Levi’s Silver Tab advertisement, for example, portrays ethnically and racially ambiguous people who can pass as Latino, African American, Asian American, Native American or as any person of color. In doing so, the Levi’s Silver Tab advertisement contains and controls diversity and ultimately eliminates multiculturalism. This visually diverse image appeals to white America because it is superficially multicultural. However, the carelessly mixed-n-matched racial and ethnic markers, like the slanted-eyes, the afro-centric hairstyles, and the brown skin homogenize people of color.

also African American, Euro-American, other Latin ethnics, and whoever was willing and able to swing in the groove.”¹²⁸

The Cafe then re-defined the term Nuyorican. It approached the term “Nuyorican” in the same way it was created, as a fusion of two words in two different languages: Nueva York and Puerto Rico. The Cafe practices this act of cross-cultural recognition and exchange by sharing the space with various ethnic identities coming from different walks of life in New York City. The audience witnessing works at the Cafe was open not only to the various cultures and languages that artists offered in their work but also to their personal struggles. “Nuyorican” goes beyond national identity politics and instead brings people together and creates a sense of solidarity among marginalized communities as they share a history of colonial oppression. A space, Rachel Rinaldo explains, “is also a means of circumscribing a zone of shared experiences.” With this conceptual framework in mind, we can look at the Cafe as a performative zone of mediation that forged a transethnic/racial community in New York. It is the non-conventional manner of producing, interpreting and communicating art in the Cafe that makes diversity possible.

In addition to being a literary salon, the Cafe is also a publishing house that reorganizes the performance practices and the practice of production and circulation. Because the mission of the Cafe was to support the work of Nuyorican poets, in 1975 Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero edited *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings*. This was the first anthology featuring the works of poets who were born in Puerto Rico or were culturally connected to Puerto Rico but were living in the Lower East Side. More recently, in 1994, Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman published the

¹²⁸ Maria Damon, “Avant-Garde or Bordeguard: (Latino) Identity in Poetry,” *American Literary History* 10, no. 3 (Autumn, 1998): 487.

anthology *Aloud: Voice from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*, which documents many poems that were performed at the Poets Cafe since its inception. Three years later, *Action: The Nuyorican Poets Cafe Theater Festival* featured a wide range of performance pieces. Since the 1970s the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe has supported the work of many Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, white Americans, and international artists. The second anthology, *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*, points to this inclusion of poets of different nationalities, races, ages, and social background. This phenomenon brings into question how we understand national, racial and ethnic labels of identification.

The Cafe is crucial to the Nuyorican Movement because it serves as a physical center for people to imagine and re-imagine community. The hybridized nature of this space offers cultural workers an alternative sense of self and community. In this space cultural workers take artistic license and merge politics with art, art with personal experiences. Home, then, is a zone of mediation that accounts for the commonalities, contradictions and intersections of experiences and practices. The ability to mediate these multidirectional forces ultimately shaped the very form and style of protest, poetry and theater during the Nuyorican Movement. Today, the Cafe remains a creative space where Nuyoricans continue to imagine community through the expression of their own identities. The act of imagining and constructing a sense of home pulsates through the work of Nuyorican poets and performers. As the Cafe became a zone of mediation, reflection and action, cultural workers used the performance and cultural events as rehearsals for the political arena including rallies, town meetings, and sit-ins. As such the community gathers, unites, reflects, speaks out, acts out on and off stage, and circulates their views at the Cafe and beyond.

The Aesthetic of Nuyorican Poetry: Nuyorican Discourse, The Role of the Poet, and the Community

For over thirty years the Cafe has served as an artistic, literary, cultural and political refuge for artists to share their diverse experiences and political perspectives. Founding Cafe poets like Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Pedro Pietri, Sandra María Esteves, Amina Muñoz, among others were, indeed, instrumental figures in the development of Nuyorican poetry. As founding Cafe poets, they formalized an aesthetic and a performative tradition that developed over one hundred years ago. According to Efraín Barradas, there were Puerto Rican writers in the United States before 1898, before Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States and ended the Spanish American War.¹²⁹ In light of this historical context, I position Nuyorican poetry as a living literary genre as opposed to a “dead genre,” one that continues evolving as many artists practice and implement the styles and traditions of Nuyoricans while simultaneously adding their contemporary flavor to the form.¹³⁰

Pedro Pietri’s idea that the “Nuyorican Movement is the First Draft Nuyorican Poetry Movement” is significantly valuable to approaching the development of Nuyorican poetry as an ongoing historical and literary process. It is one that is not bound

¹²⁹ Efraín Barradas and Rafael Rodríguez, eds., *Herejes y mitificadores: Muestra de poesía puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos* (Río Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 1980), 74.

¹³⁰ In the article “Within the Context of a Nuyorican Element: Sandra María Esteves,” Louis Reyes Rivera gives his introductory remarks to a discussion and reading by Sandra María Esteves at the Hispanic Women Writers symposia, SUNY, Binghamton, February, 1988. He states that Esteves’s work “represents the culmination of a literary particular in process since 1898, the year Puerto Rico fell to English-speaking hands.” However, I tend to believe that the work of the founding Nuyorican poets is not the culmination of a literary genre, but one that continues to be in the process of development. *Centro* 2.3 (Spring 1988): 51.

by time but by the many generations that participate in making such a phenomenon. “First draft,” he states, “is you scribbling it on a notebook, or a paper, or a napkin and you read it there. And if you make mistakes, man, it makes the poem much more interesting and exciting, and that’s when history started being made.”¹³¹ Instead of emphasizing Nuyorican poetry as a product, he underlines the various stages incorporated--writing, revising, performing, and editing the same piece of work that was publicly enacted--all of these stages contribute to the evolution of the movement.

Influenced by the oral traditions of Puerto Rico and the United States, Algarín believed that the body and the voice of the poet are as important as or even more important than the written text. The titles of both anthologies, *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings* (1975) and *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (1994) document the relationship between the written word and the performing body. Despite the passage of time between each anthology, Algarín’s views about the aesthetic of Nuyorican poetry remain the same. In the introduction to each of these collections, he establishes that there are three fundamental elements to consider: the oral expression of the self, the creation of a discourse that negotiates between New York/American culture and Puerto Rican/Caribbean culture, and the transformation of the performer into a conscious cultural worker before the public. Algarín’s theory provides a useful framework for understanding the aesthetic and production of Nuyorican poetry. I use these three components as a springboard to discuss the multiple linguistic, historical, and political influences comprised in the Nuyorican aesthetic.

Given the racial and political climate of the 1970s, the connection among the

¹³¹ Pedro Pietri, “There was Never No Tomorrow, Nuyorican Pedro Pietri in His Own Words,” a storytelling edited by Raymond Beltrán, *La Prensa San Diego*, February 6, 2004.

breath, the text, and the body are significant because it makes visible the history of marginalized people and their commitment to social change and social action. This section demonstrates how Nuyorican poets orally expressed the self to raise consciousness, stimulate political action and form community. In his piece “Volume and Value of the Breath in Poetry,” Algarín captures the moment in his career when he encouraged poets to use poetry to promote social change. He taught them how to transform their written work into a living text. He believed that the voice and the body can function as agents for mobilizing the community, especially since the audience is required to listen and witness the poet embodying his words and his experiences. As Algarín puts it, “When a New York street poet recites on Sixth Street and Avenue A, he cannot afford to sound pale and unengaging....The poet has to get out there and project a volume that stops the crowd and concentrates it into a listening body. The success with which a poet can do this determined his reputation in the community, as a poet.”¹³²

To make their poetry accessible to the common person Nuyorican poets took their work to the streets. They captured the audience on a street corner by physically and orally projecting their identities, themselves, in the presence of the public. Algarín evaluates the effectiveness of the poet’s skill by studying whether his body and voice fully captivated and engaged the community. He argues that to be an effective poet the self must move beyond the text and transpire in an oral performance. “Open uncontrolled sound [from the poet] makes people respond,” Algarín states. “They not only give you

¹³² Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero ed., *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings* (New York: William Morrow, 1975), 326.

their attention, but they're also at that point where attention is not passive but active.”¹³³

The instant the voice and the body become unruly the poet catches the attention of the people. Algarín consciously transforms the written words into “flesh and bone,” thus bringing the focus to the poet’s body. It is the uncontrollable state of the body that creates a site of mediation where the audience witnesses the struggle of working class people, the desire of emancipation from economic and social oppression, and the actions taken as a result of their current situation.

As the poet makes his/her body and voice publicly visible and audible, s/he transforms the literary tradition of poetry and brings it back to its oral roots. The poet is at once an artist, a social critic, and a political figure who transforms and heals the self so that the community can undergo the same process. The commitment to orality, the physical acting-out of the voice and the body, produces community as people gather, reflect and respond. In doing so, performance poetry becomes a medium for “sharing and binding,” for building *comunidad*, while simultaneously exploring the complexity of the self.¹³⁴ This communal process is possible because Nuyorican poetry is a cultural- and site-specific live art form dependent on performative expressions of the self that are dialogical and publicly transformative. It is important to perform the self because the poet is testifying to the political repression and discriminatory injustices s/he encounters in

¹³³ Miguel Algarín, “Volume and Value of the Breath in Poetry,” *Revista Chicana-Riqueña* (August 3, 1976): 53.

¹³⁴ Flores emphasizes the meaning of community by exploring the intertextuality of the Spanish word, “*comunidad*.” “For while ‘*común*’ refers to sharing those aspects in the cultures of the various constitutive groups that overlap, the sense of ‘*unidad*’ is that which binds the groups above and beyond the diverse particular commonalities... ‘*común*’ stands for the community in itself, while ‘*unidad*’ refers to the community *for* itself, the way that it thinks, conceives or imagines itself.” Juan Flores, “The Latino Imaginary: Dimensions of Community and Identity,” *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representation of Latinidad* eds., Frances R. Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 194.

his/her everyday life, which is not so different from the experience of members in the audience. In making his/her experience known, s/he is pushing other members in the community to speak up and change their oppressive situation. After the performer leaves the stage or the urban streets, the sound of his/her voice and the articulation of his/her body become part of a collective memory.

The oral traditions used by Nuyorican poets are foundational to the process of building *comunidad*. In “Documentaries and *Declamadores*: Puerto Rican Poetry in the United States,” Martín Espada, a poet and activist himself, notes that Nuyorican poets are descendents of *declamadores*. Traditionally males, *declamadores* renowned for their oratorical skills, voiced the social and political needs of the community in commercial plazas or other public arenas that were located in Spain and its colonies.¹³⁵ Interestingly, Nuyorican poet Jorge Brandon (1909-1995), whom Espada and many Lower East Side poets know as the *declamador* of the Lower East Side, has carried on this tradition since the forties.¹³⁶ His commitment to sustain the oral practices of poetry is evident and his *declamador*-style has made him the father of Nuyorican poetry.¹³⁷ In *Aloud: Voices from*

¹³⁵ Martín Espada, “Documentaries and *Declamadores*: Puerto Rican Poetry in the United States,” *A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in Contemporary American Poetry* eds., Marie Harris and Kathleen Aguero (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 260.

¹³⁶ Espada mentions that Jorge Brandon is “an old-style *declamador* nearing eighty who still recites on street corners” (260). In the essay “An Overview of Latino Poetry: The Iceberg below the Surface” published in the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *American Book Review* (November-December 2002), Nicolás Kanellos, a renowned literary historian, identifies Brandon as a community bard whose *declamador* style served as an artistic and cultural model to other poets (1-2).

¹³⁷ Miguel Algarín reflects on the impact that Brandon has had on many poets in *Puerto Rican Voice: Interview with Writers* by Carmen Dolores Hernández (Westport, CT: Prager, 1997), 42. Similar to the ways Pietri, Esteves, Holman, and other Nuyorican poets describe Brandon, Algarín brings a sharper focus on the poignant yet ephemeral aspects of orality and performance. In addition to acknowledging him in interviews, he reveres Brandon’s declamatory style in his poem “Christmas Eve: Nuyorican Café,” *Mongo Affairs* (New York: East Village Press, 1978), 6.

I sit weaving electrical impulses
With Willy One, Ruben and the talking
Coconut, el Señor Jorge Brandon, who

the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe, Algarín states that Brandon's mission was "to say it aloud, to say it on the street corners, to say it in the parks of this city."¹³⁸ Pedro Pietri would concur as he writes in his poem "Traffic Misdirector,"

he recites his poetry
to whoever listens
& when nobody is around
he recites to himself

.....
to become familiar
with this immortal poet
you have to hang-out
on street corners
building stoops rooftops
fire escapes bars parks
subway train stations
bodegas botanicas
iglesias pawn shops
card games cock fights
funerals valencia bakery
hunts point palace
pool halls orchard beach
& cuchifrito stands
on the lower east side¹³⁹

Having performed in the "plazas of Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia, Central America, and Mexico," Brandon must renegotiate the public spaces he engages with when he

bears the flag of poetry on his tongue
and purest love on his heart giving it
away on the impulse of the moment,
generously to anybody ready to control
the ego and become a listener to a master
painter with words....

¹³⁸ Algarín, Miguel and Bob Holman, eds., *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 10.

¹³⁹ Pedro Pietri, "Traffic Misdirector," *Traffic Violations* (New Jersey: Waterfront Press, 1983), 103-105.

settles in the Lower East Side.¹⁴⁰ Since a central public square does not exist in New York City, to disseminate his words and his message Brandon performs in churches, bars, trains stations, pool halls, funeral homes, and any space where folks convene on a daily basis.

As Pietri and countless other Nuyoricans poets have concurred, Brandon taught many of them how to declaim and declare poetry in the everyday life of the community. In my interview with Sandra María Esteves, she recalled that Brandon would break into poetry in the middle of a conversation. He was a model to many poets because the poetry he recited was his daily, and sometimes only, means of communication and interaction. As a *declamador*, Brandon leaves his words on the streets only for the present moment. Trusting only the power of orality and performance, his work cannot be easily found in bookstores or libraries nor is it recorded for the public domain. There are only two poems published in *Aloud*, a handful of audio-recorded performance by the Poets House in New York City and one homemade video that features him.

According to Brandon, the poet was to say it *now*. For it is in the telling of the past that he can teach today's audience. Giving voice to the past was certainly one way that Brandon educated the next generation. His poem "La Masacre de Ponce," does exactly that. He commemorates the heroes and heroines who lost their lives protesting against the incarceration of Pedro Albizu Campos. Since Brandon bears witness and archives the Puerto Rican history of resistance, Tato Laviera refers to him as "a sacred

¹⁴⁰ Nicolás Kanellos's "Orality and Hispanic Literature of the United States" is invaluable to the study of performance poetry as it brings into focus the impact of oral performance on the literary canon. In *Redefining American Literary History*, ed. La Vonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward Jr. (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1990), 115-123.

father-testament.”¹⁴¹ Brandon’s oration serves as a testament in the same way that the Old Testament served as a prophet’s oral transcription of the plight of Jews. Brandon’s testament, however, is documented in the act of telling through the mouth, through the body.

In the case of Jorge Brandon, *declamando* meant that because he memorized a great deal of prose and verse, in recitation the poetic words of the past got conflated with his personal poems. He embodied and enacted the words and ideas of his own work as well as those of other poets. Whether it was their words or his did not matter. What was important, as Bob Holman suggests, was that in performing the poetry, Brandon ultimately became the poem. It was almost impossible to separate the poet from the poem. In “For Jorge Brandon,” Holman illustrates the performative relationship that existed between Brandon and the public acting out of poetry.

His vision was his voice
 Your ears had to rejoice
 He’d wickedly splinter
 the meaning of center
 Into atoms of busted dust
 And rust and trust
 Padre Jorge the Master of Sound
 The Creation of sidewalks the streets surround
 The conduction of trains to realty’s brains
 The wheelchair of dictionary aeroplanes
 This quivering quaver
 Piraguero’s flavor...

.....
 Jorge Brandon the World’s Greatest Poem
 Wherever I go you have been
 I see you there always again¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Tato Laviera, *AmerRícan*, “don luis muñoz marín” (Houston, Texas: Arte Público, 1985), 87.

¹⁴² Bob Holman, “For Jorge Brandon,” In *With the Crowd*, USA Mouth Almighty Records, CD, 1998.

In this poem Holman recalls Brandon's obsession with putting sound and body to the word. It is that performance aesthetic of embodiment and vocal technique of incantation that become a model to many Nuyorican poets. In fact, in an interview conducted shortly before his death, Pedro Pietri anoints Brandon as the Saint of the Nuyorican Poetry Movement because it was his style of declamation that made "him decide whether it was poetry or suicide."¹⁴³ In revering Brandon's works, Pietri cements the notions of orality and performance into the Nuyorican literary canon. The religious associations made by poets to describe Brandon make him and his work immortal, mystical, and worthy of veneration.

Although the descriptions of Brandon capture his old-style of *declamando*, José Parreño's homemade video *El coco que habla (The Talking Coconut)* (1978) offers a visual documentation of how Brandon embodied poetry not only on stage but also in his normal everyday life. We witness his declamatory style as he recites on the streets of the Lower East Side, in his house, in the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and on the stage of El Teatro Ambulante. In the video recordings, he seems possessed by words, for at times he recites in prayer-like form, incantations becoming a hysteria of words that are at times overwhelming to the ears. Even his clothing becomes another way of emphasizing how he can move the written word out from the text and onto the body. He wears a black World War I army helmet that reads "EL POETA RECITA" (THE POET RECITES). The poet is a performer unveiling the written word in corporeal narration. And as such, he needs an audience, director and theater. In an attempt to promote his work he paints on

¹⁴³ Pedro Pietri, "There was Never No Tomorrow, Nuyorican Pedro Pietri in His Own Words," storytelling edited by Raymond Beltrán, *La Prensa San Diego* February 6, 2004.

a black slate:

OIGA EL POETA QUE RECITA
 LAS CIEN MEJORES POESIAS
 UN PEDACITO DE PUERTO RICO EN NUEVA YORK
 EL TEATRO AMBULANTE
 BAJO LA DIRECION DE EL COCO QUE HABLA
 HABLA Y RECITA
 CON EL POETA
 BIMBO RIVAS
 (HEAR THE POET THAT RECITES
 THE BEST HUNDRED POEMS
 A PIECE OF PUERTO RICO IN NEW YORK
 THE TRAVELLING THEATER
 UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE TALKING COCONUT
 SPEAKS AND RECITES WITH
 BIMBO RIVAS)

Brandon's declamatory style embodied many performative qualities. His oratorical skills moved beyond simple recitation to encompass the corporeality of his act. Part of his technique was to place a small speaker in a coconut so that when he spoke into the microphone it appeared to talk. The juxtaposition between Brandon *declamando* and the talking coconut (*el coco que habla*, which also can mean the talking head) accents the presence and absence of the body. So there are two performative moments occurring simultaneously; there is the performance poetry by Brandon and the one by the coconut. To Brandon, *declamando* means that the orator is thinking about recitation as a theatrical piece that requires direction. Brandon disrupts the conventions of poetry with vocal and corporeal actions as a way of resisting against the static state of words in the traditional literary realm. Brandon's style of oration derives from such a long-lasting tradition that it has been passed down to contemporary Nuyorican poets. Brandon's oral practices demonstrate how the aesthetics of Nuyorican poetry is closely linked to theatre and performance.

Victor Hernández Cruz, another Nuyorican poet, demonstrates how the tradition of declamation has been passed on from one generation to another. He recalls that his grandfather was a tobacconist in the small mountain town of Aguas Buenas.

I have been told that the chin-chal, tobacco workplace, was near my home and that I, as a toddler, was always around my grandfather. The workers sang and recited poems; my body heard songs, guitars, and oral poetry before my mind. The poems were almost chanted; they were dramatic; they belonged to the Spanish rhyming tradition of *décimas* and *coplas*. Later in New York, an uncle of mine continued to declaim in this tradition.¹⁴⁴

As a Nuyorican poet influenced by the practice of declamation, Hernández Cruz makes references to the connection between poetry, theatre and performance. In his poetry, he incorporates sounds and musical rhythms to emphasize the movement of the words in relation to the body. His poetry relies on the body to translate the sounds, the energy of the words, and the real life experiences written on the page. In a piece titled “Poem” he succinctly addresses how to make a poem. “Think with your body/And dance with your mind.”¹⁴⁵ The poet must think of the multiple texts needed to make poetry. Hernández Cruz’s poetry, like the poetry of many Nuyoricans, relies heavily on the written, vocal, and corporeal to make the poem complete.

In addition to thinking of poets as *declamadores*, Algarín also links the aesthetics of Nuyorican poetry to a troubadour tradition. As he states in the introduction of

Nuyorican Poetry:

¹⁴⁴ Bruce Dick Allen, *A Poet’s Truth*, 57.

¹⁴⁵ Victor Hernández Cruz, “Poem,” *Mainland* (New York: Random House, 1973).

The poet sees his function as a troubadour. He tells the tale of the streets to the streets. The people listen. They cry, they laugh, they dance as the troubadour opens up and tunes his voice and moves his pitch and rhythm to the high tensions of “bomba” truth. Proclamations of hurt, of anger, and hatred. Whirls of high-pitched singing. The voice of the street poet must amplify itself. The poet pierces the crowd with cataracts of clear, clean, precise, concrete words about the liquid, shifting latino reality around him.”¹⁴⁶

Like the declamadores, the songs of troubadours from of the 11th to the 13th century did not remain in manuscripts but were realized with the performances of the live body.

Similar to the Young Lords’ tactics and Brandon’s declamatory style, the Nuyorican poetry/tale is conveyed by using elements of performance--a story, an audience, and live bodies in action. Algarín radicalizes the role of the poet as he paints a dialogical picture of the spectator and the performer. Part of what is complicated about this image is that the poet narrates “the tale of the streets,” which is in fact a reality encountered by the performer as well as the spectator.

The Nuyorican poet then has more at stake when s/he must carry the burden of representation for the community at large. The poets who were originally meeting at Algarín’s place were not only sharing poetry but were documenting the day-to-day history of the Nuyorican community. Ingrained in Nuyorican poetry is the culture--what people do, the music, the sounds, rhythms, and beats as well as the idioms and speech patterns of the community--on the written and corporeal text. The poetry chronicles the life of the community to ultimately raise awareness and instigate action.¹⁴⁷ By publicly

¹⁴⁶ Miguel Algarín, *Nuyorican Poetry*, 11.

¹⁴⁷ For a discussion on the historical trajectory of Nuyorican poetry and how it functions as a form of documentation see Martín Espada “Documentaries and Declamadores: Puerto Rican Poetry in the United States” in *A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in Contemporary American Poetry* eds., Marie Harris and Kathleen Aguero (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 257.

sharing the personal life experiences, the poet narrates his story and makes visible the struggles that exist for him and his community, and documents the histories of the people. Thus the poet does not speak for him or herself but for an entire community that has gone through similar if not the very same trials and tribulations.¹⁴⁸ In this way, the poet becomes a community chronicler narrating the everyday struggles and realities of many Nuyoricans. It is the articulation of the text as a performance piece that facilitates the transmission, reception, and dissemination of poetry.¹⁴⁹

A tradition of oration continued throughout the 1920s in Puerto Rico with the development of a new poetic movement called *Atalaya de los dioses* (The Watchtower of the Gods). In 1928 Graciany Miranda Archilla, together with Clemente Soto Vélez, Alfredo Margenat, and Fernando González Alberty, a group of poets who wanted to revolutionize Puerto Rican poetry by breaking away from the traditional content and form of Romanticism, started *Atalaya de los dioses*. They wanted to create poetry with new themes, imagery, and rhythms that raised social and political consciousness. In an article written for *El Diario de Nueva York*, Miranda Archilla states that this poetry, would “ajustar nuestras voces líricas al dolor de la tierra puertorriqueña” (give lyrical voice to the pain of the Puerto Rican people).¹⁵⁰ Since their goals were very similar to that of

¹⁴⁸ In an interview conducted by Martín Espada, Louis Reyes Rivera states, “there is no distinction between the reader and the writer. Without someone to clean streets and sew garments, there would not be someone with time to write poetry.” In “Documentaries and Declamadores: Puerto Rican Poetry in the United States,” *A Gift of Tongues*, eds., Harris and Aguero, 259.

¹⁴⁹ I am reminded of Daniel Kane’s *Welcome All Poets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) where he considers the readings as events that problematized the state of poetry. “Readings,” he writes, “were not just public presentations of texts, but events that defined a contemporary avant-garde as they redefined the way poetry was used in contemporary American culture” (27).

¹⁵⁰ The Graciany Miranda Archilla Papers, 1916-1991, Puerto Rican Archives of New York, Box 5, folder 1, “Que fue y que es el atalayismo” (“What Was and What is Atalayism”), 3. The quote is cited from a draft of an original essay submitted to *El Diario de Nueva York* for publication on Sunday,

Albizu Campos, who wanted to “romper las cadenas de Puerto Rico” (break the colonial chains of Puerto Rico), Miranda Archilla asked him to be the honorary president of *Atalaya* soon after having been elected as president of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party.¹⁵¹ As their collective efforts mutually supported the goal of anti-colonial liberation, *Atalaya* connected their literary movement to a political movement. This consequently laid the foundation for artists (cultural workers) and political vanguards to merge poetry with politics.¹⁵² For example, Soto Vélez, believed that “un poeta es un creador, un inventor, un constructor de mundos” (a poet is a creator, an inventor, a builder of worlds), supported Albizu Campos’s political ideologies and incorporated a sense of anti-colonial nationalism into his own poetry.¹⁵³

While many scholars and poets point to the *declamadores* and oral traditions that were carried on by men, I want to also recognize the practice of oration by women which goes back to the tradition of *lectoras* (readers). At the turn of the twentieth century, women workers in factories continued this tradition of declamation both on the Island and in the States. Lisa Sánchez González’s work on Luisa Capetillo, a feminist activist of the epoch, describes her role as a *lectora*:

September 2, 1951. *Atalayistas* promoted conversations between the geographic borders of Puerto Rico and New York, as the group frequently wrote to a Spanish speaking audience in New York.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵² In “The Cultural Expression of Puerto Ricans in New York: A Theoretical Perspective and Critical Review,” *Latin American Perspective* (Summer 1976), Felix Cortes, Angelo Falcón, and Juan Flores state that, “The pressing tasks on the cultural front are the dual responsibility of active cultural workers and the political vanguard, whose efforts have for too long been extended separately and, at times, even at cross purposes” (150).

¹⁵³ Clemente Soto Vélez’s “Acracia Atalaysita” was first published in *El Tiempo* (September 16, 1929): 4 and later republished in *Nuestra aventura literaria (los Ismos en la poesía puertorriqueña) 1931-1948*, 2nd ed, (San Juan, P.R.: Ediciones de la Torre, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1966), 248-49.

These kinds of “readings” were not an uncommon practice in Puerto Rico, particularly among tobacco workers. For a minimal fee, designated readers would provide workers with the latest news and fiction in circulation—usually materials related to current events and socialist politics--by reading out loud and facilitating discussions while the rest of the employees had their hands and eyes occupied with the day’s labor.¹⁵⁴

What is important here is that the central figures chronicling and reporting the real or fictional news to the community were women. They were as much part of the production of labor as they were the production of oration. Subjects, themes, and issues dramatized in these performed readings focused on the immediate community. This would elicit audience participation not solely in response to the read/performed piece but as participants of the social world. This performative space where women were both laborers and *lectoras*, I believe, became a space to educate and radicalize women. Because *lectoras* and their performances were not removed from the audience and their current experiences, these women had the potential to create and help build a sense of community among other women. Women have always shared the stage and been an important part of the tradition but they are often overlooked in the history of the Nuyorican Poetry Movement. This troubling absence of women is an issue that I will further discuss in the following chapter.

In addition to the oral expression of the self, Algarín believed that a Nuyorican aesthetic created “a discourse between ourselves about setting up systems of protection and mutual benefices.”¹⁵⁵ Similar to the Young Lords Party and other political

¹⁵⁴ Lisa Sánchez González, *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 24. See also Norma Valle-Ferrer, *Luisa Capetillo, Pioneer Puerto Rican Feminist*, trans. Gloria Waldman-Schwartz with the collaboration of students from the Graduate Program in Translation, The University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, Spring 1991 (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

¹⁵⁵ Miguel Algarín, “Volume and Value of the Breath in Poetry,” *Revista Chicana-Riqueña*

organizations during the sixties and seventies, the Nuyorican Poets Cafe promoted the idea of protecting the space inhabited by Nuyoricans. This system of protection became an inherent practice in the work of Nuyorican poets. One of the ways poets maintain this system of protection is by creating a forum for protest while documenting the experiential histories of the community. Nuyorican poetry often protests against social injustices experienced by the community. For example in Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" and Louis Reyes Rivera's "Grito de Lares" they write about the tenuous political status of Puerto Rico. They take an anti-colonial stance by commemorating some of the protest manifestations of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party in hopes of creating a post-colonial imaginary. As Espada explains,

At times, this protest manifests itself merely by description of surroundings: when Pedro Pietri writes of funeral parlors and liquor stores proliferating in his neighborhood, that and similar observations based on simply looking out the window may be interpreted as political. The daily enemies are depicted in turn: the landlord, the boss, the police, the pusher, the cold, and even the city itself, be it in the form of bad public hospitals and welfare systems or the apparent soullessness of the metropolis.¹⁵⁶

This element of protest is a fundamental aspect of Nuyorican poetry as it offered the community political tools for reclaiming spaces such as the abandoned building and the arena of language.

Poets put into practice the artful skill of protest by also manipulating the Spanish and English language to construct a sense of home despite their experience of displacement, alienation and their questionable citizenship.¹⁵⁷ As Nuyoricans, poets stood

(August 3, 1976): 329.

¹⁵⁶ Espada, "Documentaries and Declamadores," *A Gift of Tongues*, 262.

¹⁵⁷ In "Home and the Ruins of Language: Victor Hernández Cruz and Miguel Algarín's Nuyorican Poetry," Carmelo Esterrich offers a psychoanalytical approach to Nuyorican poetry. Using the theory of

and still stand today at the crux of various intersections: the junction of two national spaces—Puerto Rico and the U.S, two languages—Spanish and English, and two poetic traditions—literary and oral.¹⁵⁸ Caught between the island of Puerto Rico and New York City, Nuyorican poets created words and images that juxtapose and fuse the Caribbean and urban worlds.

Spanglish is apparent in the work of many Cafe founding poets, such as Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Pedro Pietri, Lucky Cienfuegos, Marita Morales and Sandra María Esteves. They reconfigured Spanish and English words, phrases and sentences to construct a hybrid tongue, one that transforms both languages, refuses to be homogenized into the norms of any one language, and yet has access to both. Language is then constructed as a self-selective process as opposed to one that is imposed by the English Only mandates that forbid bilingualism. It is by altering the linguistic structures of both English and Spanish that the poet is able to generate not only a hybrid linguistic form, but also a hybrid identity that reflects the experiences of Nuyoricans. Poets literally create a home and their identity in the way they construct language. David Colón states it clearly, “identity is presented as language” because it is a site where Nuyoricans can negotiate

incorporation, a concept created by post-Freudian psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, he argues that Nuyoricans cope with the loss of the “original” home by inscribing in their poems a fantasy of home. The memories of the island of Puerto Rico are put away, kept a secret and maintained intact in this crypt known to us as a poem. However, the ways that the poet uses both Spanish and English actually creates fractures in the poem that allow the reader/audience to understand the loss of the “original” home and procreation of an alternative home due to the cultural process of acculturation, transculturation and assimilation. *MELUS* 23 (Fall 98): 43-57.

¹⁵⁸ For further discussion on the in-between spaces that Nuyorican poetry generates see Efraín Barradas, “Introduction,” *Herejes y mitificadores muestra de poesía puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos*, eds., Efraín Barradas y Rafael Rodríguez (Río Piedras, P.R.: Huracán, 1980), 11-30 and Juan Flores, “Puerto Rican Literature in the United States: Stages and Perspectives,” *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage*, eds., Ramón Gutierrez and Genaro Padilla (Houston, TX: Arte Público, 1993), 31-68.

who they are and where they are in relation to the rest of the American social body.¹⁵⁹ In doing so, the poet creates a sense of selfhood and home through the way he or she transforms the original languages, Spanish and English.

Nuyorican poets practiced reclaiming and protecting their space by transforming Spanish and English to Spanglish. The Lower East Side, for example, became known as “Loisaida.” In her enlightening essay “Making Loisaida: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan,” Liz Sevckenko interviews Chino García, a community organizer, who remembers that he and Bimbo Rivas, a Loisaida Nuyorican poet and activist, were working on the play *Don Quixote of the Lower East Side*. They believed that the title was too long so Rivas decided to use Spanglish and shortened the title to *Don Quixote de Loisaida*.¹⁶⁰ García and Rivas started performing skits from the play on the streets of Loisaida to promote the name. Rivas often performed his poem “Loisaida,” which upheld this neighborhood as the love of his life: “Lower East Side/I Love You/you’re my lady fair/no matter where I am/I think of you!/The mountains and the/valleys cannot compare./my love to you/Loisaida, I love you! I dig the way you talk/I dig the way you look. Me vacila tu cantar/y yo me las juego/fria pa’que viva para siempre,/En mi mente, mi amada, you te llamo Loisaida.”¹⁶¹ These public performances offered local residents a chance to think of their neighborhood as a community with a specific Nuyorican or

¹⁵⁹ David Colón, “Other Latino Poetic Method,” *Cultural Critique* 47 (Winter 2001): 268. For a more detailed discussion of how language functions in Nuyorican poetry see Juan Flores, “Living Borders/Buscando América: Language of Latino Self-Formation,” *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1993), 199-224.

¹⁶⁰ Liz Sevckenko, “Making Loisaida: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan,” *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, ed. Agustín Laó-Montes & Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 298.

¹⁶¹ Bimbo Rivas, “Loisaida,” *Aloud: Voice from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*, ed. Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 361.

Latino identity. In 1975 at a town meeting Rivas recited his poem “Loisaida,” and Ruth García Nazario, a resident and community organizer, proposed that the community formally adopt Loisaida as the name of the neighborhood.¹⁶² Soon after, community organizers rehabilitated a building specifically to hold town meetings and hung a large sign over the door that read “Loisaida Town House.” Loisaida then became incorporated into the names of small businesses. Soon, the entire neighborhood became familiar with the name “Loisaida.” This transformation of the Lower East Side to Loisaida is representative of what the discourse attempts to execute; it is one that disrupts cultural and linguistic conventions, identifies the self throughout history, and establishes the future presence of the self and the community.

The third element of the Nuyorican aesthetic that Algarín discusses is about transformation. He believed that the poet must transform before the public to begin the process of healing the scars and wounds of domination. This metamorphosis occurs when spaces are created for people to freely express themselves. The Nuyorican Poets Cafe is, of course, an exemplar of how to create alternative spaces of expression. I further expand this idea of creating artistic and cultural venues of transformation by situating the poet as cultural worker, because in generating such spaces they are building trans-ethnic alliances among various communities.

Although Nuyorican poetry was rooted in the oral traditions of Puerto Rico, the poetry scene of the sixties and seventies in the Lower East Side also had its influence. In an interview with Bruce Allen Dick, Miguel Algarín discusses how Allen Ginsberg shaped his work. The Beat style of live poetry readings, seemingly spontaneous word

¹⁶² Sevchenko, “Making Loisaida,” *Mambo Montage*, 299.

makings and use of breath and incantations resonate in Algarín's own repertoire. He calls part of his book "Nuyorican Kaddish" to underline the intersections between this Nuyorican poet and his contemporary, Ginsberg.¹⁶³ These moments of artistic encounter are crucial as they demonstrate how poetry has the potential to traverse race, ethnicity, and economic class and create dialogue among various communities.

In the film *Fried Shoes, Cooked Diamonds* by Constanzo Allione, Allen Ginsberg discusses the initial development of the poetry scene at the Naropa Institute, which later became the Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. In the summer of 1974 Chögyam Trungpa, the founder of Naropa Institute, invited Allen Ginsberg, Diane di Prima, and Anne Waldman to share and teach poetry. From that moment on the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics was created. Among the many poets invited to read that year were Peter Orlovsky (Ginsberg's long-time companion), Meredith Monk, Diane di Prima, Amiri Baraka, as well Piñero and Algarín. Their presence clearly marks the exchange and interconnections between the Nuyorican and Beat poets. Ginsberg notes that like the Beats, Algarín and Piñero viscerally share their poetry by performing the experience of living between two worlds: Puerto Rican and New York. Algarín's and Piñero's performance at the Naropa Institute is distinct from the work of other Beat artists as they open with a choral ensemble chanting in a call and response manner the names of Orishas such as Yemaya and Shangó and asking these spirits to descend and speak to their people. They immediately establish a sense of collectivity rather than taking an individualistic approach. Piñero follows with loud claps, like the *clave*, that set the rhythm of the chant. He performs the poem "Seeking the 'Cause,'" and although, it is not

¹⁶³ Bruce Allen Dick, *A Poet's Truth*, 17.

in the text, he intermittently sings “good night my love where ever you are.” In doing so, Piñero adds an extraliteral element to his work as the performing body breaks away from what is written on the page and plays with performative elements of singing, chanting, clapping and dancing. Although there are distinct personal and cultural elements in the work of Algarín and Piñero, it is clear that their work remains connected to the human conditions and experiences of Nuyoricans. This layer of humanness brings together in one space shared and divergent experience of oppression dealt with by many marginalized communities.

The Absent Bodies: The Troubling of Gender and Sexuality

I acknowledge Algarín’s practice and theory of performance poetry as an essential political tool for community building; however, this process raises several issues important to theatre practitioners and scholars who in one way or another facilitate the process of collaboration. What are the social implications of building community, when Algarín consciously or unconsciously fragments, denies, and at times censors other bodies in the Nuyoric aesthetic?

Although the Poets Cafe was a haven for many artists, during the seventies it harbored very few Nuyoric female poets. The anthology *Nuyoric Poetry* co-edited by Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero features eighteen poets, of which only three female poets were included: Sandra María Esteves, Martita Morales, and Amina Muñoz. The absence of Nuyorriqueñas is not surprising as many social movements during this period put race and ethnicity at the forefront and neglected to consider gender. As in most movements that were born in the seventies, many male leaders fought for racial and

ethnic equality but practiced gender oppression among their own people. Although Algarín, Piñero and Pietri do not fully feature Sandra María Esteves's work, she certainly had a vital role in the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and the Nuyorican movement.

Within a predominantly male-centered Nuyorican poetic discourse, Esteves, Morales and Muñoz began to carve a distinctly female-oriented space that represents their Latina worldview. Díaz-Quiñones's anecdote of a female Puerto Rican worshipper who explains her notion of *bregar* comes to mind here. She says that *bregando*: “significa encontrar soluciones apropiadas, tender un puente sin hacer demasiado ruido. Se trata de buscar un punto medio, evitando prudentemente la violencia” (means finding solutions for a given situation, to actually build a bridge without fussing about it. It is about finding a middle point, avoiding violence).”¹⁶⁴

For this woman the making of alternative possibilities is not a recreational activity but a way of dealing and getting through the everyday colonial reality. While Nuyorican male poets construct an extraliteral landscape that attempts to escape the colonial reality, this woman weighs her options, finds a middle ground and builds bridges between the many paths that life offers so that she can walk through her challenges with ease. This Puerto Rican woman is pointing to the way she creates alliances among various communities, diplomatically, without protests, confrontations or violent acts,.

Like the Puerto Rican female churchgoer, the Nuyorican poet, Sandra María Esteves also practiced this idea of building bridges in her poem “Blanket Weavers.” She calls upon the weavers, traditionally women in Native American communities, to make alliances and stitch a song of many colors painting stories of pain, sweetness, fear and

¹⁶⁴ Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones, *El arte de bregar*, 33.

passion. It is the women collectively weaving a song “that builds upon our graves a home/for injustice fear oppression abuse and disgrace/and upon these fortifications/of strength unity and direction.”¹⁶⁵ It is when the female churchgoer and Esteves build bridges between a community of people and their social circumstances that they can weave a song that will “cover us with the warmth of peace.”¹⁶⁶ This metaphorical notion of building bridges, I suggest, is a distinct strategy particularly based on the experiences of women of color that resonates in the work of today’s Latina hip hop performers.

Caridad de la Luz, Mariposa, Nilaja Sun, and Aya de León, have performed their poetry in the Cafe and see the space as a fundamental source of political engagement and artistic inspiration. Having been nurtured and supported by the Poets Cafe, these artists infuse their poetry and solo pieces with the performance traditions of this historic venue. For them the Cafe served as a rehearsal space to perform their poetry and lead them to create solo pieces with a hip hop sensibility. They use spoken word, rhyming and rapping together with hip hop music and African-based Puerto Rican popular music such as *bomba y plena*.

What are the performative aspects of Nuyorican poetry and the spoken word art form that allow Luz, Mariposa, Sun, and León to express their individual identity as well as their communal identity? What are the social factors that drive poets/performers/artists to utter and embody the written poetic text? Like hip hop, performance poetry provides a vehicle to articulate one’s autobiography where there is a narrative trajectory that has to do with starting off at one point and eventually getting to another higher point. Unlike

¹⁶⁵ Sandra María Esteves, “Blanket Weaver” in *Nuyorican Poetry*, ed. Algarín and Piñero, 134.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

poets who rely on the text as the medium to disseminate their work, these Latina poets reach their audience by transforming the written word into a living corporeal text, performed by the poet in flesh and bones. Their work, like the art in the Cafe that Algarín describes in the opening poem of this chapter, are living messages, not representations of life. Their work produces a gender-specific sense of identity, community and nationhood as their live bodies restore the protest traditions of the sixties and seventies as well as traditions of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe that, by no coincidence, inform their own realities as women in social action, always resisting, *siempre bregando*.

Chapter 3

Nuyoriqueñas in the House:

Feminist Performance Strategies of Sandra María Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa

... A real life drama

WRITTEN, PRODUCED & DIRECTED BY
SANDRA MARIA ESTEVES

WITH
 EDUARDO FIGUEROA & JOSEPH PAPP

JAN 8, 1979 6:30 P.M.
 SMALL CLAIMS COURT
 111 CENTRE STREET, NYC
 (FREE ADMISSION)

BMT TRAIN TO CANAL STREET (EAST 2 BLOCKS, SOUTH 3 BLOCKS)

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO THE CIVIL COURT OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK, THE NEW RICAN VILLAGE CULTURAL CENTER, THE NEW YORK SHAKESPEARE THEATER FESTIVAL, CITY OF NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS, THE NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS, THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT UNDER C.E.T.A. VI, THE CULTURAL COUNCIL FOUNDATION, THE HOLISTIC CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMAN SOCIETY, THE NICHIREN SHOSHU ACADEMY FOR BUDDHIST CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE INTERNATIONAL PEOPLE'S CULTURAL MOVEMENT.

Figure 3. Theatre advertisement of *The Lawsuit* (1979), from the personal archive of Sandra María Esteves.

In the same way that broadsheets serve to relay information about a specific event, the preceding theater advertisement announces the date, time, and place of the “real life drama” of *The Lawsuit* by Sandra María Esteves. Initially, when Esteves provided me with this flyer, I did not give much thought to the content of the performance, as the title seems to explain the subject matter at hand. I was intrigued that *The Lawsuit* was taking place at the small claims court of New York City. Why would an artist perform her work in a courtroom? How did Esteves convince the city to stage a production in the courthouse? Assuming that Esteves was simply publicizing her work, I was caught off guard when she informed me that the performance was the actual trial itself.¹⁶⁷ As an uninformed reader and/or audience member, I did not know that Esteves filed a case against Eduardo Figueroa, the co-founder and director of the New Rican Village,¹⁶⁸ and Joseph Papp, the producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival, because she was not paid for her services as a poet and set builder.¹⁶⁹ “The Lawsuit” was indeed a real life production that took many by surprise. The defendants were certainly taken aback when Esteves made a satirical production out of the court trial.

¹⁶⁷ Sandra María Esteves, e-mail interview by author, Sunday, December 10, 2006 and personal interview by author, on July 20, 2006. I thank Esteves for generously sharing her archives, time, experiences and memories. The numerous discussions at the Coral Diner in Washington Heights, on the benches across from Boricua College, by phone and in cyberspace have deeply informed the ways I read and understand Nuyorican poetry and performance.

¹⁶⁸ The New Rican Village opened its doors on October 1976, three years after the Nuyorican Poets Cafe officially and physically established its own space. Located on Avenue A between Sixth and Seventh Street, literally three blocks away from the Cafe, the New Rican Village is another historic space that produced Nuyorican music, art, poetry, theatre, and dance. For an ethnographic approach to the history of musicians and the music produced in the New Rican Village see Marina Roseman’s “The New Rican Village: Artists in Control of the Image-Making Machinery,” *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Musica Latinoamericana* 4, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1983): 132-167.

¹⁶⁹ Nestor Otero, a Puerto Rican graphic artist who has won a number of awards, designed the set. His work has been part of exhibitions throughout the United States and the Americas in places such as Bienal de Sao Paulo in Brazil, Cuenca in Ecuador, Documenta in Basel, Switzerland, and many other international venues.

Interestingly, similar to any theatrical production, this court drama was preceded by a number of rehearsals. On July 17, 1978 the New York Shakespeare Festival's Summer Mobile Theater featured the New Rican Village, a group of artists working in diverse mediums such as poetry, theater, visual art, dance and music, of which Esteves was a part.¹⁷⁰ After receiving payment from the Public Theater, which was the organization administering the festival, the New Rican Village made a check out to Esteves. The two hundred and fifty dollar check bounced three days later. Since she was scheduled for more performances, Esteves confronted Figueroa at the following event. He brushed her anger aside, imploring her to calm down and get on stage because there were "important" politicians in the audience. Immediately after her performance she was fired. Esteves reminded him of the verbal contract they made, but Figueroa refused to acknowledge her. Given that Esteves was the only poet who was not paid for her artistic services and was the only woman on board, she was "determined to make a statement, as well as an example of the situation."¹⁷¹ She exposed Figueroa's unprofessional and chauvinistic behavior by filing charges against him. Although as a third party Papp was not liable, Esteves included his name "to insure that Eddie Figueroa would show up and to humiliate him in connection to the Public Theater."¹⁷² Just as she would with any of her productions, she booked a date for the event, created a flyer with acknowledgments, and publicized it widely. While the uninformed audience member called to make reservations, others questioned the use of the court as a performance space, as I did.

¹⁷⁰ New Rican Village called the performance "Conjunto Libre." It presented the poetry reading of Pedro Pietri, Lou Pérez, and Américo Casiano. The visual art of Jorge Soto and Nestor Otero were exhibited and the musicians Mario Rivera and the Salsa Refugees played with Brenda Feliciano on vocals.

¹⁷¹ Sandra María Esteves, interview by author, New York, NY, December 10, 2006.

¹⁷² Ibid.

Clearly the locality of the venue did not prevent people from attending her new work. About twenty friends and relatives attended the performance. In fact, some came to learn about Esteves's new professional connection to an innovative performance space and hoped to tap into this new resource. The production's finale ended with Figueroa's admission that a verbal contract between him and Esteves did have the arbitrator rule in her favor and split the liability between the New Rican Village and The Public Theater. Within a couple of days the Public Theater paid Esteves but until this day she has yet to receive a check from Figueroa or the New Rican Village.

I open this chapter with the production history of *The Lawsuit* to accent the "real life drama" embedded in the work of Latina poets in the seventies. Esteves intentionally parallels the theatrical process with the legal system for several reasons: to call attention to the performative dimension of social institutions, to challenge the place of social institutions and the role of cultural workers, and to reveal the power dynamics played out in society. In direct engagement with the feminist mantra that "the personal is political," Esteves offers a critique of patriarchal institutions (literary, theatrical, and legal) that most often center on male figures as founders and creators. The Nuyorican Movement is no exception. One of my primary objectives in this chapter is to de-center the predominantly male presence of Nuyorican poets through the inclusion of female poets. Through an in depth examination of the ways Esteves and other Nuyorican *poetas* use visual art, poetry, and performance, I argue that women throughout the Movement have strategically and purposefully employed subversive traditions to counter patriarchal dominance. This chapter works to reinsert the history of women into the Nuyorican Poetry Movement and demonstrates how gender informs the processes of creating,

building and nurturing community.

I consciously position Esteves as a *poeta* because this Spanish term acknowledges and honors the female poet makers. Many *poetas*, especially during the early part of their careers, picked up many of the writing tactics of contemporary male poets like Pedro Pietri, Jesus Papoleto Melendez, Lucky Cienfuegos, Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, and Tato Laviero. Esteves points out how she unconsciously mimicked many of the male practices in an interview conducted by Bruce Allen Dick:

I found that different devices would show up in my work, devices that my male colleagues were using, to the point that even their themes would become my themes. Then one day someone came up to me and said that the reason I write so well is that I write like a man. I didn't know how to take that. It hit me profoundly, and I had to think about it for a while. It made me realize that I wasn't really expressing my own voice. Even my style was very much like the men's style—strong and militant. Not to say that all men are strong and that all women are soft, but there were parts of myself that I just wasn't exploring or expressing by emulating these male voices.¹⁷³

Even with her political awareness, she unconsciously normalized her female voice to fit a male-centered style and aesthetic. The performance and reification of these dominant discourses in effect made women's work undistinguishable from the men. It is not surprising then to see why women in the Nuyorican Movement did not receive their rightful recognition. Although women played an important role in the Nuyorican Movement, most scholarship on Nuyorican poetry tends to focus on the work of male poets. How do scholars recover the work of these *poetas* given that they have been largely erased from the Nuyorican Movement? First, their work must be interpreted in

¹⁷³ Bruce Allen Dick, *A Poet's Truth: Conversations with Latino/Latina Poets* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 46.

relation to the conditions and efforts of the Nuyorican Movement. Esteves's work was, for example, tightly connected to a social movement that was developing a political identity of being Latino, and more importantly, Nuyorican.¹⁷⁴

I position Esteves's work as a precursor to the work of contemporary Nuyoriqueñas performers such as La Bruja (Caridad de la Luz) and Mariposa (María Teresa Fernández), discussed in this chapter, as well as Nilaja Sun and Aya de León, whom I will turn to in the following chapter. The discussion of Esteves's work sets the stage for studying a range of performative strategies employed by these Nuyorican *poetas* and performers. As proposed in the last chapter, rather than identifying these strategies as anti-colonial, hybrid, *mestizo* or transcultural, I am interested in the liminal spaces Nuyorican feminist expressions inhabit. I specifically turn to the liminal sites of form (poetry, theatre, and hip hop), of content (biography and autobiography) and/or of action (artistic production and activism). These strategies are by no means the only liminal zones of Nuyorican expressions that exist in their performances; however, I focus on them because they serve as connective tissues linking the past (Nuyorican performing *poetas*), present (Nuyorican female solo performers today), and future.

Terminological Conundrums Part 1: Poetry and Theatre

Before launching into an analysis of these *poetas*, it is necessary to clarify how I position the work of Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa as challenging the traditions of

¹⁷⁴ See Jan Clausen, *A Movement of Poets: Thoughts on Poetry and Feminism* (Brooklyn: Long Haul Press, 1982) and Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).

poetry, theatre, and performance. One of the first scholars to address the commingling of poetry and theatre in a social and political context is Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, who refers to this phenomenon as *teatropoesía*, the co-existence and fusion of poetry and theatre on the stage.¹⁷⁵ She brings attention to the 1981 *teatropoesía* production *Tongues of Fire* at Mills College in Oakland. This was a dramatic adaptation of selected poems from the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, which featured the writings of radical women of color. As noted by Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach, Latinas throughout the U.S. gravitated toward poetry as a way of entering into theatrical practice and as a result “have invented a theater of hybrid genres.”¹⁷⁶ Given that Yarbrow-Bejarano, Sandoval-Sánchez, and Sternbach focus on the Chicana development of *teatropoesía*, it is useful to examine in detail how Nuyoriqueñas conceived poetry and theatre as one artistic medium. Whereas the poetry preceded the stage in the Chicana development of *teatropoesía*, for Nuyoriqueñas the poetry was incomplete until the words transcended from the literary text to performance stage.

Marita Morales, a teenager who was also featured in *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975), began her career by performing her poetry on Sixth Street, the urban stage. Her poem “Teatro” describes the close, intricate relationship between real life, poetry, and theatre:

Teatro
a street scene
a scene of

¹⁷⁵ Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, “*Teatropoesía* by Chicanas in the Bay Area: *Tongues of Fire*,” *Revista Chicana-Riqueña* 11, no.1 (1983): 78.

¹⁷⁶ Alberto Sandoval Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach, *Stages of Life*, 54.

us, you and me
 a scene
 a Puerto Rican scene
 the scene of
 us
 as in we
 as we express us
 and touch the hearts
 when we
 release our inner feelings
 of
 I am me and you are you
 Teatro
 as in you
 as in we
 of THE LOWER EAST SIDE
 that set aside
 that higher side
 down to us
 when we go up
 and look down to them
 Teatro
 a freedom of life
 as in reality to us
 for function of we
 as in Ambulante
 Teatro
 a scene
 as in
 feeling of feel
 of
 expression of you
 to us
 of
 OH SHIT
 WOW
 Y ESTE
 PERO BIEN HEAVY DUTY MAN!!
 sí
 a street scene
 a feeling of love
 for our people
 as in us
 that are we

of *Ambulante*¹⁷⁷

In this poem Martita establishes the interdependence of theater and the urban scene, which itself can serve as theater. Given that theatrical venues were, and continue to be, limited, the streets functioned as an extension of performance spaces. Her street experiences replace the “I” with “we” so that theater functions to create a sense of collective memory. Knowing that a physical space is also an essential part to community gatherings, Jorge Brandon and Lucky Cienfuegos, founding Nuyoricán poets, established and directed the short-lived theatre company, Teatro *Ambulante*.

The physical immediacy of poetry on the theatrical stage in the seventies is a phenomenon that continues to exist in the Nuyoricán community, take for example the work of *La Bruja* and *Mariposa*. Precisely because the presence of *teatropoesía* continues to be a medium used by many Latina poets and solo performers today, we must pay close attention to this connection. Although *teatropoesía* is an outlet for women to articulate their experiences, during the mid-seventies the male practitioners were acknowledged as the creators and thus not surprising that they advocated the objectification of women. Soledad Barreto, for example, who was part of the Puerto Rican Poets’ and Playwrights’ Workshop, which Algarín led, questioned how men have represented women on stage: “Why are you glorifying pimps and prostitution? Where are you taking our people?” And “What the hell does Miguel Piñero know about female orgasm?” As a poet and playwright herself, Barreto advocated plays that speak women’s truth.¹⁷⁸ Two of her

¹⁷⁷ Martita Morales, “Teatro,” *Nuyoricán Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (New York: Morrow, 1975), 102.

¹⁷⁸ Carlos Morton, “Nuyoricán Theatre,” *The Drama Review* 20, no.1 (March 1976): 43-49. This was the first article in *TDR* about Latino theatre, let alone Nuyoricán theatre. The fact that this article was published in the issue about theater and therapy shows how the field has struggled with placing Latino

plays, *Opiate Seven* and *Perdido*, address machismo and post-Vietnam conditions, respectively, from a female perspective. The visibility of women has increased as witnessed in the recent theatrical adaptation of the Latina Poets Festival in March 2007, organized by Miriam Colón, the Executive Director of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater.

Terminological Conundrums Part 2: Poetry and Performance

Although scholars such as Efraín Barradas, Yamila Azize Vargas, and Louis Reyes Rivera, among others, have discussed Esteves's work as part of the canon of Latina literature, her work has yet to be analyzed as a performative text.¹⁷⁹ The artistic culture of the seventies, as Esteves remembered, fomented and shaped the oral practices of poetry through informal gatherings in someone's apartment, recitations of work-in-progress, and feedback from peers. As exemplified by the tradition of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, poets pushed the written word off the page and into the vocal and corporeal realm as a way of gaining visibility.¹⁸⁰ Because the act of writing does not remain on the surface, we must consider the process of poetry making as inherently performative.

theatre in the tradition of American theatre.

¹⁷⁹ The following essays discuss the literary impact of Esteves's work but do not draw upon the performance traditions that inform her poetry. Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta Sternbach, "At the Threshold of the Unnamed: Latina Literary Discourse in the Eighties," 2-23; Eliana Ortega "Poetic Discourse of the Puerto Rican Women in the U.S: New Voice of Anacoanian Liberation," 122-135; and Yamila Azize Varga "A Commentary on the work of Three Puerto Rican Women Poets in New York," 146-165 in *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989). See also Efraín Barradas, *Parte de un todo: ensayos y notas sobre literatura puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos* (San Juan, P.R.: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1998) and *Herejes y mitificadores: Muestra de poesía puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1980) and Louis Reyes Rivera, "Within the Context of Nuyorican Element: Sandra María Esteves," *Centro Bulletin* (Spring 1988).

¹⁸⁰ The economy of the art form comes in question when a poet's financial stability depends on arrangements for public presentation to enhance her future professional engagements.

Reading, reciting, and performing are performative practices ingrained in the writing process of Nuyorican poets.

Since Esteves's work navigates various performance media including poetic oration, written poetry, performance poetry, and audio and visual recordings, her poetry necessitates alternative methods of examination.¹⁸¹ As the Nuyorican tradition shows, literature can be used as a means of liberation. Writing in this tradition, Esteves deploys poetry and performance as feminist strategies¹⁸² that rupture, critique, and transform the systems of domination that operate in the social world.¹⁸³ The aurality/orality enmeshed

¹⁸¹ The poetic oration is not a new art form. As printing capabilities were limited or non-existent, oral traditions of poetry sprang up as means of circulation and dissemination. When publishing became accessible the oral poetry shifted to written poetry. Now the widespread publication of poetry in a book-and-audio-CD format points to the ways poetry has come to rely more on the listening ear than the reading eye to gain publicity and appeal to the masses. For example, the release of *Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath*, edited by Elise Paschen and Rebekah Presson Mosby (Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks Mediafusion, 2001), combines poems in print with the reading of poetry by the authors themselves on audio CD. The work of William Perdomo, Saul Williams, Patricia Smith, Beau Sia, and Regie Cabico on CD also points to how poetry is returning to oral traditions. Daniel Kane's *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) illustrates how even scholarship on poetry demands the use of CDs to compensate for the impossibility of capturing the vocal and performative qualities of poetry in a written text.

¹⁸² I am intentionally using the word "strategy." It has often been used in feminist literary theory to describe women's writing in terms of oppression and resistance, situating literature as a site of social struggle. However, cultural feminists have argued that the term "strategy" conjures a militarist approach and have questioned whether the term simply reifies patriarchy. Joyce Van Dyke argues against the use of this term as it metaphorically places feminist strategy in a combat field where women are attacking and defending their intellectual territory. However materialist feminists such as Sue-Ellen Case and Jill Dolan are interested in the ways practitioners "chart new pathways in performance theory" by taking into account their own positionality. In dialogue with these feminist critics, who argue that women consciously create alternative expressive mediums and explore their subjectivity, I examine the feminist strategies used in Esteves's work. See Joyce Van Dyke, "Performativity Anxiety," *The Women's Review of Book* 6, no. 4 (1989): 1-3. She reviews three books pertaining to feminist approaches to theatre and performance: *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwright*, ed. Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig (New York: Morrow/Beech Tree Books, 1987); Sue-Ellen Case *Feminism and Theatre*, (New York: Methuen, 1988), and *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre* ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1989). In response to her review, Jill Dolan writes "In Defense of the Discourse: Materialist Feminism, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism...and Theory," *The Drama Review: TDR* 33, no.3 (Autumn, 1989): 58-71 and Gabrielle Cody adds another rebuttal in "More Defense, More Discourse," *TDR* 34, no.2 (Summer, 1990): 8-9.

¹⁸³ For scholarship that examines literature as site of emancipation see "Sudden Def" (*The New Yorker*, June 14, 1995, 34-42) in which Henry Louis Gates Jr. discusses how spoken word and rap, though different genres, create sites that produce a sense of freedom. Also see Maureen N. Eke, *From the Heart: Women and Liberation in New Writings by Black South African Women* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1993); Lisa Maria Hogeland, *Feminism and its Fictions: The Consciousness-raising Novel and the Women's Liberation Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Carla Kaplan,

in the Nuyorican poetry of the seventies provides a lens to read Esteves's literary and visual work in a performative discourse. I refer to Esteves's work as performative rather than theatrical because she stages her work and her self as the subject in process, whereas theatre tends to stage the subject as a product.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, while theatre studies allow us to look at a poem as a script, events in the poem as dramatic actions, and the people referred to in the poem as characters, performance studies focuses more sharply on the social meaning in the performance itself.¹⁸⁵ That is, using a performance lens to study the work of Esteves makes visible the hierarchical constructions of race, sex, gender, and class that *poetas* like her attempt to destabilize.

The performative is a multi-layered concept that, as Shannon Jackson suggests, is sometimes too complicated to untangle. In *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*, Jackson finds that the disciplinary tension of drama, theater, and performance has made it difficult to understand the difference between theatre and theatricality as well as performance and performativity.¹⁸⁶ She encourages scholars to reflect on the moments of incomprehensibility to make sense of

"Women's Writing and Feminist Strategy," *American Literary History* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 339-357; Ellen McCracken, *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999); Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 1987) and Patricia Yaeger, *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

¹⁸⁴ Janelle Reinelt, "The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality," *SubStance* #98/99 31, no. 2 -3 (2002): 201-215. In this essay Reinelt contests the terms performance, performative, and performativity to reconsider how performance theory has reshaped the current transnational situation.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁸⁶ For scholarship on performativity see Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Performativity and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and *Bodies that Matter: On Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

these very concepts.¹⁸⁷ In evaluating the field of performance studies in *The Drama Review*, Rebecca Schneider concurs and suggests that scholarship should intentionally fall into the slippery divides of these concepts with the hope of creating a more porous and fluid space for inquiry.¹⁸⁸ It is slippery because in the shared effort to differentiate theatre and speech studies from literary studies, scholars produced a tradition of separation between oral interpretations and performance.

With this in mind, I use performativity as a way to examine the slippery relationship between the poem and the poet who performs her work. Since all three of these practitioners participate and continue to develop the aesthetic and style of Nuyorican poetry, they are first and foremost performing poets. A brief examination of the complexities of this term is vital to read, see, and understand the relationship between the literary and the performing body. The reopening of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in 1989 and the emergence of Poetry Slams hosted by Bob Holman through 1996 generated what is known today as the Spoken Word Movement. *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* is one the first poetry anthologies to document the Spoken Word Movement of the 1990s.¹⁸⁹ While some artists and producers use the art forms, spoken word, rap, and performance poetry interchangeably, others often contest the parameters of these art genres. Of particular interest here are the ways *poetas* use the live performing body to

¹⁸⁷ Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁸⁸ Rebecca Schneider, "Intermediality, Infelicity, and Scholarship on the Slip," *Theatre Survey: 50 Years of ASTR* 47, no. 2 (November 2006): 253-260.

¹⁸⁹ Other sources that document the Spoken Word Movement include the CD *Grand Slam!: Best of the National Poetry Slam Vol. 1* Mouth Almighty, 1996; the anthologies *Listen Up! Spoken Word Poetry* ed. Zoë Anglessy (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999) and *Bum Rush The Page* ed. Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001); Paul Devlin's documentary film *Slam Nation: The Sport of Spoken Word* (1998) and Marc Levin's *Slam* (1998) featuring spoken word poets Saul Williams, Sonja Sohn, and Beau Sia; Russel Simmon's HBO series *Def Poetry Jam*.

move beyond the text. Spoken word, rap, and performance poetry is shaped and informed by the various levels of corporeality. However, since measuring the dynamics of the body in motion is nearly impossible, any given parameter of these art forms are constantly in flux rather than simply fixed.

As a way to distinguish the unique elements of these various art forms, a general template is useful here. I use spoken word poetry as an umbrella term encompassing different oratorical styles, including but not limited to recitations, poetry readings, incantations, raps, and slams.¹⁹⁰ However, I differentiate it from performance poetry because while spoken word stresses the oral practices of poetry, performance poetry adds another dimension to this phenomenon. I distinguish spoken word from performance poetry by marking the inactive presence of the body in the former and the active presence of the body in the latter. With performing poets the conscious engagement of the body is at the core of their work; in contrast, spoken word emphasizes the vocalization of words and sounds. I specifically identify Esteves's work as performance poetry in spite of the fact that she does not call herself a performer because her poetic text interacts with the enactment and embodiment of the poetry. "I call myself a poet," she strongly states, "but my presentation is somewhat dramatic because I feel one can't just do a monotone reading. Even if you are not acting you have to put in some kind of energy so that people

¹⁹⁰ In "The Spoken Word Movement of the 1990s," Mark Miazga attempts to explain how the mass interprets spoken word. Some think that, "all poetry read aloud is spoken, but not all spoken word is poetry" (1). Simmering in this claim is the everlasting debate of what constitutes poetry and what is good or bad poetry. Such a statement imposes a hierarchy on the different modes of poetry and debunks the importance of spoken word. In contrast, Bob Holman, a central figure in the vocal performance of poetry, breaks away from ranking the different oral practices in poetry but instead underscores the intersections of such forms. For example, between 1993 and 1999 he organized and hosted "rAp mEETS pOETRY," a live poetry series held at Fez, S.O.Bs, and the Knitting Factory. Holman understands rap as the spoken word genre of Hip Hop.

can receive it.”¹⁹¹ In the case of Esteves, she creates a dialogical relationship between the performing poet and the audience by using the live performing body to move beyond the page. She keeps in mind the transmission of the word, that is, the vocal and physical embodiment of the word, as well as the reception of it.

Her poetry is not meant to remain on the page. She is continuously performing her work and reflecting on it. In an event entitled “Nuyorican Contrapunto” at Berkshire Community College, which I attended, Esteves explained that, “If poetry had a job, it is to find a voice because you have to speak up for yourself.”¹⁹² In other words, there is a range of strategies for breaking silence but she specifically uses the live and public performance of her poetry to expose the social conditions that impose silence. One of the pieces that best exemplifies this feminist strategy is “Poem for Closet Poets”:

This is a poem for women who write
 Who use powerful metaphors
 To describe our common victimization
 This is a call, a plea, a song of your poetry
 A request to believe in the power of your voice
 There is need for your vision in a common sharing¹⁹³

Esteves’s poetry and performing body become a vehicle for encouraging other women to write their own poetry or to simply write, for this very act “[t]ear[s] down walls where our voices were sealed.”¹⁹⁴ She ends the piece by imploring women to reveal the poet

¹⁹¹ Sandra María Esteves, interview by author, New York, NY, July 20, 2006.

¹⁹² As part of the diversity initiative at Berkshire College, Sandra María Esteves was invited to perform and discuss her work. This gathering entitled “Nuyorican Contrapunto” took place on Thursday, November 30, 2006.

¹⁹³ “Poem for the Closet Poet” was performed for the event at Berkshire College and can also be found in *Undelivered Love Poems* (New York: No Frills Publications, 1997), 46.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

within them. Esteves pushes the audience to contemplate and even search for the next closet *poeta* in the room that “dare[s] to scream through silence.”¹⁹⁵ Her work develops a strategy of speaking out that is mediated by poetry and performance and allows for the histories of diverse women to be not only heard but also listened to. The interplay between poetry and performance functions as a means to recover and restore collective historic memory of Nuyoricans and to critique cultural ideologies rather than replicating or reproducing them. Curiously, that physical and sensorial ephemeral experience of the body incessantly probes the process of imagining and transforming one’s individual and collective identity.

The body in the work of performing poets does not, by any means, diminish the work of spoken word poets. Of course, gestures and body language are naturally part of poetic delivery. Yet, it does not necessarily mean that the presence of the poet’s body or the staging of it informs the performance. Rather the focus is on the acoustics. In his essay “Poems on the Page, Poems in the Air,” Billy Collins, the U.S. Poet Laureate between the years 2001 and 2003, clarifies the role of the spoken word poet. He refers to the poets participating in the Spoken Word Movement as composers for the ears rather than writers who capture the reading eye.¹⁹⁶ That is, how does the poet use the written word as material to perform sound? Where does s/he pause or stretch the enunciation of any given word? How fast or slow does s/he recite her/his poem? Does the poet fill the poem with poly-tones or monotonies? And how do the rhythm, tempo, beat, and tone of the recited poem inform listeners and readers? What is important here is that the written

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 46.

¹⁹⁶ In *The Spoken Word Revolution (Slam, Hip Hop & the Poetry of a New Generation)* ed. Mark Eleveld and advised by March Smith (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2003), 3.

text cannot make visible the presentational style of incantation in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg or the rapping in Jerry Quickley's work, the emotional intensity of Beau Sia and Anne Waldman, the monotone drive of John Ashbery, the musical echoes of jazz and blues in the work of Amiri Baraka and Jessica Care Moore. It is the vocal performance of a poem that inevitably alters the way viewers hear and read the poem on the page. This is precisely why Charles Bernstein calls attention to the sound in the reading of poetry, an approach he refers to as "close listening." Thus, poetry readings or recitations do not solely fall back onto the printed text but acoustically permeate the page, the stage, and beyond.¹⁹⁷

My discussion resonates with the ideas of Bernstein who advocates for multiple audio and visual frames to interpret poetry in its totality. Bernstein argues for a practice of aurality, a type of scholarship that primarily focuses on "what the ear hears" and examines "the sounding of the *writing*." While orality focuses on the breath, voice, and speech, aurality draws on the writing, sound, and hearing. Bernstein encourages scholars to consider a performative approach to examining poetry. At the same time, he is clear at separating the poet from the poem in spite of the fact that both inform each other. He states:

Aurality is connected to the body—what the mouth and tongue and vocal chords enact—not the presence of the poet. . . . The poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet; it materializes the text not the author; it performs the work not the one who composed it. In short, the significant fact of the poetry reading is less the presence of the poet than the presence of the poem.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Charles Bernstein, "Introduction," *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

¹⁹⁸ Bernstein, *Close Listening*, 13.

The goal in separating the poet from the poem is to underline the making of sound and to allow for different possible meanings to develop in the process of reading poetry. In the Nuyorican poetry discussed in this study, it is difficult to separate the poet from the poem as the performances of poets such as Jorge Brandon incorporated autobiographical and historical accounts that trigger a transformative and healing process for the poet as well as the audience. Instead of pulling apart the intricate connection between the poet and poem, I pay close attention to the ways performing poets literally incarnate the word and how this corporeality generates a communal exchange between the poet and the spectator. Esteves not only invokes the performative in the written text but when she embodies her own words on stage a communal performativity is physically apparent. For instance, in the poem, “Mutant Borinqueña Nubian Mermaid,” Esteves opens with the following stanza:

Mutation
 Metamorphosed
 From a turbulent past
 Silenced woman singing into birth
 Breaking down the wall of pain
 Blowing it up in the light of day
 Reclaiming sacred altar
 Precious land that we are
 Fruit and seed from tree of spirit
 Temple of the living well
 Nurturing tribe, cultivating nation¹⁹⁹

The series of participle verbs “breaking down,” “blowing it up,” “reclaiming,” “nurturing,” and “cultivating”--underscores the continuous *doing* inherent in this always present verb tense. That is, while the performative exists within the literal body of the

¹⁹⁹ Sandra María Esteves, *Undelivered Love Poems* (New York: No Frills Publication, 1997), 9.

poem, it also carries other performative meanings as the live performing body of the poet herself. The body serves as a vehicle for listeners and viewers to embark on a journey of re-memory. When Esteves utters the words “breaking down,” “blowing it up,” “reclaiming,” “nurturing,” and “cultivating,” she is not only describing the action, but she is also accomplishing the action. Similar to “Poem for Closet Poets,” Esteves urges women “to scream through silence.”²⁰⁰ For Esteves, the art of performing poetry transcends the literal text and captivates the body as a site for self-reflection. This inner journey is reflexive as the very act of contemplating during performance deflects onto the audience and triggers a communal act of reflection. Thus, the poet’s body becomes a critical site for examining the intersections among poetry and performance and as a way of creating community.

Terminological Conundrums Part 3: Hip Hop Theatre and Hip Hop Solo Performance

In the mid-1970s the South Bronx was known as the Boogie Down, the “home of hip hop culture.” During that period, African American, Latino, and Caribbean teenagers from the South Bronx combined elements of speech and song, dance and display, visual and performance art to express their experiences as inner city youth. This cultural art form is known today as hip hop. Given that second-generation Nuyoricans and African Americans were living side by side with each other, they shared similar experiential histories of discrimination. As a result of this common history, black and Puerto Rican communities used hip hop as a site to develop transethnic relationships.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 46.

²⁰¹ For a discussion on transethnic relationships of Hip Hop music see Juan Flores’s *From Bomba*

As women of Puerto Rican descent born and raised in the South Bronx, La Bruja and Mariposa must consider a field of verbal and physical action to explain their cultural and political reality.²⁰² More than twenty years after Yarbro-Bejarano coined the term “teatropoesía,” performing artists such as La Bruja and Mariposa have transformed the hybrid genre into an entirely new form of theatre—hip hop theatre and solo performance. Whereas Esteves uses an urban aesthetic in her poetry, La Bruja and Mariposa explicitly draw from a hip hop aesthetic. By incorporating hip hop into their performance pieces, their work is in conversation with the struggles, experiences, and traditions of African Americans. La Bruja and Mariposa express variant urban realities, while accentuating the shared history of Puerto Ricans and African Americans. The flow, layering, and fragmentation demonstrated in the dance forms, rap songs and graffiti murals correlate with the Puerto Rican experience of displacement, transformation, and recuperation of the autonomous self. For example, La Bruja uses parts of popular Latin songs and rap lyrics and then creates new beats and rhythms; She also fuses *salsa* and *merengue* with break dancing and other hip hop dance forms such as poppin’ and lockin’, and she intermixes Spanish and English in her rap lyrics. These hip hop techniques reflect the experience of dispersal and fragmentation of Afro-diasporic people in the Americas while creating an historical coherency.²⁰³

A question posed by hip hop performer, producer, and critic Danny Hoch is

to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Raquel Rivera’s *New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

²⁰² Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman eds., *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 4.

²⁰³ For further discussion on the relationship between Hip Hop and the Diaspora see George Lipsitz’s *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1997).

relevant to this discussion: “What happens with hip hop aesthetics, when they are mixed with the aesthetic of ‘recognized’ art, or when hip hop’s venue changed from the street to the stage, from the subway car to the gallery, from the schoolyard to the screen?”²⁰⁴ Like the Nuyorican aesthetic, hip hop is an artistic medium that exposes the oppressive social conditions of working-class communities of color. hip hop sounds, styles and energy have influenced music, fashion and language, and now within the last decade or so, they have found their way into a new artistic venue, the theatre. Although there are several schools of thoughts regarding the definition of hip hop theatre, practitioners understand that it is more than just a rap concert or music video; it is a cultural phenomenon that not only has the ingredients of any artistic movement—dance, visual arts, and poetry/literature—but also fuses culture, politics and social thought. Performer/writer Will Power defines it as a theatre that uses one or more of the four cornerstones of hip hop culture—break dancing, emceeing, deejaying, and graffiti art—to tell a story. However, as the writer/performer Psalmayene 24 explains, it is not solely about bringing one of the four elements of hip hop into theatre but also about artists infusing the streetwise crucible of hip hop culture with every theatrical element from lighting, set, and sound design, to playwriting, directing and acting.²⁰⁵ Psalmayene 24 calls for a new vision, one that intimately interweaves hip hop culture with theatre and performance traditions.

Rather than trying to define hip hop theatre, I am interested in the social and

²⁰⁴ Danny Hoch, “Towards A Hip Hop Aesthetic: A Manifesto for the Hip Hop Arts Movement,” *American Theatre* December 2004: 35-50. This article can also be found in *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetic of Hip Hop* (New York: Back Civitas, 2007).

²⁰⁵ Holly Bass, “Blowing Up the Set,” *American Theatre* 16.9 (1999): 18.

cultural productions that are created when La Bruja and Mariposa marry hip hop and theatre. As Rha Goddess, a performance and recording artist, explains, an entire generation of artists exists who grew up on hip hop went on to receive professional training in theatre and dance, and are now integrating those two worlds.²⁰⁶ This means that as scholars, we need to keep in mind how the cross-pollination of expressive mediums have altered the way we read and understand hip hop theatre. But more importantly, how women participate in this art form.

In the early 1990s several regional theatres produced and coined the term “hip hop theatre.” Interestingly, men wrote most of these plays. Connecticut’s Long Wharf Theatre and Minneapolis’s Penumbra Theatre presented Michael Henry Brown’s *Generations of the Dead in the Abyss of Coney Island Madness* (1996), a play influenced as much by classical Greek drama as by hip hop. New York’s Playwrights Horizons mounted Marion McClinton’s *Police Boyz* (1995), while Trinity Repertory Company of Rhode Island produced Robert Alexander’s gangstarap play *A Preface to an Alien Garden* (1998). The Public Theater in New York developed *Bring in ‘da Noise, Bring in ‘da Funk* (1995) by hip hop poet Reg E. Gaines, which in 1996 became the first hip hop musical that made it to Broadway. These plays are suitable for theatre as they maintain the traditional linear dramatic structure and narrate the life and (sometimes) death of a hip hop youngster, but they are also part of the hip hop scene as they incorporate one or more elements of hip hop.

Just as hip hop culture is constantly evolving with new songs, new beats, new stars and the latest fashion styles, hip hop theatre is not a fixed genre but one that is fluid

²⁰⁶ Kim Euell, “The Playz tha Thang,” *American Theatre* 19 (2002): 37.

and shaped by the social and cultural conditions of the times. By the late twentieth century, artists like Danny Hoch, Jonzi D, Sara Jones and Will Power marked the advent of hip hop solo performance. Instead of producing an actor driven play with a linear plot, the writer himself performs a series of semi-autobiographical personas and/or vignettes. The shift from hip hop theatre to hip hop solo performance occurs because the artist comes from other performance stages—poetry slams, the hip hop scene and other locations where text, movement, and sound may not necessarily begin with a script, a story-line, a staging context or a production team.

Jonzi D, a hip hop dancer, successfully combined break dancing, a cappella rap and theatrical conventions in his *Lyrika Fearita* (1995). Sara Jones came into hip hop performance scene as a poet who won the Grand Slam Championship at the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe in 1997 with "Your Revolution," a reworking of Gil Scott Heron's 1975 proto-rap song, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." "Your Revolution" and other poems evolved into monologues and eventually into the eight characters in her solo performance piece *Surface Transit: More Sketches of Ordinary People* (1995). Will Power is an actor, rapper, playwright, spoken word artist and vocalist who fuses jazz with Latin rhythms and hip-hop. *The Gathering* (2001) is a solo piece that deals with the struggles of black men in America by focusing on the places where these men gather: the barbershop, the jazz club, the basketball court and the street corner.

The work of these solo performers understands that hip hop is, what Roberta Uno of New WORLD Theatre refers to as, the "future aesthetics."²⁰⁷ Uno describes hip hop

²⁰⁷ New WORLD Theater is a multiracial theater founded in 1979 in Amherst, Massachusetts by Roberta Uno, producing and presenting plays by people of color. On April 12–13, 2000 New WORLD Theater organized the third *Intersections* conference focusing on Hip Hop theatre as the *Future Aesthetics*.

theatre as the art of the future because it demands a new style of theatre making, one that changes the demographics of theatre artists as well as audiences. According to Danny Hoch, the founder and executive producer of the NYC Hip Hop Theatre Festival, it is the type of “theatre that is by, for and about the hip hop generation, which spans roughly ages 12 through 36.”²⁰⁸ The age range is important to Hoch because hip hop theatre is transforming the face of the American theatre community. I would add that the visibility of women on stage also plays a major role in producing and embracing a new type of audience, one that directly connects to the generation of artists developing performance projects that explore the intersection of theatre, poetry, spoken word and hip hop culture. The success of Def Poetry Jam on Broadway is due to the fact that hip hop theatre goes outside of the traditional theater audience by cutting across the divides of gender, race, class, and generation.

Much like Esteves brings the feminist perspective into the Nuyorican Movement, hip hop performers, like La Bruja and Mariposa, also utilize this strategy. As women who are working within hip hop, a male dominated art form, Luz, Mariposa, Sun, León and Valle cross dangerous roads when they include the feminist perspective to contest the politics of sex and sexism. Male hip hop artists are guilty of asserting their masculinity by sexually objectifying and oppressing women. These Latina solo performers respond to the absence and misrepresentation of women in hip hop by working within and against

In New WORLD Theater’s newsletter (Fall 2002), the editor, Irma Mayorga, describes the conference as a “gathering” where “a coast-to-coast, cross-section of artists and presenters” put their viewpoints in dialogue with other artists and map the territories of new aesthetics (7). The event featured a number of solo writers/performers and ensembles including Luis Alfaro, Tracie Morris, Suheir Hammad, Martín Espada, Jessica Hagedorn, I Was Born With Two Tongues, Rha Goddess, and Universes.

²⁰⁸ Euell, “The Playz tha Thang,” 37.

the dominant sexual and racial narratives. La Bruja and Mariposa, for example, create a space of reflection for women and men of color by interrogating culturally constructed notions of femininity and masculinity. They either incorporate female and male characters that meditate on their womanhood and manhood, or they perform identities that reinforce gendered stereotypes. In doing so, they create a dialogic process with male hip hop artists, African Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Afro-diasporic groups, and most importantly Latinas and women in general.

Autobiographic and Biographic Encounters

Having addressed various liminal modalities of Nuyorican expression throughout this project, I now turn to the ways Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa use the content of their work to blur autobiographical and biographical performance practices. I turn to the experiences performed by these *poetas* to discuss how they create an autobiographical discourse of accessing buried realities of the self to create a form of individual agency, while also facilitating a biographical collective understanding of Latinidad. “Only with the individual agency,” Brent R. Henze insists, “can we have an effective political collective that truly works on behalf of its constituents.”²⁰⁹ When Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa perform, they are not simply embodying their poetry but are braiding their experiences into the live performance so that there is an explicit I-ness reaching out to the audience. In fact, they implicate themselves not solely by virtue of being women but by staging their female subjectivity, which allows other women to enter in this dialogue.

²⁰⁹ Brent R. Henze, “Who Says Who Says? The Epistemological Grounds for Agency in Liberatory Political Project,” *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 238.

As traditional studies of autobiography read beyond the written text to understand the multi-layered representations of the self, I am interested in how the body writes/acts out personal narratives. Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa are not solely embodying the written text, but in most cases they are dealing with memories, experiences and the ways they understand themselves in relation to society. These performers put meaning to each word, movement, gesture and verbal intonation as they re-create vivid moments of their life. Hence, the body in performance is a mode of communicating that should be as carefully read as a written text. Given this extra-literary phenomenon, solo performers can be described as autobiographers who tell their stories in the flesh.

According to Cherríe Moraga, the body has the extraordinary ability to materialize and convey the experiences and feelings individuals undergo. “A theory in the flesh,” she posits:

means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity.

We are the colored in a white feminist movement.
 We are the feminists among the people of our culture.
 We are often the lesbians among the straight.
 We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.²¹⁰

Female solo performers like La Bruja and Mariposa continue this tradition of the flesh that twenty-five years ago Moraga was calling for. In the same fashion as Moraga, they

²¹⁰ Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1981), 23.

are interested in using experiences of the flesh to create alliances among communities that are often wounded by the social systems that oppress them. In embodying experience, the body carries social meaning and functions as living repositories of knowledge that expose the systematic matrices of power.

Unlike postmodernists who are suspicious of the knowledge gained from experience, I place cognitive value in individual experiences. The challenge in using one's experiences as a source of information is that since the act of telling one's story creates a form of agency for marginalized people to understand themselves, it has the potential of promoting an essentialist project.²¹¹ That is, what begins as a form of agency results as a hindrance to identity formation precisely because it confounds and conflates differences between and among marginalized communities. Since the shared experiences of the collective are oftentimes privileged, distinct and differing experiences are neglected and simply homogenized into a collective understanding. For this reason, I turn to Satya Mohanty's realist view of identity, which "maintains that experience, properly interpreted, can yield reliable and genuine knowledge, just as it can point up instances and sources of real mystification."²¹² He encourages scholars to analyze experiences not as authentic sites of identity but as socially constructed raw material from which individuals can develop their identities.²¹³ The knowledge produced by the interpreter alters from person to person and as such there are different ways of making meaning of

²¹¹ A more in depth discussion on how different forms of essentialism among women play out in the politics of identity. See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

²¹² Satya Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity," *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, eds. Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 30.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

experiences. As Paula M.L. Moya and Brent R. Henze persuasively demonstrate, Moraga's theory of the flesh resembles Mohanty's realist identity project in many respects. Keeping in mind these two complementary "seeing and reading" frameworks, I turn to the experiences performed by Esteves, La Bruja and Mariposa to discuss how they hybridized autobiographical and biographical performance strategies to transform themselves and the larger collective.

Esteves's story of transformation is politically charged. Often she shares her childhood experience of falling into a culture of silence when she went to a Catholic school where she was forbidden to speak Spanish. She used painting, a non-verbal mode of expression, to change her reality. She transforms the experience of living in silence into speaking out testimony that can potentially push a woman or person to share her truth. She performs the transformation of a woman who was once a closet poet and now publicly stands transformed. In the court trial against Eddie Figueroa and the New Rican Village discussed in the beginning of this chapter, Esteves was able to publicly dramatize the ways men or male-centered institutions downplay or erase the women involved in writing, making, and performing poetry. She was not compensated for the work as a poet and set builder and as such she used speaking and acting out strategies that traversed the legal, artistic, and political stage. This application of strategies makes her transformation from a girl living in silence to a *mujer guerrera*, a woman warrior, much more apparent.

For Esteves, performing her poetry is not only about embodying the text, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter, but about sharing *testimonio* (testimony) of transformation so as to encourage others to tell their own stories. Giving *testimonio* to her inner spiritual journey is a process that eventually and inevitably energizes people from

her own *familia* as well as those outside of her community. Nuyorican poets, as Maria Damon suggests, are simultaneously in-between two processes: the process of poetry making and the process of identity making. They “create experience and subjectivity in the process of meaning-making, of poeisis.”²¹⁴ So for *poetas* like Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa, performance comprises complex processes that are both historical and personal. In creating such a discourse, female solo performers must navigate the thorny terrain of representation as stereotypical constructs that project, shake up, and reify distorted versions of Latinas and their communities.

It is often the case that Latina artists as well as other ethnic artists function as cultural icons for their entire community. The mainstream public automatically assumes that the artist and her work are representative of that collective identity. The artists, therefore participates in the creating, shaping and formation of cultural identity. These artists evoke a minority discourse, one that attempts to represent the many voices from within marginalized communities including those of people of color, women, and sexual minorities. Many popular ethnic autobiographies such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* and Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* are now often part of the English curriculum to represent the Chinese-American or Chicano. While this is a progressive move, it is also clearly the case that Kingston and Rodriguez are not the only voices in their specific communities. These two examples share “the semiotic principle that something is standing for something else, or that some person or group is speaking

²¹⁴ Maria Damon, “Avant-Garde or Borderguard: (Latino) Identity in Poetry,” *American Literary History* 10, no. 3 (Autumn, 1998): 479.

on behalf of some other persons or groups.”²¹⁵ Consequently, the artist inevitably faces the burden of representation. These ethnic forms of expressions are not only representational; they also hold great cultural value and have real effects in the world. For example, the inclusion of Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory* in many English courses caused much uproar as students from M.E.Ch.A (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán/Chicano Student Movement of Aztlan), a national student coalition with a presence on many university campuses rallied against a novel that was upheld as representative of the Chicano community but in fact rejected any connection to the community. As it true for most autobiographies, these ethnic autobiographies bring into play real-life elements of space, time, social and cultural relationships. The reader, therefore, reads, or at times misreads, the representational as real and the boundaries between the artist expressing her individual identity and the collective identity are blurred.

The scholarly works of Leigh Gilmore, Ellen McCracken and Sidonie Smith, which interrogate the discourse of autobiography in women’s writing, provide a powerful lens through which to understand the work of La Bruja and Mariposa. In *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*, Gilmore acknowledges that in autobiography the reader runs the risk of essentializing the voices of individuals or groups. She challenges the notion of the essentialized self at the center of the autobiography and recognizes the multiple subjects within the self. Gilmore uses the term *autobiographics*, instead of autobiography, to emphasize that within these multiple identities there is a discursive legacy of mixing truth and lies. By applying an

²¹⁵Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 183.

autobiographic lens to this discussion, we position La Bruja and Mariposa as autobiographers who perform real and invented histories as a way of calling attention to the self and the community. La Bruja and Mariposa use the self as representative of the communal history.

Their performance falls under what Ellen McCracken defines as the new Latina narrative. In her work she examines the work of such Latina novelists as Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, and Ana Castillo to discuss how these authors practice autobiographic simulation in their writing. She explains that in narrative fiction the writer does not usually declare herself in narration, thereby invoking questions of the subject's point of view. On the other hand, in autobiography the narrator openly declares that she is creating a representation of real life. Although the writer establishes that she is sharing firsthand personal accounts, "[r]eaders often forget the fictionality of the autobiographic mode, temporarily believing that they are experiencing life as it was at the time of the narrated events."²¹⁶ So that even though the writer outwardly establishes the autobiographic simulation, "it claims more truth value than does fictional representation."²¹⁷

In her book *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*, Sidonie Smith encourages readers to consider the different types of bodies at work. La Bruja, for example, vividly captures her life as well as the lives of other Latinos by blending original characters, poetry, slide photography, hip hop and Caribbean music. Throughout the travel narratives between New York and

²¹⁶ Ellen McCracken, *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* (Tuscon, AZ: Arizona University Press, 1999), 74.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

Puerto Rico, La Bruja depicts multiple identities, with cultural connections to her neighborhood and her heritage. In doing so, she navigates from self-narrative to a collective narrative. La Bruja intentionally codes the various “I”s with multiple markings of identity.²¹⁸ There is La Bruja’s “specific body” as speaker/narrator, who shares her birth story. However, when La Bruja performs a range of characters she creates “subject bodies”: a middle-aged father (Don José); a wannabe hip hop star (Pito) trying unsuccessfully to pick up chicks, and a very pregnant young woman (Cuca) whose man has left her. In addition, she turns to the photographic slides of homeless people, prostitutes, abandoned buildings, and neglected areas in the Bronx to emphasize the reality of people she grew up with. The various personas she takes on deal with some of the most common problems that Latinos face—violence, drug dealing, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and the New York street life. Together, this collection of historical biographies creates a story about a generation of working class Latinos who come to realize their identity as individuals and as a collective entity.

What emerges from these individual identities is a “cultural body,” soliciting specific social orientations. By capturing her life as well as the lives of other Latinos in performance, La Bruja creates a point of entry for the audience to identify and to see the rich experiences of Nuyoricans. Of course, we must also consider the politics of the physical body. Race, ethnicity, and gender mark La Bruja’s body and inevitably inform the way she views and experiences the world. By considering the narrator, the historical subject, and the autobiographical subject in La Bruja’s work, we can avoid essentializing notions of Nuyorican identity and can associate subject patterns with discourses of

²¹⁸ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 271.

identity formation. I suggest that La Bruja's use of autobiographic performance practices initiates a process of self and collective definition specific to Nuyoricans living in the Bronx. When Latina performance artists represent themselves, they articulate their identity through their own experientially based history. Acting out their experiences fosters a process of self-definition and collective identity formation. This self-defining process triggers a collective recognition and understanding of building, belonging and participating in the creative process of Latino culture.

In fact, my naïve autobiographical realism was tested when La Bruja, in a personal interview, stated that her one-woman poetic, comic musical *Boogie Rican Boulevard* (2001) was not an autobiography. "It does not bother me that my show is called an autobiography because I am sharing the stories of other women who do not have a chance to voice their ideas. My work is personal and in that respect it could be looked at as autobiographical."²¹⁹ Because she opens her piece by re-enacting how her parents met and the moment she came to be on this earth, I was led to believe that *Boogie Rican Boulevard* was more of an autobiographic piece. However, she explains in an interview with *Urban Latino*, "I am an artist—a performance artist. I love that form of expression, and the freedom of creating another world within a world. It is just a reflection, even though it is so personal."²²⁰ La Bruja's comment pushes us to read, define, and experience autobiographic practices of performance as simultaneously real and fictional.

Given my reality check, do I dismiss the fact that I, as well as other members in

²¹⁹ Caridad de La Luz, interview by author, Bronx, NY, November 19, 2000.

²²⁰ Afarin Majioi, "At Home with...Caridad de la Luz," *Urban Latino* 21 (Fall 1999): 95.

the audience, automatically assumed that the various “I’s” performed were part of La Bruja’s life and experiences? Actually I am less interested in knowing if Latina solo performers like La Bruja and Mariposa enact their real life stories than I am in examining what the representations have to say about the relationship between the cultural production of images and the conception of identity, subjectivity, and self-representation. What remains at the crux of my study is to explore the relationship between the collective social identities of Latinos and the autobiographical subject. How do solo performers manipulate the “I”? How do they move in, out and through various sites of alienation?

In this same personal and collective vein, Mariposa’s lived-experiences have given shape to her one-woman piece *Diasporican Dementia* (2001). This piece is about her process of transforming into Mariposa, a butterfly, which in many indigenous cultures is associated with a warrior. She takes the audience into different stages of her life. Like a butterfly, she undergoes several metamorphoses that break through specific oppressive nets. She first appears as a Catholic schoolgirl who often is punished for expressing her ideas. Prayers to Papa Dios, God, ignite her childhood experience. She pleads for him to illuminate the pathway for her to be a good little girl. She reveals how at a young age religion piqued her curiosity, “but why, why can’t I say this or do that?” We then embark in her coming of age years where the systematic –isms in our society literally drive her insane. There are scenes when she is in a psychiatric ward and plays Nurse Thelma. Again she speaks to God and questions why she is labeled insane for burning *Hustler Magazine* in a bathtub. She also enacts members of her family: her uncle, a revolutionary figure who was lost in a diagnosis of mental illness and eventually died in a mental institution; and her mother, who always questioned the many unconventional decisions Mariposa

made throughout her life, but who becomes a source of inspiration. Finally, we witness the birth of Mariposa, the proactive adult involved with political organizations, like Pro-Libertad and Casa Atabex Ache-Womyn's House of Power, that makes visible how racism, sexism, elitism, and colonialism manifest in the experiences of marginalized people. Performers like Mariposa and La Bruja deal with such realities to remind us that although representations are not absolute truths. They still function as truths because the community is invested in these portrayals. As such these representations allow La Bruja and Mariposa to navigate from a narrative of self to a collective narrative. Their concept of self renders a collective voice wherein the narrated self remains rooted in the community.

Another autobiographical intersection to consider is how these performers map out their geographies of home. Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa are Bronx natives with ancestral ties to the Caribbean, namely Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Both of these cultures inform their work as the narrated self maintains strong ties to both communities. The titles of their works are indicative of their bond to both their ancestral homes and New York. The titles of Esteves's books of poetry, namely *Yerba Buena* and *Tropical Rains*, signify Puerto Rico. The word "yerba buena" literally translates as "good herb." Drawing from the natural healing powers of the earth, this herb is known for curing painful ailments. While her poetry clearly calls forth Puerto Rico, poems like "Homeland," "Nuevajok," "For the South Bronx," among others, also paint an urban East Coast landscape.

Similarly, Mariposa's chapbook title, *Born Bronxeña* (2000), which includes an illustration of Atabex, the Taino goddess of fertility, pulls in Puerto Rico and the Bronx.

This chapbook includes her famous poem “Ode to the DiaspoRican,” which is also part of her one-woman piece. In this poem she invents an alternative label of identification to describe her state of standing between cultures or being part of cultures that have a history of dispersal and displacement. She affirms her own identity as fragmented yet engrained in several homelands.

What does it mean to live in between
 What does it take to realize
 that being Boricua
 is a state of mind
 a state of heart
 a state of soul..
 ¡No nació en Puerto Rico
 Puerto Rico nació en mi!
 (I was not born in Puerto Rico/ Puerto Rico was born in me!)²²¹

Ode to the DiaspoRican moves away from authenticating her Puerto Rican roots by way of birthplace but rather turns to her body as a temple for absorbing, remembering, and understanding her culture. Rather than engendering her body in Puerto Rico, the geography of home lives in her body. She does not rely on geographic location to legitimize her cultural identity but instead values the ways she embodies Puerto Rico.

Likewise, *La Bruja* locates a dual sense of home as the title of her one-woman show, *BoogieRican Boulevard*, indicates. In the opening of her piece, she immediately establishes that her body, mind, and soul stand in both Puerto Rico and the Bronx. She enters the stage speaking directly to the audience:

Are you here to Boogie or what? (Clapping)
 Are you ready to see where the tropical paradise meets the city?

²²¹ Mariposa, “Ode to DiaspoRican,” *Born Bronxña* (Bronx, New York: Bronxña Book, 2000), 7-8.

And sandy beaches cover the concrete?
 Open your hearts
 And try not to miss a beat
 And enjoy where the Boogie Down and Puerto Rico meets
 Welcome to my world of Boogie Rican.²²²

La Bruja provides a multi-focal lens that allows the audience to see the intercultural textuality of her experience. While the audience experiences La Bruja's strong sense of home in the South Bronx, we also discover her connections to Puerto Rico. She begins her piece by providing the audience with a taste of the Bronx and ends her piece with firm connections to the Caribbean and Puerto Rico. She further underscores her in-between condition by juxtaposing her poetry with photographic slides that simultaneously represent both Puerto Rico and the Bronx. She shows slides of her father in Puerto Rico, the beaches, and El Morro. She juxtaposes these slides with those of children riding their bikes near a schoolyard in the Bronx and of entrepreneurs trying to make a dollar out of fifty cents by selling *coquitos* or *piraguas*. There is a snapshot of those who permanently camp out in the streets beside an ad that reads "Great job, Rudy," in reference to the former mayor of New York City. Other slides capture how people beautified her neighborhood; for example, one slide depicts an abandoned building decorated by the works of graffiti artists and another shows a neighborhood tree adorned with shoes, clothes and toys. "To know the spirit of the Bronx," she humorously says, "is to know the unique ways people from the Bronx express themselves."

In La Bruja's latest album and performance piece *Brujalicious*, she coins the term "Nuyorico."²²³ Playing with the English translation of "Puerto Rico," which literally

²²² Caridad de La Luz, *BoogieRican Boulevard*, unpublished manuscript.

²²³ La Bruja performed *Brujalicious* in the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance for their BAAD!

means “a port full of riches,” La Bruja’s lyrics describe the riches that exist in the homeland of Nuyoricans, a place where everyone is welcomed regardless of race or ethnicity. She passionately sings “Bienvenidos. Todos some amigos en Nuyorico” (Welcome. We are all friends in Nuyorico). This place lies between the Empire State Building and El Morro; a place where resistance, in its many forms, lives on despite the many struggles. As a contemporary artist collaborating in the making of Nuyorican tradition, she cites the work of Nuyorican poet El Reverendo Pedro Pietri. As she credits him for using his poetry to incite the movement of resistance, it is evident that she is carrying on the tradition of a long line of poets who embarked on the struggle of building community. La Bruja, like many of the artists from the sixties and seventies, finds meaning in words that give her people and her community social precedence. They take artistic license with the English and Spanish language to create terms that reaffirm the identity of Puerto Ricans living in New York.

La Bruja’s performance of *Boogie Rican* is not solely about self-representation but rather is meant to present the self as a way of reflecting on people within the community. This individual and collective moment of reflection is clearly seen in the character of José, played by La Bruja, who is teaching his grandson how to play *basebol*. As the grandson is not an actual character on stage, the audience are active participants playing the role of the student learning how to play *basebol*. Every time José throws the ball to the audience, we learn about one of José’s special *basebol* moments.

Basebol brought me here to New York City. Wheng I was your age, yu

Ass Women Festival on Saturday, March 18, 2006. This 70-seat performance space founded by dancer/choreographer Arthur Aviles and writer/activist Charles Rice-González houses the works of “emerging, evolving and established choreographers, dancers, directors, playwrights, poets, and musicians who are women, people of color and/or are from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.” www.bronxacademyofartsanddance.org.

could not estop me from playing basebol. I could hit a ball over thee mountain. I played for my hometown of Yabucoa Puerto Rico. We was called los azucareros. The sugar papis, check it out. (Does hand gestures) You'll never know what that means!!! We were so good they sent us here to play.

Basebol symbolically represents José's airplane ticket to New York. The memories of *basebol* connect José here, to New York, and over there, to Puerto Rico. *La Bruja* uses José's memories of basebol as a terrain to negotiate his diaspoRican identity. This story reflects José's travel narrative, as well as those of other Puerto Ricans who migrated to New York and settled in the South Bronx. José's use of Spanglish demonstrates how both places, here and there, have influenced him. Although the memory and linguistic practice of self is understood here to refer to an individual, the collective identity is always inherent. As such, *La Bruja* is using her body and memory to trigger the experience of other Latinos who share this travel narrative, thereby engendering a collective experience of remembering.

In another instance, *La Bruja* grabs a balloon from the stage and shoves it into an oversized sweater that she is wearing in order to suggest that the character she is playing pregnant. "People used to tell me I wasn't ready." From the outset, the audience understands that in light of the high numbers of Latina teenage moms, this character is representative of the national crisis of teenage pregnancy. Although the teenager has decided to have this baby, her brother insists that "what you need is an abortion/ Maybe I can help you? (Gestures money)." ²²⁴ By the end of this scene, *La Bruja* has turned on the slide projector and the audience sees a photographic slide of the performer's husband carrying her newly born child. The juxtaposition of a picture of a real father with the

²²⁴ *La Bruja, Boogie Rican Boulevard.*

absent father of the character's soon to be born child illustrates how *La Bruja* manipulates autobiographical elements to conflate real and fictional characters. She encompasses both individualist and collective strategies, which simultaneously function in performance.

Artists as Activists

In this final section, I explore the intersecting social and cultural histories of these multifaceted performers and reveal how their work engages with three strategies of activism: alternative means of production and dissemination, class-consciousness,²²⁵ and, what I am coining as, spiritual activism. As previously discussed, we cannot examine the work of these *poetas* in a literary vacuum but rather we must understand the liminal spaces of Nuyorican expression encompassing the work of these women. As multifaceted artists implementing other expressive forms, they create cross-pollinated montages, poems that transmute into monologues, vignettes, or solo performances. Besides her role as *poeta*, Esteves is an essayist, graphic artist, director and producer. La Bruja is a singer, rapper, and lyricist, and Mariposa is a freelance writer, actor, and visual artist. Class plays a significant role here as these artists are making the best use of their artistic resources with little, if any, funds. Similar to the ways the lack of resources generated a hip hop aesthetics; it is the economic pressures on Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa that produce a savvy means of production and dissemination. An unstable income demands artists to explore other mediums that can increase their visibility, pull in different types of

²²⁵ Many thanks to Lourdes Gutiérrez-Najera who, when encountering the poster of “The Spanglish National Anthem” created by Pietri, shared how telling it is. This piece articulated notions of class in the making and production of this piece. “If he is selling his work like this, he must really be a starving artist? How did he die, was he destitute?”

audiences, and expand the network of contacts that can put them in touch with upcoming events. Navigating the economic waters is a skill that artists today must have in order to attain a level of public recognition and credibility. The underlying economic motive, however, does not alter the fact that these multi-faceted female artists of color innovatively transgress the conventional boundaries of various art forms, particularly, poetry, theatre, and hip hop.

When Esteves performs her poetry, she is also selling color-printed copies of her artwork. She carefully pastes copies of visual artwork on blank cards or on photo borders. She packages them in nicely fitted clear cellophane bags and sells them for five to twenty dollars depending on the size. In 1999, she organized a fundraiser *Bringing Down the Moon/Millennium Goddess Spoken Word Ensemble* at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, as a way of supplementing her annual income as a poet, visual artist, and teaching artist. Similarly, after every performance La Bruja reminds her audience about her latest CD, which she sells for ten to fifteen dollars and personally autographs. Her CDs are collaborations with various voices of hip hop and call on a different skill set as a rapper as opposed to performance artist. Mariposa is always thinking about generating audience members by informing them of upcoming events that are affiliated with political initiatives in which she is also involved. As it is increasingly difficult for poets to get their work published, Mariposa also decided to self-publish her own chapbook, a low-cost hard copy production of some of her poetry. While the chapbook *Bronx Borinqueña* provides readers with a sampling of her work, it also generates some income for her as she sells them for ten dollars.

These three performers have a post-performance agenda that aims to increase the

dissemination and circulation of their work. Given that the demand for performance poetry fluctuates depending on funding received by organizations or venues that hire poets, they must find ways to generate revenue. The late Pedro Pietri (d. 2004), when selling his poems in pamphlets and posters that included his poems or Puerto Rican passports that he created publicly announced that he did this out of necessity as a way of raising funds. In other words, he intentionally prints his poems in pamphlets or adds a pictorial dimension to his poetry as a way of packaging his art for sale. For example, a large-size poster of his poem “The Spanglish National Anthem,” created and autographed by Pietri, hangs in my dining room, as does the visual artwork of Esteves, each of which I purchased for ten dollars. These artists make their work accessible by disseminating it in various venues and by intentionally selling their artistic products below market, available and affordable even to graduate students. A level of class-consciousness is embedded in the poetry-making as they self-promote their works. It is important to bring to the forefront the issue of class, especially since the poets examined in this chapter contribute a dimension of class-consciousness that is not often exhibited in the field of theatre and performance.²²⁶ As Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa are trying to make ends meet, class and gender explicitly mark the performance strategies they employ.

Even the production spaces in which Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa present themselves reveal that they understand how social class can determine who attends a performance. Since these artists present in venues where the admission is free or nominal, it draws a financially challenged audience. The publicity material of “The Lawsuit” and

²²⁶ Most recently at ASTR 2007, David Savran commented on the lack of a discussion of class in recent scholarship.

“An Evening at New Rican Village” clearly states that the admission is free. Both La Bruja and Mariposa have presented their work in the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and admission ranged from ten to twelve dollars, which, compared to the cost of theatre tickets, is quite inexpensive. In maintaining a nominal fee for admission, performers are once again making their work accessible to people who are financially struggling.

Interestingly, all three multi-genre Latina *poetas* and performers use education and art as agents of activism. Their similar urban East Coast and Caribbean ties, common working-class experience, and drive for individual and collective transformation locate the aesthetic of Nuyorican women’s performance and poetry in a political realm. Caridad de la Luz teaches writing workshops to youth called “How Can I Change the World?” which was first developed for The East Harlem Tutorial Program in 2000. Esteves has conducted various literary programs for the Board of Education, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, the Caribbean Cultural Center, Bronx Council of the Arts and El Museo del Barrio, to mention only a few. As an educator, she promotes literacy and arts by encouraging youth to create their own short stories and storyboards. For over twenty years, Esteves has edited student anthologies to demonstrate the power of words coming from youth. In 2006, she gathered the work of third graders and created the compilation “How Angels Were Made.” Mariposa works as a head counselor for young women in an elementary school, is actively involved with political organizations like ProLibertad, Sista Underground, and holds open mics with her twin sister MelleSol. The work of these *poetas* on and off the stage empowers the voices of youth and other marginalized communities.

In addition to their commitment to raising social consciousness through their art

and educational program, Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa use a spiritual discourse in their performances as a way of honoring their own individual and collective female experiences. I use the term spiritual activism to describe a form of mobilization that implements spiritual practices to raise consciousness and promote political action. I identify the work of Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa as spiritual activism for two reasons. One, they are aware of the presence of their souls and the spirits around them. That is, in their pieces they acknowledge their ancestors and believe in the possibility of life beyond the human flesh. As such, they resort to their inner strength as a way of resisting and surviving social injustices. “Spirituality,” as Gloria Anzaldúa puts forth, “is oppressed people’s only weapon and means of protection.”²²⁷ Like Anzaldúa, these performers make use of their inner source of wealth. On stage they enact rituals and moments of self-reflection and affirmation to potentially incite social change. When they perform on stage they tap into what Anzaldúa refers to as their *conocimientos*, faculties of knowledge “that encompass all the dimensions of life, both inner—mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, bodily realms—and outer—social, political, lived experiences.”²²⁸ All three performers evoke the spirit world and believe that their artistic skills are sacred gifts given to them by a higher power. It is therefore their job, their calling, and their responsibility to write and perform. They see themselves functioning as open vessels receiving and conveying messages from the higher world. They place themselves in a position of receivership. As recipients of their artistic skills they feel it is their obligation to always acknowledge and honor the higher forces that grant them the skill to perform in

²²⁷ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed., AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000), 98.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

the first place. Without their sacred gift from the higher world their work would not exist.

A second reason for situating them as spiritual activists is because they claim “la bruja,” the witch within themselves, despite the stigmatization this word engenders. “La bruja” is often perceived as an evil sorceress, a mad, hysterical woman with malignant supernatural powers. However, these performers portray witches as wise, clever, skillful women with healing powers. Because these women work on transforming and healing the community, Irene Lara would identify them as, *bruja-curanderas* (witch-healers), spiritual activists who are “in the process of embodying and living this spiritual *conocimiento*, re-membering and creating powerful knowledges for personal and community healing.”²²⁹ Although mainstream dominant culture perceives *brujas* (witches) as dangerous to the social order, these performers make sense of the social chaos of oppression—racism, sexism, elitism, homophobia, ageism, among others. As such, they embody and enact what Lara calls a *bruja* (witch) positionality. Clearly, La Bruja’s name asserts her witch identity. She calls herself *La Bruja* because she embraces her spiritual history and experience. In her performance she shares that her parents were married on Halloween and she was named after the patroness of Cuba, La Virgen del Cobre (the Virgin of Charity). Her name is associated with the African goddess Ochun, the goddess of love, which she often invokes on stage. It is a kind of magic, as she states, that everybody has. “[E]veryone has a *brujo* or *bruja* inside that they can use their own magic to do positive things....I hope to inspire people to find the

²²⁹ Irene Lara, “Bruja Positionalities: Toward a Chicana/Latina Spiritual Activism,” *Chicana/Latina Studies* 4:2 (Spring 2005): 26.

magic in themselves.”²³⁰

While a spiritual discourse was integrated in the work of founding Nuyorican poets, it differs from the performance strategies of Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa who center the community as radical actors in their performance pieces. Miguel Algarín and Tato Laviera in their musical *Olu Clemente* (1973) use spirituality to feature one male protagonist. This piece is a spiritual celebration weaving Afro-Caribbean music and instruments to honor Roberto Clemente, a baseball star from Puerto Rico who died in an airplane crash while delivering aid to earthquake victims in Nicaragua. Included in this musical are ceremonies that call upon African deities, religious chants, and spirits of dead souls to keep the good deeds of Clemente alive. By placing Clemente at the center of this musical, Algarín and Laviera ignite a collective memory of a cultural and political figure. Esteves, La Bruja, and Mariposa consciously move away from focusing on one person leading the group and instead model a collective notion of leadership and mobilization.

La Bruja brings a spiritual dimension to her performance piece *Boogie Rican Boulevard* when, after a ten-minute intermission, she emerges from the dark with a long white flowing dress in place of her sweatshirt and baggy jeans. A red velvet turban covers her head and a necklace, which she uses as a maraca, hangs on her neck. The scene has changed. She lights several candles and begins to play the drums. The beat of the drums recalls the hip hop beat that played in the background a few minutes before. Now spiritual chants about Changó, Babalú, and Ogu, Orishas within the religious practice of Santería, echo in the same space where La Bruja rapped. What is the purpose in speaking from and through a *bruja* position? In this performance, La Bruja taps into

²³⁰ Claudia Soto, “La Bruja Rocks Quepasa to the Rhythm of Reggaeton,” *Quepasa News*, August 14, 2006. www.quepasa.com.

the spirit world to transcend flesh and tap into the inner spiritual world she sees in everyone. The induction of the audience into a spiritual world urges audience members, as diverse as they may be, to understand the components that comprise who they are and that comprise us all.

This awareness of another world, a higher world is also evident in Esteves's work. She calls upon their spirits to educate women about the long history of coalition building among women. In the poem "Sistas," Esteves lays out several existing moments of interethnic alliances:

Nina Simone, Celia Cruz, Billie Holiday, and Bessie
were all her sistas growin' up
.....
Aretha Franklin, La Lupe, Diana and the Supremes
stayed up nights at heartbreak hotel,
rapping real close moonshine doo-wops,
patiently riffin' their lines till she learned all the words
.....
Ronnie Scepter and Gladys Knight hung out too.
The first time ever she heard Roberta Flack,
knew they were fruit from the same feelin' tree.
How they loved her madly without even tryin'.
They never got tired, or complained about the volume,
Or even cared who was listenin'.
Always by her side, no matter what.
Tight for days.
Getting' it on. Getting' down.

Sistas all the way.²³¹

The basis of this interethnic female relationship relies on the exchange, intersection, and production of knowledge. The women learned to harmonize with each other, took time to understand each other's artistic language, and stood side by side like sisters. This coalition-building philosophy is one that she threads throughout her work. For instance,

²³¹ Sandra María Esteves, *Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo* (Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press, 1990), 19.

as a director and producer, Esteves organized *Latina Voices Visible in the Light* (2004), an event that specifically invited Latinas from all realms of life to share their experiences as women. In doing so, she held women accountable for shedding some light for other women going through similar, if not the same, experiences. More specifically, her piece *La Cura: A Ritual of Healing and Feeling*, speaks to the elements of spirituality that serve as an inspirational force for her work. From 1976 to 1978 she co-created and produced a multi-media poetic dramatization of music and dance with female artists like Andrea Brachfeld and Marilyn Warrell. In this piece she incorporated objects that carried spiritual meaning such as *agua florida* and lucky leaves used for spiritual cleansing, sage to call upon the spirit world, and drumming to guide the spirit into the material world. In addition, she used colors, textures, and scents to stimulate the sense organs. These objects were not props on stage used by characters, but rather they took on a ritualistic purpose where Esteves, the *bruja-curandera*, guided the audience through a collective spiritual cleansing. The performance became a transformative ceremony of pushing away negativity.

The spiritual journey that both Sandra María Esteves and La Bruja advocate is one that audience members witness in Mariposa's performance as well. In *DiaspoRican*, Mariposa informs us that in order for her to transform she must undergo the process of rebirth. In a voiceover she shares with the audience a letter she wrote to her family. She tells them how she has started practicing alternative medicine to help cope with depression; how she has become a vegetarian and detoxified her body with homeopathic remedies. She tells how she will shave her hair and claim a new name. At the end of the voiceover the stage is dimmed and two drummers enter. They play *bomba y plena* and

Mariposa enters the stage dressed with her white flowing dress. She declares that she is not lost, not fragmented, not colonized, but whole and free. Her powerful dancing moves invigorate the audience as they applaud and welcome her on the stage, reborn.

Returning to the flyer of “The Lawsuit,” it is evident that Esteves forged a path of spiritual activism from early on in her career. In the acknowledgment section, she not only includes the organizations that participated in this court performance but also credits venues that informed her spiritual consciousness. The Nichiren Shoshu Academy for Buddhist Consciousness, for example, was a culturally transplanted Japanese-based Buddhist movement that sought to change the world by changing individuals. It was introduced into America in 1960 and has since attracted many people. The other two organizations mentioned, International People’s Cultural Movement and the Holistic Center for the Advancement of Human Society, although they might be invented names, as Esteves recalls, demonstrate the desire to create a space that transforms and radicalizes marginalized communities to claim their given rights as humans. This motion towards building a collective as opposed to acknowledging individuals, usually male figures, is a subversive-counter tradition specific to Nuyorican female solo performers today. They not only place their lives on stage but the lives of others so that the audience witnesses their transformation, the subject’s evolution, and the formation of a collective.

Chapter 4:

Performing Afro-Latinidad: The Work of Nilaja Sun and Aya de León

In this chapter, I draw from the repertoire of Nilaja Sun and Aya de León to examine how they negotiate and mediate their Afro-Latina identities on stage. Moving from specific experiences confronted by Afro-Latinas to more universal hardships like the heartache of a first love, the death of a close friend, and the life of a struggling artist, the social dimensions of ethnicity, gender, and race play the role of protagonists in their performances.

The term “Afro-Latina” does not solely embrace the African lineage of Nuyoricans but also alludes to a consciousness lived by and embodied by individuals of both African American and Latino descent. Whereas La Bruja and Mariposa reenact the ethnic and cultural experiences that mark them as Latinas, León and Sun demonstrate how the labels “African American” and “Latina” operate as racialized categories in the U.S. La Bruja and Mariposa perform their Latinidad by spatially situating their identity inside and outside of Puerto Rico and New York. For Sun and León, however, the spatial references are solely U.S.-based, precisely because their visible identity as black upstages any of their Latina ethnic or cultural markers. As feminist philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff, argues, “Race, unlike ethnicity, has historically worked through visible markers on the body, which trumps dress, speech, and cultural practices.”²³² The Latino identity of Sun and León is visibly different from that of La Bruja and Mariposa in that their phenotype is black as opposed to *trigueña* or *morena* (brown complexion) and their

²³² Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 242.

parents are ethnically African American and Puerto Rican.²³³ Because their blackness materially manifests as a visual marker on the body, their Latino identity is less visible and often unrecognizable by community insiders and outsiders alike. However, throughout their performances we come to understand how they articulate their identity as both African Americans and Latinas in the United States. At times the spectator witnesses Sun and León ethnically marking their Latina identity. At other times their accounts are about racial differences, and yet there are also moments when race and ethnicity are all but equated. Given that the visual references of racialization and gender are inseparable from the performance itself, I examine how Sun's and León's feminist performance strategies participate and intervene in American racial and ethnic constructions in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Since Sun's and León's bodies are center stage and the visible markers of ethnicity, race, and gender are ever present, their bodies act as texts saturated by social, historical, and cultural signs of blackness and Latinidad. However, as they embody a range of identities on stage the corporal text is able to shift meanings. In *Thieves in the Temple: The Reclaiming of Hip Hop*, for instance, León shares her personal journey from a teenage hip hop fanatic to a hip hop feminist activist. She performs a series of characters including a record producer, a white thug boy, and a porno-star, all of which in some way or another shape her experiences as an Afro-Latina. Similarly, in *La Nubia Latina* Sun also performs a series of characters ranging from herself to a quintessential stereotypical Latina to a roach asserting his everlasting presence on earth to a woman

²³³ In many of their poems La Bruja and Mariposa suggest that they identify as Afro-Latina. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I am interested in exploring how Afro-Latinidad is expressed through the convergence and bifurcation of an African American and Latina experience.

coming to terms with a heart-rending break up. Both of these solo performances enact multiple identities to make visible different attitudes towards race, various ethnic-racial-gendered stereotypes, and distinct forms of resistance. The verbal and bodily citations of what has been culturally represented as Latina and/or black challenges the audience to see the individual and the communal bodies in multiple and unconstrained ways.

Sun and León draw from grotesque but also seductive tropes of *Latinidad*. The tropicalization, ghettoization, and hyper articulation of blackness and *Latinidad* function as racial and ethnic signifiers. The danger in acting out these signifiers is that performers can reproduce and instill stereotypes into the consciousness of the audience. As such, stereotypes are artificial representations that can pass into common usage and thus can at times affirm instead of contest racial perceptions. Given that popular culture is oversaturated with stereotypes of all kinds, even if we, as cultural participants, stop reproducing or intend to disrupt these misrepresentations, there is no guarantee that these denigrating portrayals of Latinos or African Americans will cease to exist. Since mass media produce stereotypes, these indelibly etched portrayals linger and remain in our consciousness. Performers like Sun and León intervene in the reproduction and fossilization of stereotypes.

As Afro-Latinas, Sun and León enact as well as subvert familiar black and Latino identity tropes to expose the multiple layers of ethnic, racial, and gender constructions simultaneously at work. They literally and metaphorically put on masks that allow the audience to bear witness to the performance and consumption of race. In this chapter I identify four different types of masking at play throughout their performances: blue masking, roach masking, hyper-racialized masking, and white masking. These ethno-

racial-gendered maskings are oppositional performance strategies that comment on and rupture stereotypical caricatures that usurp the real person. When these performers shatter these stereotypical masks and call forth the individual, their performances eradicate these harmful portrayals and engender an initiative geared towards coalition building and a sense of universal humanity.

On the one hand, Sun and León perform across different cultural identities and in doing so, they posit alternative ways of seeing, reading, and feeling the world. They create what Jill Dolan calls utopian performatives, which she describes as “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.”²³⁴ Sun and León generate these utopian performatives with opening acts that warmly welcome the audience and recognize them as separate individuals in a theatrical collective. Intentionally greeting the audience in this way generates an openness and willingness to interact amongst each other, which incites, if only in the audience’s imagination, individuals and communities to build coalitions.

On the other hand, Sun and León maintain these utopian performatives by identifying and coming face-to-face with stereotypical portrayals of groups of people. This can be quite perplexing since negative stereotypes usually interfere with rather than facilitate the formation of collectives. When Sun and León explicitly stage stereotypical

²³⁴ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

caricatures they are using what Alcoff calls strategies of visibility. They intentionally perform stereotypical portrayals to reveal the “significant facts about our cultural ideology.”²³⁵ It is not so much that their performances reveal the ultimate truth, but rather, they make visible “self-projection, identity anxiety, and the material inscription of social violence.”²³⁶ Stereotypes ultimately prevent individuals from building coalitions because webbed in these false representations are social encryptions that induce many fears, anxieties, and prejudices. By way of making these stereotypes overtly visible, Sun and León attempt to reverse the functionality of stereotypes from alienating individuals and communities to building coalitions. The practices of visibility, Alcoff suggests, can both be “the means of segregating and oppressing human groups and the means of manifesting unity and resistance.”²³⁷ Sun and León address, or at least overtly showcase, these anxieties of difference by manipulating stereotypical notions of Latinidad and blackness and consciously accentuating the performativity of ethnicity, race, and gender. What becomes evident to the spectator is how these performatives are systematically appropriated as a commodity of capitalism. In turn, however, individuals authenticate these racial, ethnic, and gendered commodities as their own. How then do Sun and León perform who they truly are versus who they are made to be in a culture of mass consumption?

²³⁵ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 8.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

Opening Acts: Coalition Building Strategies

Since popular media over-saturate mass culture with stereotypical images of ethno-racial subjects, Sun and León question and push the conceptual limits of identity. Instead of fossilizing identities, they are interested in fostering processes of personal and political transformation both for the self and the community. They create alternative possibilities that allow members in the audience to envision a world that can resist systematic social oppression. In creating this ideal world, Sun and León make visible the misrepresentations that negatively impact the Latino and African American community and give testimony to the lived experiences that activate progress and development.

A practice that Sun and León often use to produce utopian performatives is to personally invite the audience into their world and their experiences. The titles themselves begin to carve out a sense of community even before the performance begins. As is true for most titles, they function as way of signaling the subject at hand and connecting with potential audience members. The title *La Nubia Latina*, for example, invites the audience to consider hybrid notions of race because it places two separate identities together seamlessly, black and Latina. Since the title declares the theme of the performance as it is in Spanish and the terms alone, “Latina” and “Nubia,” carry significant social and political meanings, the audience is prepared by the title to embark on an exploration of the racial complexities in the Latino community. Despite the audience’s association or non-association with the Latino or black community, by attending the performance they are ushered into the worldview of the performer, in this case the worldview of Sun, *La Nubia Latina*.

Similarly, the title *Thieves in the Temple: The Reclaiming of Hip Hop* speaks to a

generation familiar with the hip hop culture, or at least those who want to learn about it. The word “hip hop,” as discussed in the previous chapter, is a contested term that brings several issues of ethnicity, race, and class to the surface. The origin, as noted by Tricia Rose, Danny Hoch, Jeff Chang, and many other hip hop scholars and practitioners, comprises several socio-historic circumstances: the end of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, the militarized political movements such as the black Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Brown Berets, the devastating effects of Reaganomics on urban America, and the age of technology.²³⁸ Just as the title *La Nubia Latina* adheres to hybrid notions of race and ethnicity, the meaning of “hip hop” is associated with an African American continuum that expands into the polycultural nature of New York City.²³⁹ The titles *La Nubia Latina* and *Thieves in the Temple: The Reclaiming of Hip Hop* explicitly target specific communities of color with distinct social histories. Both titles are charged with social and political significance and potentially draw the attention of individuals who are in some level invested or interested in seeing performances that engage with contemporary issues of ethnicity, race, and gender.

In addition to the informative and invitational dimension inherent in titles, both Sun and León make a conscious theatrical choice at the beginning of their pieces to invite the audience into the world from which they are performing. This practice is a common convention of solo performance; however, these Afro-Latina practitioners build on this tradition by mediating the performance with a hip hop sensibility. While *Thieves in the*

²³⁸ For a compelling discussion by practitioners on Hip Hop as a historical art form with an angle on the present and future trajectory see *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetic of Hip Hop*, ed. Jeff Chang (New York: Basic Civistas Books, 2007).

²³⁹ Danny Hoch, “Towards a Hip Hop Aesthetic: A Manifesto for the Hip Hop Arts Movement,” *Total Chaos*, ed. Chang (Basic Civistas Books, 350).

Temple explicitly utilizes the four original elements of hip hop--emceeing, deejaying, breakdancing, and rapping--Sun's work does not. But by virtue of growing up during the eighties in the Lower East Side, a polycultural community of immigrants, Sun was at the center of the hip hop genesis. Her work organically integrates an understanding and respect for "hip hop's wide range of aesthetic."²⁴⁰ That is, she fuses her urban city life-experiences with African American and Latino traditions on a performance stage where poetry, dance, and visual art meet. In addition, as we will later learn, her piece also addresses issues relevant to the hip hop generation.

In the same way that hip hop was generated in part due to a lack of access to resources, Sun and León infuse the stage with a sense of urban minimalism. They reject conventional theatrical acting styles, grand sets, and linear dramaturgical trajectory, and instead performative meaning is primarily mediated by the actor's body and less by external theatrical elements such as sets, costumes, lights, and any technological intrusion. The light design, for example, is usually limited to blackouts, general stage-audience lighting, and sporadic acting area specials. These solo performers merge dance, poetry, music, and photography in their scenic representations. Drawing from autobiographical experiences, Sun and León create a hybrid performance medium that focalizes the body as a primary staging element for addressing notions of Afro-Latinidad. Much like the way the hip hop aesthetic blurs the boundaries between the stage and the audience, Sun and León perform in a way that is stageless.

In *La Nubia Latina* Sun commences with poetry that directly engages with the audience. She makes it clear that the audience will be walking into her world: "The

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 357.

world of *la Nubia Latina*. *Mi mundo, baby*. Nobody forced you into this world. You came willingly and so I open my arms to you.” This opening provides the audience with glasses to see, not so much the internal world of the performer, but the social world in which she inhabits and which she attempts to recreate on stage. In order for the audience to fully understand these two worlds, Sun asks them to obey two rules:

First, you must come in with the biggest mind imaginable. Open your hearts, open your souls, open your eyes. And second, because this is not your ordinary type of theater, I want to hear your mouth, don’t be sleeping out there. I want to hear you react out loud. Want to hear you laugh. Want to hear you cry. Want to hear you say Hmmhmm. Want to hear you say “*así eso*.” Want to hear you say, “you know, I really am beginning to understand what she has to say.” I want to hear you because you want to hear me. It is all about the world we live in so let’s live.²⁴¹

Inviting the audience into her world, she breaks away from theatrical conventions that separate the spectator from the performance. Instead of reifying the fourth wall as a voyeuristic device, Sun pierces it by acknowledging and interacting with the audience. For instance, Sun casts the audience in the role of her girlfriend. That is, the audience, either individually or as a collectively, are physical embodiments of that friend. In spite of the audience’s own social, cultural, political, and personal baggage, Sun considers the audience members as loyal compatriots listening to the internal politics she encounters in her life. In casting the audience as her friend, she emphasizes that in order for the audience to fully experience the theatrical event, they must be willing to listen without judgment. Sun locates the act of listening in the performer and the spectator because it is a significant part of not only the theatrical process, but the mission of coalition building. As Alcoff states, “When I refuse to listen to how you are different from me, I am refusing to know who you are. But without understanding fully who you are, I will never be able

²⁴¹ Nilaja Sun, *La Nubia Latina*, VHS, Henry Street Settlement, Spring 1999.

to appreciate precisely how we are more alike than I might have originally supposed.”²⁴²

For this reason, Sun promotes a type of active listening that allows for people to understand difference and to build coalitions between and across various communities. As such, she underlines the role of the audience as active listeners and holds the audience accountable for shaping and participating in the development of her performance piece and the creation of a community. She expects the audience to witness and remain open-minded, while also questioning the scenarios presented to them. As such, the audience does not passively witness the theatrical event but instead interacts, reacts out loud, speaks back, and testifies to the experiences shared by Sun.

Like Sun, León, captivates the audience by incorporating a personal welcome greeting in *Thieves in the Temple: The Reclaiming of Hip Hop*. Her vibrant voice captures the audience with a rap: “when hip hop was alive/male emcee respected the ladies/we wanted black people to thrive/but somehow we lost the love/somewhere along the way/it is the time for the reclaiming of hip hop.” So even before León welcomes and thanks the audience for coming to see the show, she sets the stage with beat boxing, a type of vocal percussion, and sings about the culture of hip hop in the eighties, how it has evolved into a misogynistic culture, and how she intends to change it. León makes it clear that she is not the silent, sexualized dancing body so often portrayed in mass media’s version of hip hop, but the intellectual speaking body on stage holding a microphone. This powerful feminist positionality along with her beat boxing and lyric-making skills immediately establishes the urgency in remembering the eighties with hopes of mobilizing today’s hip hop generation. She urges the audience to pay attention to the

²⁴² Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 6.

work of women who are politically and artistically contributing to hip hop culture and art.

She begins with sharing her fears and hesitations about publicly picking up the microphone. Although it took her at least ten years before she came out as an emcee, she makes it quite evident that she has overcome this and can grace the stage with powerful words of wisdom. Like Sun, León asks the audience “to come here and open [their] ears” to the trials and tribulations she has had and continues to face. Since León is a woman, people expect her to be the object of desire and not the witty performing poet. She is not like the other women in hip hop: “I am not a pimp, I am not a ho, I am not a slanger or a banger.” Instead she “practice[s] breath control” and work[s] with young people and [she] tr[ies] to make them skeptical.” She urges young people to question what they see on TV because “every gold tooth emcee ain’t got a ghetto pedigree.” Her rap encourages youngsters to learn about their history and understand their identity. She accepts her womanhood and blackness by maintaining “her real hair, real nails, real tits, real ass, real smart, real A’s.” In accepting her natural assets both on the page and on the stage, she empowers herself while encouraging and inspiring others to embrace their own natural beauty. She strongly affirms that “[she is] built to last, built to last” in spite of the evolution of hip hop from a political art form to a trendy, consumable art form. After this captivating introduction, León warmly welcomes the audience to her show.

In line with the hip hop tradition of storytelling, León tells the audience that her story begins with old school hip hop music. In place of an in-house DJ, she relies on the audience to do musical samplings for her using LL Cool J’s melody “it’s jingling baby...go ahead baby.” She rehearses a call and response sequence with the audience and in doing so activates a shared experience while at the same time hearkening back to what

she sees as a more authentic time in hip hop history. Feeling comfortable with the audience's performance, she moves into her poem "Cellulite," which illustrates how capitalism perpetuates and upholds the anorexic body image by advertising "lite" items: "lite beer/lite cake/lite cookies/pepsi lite/99% fat free/ but who's trying to be fat-free? Certainly not me," announces León. "[L]et me see your thighs jiggle/they're jiggling, baby," and the audience responds "go 'head, baby."²⁴³ This piece has a dual purpose. Since this piece draws from the interactive call and response style of hip hop music, the audience not only participates in León's performance, but they also collaborate in shaping the piece itself. In addition, this interactive performance strategy endorses the collective move toward body consciousness rather than an obsession with body image.

This performative labor, along with the delivery to and movement toward the audience, breaks the fourth wall by engaging directly with the audience. Sun and León recognize the need to inform the audience that their presence in the physical space is only the beginning—they, the audience, are expected to enter the world of the performance itself. Consequently, the solo performance becomes a performer-audience theatrical experience. That is, the audience takes on an active role as listeners and participants in Sun's and León's theatrical and performative process rather than being solely passive witnesses. As a result, Sun and León create safe spaces for sharing their experiences, revealing their worldviews, and creating potential sites of community dialogues, interactions, and interventions. This visceral and dynamic experience of mutually giving and receiving is what makes the solo performances unique. In the case of Sun, León, and

²⁴³ The basis of my reading of *Thieves in the Temple* relies in my attendance at this piece, which was featured as part of the 3rd Annual New York Hip Hop Theater Festival at New York City's PS 122 during the summer of 2002. I also use the video documentation of this piece, which was performed at the Afro Solo Theater Festival in San Francisco, CA the summer of 2001. The poem "Cellulite" (2002) can be found on León's website www.ayadeleon.com. León consents to the reproduction of her material.

other Latina performance artists, this type of theatre is about the living moments and the living memories, the lived encounters and challenges, and the ghosts of the past that haunt the living so as to incite hope, transformation, and action.

Blue Masking

As Afro-Latinas, Sun and León are forced to wear social masks from day to day especially since their blackness becomes a corporal text that prevents them from easily participating in the Latino community. In fact, their verbal and bodily citation of blackness is the source of alienation. At first glance, the audience thinks that they are simply African American women. However their bodies limit the reading of their identity. For example, as a child Sun remembers that she was often stared at.²⁴⁴ At that time she did not quite understand why, but as she grew up she realized that the anxiety emerged from the impossibility of fitting her into one category of identification. She did not quite fit the Latin bombshell image and her Latina cultural and linguistic inflections decentered her blackness. Now on the theatrical stage, she is able to respond to the perplexed gaze and affirm her blackness and Latinidad. In many of her performances the audience comes to learn that she is both Latina and black and that she has been marginalized for not visibly wearing “authentic” Latina or black markings. León, who puts hip hop in the forefront to critically interrogate representations of blackness, does not explicitly perform her Latinidad. Instead, Spanish or Spanish inflected words and references to Latino cultural icons shape her performance. Despite the implicit nature of

²⁴⁴ Nilaja Sun, phone interview by author, February 6, 2007.

her Latinidad, she sets out a rich understanding of her Afro-Latina identity by implementing a hip hop aesthetic that historically has been practiced by both blacks and Latinos.

The audience witnesses Sun negotiating her Afro-Latina identity in *Gray Sun* where she compares the highly publicized coverage of the suicide of Spalding Gray, a renowned artist with whom she is unfamiliar, to offer a glimpse of other American personalities who are less recognized and often forgotten. In addition to being herself, she plays a young black male Brooklynite, her mother, a Jamaican gynecologist, a black female entrepreneur taking a yoga class, her grandmother, and her anti-Bush friend, among other characters. Together, these impersonations bring to life the important people in her world. These are people who otherwise would be anonymous players in our lives, but to Sun they are important for reasons that Spalding Gray can never be. That is to say, Sun's corporal text functions as a resource for understanding, race, ethnicity, and gender. While Gray's whiteness and celebrity status might allow him a publicized life, it does not access the experience of racialized people. Upon starting the play, Sun taps into notions of referentiality when she starts speaking in Spanish and then turns to the audience asking the correct tense of a verb. In so doing, she challenges notions of Latinidad. If Sun does not fully master the Spanish language and she is often mistaken as black, how does she challenge people's perceptions of Latinos? What social masks must she put on to be a part of the Latino community and what is at stake when she is continuously masking her identity?

The issue of masking the self reverberates throughout Sun's performance pieces. This is exemplified in *Black and Blue*, a vignette that reenacts the rehearsal process and

theatrical experience of Sun at a young age when playing the role of Smurfette in the musical production of *The Smurfs Saved Their Village Against the Evil Gargamel* at Henry Street Settlement's Summer Day Camp in 1982.²⁴⁵ She relives this childhood memory by impersonating the various campers involved in the production, including the asthmatic boy, the real thug-like boy, and the Spanish-speaking youngster. In addition to dramatizing these characters, Sun also portrays the younger version of herself who remembers the traumatic experience of alienation due to her Afro-Latina identity. Life changes for young Sun when Señora Libertad Rivera, the director of the Smurf's production, after originally casting Yolanda for the role of Smurfette, gives it to Sun. Yolanda, whom we will meet again in *La Nubia Latina*, does not quite know her lines and choreography, and Sun, who has quickly mastered them, volunteers to teach her. After Señora Rivera offers the role to Sun, Yolanda ostracizes Sun because of her blackness. She intentionally mistakes her given name Nilaja for "Nigeria" and "nostalgia." By deliberately making these mistakes, she makes herself seem more knowledgeable than Sun even when she is the one in need of her help. Yolanda pompously doubts Sun's ability to know anything, let alone teach her the movement. "How can an African booty-snatcher teach me how to dance?" The fact that Yolanda, a person from within the Latino community, poses such a question painfully alienates Sun at a very young age as her blackness is denigrated. As spectators, we witness how racial

²⁴⁵ *Black and Blue* was also performed as part of *Mezclasita/Mixtures*, a compilation of three distinct solo works. In the second piece, *Insufficient Fare*, Sun depicts a semi-autobiographical version of herself, a New York City struggling artist trying to make ends meet while confronted by the death of her childhood friend Cindy Wong. Sun's financial and professional preoccupations become less of a priority in the final piece, *Due to the Tragic Events*, which portrays the experiences of those who live in the 'hood, outside of the corporate world of the World Trade Center. Sun began writing the piece with grants received from Amherst College in 2000 and eventually performed it as part of New WORLD Theater's 2002 season on November 13 and 14 in the Bowker Auditorium in Amherst, Massachusetts.

discrimination traumatically marked Sun's childhood memories, especially since Sun is the only black girl in the entire camp. We see her living in the fractures between two communities, the African American and Latino.

Although from the outset this vignette simply reenacts the rehearsal process of a musical for a kids' summer camp, for the young campers Smurfette is the embodiment of a real racial concept. Interestingly, Smurfette's racial identity never comes up when Señora Rivera casts Yolanda. However, Sun's casting as Smurfette raises a whole new set of questions for the campers. They ask: "How is she going to be Smurfette when she is black? Smurfette ain't black, am I right?" The group comes to a consensus that Yolanda can play the role of Smurfette while Sun cannot. This decision is not based on their performance skills but on their complexions. While blackness is marked, Latinidad is unmarked. The campers naively believe that because the racial markings on Yolanda's and Smurfette's body are not black but cinnamon or blue, they are in a sense raceless and consequently exempted from having any African ancestry. In comparison to Sun, Yolanda could more easily mold her racial and gendered physical traits to transform herself into Smurfette. That is, as a light-skinned Latina Yolanda could easily paint her face blue, wear a blonde wig, and put on a white dress with white heels. Señora Rivera, however, does not understand the relevance of the racial bickering among the campers and trumps their discussion by making an obvious observation: "Smurfette is not black, she is blue." Ultimately, it is Señora Rivera's final word that puts an end to the discussion; Sun will play the role of Smurfette.

Just minutes before showtime, Señora Rivera visits Sun to wish her well and to remind her to enjoy the performance in spite of forgetting or stumbling through any lines

or movements. Sun takes off her sweater and jean overalls and instantly transforms into Smurfette. She reveals her Smurfette outfit-- a white mini-skirt and a white fitted t-shirt that has a small red heart next to the name "Smurfette." After completing her costume change, Sun sits by the changing area, looks at her self in an imaginary mirror located upstage center, and proudly smears blue paint on her face. This celebratory moment is tempered by the realization on the part of the audience that Sun's blue face appears bruised instead of Smurfettish. Oblivious to how she looks, Sun proudly stands by for the Smurf song to begin and gracefully dances and sings her lines as Smurfette. At the end of the performance, Sun is both surprised and honored at the cheers and applause from the audience. She humbly bows and goes back to her changing area. While she takes off the yellow wig, and wipes the blue paint from her face, the audience hears Louis Armstrong perform the song "What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?" and the lights dim to black.

For Sun the role of Smurfette is loaded with social and political value; To the campers Smurfette becomes a cultural and mythical Latina icon that Sun is honored to embody. She reminds the audience of the constructed nature of identity as we witness her in the process of becoming Smurfette. By choosing to put on a blue mask, Sun replaces the blackface minstrelsy with a blueface act that explodes the black and white binary paradigm and reveals the complexities of race and racism. She implements metatheatrical moments that incorporate music, dance, theater, and masking strategies *a la* Smurfette to display the multiple axes of racial oppression simultaneously at work: cultural, ethnic, and racial. Given that the campers collectively agree that Yolanda is a better fit for the role of Smurfette, this cartoon character becomes a medium through which Sun reclaims

and affirms her Latinidad.

On the one hand, the blue masking reveals the limitations of the white and black binary and the desire to create a heterogeneous notion of Latinidad. Race, as Juan Perea states, is conceived by Americans as consisting “either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the black and white.”²⁴⁶ It is often the case that other racial identities are understood from this limiting binary, which does not adequately work for Latinos or other immigrant and migrant communities in the same way that it does for African Americans and Caucasians.²⁴⁷ In other words, the black and white paradigm does not reflect the diverse ever-growing number of racial identities in the United States. The press photograph used for *Black and Blue* suggests the inadequacy of the white and black paradigm as it captures Sun leaning into a blue mask with a teardrop on the cheek. So as not to fully conceal her face, Sun peeks through only one eyehole and partially reveals the other side of her face. Although she stares out, there exists an inner tension when her face is black and blue. The photograph captures her in the process of embodying her identity as black and blue. However her racial visibility and ethnic ambiguity create a bit of anxiety, as the viewer cannot easily decipher her cultural background.

On the other hand, because the blue masking is bounded by color, Sun performs the impossibility of escaping from the very axis that racially oppresses her. Sun makes it clear that she stands within the interstices of racism for her blackness sets her apart from

²⁴⁶ Juan Perea, “The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race,” *The Latino Condition*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefaniec (New York: New York Press, 1998), 361.

²⁴⁷ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 245. Other theorists who argue for an alternative approach to the white/black paradigm include Elaine Kim, Gary Okihiro, Elizabeth Martínez, Richard Delgado, and Juan Perea.

whites, blacks and Latinos. Since her black racial traits upstage her status as a Latina, she is perceived as other in the Latino community. Similarly, since Sun associates herself with Latinos, the African American community “others” her. This otherness is a byproduct of the racialization process that Latinos and African Americans internalize, which as this performance makes visible, reproduces other scenarios of racial discrimination within the already marginalized community. Disturbed by internalized racism, Sun displaces the physical attributes conventionally signifying racial categories of blackness and whiteness onto the cartoon character Smurfette. In doing so, she engenders utopian performatives, alternative realities and moments of reflexivity for which Latinos and other audience members can come to realize their role and participation within the hegemony of the black and white binary paradigm.

When the song “What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue” plays in the background it reminds the audience of how these racially traumatic lived experiences affect Sun’s emotional state of being. The melancholic music complements the weary look on Sun’s face when she sees her black and blue reflection in the mirror. A moment of post-performance celebration turns into a daunting moment for Sun as she realizes how tired she is of creating, putting on, and taking off masks that assert her Afro-Latina identity. The song highlights how as a result of the existing internal racism Sun has had to wear a variety of masks, in this case a blue one, to be part of the community of Latino campers. Behind the blue face stands an Afro-Latina who resents both putting on the masks and the psychological and emotional battering that comes with wearing these masks.

Like race, gender is woven in Sun’s blue masking performance strategy. In the

last vignette of *La Nubia Latina* Sun shares the anecdote of a young woman who loses her virginity with her first love. Unlike the other vignettes in this one, Sun does not refer to herself. In doing so, Sun shifts her character development practices from the very personal to more universal experiences. This technique is similar to the feminist approach of Ntozake Shange in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1974). Like the female characters in *For Colored Girls....*, the young woman in *La Nubia Latina* consider sexual intercourse a rite of passage into womanhood. She comes to realize that despite the excruciating pain of her first sexual encounter she romanticized the whole experience and convinced herself that she had fallen in love. The audience sees this young woman obsessing about her relationship. Throughout the piece, she constantly inquires about his whereabouts and his lack of communication with her. The more she obsesses about him the more unresponsive he is. While this dysfunctional relationship continues, the young woman loses her sense of self. This piece is about her inner journey, which Sun metaphorically represents with dance movements and by donning a blue mask. (This mask is the one used in the press photograph of *Black and Blue* seen below.) Together the mask and the dance movements accentuate the inevitable emotional rollercoaster experience by the young woman. At the end of her journey, she takes off the blue mask, places it on the floor, and walks away.



Figure 4. Press photography of *Black and Blue* (2004)

The blue mask represents the character's emotional state of dejection. When she is able to break through this state, she triggers the process of self-realization, which then gives her the strength to leave the blue mask behind. When she wears the blue mask she does not speak. While the speaking body has the power to signify race, the silent body adds an unforeseen layer of universality that focuses less on social circumstances and more on common everyday happenings that most people experience at some point in their lives--love, death, inner quest, and so forth. Silence here is not passive but rather fully engaged with the body. Sun dances to the song "Strength" written by Patricia Cathcart Andress, which parallels the inner journey of the character. Although Sun does not speak, she narrates through dance the process of finding one's inner strength, a completely

empowering journey not only for the character but also for the spectator who witnesses a cathartic voyage. Despite fear and loneliness, the young women in both the performance piece and the song find the courage to make it through the hardship of breaking up with someone with whom they were deeply in love.

The mask is also symbolic of the various socially constructed masks imposed on Sun/the young woman. The blue expressionless mask suggests a kind of rigidity that sharply contrasts with the flowing body on stage. While the blue mask calls attention to the fixed constructions of ethnic, racial, or gendered identities, her body points to the fluidity and motion necessary to understand her identity. When Sun/the young woman turns away from the blue mask, she is discarding the social constructions that fragment and limit her. For instance, she leaves behind material objects that consume her identity and takes with her a richer understanding of her self. Whether Sun uses this blue masking performance strategy to talk about race or universal female experiences, this technique moves away from fixed categories of identification that stymie political and communal efficacy. In the dance piece, Sun's body emotes and the audience witnesses a performance of affect. Instead of fixating on categories of identification, the dancing body creates an affective performance that locates the experiences, feelings, and desires of individuals and enables the creation of lasting coalitions between and among various communities.

Roach Masking

In *La Nubia Latina* Nilaja Sun moves in the piece from addressing the racial tensions within the Latino community to critiquing how society sees the increasing

population of Latinos as a crisis. She suggests that the everlasting presence of Latinos is like having a roach infestation in one's home. Framed by the childhood memory of home, in the third vignette of *La Nubia Latina*, Sun recalls growing up in the tenements of the Lower East Side and living side by side with roach invaders to parody the positionalities of humans and roaches. She reports like a radio announcer that: "The roach population has increased over one hundred percent." Due to the roach outbreak, she and her mother take on the domestic chore of cleaning up dead roaches and roach remains. In her household this action was not merely a seasonal routine but a weekly one. Religiously, she and her mother would thoroughly clean their apartment in hopes of controlling and containing the roach invasion. They would manically clean up every part of the house from flowerpots to figurines that "beckoned la isla del encanto" (beckoned the enchanted island). They exterminated the roach colony, an act that they rejoiced over. Unfortunately, at the end of the day, their efforts remained unrewarded as Sun ends this vignette with a roach's recommendation: "You can kill me, but we, we ain't never going to go. So you just live your life and let us live ours."

Interestingly, Sun parallels the human-roach relationship with relations of power among minorities and less marginalized individuals. The use of roaches as a metaphor for the discriminatory social realities faced by Latino communities or as an allegorical stand-in for humans is not an uncommon tradition in Latino plays. In Luis Valdez's *Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1964), the attempt of a Chicano farm worker family trying to find their place in society as Mexicans and Mexican Americans is paralleled by the invasion of roaches in their household. *The Red Rose*²⁴⁸ produced by Pregones (2005)

²⁴⁸ This theatrical adaptation was based on archival research conducted at the Center of Puerto

is based on the life and works of Puerto Rican activist and journalist Jesus Colón.²⁴⁹ In his short story “Cuentos para niños de uno a ochenta años” (1927), Colón writes about his encounter with a village of roaches that taught him about radicalism and social action. Carmelita Tropicana’s *With What Does the Cockroach Sit* (2004), which was performed at INTAR in repertory with Sun’s *Blues for Gray Sun*, imagines the life of roaches and dolphins living around Elián González’s house.

While Sun uses blue masking to make visible the interwoven systems of racial and gender categorization, she also uses what I term “roach masking” as a way of explicitly looking at the Other. She puts herself in the position of her younger self, the exterminator, and the roach. She uses a roach to discuss the issue of race and, in turn, how these social forces shape notions of identity formation and community building. Sun

Rican Studies and collectively created by the ensemble.

²⁴⁹ Several other Latino works utilize a roach metaphor to signify social realities. Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1973) is a semiautobiographical novel that recalls the Chicano Moratorium on August 29, 1970, a mass protest against the Vietnam War. This historic act of resistance is often missed because, as the title indicates, society perceives minorities as undesirables. Despite the denigrating connotations of roaches, Lalo Alcaraz calls his syndicated comic strip and political radical comic protagonist *La Cucaracha* (2002). Aware of the many stereotypical images the song “La Cucaracha” has been associated with, from the image of the Mexican with a wide-brimmed sombrero wearing a colorful serape to Speedy González, Alcaraz names the protagonist character Cuco Roach to satirically address issues of ethnicity, race, immigration, and the politics of current events. Sandra Cisneros’s short story “Bien Pretty” in *Women Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1992) is about the love affair of Lupe, a painter, and Flavio Galindo, a cockroach exterminator who she hires. The relationship goes from a passionate love affair to an enraged break up when Lupe finds out that he has two wives and several children in Mexico. In *Drown* (New York: Riverhead, 1996) Junot Díaz describes how his recently migrated family from Dominican Republic must adjust to the constant presence of roaches in their New York City apartments. And lastly, in Rubí Theater Company’s theatrical adaptation of Martín Espada’s *Imagine the Angels of Bread* (New York: Norton, 1996), the poem “My Cockroach Lover” was performed to describe the intimate relationship between roaches and New Yorkers as they deal with their similarities and differences. Another Espada poem “Cockroach of Liberation” in *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* (New York: Norton, 1993) describes how in a student strike in Puerto Rico the crowd quickly dissolved as police swung their bats like Roberto Clemente. Once the ruckus is over the students gradually return multiplying their supporters “like cockroaches of liberation” (24). In *Puerto Rican Obituary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), Pedro Pietri’s anti-consumerism poem “Suicide Note from a Cockroach in a Low Income Housing Project” recounts the integration of the ghetto into the new consumer society of late capitalism through a suicide note from an irate cockroach protesting the genocide of his people.

begins this vignette with her childhood memories. As spectators we understand that her lived-experiences are a valid historical documentation of the American social world she encounters. While the roaches are a “real” problem in many New York City apartments in old tenement buildings, in Sun’s vignette they also become symbolic of the challenging living conditions faced by working-class families of color. Although the task of cleaning her roach infested home is not the most pleasant memory, the event invokes a family memory. Sun and her mother bonded as they maintained and sustained the family’s living quarters. Under the grim circumstances, the audience learns from Sun’s lived experiences and appreciates how she transforms an unpleasant task into one that generates much joy and laughter.

Unable to control the roach population, Sun’s family turns to the exterminator, whom she associates with the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Day. She rejoices with a “hallelujah” as the exterminator blesses the house with the presence of pesticide. Although quite comedic, the exterminator is emblematic of the ways people violently approach difference and recalls the eugenics movement. Sun’s portrayal of the exterminator and those inflicted by roach epidemics reminds us of the systematic legal forces that control and contain immigrants and people of color, as is evident with the passing of Proposition 187 in California in 1994. Sun’s performance strategy is reminiscent of how Suzan-Lori Parks in *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989) uses the metaphor of bugs to represent women of color, and an exterminator to represent a white naturalist, who perceives African American women as species to be scientifically observed, analyzed, and experimented with.

In spite of the thorough extermination, Sun confesses that the roaches continue to

return, especially when the lights are turned off. It is in the reterritorialization of these roaches that one of them approaches Sun and tells her that no matter what humans do, they can never get rid of them. The roach suggests that they must learn to let others live and learn to live with the Other. The audience once again bursts in laughter as they immediately grasp that the roach is meant to comment on Sun's reality as an Afro-Latina. Despite being different species, over their many years together, Sun and the roaches learn how to co-exist in a world that despises roaches. Moreover, if there are groups of people preventing exchange or interaction among different communities, then the best solution is to find ways to co-exist without disrupting one another's life. The roach offers an altered sense of self, which meditates from a distance on the racism and resists no matter how many times the exterminator returns. Sun steps back from the hierarchical systems and imagines how other creatures would respond to such a world. Instead of trying to fit in a specific racial and/or ethnic category, Sun is interested in fomenting relationships that allow humans and creatures to coexist, communicate, and interact in any given temporal or spatial landscape.

White Masking

If Sun uses "roach masking" as a metaphorical performance strategy, León engages with the performativity of whiteness. Just as Sun identifies a range of perspectives on issues of race, León portrays a series of players who participate in the construction of racial categories. Her portrayal of the white entrepreneur, the white thug boy and Lady Triple X reveals how whiteness is not solely a racial category but a source and outlet of power. Power in this case is measured by the commercialization and

consumption of hip hop. By performing the power of whiteness, León offers an illuminating history of hip hop from its radical origins to its commercial success and parallels it to her evolution from an ordinary consumer of hip hop culture to a proactive emcee taking hip hop beyond the television screen and onto the stage.

After captivating the audience with LL Cool J's old school melodies in the backdrop of her poem "Cellulite" and reminding us of a time when hip hop revolutionized the people, she "fast-forwards" to the present time and shows how hip hop betrays her. She portrays three characters who participate in inflicting "black and blue" experiences. She personifies the music industry as a stout white businessman, impersonates a white teenager co-opting hip hop, and incarnates the pornographic image of women on the hip hop screen. Each of these characters reveals how hip hop has been co-opted to play into the system of capitalism and consumerism.

In slow motion she picks up a cigar from the stool behind her, crouches, takes a couple of puffs, and in a nasal voice begins to half-speak and -sing:

I want albums, I want albums, I want albums with big guns and naked chicks. Ahh sounds good. Throw in a few more suck my dicks. Take out the part about missing your pops and the part about crooked cops and I think we'll have a big hit in our hands. Sex is selling. Violence is selling. It always has, it always will. This is no big news. You people have sung about it ever since the days of the blues. Just now the profits are much, much bigger. So get back to work.

In performing the character of a white record producer, León explores the gap between herself and the character. She detaches her self from the character by transforming her body language, her posture, and her voice. The short and stout physique of the record producer completely contradicts the control he has over the hip hop music industry. His demands for the hip hop artists to rush back to work are not very different from master-

slave interactions. León suggests that the music industry has enslaved hip hop artists by binding black men and black women to images that portray them as violators or as sexual objects. The character of the record producer demonstrates how hip hop music has evolved into an art form that pigeonholes individuals into stereotypical identities systematically constructed by the oppressive categories of race, ethnicity, and gender.

After the record producer sends the slave-like hip hop artists back to work, León in slow motion puts down the cigar, places a black cap on her head, and takes on a timid yet thug-like demeanor. This character repeatedly strikes the classic hip hop pose—arms crossed, mountain posed body, and aggressive looking face staring straight out into the audience. His shyness drastically contrasts with his aggressive physical performance, which is meant to signal that a white boy is role-playing blackness. He publicly confesses, “I am a white boy from a small town.” Attempting to rap, he often pauses and trips over his words. However, it is evident that he understands that the power of this art form lies in telling the story of the self. Thus, he follows the methodology of gangsta rap by describing his life: “Nothing ever nothing ever happens here. My parents they just go to work and come home and watch TV or hit each other and drink beer.”

Although the audience’s response indicates that this is perceived as a humorous portrayal of how white working-class youth come to appreciate hip hop, León is quite critical of how hip hop culture is trapped in a dangerous cycle of performing blackness and then consuming it. She fiercely accuses hip hop of selling out “our revolution for a gold chain, three rocks of crack, a girly magazine, and a record deal.” León suggests that now that the record industry is massively reproducing and disseminating hip hop music, the local grassroots qualities of this art form are lost in translation.

Clearly, the young white boy is a bystander of this system of consumerism as he raps about how “last year in sixth grade my best friend got MTV and gangsta rap is transforming me. I want the realness...I want the realness...I want the realness of hanging and banging, of hoes and clothes, of shorties and forties, of ragging and du-ragging. I want every single rap CD that you can get.” This character consumes hip hop fashion, speech patterns, and mannerisms and thinks he can borrow this realness by appropriating them as part of his white identity. In mimicking fashion, language, gestures, postures, and urban colloquialisms, León makes it quite clear that consumers, like this white thug boy, mistake the mass mediated signs of blackness as real and therefore end up performing what they think is an authentic performance of race and gender, what they perceive as black masculinity. This character admits that he doesn’t care “if this thug life is a fantasy” because gangsta rap offers him an outlet to express himself: “Thank God for Tower Records or MTV. I was numb until gangster rap set me free. Cause the rage it expresses is the rage in me.” As if following the dramatic script of black masculinity, he turns his black cap around and strikes the classic hip hop pose again. Unsure about whether he executes the lyrics properly and moves in the right way, he questions himself: “Cause it ain’t no heart in the heartland fool. Or wait or is it ain’t no heart in the heartland motherfucker? Do I...wait...do I grab my dick before or after I say...ain’t no heart in the heartland motherfucker. (Grabbing his crotch.) Yeah, that’s it.” The young white boy takes these images as true representations and admires them so much so that he masks his whiteness with body postures, gestures, and language that signify blackness. León makes visible the construction of racial scripts as the boy practices to be black. It is clear, however, that he has not quite mastered the thug-like mannerisms and poses. The

simulating a black person is the white thug's way of expressing his feelings about lacking cultural richness. He romanticizes the desire to belong in a community. This desire or imagining by the white thug cannot create a utopian performative because it is driven by a lack of understanding or misunderstanding about hip hop culture and hip hop participants.

When León takes on the characters of the businessman and the young boy she is not only performing whiteness but also demonstrating the racial dynamics and relations of power within hip hop culture. Notions of whiteness are deeply embedded in socially constructed racist practices. Like Sun, León reveal the various players who make her experiences black and blue; however she also portrays how these identities are grossly implicated in the misrepresentation of black men and women. Without engaging or even considering the socio-political dimensions of hip hop music, the entrepreneur constructs the most consumable image -- overly violent black men and overly sexualized black women—as a form of domination and control. While León is a highly skillful performer embodying a character from another race, we cannot help but see her blackness. She is an Afro-Latina performer explicating her reality in the presence of others to publicly testify to the problem of systematic racism in the American economy.

Hyper-Racialized Masking

But what happens when the consumer is no longer the young white hip hop fanatic co-opting blackness, but a person of color buying into the hyper-constructed images of sex and violence? When León enters the stage as Lady Triple X wearing a blonde wig, black spandex panty shorts, a black tube top, and black heels, there is silence

among the audience. This character, although dressed provocatively, is quite grotesque, and elicits discomfort among the audience. This repulsive and uncomfortable encounter allows us to come face-to-face with an image that is systematically fossilized by the categorizations of race, sexuality, and gender and locked by consumerism. Interestingly, the material items on León's body are reminiscent of the outfit worn by Sun when playing Yolanda and the wig used for Smurfette.

León makes visible the hypersexualized image of black women on the stage because the massive production of hip hop music videos naturalizes it. This black female caricature shakes her butt uncontrollably and begins to sing: "I'll be shaking my ass. Do you think I am hot? I'll be shaking my ass. Like what nigga what, what." The song is about this character's life; how even as a young child she was sexually objectified. From fellatio at the age of twelve to an abortion at the age of thirteen, today she is generously paid for her services as "a gangsta bitch, video ho, and a porn star." After "shaking her ass" for a good while, she begins to get tired and realizes that she has lost the attention of the spectators, in this case the ones watching her on stage. She pleads with the spectators to wait a minute as she bends down on all fours and continues to shake her butt. She tries harder but fails to grab the attention of the television spectators. The theatrical spectators, however, remain in their seats, and witness her having a nervous breakdown. She supplicates on all fours: "I thought you loved me. Wait a minute. Do you love me now? I am shaking my...Okay, wait don't leave! Do you love me now? I am shaking my...wait...wait. Do you love me now?" This hysterical moment brings the audience closer to understanding how women, especially black women, function as objects of consumption that increase the market sales of a new hip hop album. León brings the

pornographic caricature onto the theatrical stage as a way of intervening into and refiguring the social scripts and prescriptions of black women as ho, bitches, and pimps in the hip hop scene. León jolts the audience back to her worldview by abruptly coming out of character and angrily pointing to the mistaken path of hip hop. “Hip hop I thought you loved me and you betrayed me,” León angrily declares. So as not to blur the performer and the character, León clearly accentuates the difference between herself and the stereotypical pornographic image.

Much like the way León moves between drastically different identities, Sun, in *La Nubia Latina*, also performs multiple identities. As is the case for León, Sun brings her costumes onto the stage allowing the audience to witness the process of character transformation. After her performative invitation, Sun does a quick on-stage costume change without any significant lighting alterations. She thereby exposes the backstage mechanics to remind the audience that they are witnessing live theatre. Instead of suspending the audience’s disbelief, she shares with them her transformation into a character. In doing so, the costume change becomes part of Sun’s performance narrative, which reveals how she constructs and embodies a social mask that creates an older version of Yolanda. Whereas Sun was initially bare foot and dressed with a black top and black spandex shorts, now she changes into Yolanda, who wears high heeled shoes, a nicely fitted black skirt, and a black long-haired wig.

As Yolanda emerges on stage, the audience hears the lyrics “pa mi tú no eres na’a, tú tienes la bembá colorá” (you are nothing to me, you have thick colored lips) from the popular song “Bembá Colorá” by Celia Cruz (1925-2003), the renowned Afro-Cuban salsa singer. She abruptly hollers for Richie, her boyfriend, to come down and explain

why he has conveniently ignored her phone calls. From the outset the character of Yolanda is a jarring hyper-representation of Latinas. Obsessed with figuring out Richie's whereabouts, Yolanda relies on his attention to feel confident about herself. Like many of the stereotypical images of Latinas, Yolanda projects her body more than her mind. She is not an intellectual but a hot, sexy, boy-crazy, materialistic Latina. She is more concerned about the way she looks and how men are salivating over her than about searching for her inner self.

Although she reiterates that she cannot "find the value within herself" when her boyfriend is constantly neglecting her, she does not realize that the hidden treasure within is her African heritage. She tells us that ever since Richie has been attending a history course, he believes that everyone comes from Africa. Yolanda is so flabbergasted that she immediately responds by stating that she is not an African booty-snatcher. Despite the fact that Richie points out that her eyes, nose, lips, hair, and skin serve as visual markers that can define her racial identity, she does not admit to any African roots. She explains that she is not black but has a cinnamon complexion, and her hair is not kinky but long and wavy. The irony is that Yolanda does not recognize how her hyper-sexuality is similar to the stereotypical image of both Latinas and black women. This moment highlights Yolanda's mistaken understanding about true ethnic difference because she is playing out the stereotypes of black and brown women rather than embodying Latina cultural practices.

In an attempt to "find the value within herself," Yolanda tells us that she participated in a *Ms. Piel y Canela* pageant in Puerto Rico, a beauty contest specifically for women who have cinnamon complexion. Yolanda goes out of her way to clarify that

having cinnamon skin is different from being black. Given that Eurocentrism and whiteness have informed the ways Latinas construct notions of gendered beauty, it is not surprising that Yolanda purposefully dismisses her blackness, which clearly exists within her ethnic family. It is this racist ideology that explains the absence of positive and excess of negative images of blacks and Latinos in the mass mediascape. Yolanda propagates this ideology when she advises her girlfriend to return a pair of overpriced Nike sneakers by using a British accent. Knowing how difficult it is to return used items, Yolanda's strategy is to mimic and perform a kind of whiteness that is often privileged in the U.S. to successfully attain a full refund for the Nike sneakers. Yolanda's recommendation to her girlfriend illustrates how she tries to manipulate a system structured by racial categories. She understands that to navigate the system effectively she must perform identities that, depending on the given moment, can give her some kind of temporary agency. This is her way of getting back at a system that prevents her from gaining mobility or access to better living conditions, education, and professional development.

Interestingly, Yolanda's dismissal of blackness does not necessarily mean that she prefers whiteness to her cinnamon complexion. In fact, she is quick to indict Latino men who date white women. Sun complicates notions of race, gender, and sexuality by having Yolanda instigate a dispute between Pedro and his white girlfriend. Yolanda believes that she can teach Pedro a lesson, that by choosing to date a white woman rather than a Latina, he will be shunned by the community and treated like a traitor. Yolanda pretends that Pedro is her ex-boyfriend and that he missed his son's second birthday. Apparently Yolanda's trick worked because the couple leaves arguing. However, she

realizes that they do remain together and in that respect Yolanda fails miserably. This clearly bothers Yolanda as she tsks and gives them a displeased look from afar. This behavior is a part of her ongoing effort to protect what it means to be Latino.

Interestingly enough, she continues to perpetuate negative stereotypes. After convincing herself that breaking up with Richie is the right decision for her, when he finally comes down to meet her, she goes head over heels over him and decides that “every girl needs a little loving.” Sun leaves the audiences with the disturbing idea that Yolanda believes the hypersexualized stereotypical notions of Latinidad are authentic.

Sun creates other theatrical moments that hyper black identity, which serve to explain how race functions in mass media. In her piece *Insufficient Fare*, Sun demonstrates how race is inscribed on the black body through speech mannerisms and behaviors. Sun finds out that her high school friend Cindy Wong died, but given her hectic schedule she does not have sufficient time to mourn. Although Sun makes it to her various appointments from teaching drama at a school to auditioning for a role, Cindy is clearly on her mind. As she did when playing Smurfette, Sun sets up another metatheatrical moment when we see her audition for the role of Monica. The director tells her that she is playing a black nineteen-year old female with three children. Sun is to imagine that she is speaking to a detective who is interviewing teen mothers like Monica to find out if she or any other mothers have been sterilized in exchange for receiving cocaine. While the director is giving Sun these notes, she interrupts and starts calling out Cindy’s name and complains about the stereotypical role she is auditioning for. In this way, the audience can listen in on her inner conversation without actually disturbing the dialogue that she is having with the director. She takes on the role of

Monica when she leans back into her chair in a relaxed manner and says her lines, but tenses up in anger and sadness when she is herself.

Curiously, the director asks Sun to tone it down because since this is a TV role she does not have to work as hard to perform blackness. Although there is no apparent indication that Sun hyper-racializes Monica, the director interprets it that way.

According to the director, Sun was being too black for the part of Monica and thus, she must tone down the speech mannerisms and inflections that carry an urban flavor, which in the minds of many are associated with blacks. Sun reveals that while television naturalizes the performance of racial identities, theater can make it transparent. There is no need to perform blackness on TV because this medium is assumed to portray reality. The visual racial markers will speak for themselves, whereas in theater performers and their speaking bodies have to rehearse how to authentically signify race.

Although these characters are caricatures of Latinas and black women, they are useful because they allow us to see how the dominant culture packages stereotypical images. Sun and León's performance of these stereotyped ethno-racial subjects creates a critical site to analyze how the construction of race stems from capitalism. Yolanda and Lady Triple X come from a world that is feeding them images of who they are and who they are not; they are embodied products of these racial stereotypes. They reveal that the source producing these stereotypical racial constructions are primarily found within the systems of consumerism. Like the porno-star, Yolanda buys into the suede mini-skirts and velour tops and proudly flaunts them. In displaying the clothes they own, they construct their identity around the performance of material capital.²⁵⁰ This provocative

²⁵⁰ Annette J. Saddik, "Rap's Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity

kind of fashion style redresses their identity as a hypersexualized Latina or black woman. They co-opt these material markers as part of their truth identity and then reassert them as authentically Latina or black. Though the identity that Yolanda and Lady Triple X performs is one they perceive as a real, Sun and León present these characters as constructed personages imprinted in memory by the storehouse of consumable stereotypical representations.

As authentically Latina, Yolanda, in spite of her resistance, cannot separate her ethnic identity from her racial and gendered identity. Sun re-signifies blackness back onto the body given her own identity as an Afro-Latina. She reroutes us to the beginning of the vignette, which opens with Celia Cruz singing, “pa mi tú no eres na’a, tú tienes la bamba colorá” (you are nothing to me, you have thick colored lips). Although “Bamba Colorá” plays for a short time, for an audience member familiar with the storyline of the song, the message resonated throughout the scene. As Cruz sings about the life of four doves in a birdcage striving for freedom, she intermittently interjects the lyrics “bamba colorá, colorá.” In doing so, she accentuates the need to recover the African history of Latinos, and more specifically of Cubans, precisely because of people like Yolanda, who deny their black lineage. Unlike the doves that eventually attain liberation, she is caught in a web of essentialist notions of *Latinidad* that completely incarcerate her and rob her of any potential sites of agency.

Those who are Spanish challenged might miss the nuances in the resonances

on the American Stage,” *The Drama Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 110-127. Saddik discusses how rappers understand that their role in the system of commodity capitalism is a theatrical mode of either performing, playing, and/or socially critiquing their worldview rather than just a mimetic performance of it. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Ice Cube explains what it means to be American by “locat[ing] the foundation of American identity not only in what is conventionally seen as natural and healthy competition within the system of commodity capitalism, but in the proud *display* of one’s capital—the flaunting or performance of ownership, wealth, and material success” (110).

among the song, the performer, and the character of Yolanda. The song in itself is a particularly interesting site of investigation as it foreshadows how throughout history dominant social orders institutionalize the erasure of race. Coincidentally, Yolanda is a product of this racial censoring project. While Yolanda is busy dismissing her black identity throughout the scene, Cruz reinserts her “bemba colorá, colorá,” her thick colored lips onto her body, and Sun’s body functions as the site for asserting these visual racial markers. The juxtaposition of Sun’s black body with the hypersexualized persona of Yolanda along with Cruz’s inclusive vision of African roots sets the stage for understanding Latino identity.

If individuals have been marginalized because of their ethnicity, race, and gender, then one way to survive these systems of discrimination, as Sun and León demonstrate, is to create representations that exceed social norms. In combating others treating her as black, Yolanda over asserts her Latinidad by authenticating hypersexualized images created by the media industry with her body. As such, Sun performs these over the top representations of Latinidad as survival strategies used to inform others of what they are and what they are not. As a member in the audience, I learn that Sun is not one identity at the expense of the other, but simultaneously both.

Final Acts: Utopian Performatives and Building Coalitions

This chapter demonstrates how Sun and León resist any pure or monolithic concept of Latina identity. They create a hybrid sense of self and community by searching and finding alternative geographical, cultural, and spiritual spaces and places that they can call home. Their works are interventions exploding the black and white

binary and essentialist notions of racial hierarchy. Sun and León end their performances with scenes filled with hope for the future. In the final vignette of *La Nubia Latina*, Sun places the blue mask on the stage and exits, leaving the audience to let go of social masks that wear away vital elements of humanness. What performances are to be experienced if not for the person wearing the mask? What performance can the mask itself perform? Without Sun's corporality and the experiences remembered by the body, the prop on stage is simply a blue mask. It is the body that brings social, cultural, and political meaning to these blue, white, brown, and black masks.

While I have examined how social masks play out on the theatrical stage, there are other interpretations to consider. How do social mask performances impact the production and circulation of Sun's and León's work? Although Sun's acclaimed one-woman shows, *Blues for a Gray Sun* (2004) and *No Child...* (2006), deserve critical attention, I focus on her earlier pieces such as *La Nubia Latina* (1996) and *Mezclasita/Mixtures: An Evening of Three Solo Works* (2001) because they offer a palette of scenarios which examines how race and ethnicity function within the Latino community. Whereas her first two pieces, *La Nubia Latina* and *Mezclasita/Mixtures*, confront race head-on by acting out a gamut of black and Latina identities, in the later pieces she takes on a more crab-like, sideways approach and primarily deals with issues of death and education. In *No Child...* Sun portrays the state of New York City's public education through the eyes of teachers, parents, administrators, janitors, security guards, but most importantly the students with whom she worked as a drama instructor at Malcolm X High School in the Bronx. While Sun does not explicitly foreground race, this successful solo performance reveals how the New York City public system of

education forgets the needs of students, the great bulk of whom are students of color. The experiences, interactions, and relationships of the various characters portrayed by Sun map out the complex cultural, generational, and economic differences confronted by students and teachers.

Perhaps another way of understanding Sun's professional trajectory is to consider the spaces in which her pieces were produced. The production space can provide a lens to read Sun's work as it shapes the performance and the theatrical experience. *No Child...* has become a major success. It ran at the Barrow Street Theatre between July 2006 and June 2007 and will be touring throughout the nation to venues such as the Lookingglass Theatre Company and the American Repertory Theatre Company. The show originally transferred from an earlier hit Off-Broadway run on May 10 through June 18, 2006 at Theatre Row's Beckett Theatre. In addition, *No Child...* is the recipient of the 2007 Obie Award, 2007 Lucille Lortel Award, among others. Since the show taps into the controversial issue of the education system in New York City, it draws a variety of people, from teachers to students to community organizers. However, because the price of the performance is forty dollars, the standard fee for an off-Broadway show, it is less accessible and appealing to the unconventional theatergoer. The price of the show as well as the non-explicit racial marker in the title, I believe, drastically shapes the audience make-up.

The audience from the outset, at least in the production that I attended on September 23, 2006, was still generally white and middle-class, however there was a drastic difference in the age range. It was refreshing to see groups of teenagers and parents with pre-teens in the audience. Since this piece deals directly with the

transformation of high school students who learn to own their voices and experiences, Sun cultivates her young audience by holding matinee performances every Wednesday and post-performance discussions moderated by someone else. Interestingly, Sun observes that most students who come to these matinees are black and Latino students. Their response is usually great admiration and gratitude that an Afro-Latina is on stage representing them. Sun recalls that there was one instance when a student was so touched by her performance that while thanking her for representing youth, she could not refrain from crying. This particular student was moved because rather than seeing herself as a criminal or savage as created by mass media, she was able to see herself as a human again.

Sun's commitment to the Afro-Latino community is also evident when INTAR, a theater organization dedicated to nurturing the professional development of Latino Theater and actively cultivating a Latino audience, produced *Gray Sun* under the direction of Louis Moreno.²⁵¹ Michael Garces, then artistic director of INTAR's New Works Lab, nominated Sun for the Princess Grace Foundation in 2004. During the run of the show from November 24 to December 12, 2004, INTAR charged only twenty dollars, which is quite inexpensive compared to other shows in mid-Manhattan. Although the title of the play does not indicate that Sun is dealing with issues of race and ethnicity, by virtue of performing at INTAR and given her own Afro-Latino identity, these topics are inherently embedded in her solo production. Since these production spaces have divergent goals, the audience demographics of INTAR and Barrow Street Theatre differ.

²⁵¹ The title of this piece was originally *Gray Sun* but at the request of Eduardo Machado, the artistic director of INTAR, Sun changed the title to *Blues for Gray Sun*. From here on, I will use *Gray Sun* out of integrity to the playwright's work and in keeping with shorthand usage of titles.

INTAR is committed to bringing the work of Latino theater professionals to the public, while Barrow Street Theater is an off-Broadway venue producing a wide range of contemporary plays year round. The evolution of Sun's work from culturally specific to more general issues is a curious site of interrogation. Given the changing times, female artists of color like Sun must create performance strategies that will provide some mobility in the strata of theater and performance. The evolution of Sun's work focuses less on the racial differences and more on universal issues, like the education crisis in America. However, when paying close attention to the production and circulation of her work, it is clearly that she is commenting, negotiating, and opening avenues to discuss issues of race, culture, and class.

Interestingly, the production space that attracted a more ethnically and racially diverse audience was the performance of *La Nubia Latina* at Henry Street Settlement's Experimental Theater and *Mezclasita/Mixtures* at New WORLD Theater. *La Nubia Latina* was Sun's first one-woman show created in a senior year playwriting class at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and produced on April 25 and 26, 1996 at their Other Room Theatre. The following year it was at Duo Theater and later produced at Henry Street Settlement's Experimental Theatre as part of the Women of Color Festival in the spring of 1999. Both intimate black box theatres are located in the heart of the Lower East Side, renowned for its multicultural population in spite of the growing displacement caused by gentrification. Although mainstream theatre now recognizes Sun's work, she has not left behind her political agenda. In *No Child...*, the audience, despite the popular venue and location, leaves with a shocking awareness of how the American education system is dysfunctional precisely because educators have

not seriously considered how race, culture, and class impact a student's learning process.

While Sun has gained acclaimed recognition, León remains in the grassroots level. I came to know the work of Sun and León at the NYC Hip Hop Theater Festival. Sun's *Black and Blue* was presented in the festival in 2000 and León was part of the event in 2002 and also toured around the country with the Hip Hop Theater All Stars. The Hip Hop Theater Festival, which was founded by Danny Hoch, Kamilah Forbes, and Clyde Valentin in New York in 2000 and then expanded to Washington D.C. in 2001 and San Francisco in 2003, showcases solo and ensemble performance, including dance, performance poetry, and live music sampling that integrate a hip hop aesthetic. The festival also holds workshops that experiment with the various forms of hip hop and panels discussing the history, evolution, and future development of hip hop.

In its seventh year, this festival draws the attention of a younger crowd, ranging from teenagers to adults in their late thirties. The festival is popular among youth, especially youth of color, precisely because it makes tickets available to students for five dollars, which is more inexpensive than going to a movie theater. Generating such a shift in the demographics of the audience probes the questions: who is theater accessible to and how is theater making this art form accessible to the general public? Knowing that the future of hip hop is in the hands of the next generation, León uses the elements of hip hop to relay messages targeted to the young participants of the hip hop culture. She also reaches high school and college student by conducting workshops and teaching courses on spoken word, poetry, and hip hop theatre at institutions such as Stanford University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, La Peña, and the New York Theater Workshop. Her work in the academic sphere is about making political interventions that

push youth to act, react, and mobilize. She is committed to the word, the hip hop generation, and feminism.²⁵²

Although *Thieves in the Temple* was successful in venues on the East and West Coast, it has been picked up by only two organizations. A full-stage version was produced by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and the Oakland Box Theatre in Oakland, California March 2004. Her work continues to reach many audiences as she decided to edit the video documentation of *Thieves in the Temple* and recently released the movie in March 2007. The distribution of her work is an important aspect of this performance piece as it lives on not solely in the theatre but in the classroom as well as other educational venues.

An educational setting for *Thieves in the Temple* is quite appropriate as León resists various social masks that mass media encourage youth to wear. Interestingly, she ends *Thieves in the Temple* by hammering away at the hyper-sexualized masks of women and envisioning a hip hop world led by women in “Vision/If Women Ran Hip Hop.” Towards the end of this piece León brings to fruition the part of herself that has been in the making for over a decade, since she was a teenager. Throughout her performance we come to learn of the factors preventing her from pursuing her dream of becoming an emcee. First, the locality of hip hop was centered on the East coast and given that she was from Berkeley, it was difficult for her to tap into the resources that would allow her to thrive. Secondly, she was never encouraged to pursue such a dream mainly because emceeing was not perceived as a profession. This experience is a byproduct of an era

²⁵² Aya de León, phone interview by author, May 7, 2007.

that did not even perceive hip hop as an art form.²⁵³ Thirdly, since hip hop is a predominantly male-centered culture, as a woman León did not have access to avenues that are often available for aspiring male emcees. In addition to showing how hip hop has evolved, León presents focuses on the fight against the misogynistic dimension of hip hop.

Her prescient words make it possible for the audience to imagine, if only for a moment, what this feminist world would look like. I present this poem in its entirety to engage readers with the text as well as to suggest how the poem can create utopian performatives through live enactments. With a syncopated beat in the background León raps and envisions a hip hop world led and governed by women.

If women ran hip hop
 the beats & rhymes would be just as dope,
 but there would never be a bad vibe when you walked in
 the place
 & the clubs would be beautiful & smell good
 & the music would never be too loud
 but there would be free earplugs available anyway
 & venues would have skylights and phat patios
 and shows would run all day not just late at night
 cuz If women ran hip hop we would have nothing to be
 ashamed of
 & there would be an African marketplace
 with big shrines to Oya
 Yoruba deity of the female warrior & entrepreneur
 and women would sell & barter & prosper

If women ran hip hop
 there would never be shootings
 cuz there would be onsite conflict mediators
 to help you work through all that negativity & hostility
 & there would also be free condoms & dental dams

²⁵³ In “Towards a Hip Hop Aesthetic: A Manifesto for the Hip Hop Arts Movement,” Danny Hoch, as the artistic director of the NYC Hip Hop Theater Festival, addresses the challenges in “defin[ing] not what Hip Hop means as a culture, but what Hip Hop means as art—in fact, to make the case that Hip Hop is art” *American Theatre* (December 2004): 1.

in pretty baskets throughout the place
 as well as counselors to help you make the decision:
 do I really want to have sex with him or her?
 & there would be safe, reliable, low-cost 24 hour
 transportation home
 & every venue would have on-site quality child care
 where kids could sleep while grown folks danced
 & all shows would be all ages cause the economy of hip
 hop wouldn't revolve around the sale of alcohol

If women ran hip hop
 same gender-loving & transgender emcees
 would be proportionally represented
 & get mad love from everybody
 & females would dress sexy if we wanted to celebrate our bodies
 but it wouldn't be that important because
 everyone would be paying attention to our minds, anyway

If women ran hip hop
 men would be relieved because it's so draining
 to keep up that front of toughness & power & control 24-7

If women ran hip hop
 the only folks dancing in cages would be dogs & cats
 from the local animal shelter
 excited about getting adopted by pet lovers in the crowd

If women ran hip hop
 there would be social workers available to refer
 gangsta rappers
 to 21-day detox programs where they could get clean & sober
 from violence & misogyny

but best of all, if women ran hip hop
 we would have the dopest female emcees ever
 because all the young women afraid to bust
 would unleash their brilliance on the world

cause it's the time for the reclaiming of hip hop²⁵⁴

Because León begins each stanza with "If women ran hip hop," she reminds the audience

²⁵⁴ Aya de León, *Thieves in the Temple*, of *Thieves in the Temple*, 3rd Annual New York Hip Hop Theater Festival, PS 122, Summer of 2002 and VHS, Afro Solo Theater Festival in San Francisco, CA, Summer of 2001. In this context "dope" means great, cool, or awesome. "Phat" also means "dope."

that there exists an absence of women in leadership roles in hip hop and urges them to imagine a world that does not exist in the present moment. It is in the act of imagining that utopian performatives come to exist. What is ironic about her poem is that while her vision creates alternative possibilities, it is built on essentialist notions of women. While on the one hand she presents and interrupts stereotypes that portray women as sexual objects, on the other hand, she makes women out to always engender beautiful, joyous, peaceful, loving environments. If hip hop were left in the hands of women, the world would be less violent and more oriented to conflict resolution, less competitive and more about sharing, less about consumption and money and more about bartering, less about the self and more about the collective. Although such a portrait creates a utopian vision, it nonetheless builds upon essentialist ideas that women are pacifist and always happy-go-lucky. León illustrates how she use stereotypes and essentialism as performance tools that get to the heart and feeling of the problem.

After her performance of “Vision/If Women Ran Hip Hop,” León breaks into a rap, ranking on hip hop emcees and rappers who spend their time desiring women’s bodies, and shows how she can intellectually and lyrically outwit them. The performance style of rapping incorporates the audience as a character who asks León if she ever thought of being an emcee. She politely states that she can’t be an emcee; she is thirty-six, she is from Berkeley, North Berkeley at that. Persisting at this, León tells the audience that she will think about it, better yet she will meditate on it. She sits down crossed-legged and closes her eyes and begins to sing meditatively “Mos Def said hip hop is going where we go. I am going somewhere positive. I will take hip hop with me.” With her power fist up the lights fade to black.

In this moment of inner quest, León transforms the misogynistic attitudes of hip hop culture and creates a discourse of hope and resistance. Both Sun and León tackle and manipulate stereotypical images to create utopian performatives, alternative possibilities for marginalized identities and communities. These stereotypes are etched so deeply that Sun and León demonstrate how as consumers in a capitalistic society we participate in wearing various racial, ethnic, and gender masks that shape our sense of belonging. Their performances encourage the audience to intervene in creating and fossilizing stereotypical social masks by looking into the inner desires and passions of the self and the communities of which they are part of.

Conclusion: “We Are All Honorary Nuyoricans”

After performing a series of poems at Berkshire Community College to an intimate audience of approximately twenty students, mostly young white women, Sandra María Esteves remained on stage for a question and answer session. Among the people in the audience was Magdalena Gómez, a renowned Nuyorican poet, performer, and contemporary of Esteves. Interestingly, someone in the audience asked, “What does the term “Nuyorican” mean?” The answer to this historical and culturally loaded question has been in the works since the early seventies. The organization of events such as the “Neorican Seminar” (1972) and the establishment of venues such as the Young Lords Party (1969), the Nuyorican Poets Cafe (1975), and New Rican Village (1976), among others, is evidence that making meaning of the term Nuyorican was and continues to be an important process of developing selfhood and peoplehood.

Esteves and Gómez have been involved in defining the term Nuyorican for over thirty-five years. They offer great insight into the process. Gómez reminded the audience that identifying as a Nuyorican during the seventies gave her a place to belong.²⁵⁵ Although she was born in New York, she also identified as Puerto Rican. The term firmly anchored her in Puerto Rico and prevented her from succumbing to cultural amnesia. She came to understand her identity by way of belonging to a community that took pride in its ancestral roots, expressed through music, dance, art, poetry, and theatre. Just as Gómez describes how in the seventies the term “Nuyorican” provided strong

²⁵⁵ Louis Reyes Rivera cites Magdalena Gómez as part of the Nuyorican Poets Vanguard and although she received guidance from Rivera, Esteves and Pietri, she sees herself as an outsider of any poetry “movement” (www.amaxonica.com).

cultural connections, Miguel Algarín explains its cultural and political significance in *Aloud* (1994). He defines Nuyorican as: “Originally Puerto Rican epithet for those of Puerto Rican heritage born in New York: their Spanish was different (Spanglish), their way of dress and look were different. They were a stateless people (like most U.S. poets) until the Cafe became their homeland.”²⁵⁶ Although the definition indicates that Algarín conceived identity through demographics, this was not what occurred. The Cafe is a space that literally and metaphorically inhabits and transmits a performative history and tradition. As such, it is through the embodiment of art that one can understand Nuyorican identities. The Cafe became a haven for artists of all kinds in the seventies, so much so that in the nineties it became the epicenter of the spoken word movement. For the past thirty years the Cafe has opened avenues for cross-cultural dialogue. It advocates and puts into practice intercultural exchanges with poets from across the nation and world. For this reason, one of the alternative definitions of Nuyorican is “a denizen of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.”²⁵⁷ That is, multi-ethnic and international participants of the Cafe are also referred to as Nuyorican not so much because of their ethnic roots but because they are makers and creators of the Nuyorican aesthetic.

While the Cafe makes a clear commitment to racial and ethnic diversity, there exists a troubling history of gender and sexual politics. Women like Esteves and Gómez confronted backstage machismo and backstabbing, which made it difficult for them and other *poetas* to thrive in the Nuyorican scene of the seventies. They were forced “[to

²⁵⁶ Algarín, “Introduction,” *Nuyorican Aloud*, 5.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

make] familia from scratch,” as Moraga would say.²⁵⁸ Like Chicana lesbians, Nuyoriqueñas had to find and create their own communities even when there were places, like the Cafe, that took pride in their cultural heritage. Given this gendered history of discrimination, Esteves utilized, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as, a universalizing model of identity rather than a minoritizing model of identity.²⁵⁹ In the question and answer session Esteves moved away from any cultural and geographic specificity in defining Nuyorican; place, date, and creators of the term are not important to her. Instead of turning to the Cafe or to Algarín’s definition of Nuyorican, she took it upon herself to endow everyone in the audience as an honorary Nuyorican. Esteves reconceptualized not only the term Nuyorican but also how we imagine building community.

Esteves’s words “You are all honorary Nuyoricans,” were met with uneasy laughter, followed by a sharp silence. It is this uncomfortable silence, I believe, that generates a productive space of reflection, dialogue, and interaction. If I, as a Latina, am hesitant to assume such identification, it must be extremely difficult for non-Latinos to do the same. Ethnicity and race complicate the process of claiming a Nuyorican identity, precisely because members in the audience are not living in the skin of Nuyoricans. Clearly Esteves understands this, because her performance poetry is based on her experiences, but her point here is that the term has forced people to function in a “them and me” mindset. This is about them and not about me. “If I am not Nuyorican then what and where is my place in this discourse of identity?”

²⁵⁸ Cherríe Moraga, *Giving Up the Ghost, Heroes and Saints and Other Plays* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: West End Press, 1994), 35.

²⁵⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

By making everyone an honorary Nuyorican, Esteves challenges this minoritizing approach and implicates the audience in the meaning of Nuyorican. There are no set parameters for this elastic term. Rather than drawing ethnic boundaries between and among other culturally diverse groups, Esteves uses “Nuyorican” to encourage others to honor the social and cultural value of each person’s experiences. She disrupts notions of Nuyorican authenticity by focusing less on ethnic heritage, mastery of language, or cultural knowledge, and by paying more attention to an individual’s willingness to understand how his/her cultural and social background shapes her experiences and the experiences of others. In other words, she is more concerned with people who are interested and invested in voicing and advocating for issues and experiences of marginalized people. That is, perhaps, more important than the ancestral connections or racial or ethnic categories that authenticate Nuyorican identity. It is with this in mind that she views the term not as a label of identification but as a political term inciting interactive dialogues and contributing to the production and circulation of cultural knowledge.

In this examination of Nuyorican female performances, be they poetic, theatrical, or performative, I have worked from the same premise as Esteves. Although “Nuyorican” emerges as a way to bear witness and give voice to the experiences of alienation and discrimination of a culturally specific group of people, the term transcends its locality and takes on a position of experiential intersectionality. I posit that the production of identity and community through poetry and performance creates a universalizing model that is more effective than the minoritizing model of identification of the seventies, which centered on cultural nationalism. For Nuyorican practitioners like

Esteves, Gómez, La Bruja, Mariposa, Sun, and Leon, the process of creating poetry on the page and then bringing to life on the stage expresses as well as produces their identity as *Nuyoriqueñas*. This move from a minoritizing model of identity to a universalizing one is a more effective community-building performance strategies that move the audience to feel and long for new possibilities.

These female performers stand between hip hop, theatre and poetry, and cross-pollinate these artistic genres to create temporal, political, and feminist interfaces of protest and resistance. More importantly, this hybrid performance strategy allows artists to further create and develop female communal networks, in which women, rather than men establish community. In the Nuyorican Movement and many other movements of the sixties and seventies, women were invisible in the poetry and theatre scene. Their work therefore emphasizes on overcoming gender-based obstacles. In part, the focus here is to recover the archive of poetic, theatrical, and performative modes of communal- and self-expression of *Nuyoriqueñas* who dare to speak the unspeakable truths about the history of gender oppression.

As feminist solo performers, they do not speak of community in one voice but encompass a polyvocal spectrum of individual experiences. These performers engage in a discovery of themselves with a concern for and connection with others. That is to say, their commitment to working through personal problems translates into a political act. Esteves, La Bruja, Mariposa, and Leon raise and address issues by re-enacting moments of trauma and conflict, confronting them with the audience, and fostering alternative restorative avenues that seek to repair, reconcile, and rebuild relationships. Take, for instance, Leon's battle with the evolution of hip hop and the players who endorse

stereotypical images of hyper-racialized and hyper-sexualized black women. She reveals how these caricatures have informed her understanding of race and gender. As audience, we are confronted with the phenomenon of young women consuming these stereotypical images and the devastating reality of living such a life. In this way, the performers examined in this project make visible the strong yet permeable interconnections between personal and political.

This project maps a genealogy of performances before, during, and after the Nuyorican Movement in which the making of community was of utmost importance. I, too, use community in the most flexible manner. It is not solely a space or a place but also about the visibility and empowerment of female performers who forge avenues of affect in hope of creating alliances among members of various groups. In my eyes, what makes these performers and their work feminist is that they question who participates in the communities and who is valued. They capture and reincarnate the stories of women who sacrificed much in the interest of familial and civic communities. In the performance pieces examined, daughters, mothers, and grandmothers are represented as central figures in holding up the familial circle, whether in domestic or public space. Here, community is strongly linked to a feminist discourse of rejecting the autonomous individualism and adhering to a more socialist approach to the self as a collective, interdependent, and cooperative body.

In identifying the audience as Nuyorican, Esteves radically transforms my relationship to the field of theatre, performance, Latina/o, and women's studies. She transforms the term "Nuyorican" in substantially feminist ways. Instead of viewing the term "Nuyorican" as simply a label of cultural identification, Esteves's invitation to all is

about establishing a dynamic relationship of mutuality. Theatre and performance are exemplary sites for imagining community because they call for the gathering of diverse groups of people with common interests. The audience, at the least, has an investment in the event. Consciously or unconsciously, they participate in a community of spectatorship, albeit, a temporal one. Once the performance is over, the audience will go their separate ways and may never make this community again. Esteves reconceives this spectatorial paradigm by injecting a political agenda that obligates the audience to participate in a community that continues to exist outside the theater. Members of the audience are not simply viewers but activists who are asked to listen, share, respond, and react to embodied testimonies. Such an engagement sets in motion the vision of the radical self as part of a larger collective social body.

My commitment to specialize in the field of theatre, performance, Latino, and women's studies then, is not so much about the scholarship itself, but about thinking of ways to move the scholarship into forms of activism that are integrated into the rituals of everyday life. Moving in the direction of what Susan Gubar calls "feminism inside and out," this project engages with a theoretical and analytical framework that is as much infused by scholarship as it is by quotidian practices.²⁶⁰ What I argue for is the bridging between performative expression of identity from inside (experiential knowledge) and outside (institutional knowledge) to better understand the community not as a singular voice but as a model of multiple, dynamic social relations. This community is essential to the survival of feminism, and critical race studies, theatre studies, and performance

²⁶⁰ Susan Gubar urges scholars to "consider again the urgency of tackling the tribulations contemporary women encounter daily: domestic and sexual violence; the nonexistence or erosion of civil, reproductive, and educational rights globally; the war-related calamities and casualties suffered by civilians, journalists, philanthropic volunteers, soldiers, and their families" (1716). "Feminism Inside Out," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 121, no. 5 (October 2000): 1711-16.

studies.

Approaching community as a model of social relations ventures into imagining and creating social kinships, literary affinities, and cultural affiliations and offers a greater understanding of how artists and activists develop a Nuyorican aesthetic. They were working from the experiences of alienation and discrimination but were transforming that lived and embodied history into performative modes (protest, poetry, theatre, dance, and visual art). A Nuyorican aesthetic makes visible the passageways that can potentially gather, connect, and incite people towards a greater social consciousness. It is from this critical base that a Nuyorican aesthetic resonates today in literature, art, the streets, the theatres, and the living body. Indeed, from the living room of Miguel Algarín to the Nuyorican Poets Cafe to the solo performances of Nuyorican women at the NYC Hip Hop Theater Festival, the creation and construction of physical spaces that nurture and sustain a Nuyorican collective provides a historical context to the Nuyorican Movement and the subsequent social, cultural, political, and artistic acts that follow. Pedro Pietri was correct in stating that the seventies was only “The First Draft Nuyorican Poetry Movement.” Truly, there are many more drafts to come.

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