

On *Out of Focus Nuyoricans, Noricuas, and Performance Identities*

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Nuyorican poetics have long been bound up in questions of visibility and invisibility. This is partly a sociological matter reflective of the reality of a New York Puerto Rican community that has historically struggled for (counter)institutional visibility even against the backdrop of a variety of hyper-visible and powerful yet stereotype-defining media representations, from the punchlines of *West Side Story* to the ethnographic solemnity of Oscar Lewis's *La Vida; A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (1966). In Miguel Algarín's foundational formulation of the Nuyorican aesthetic, performed poetry (and the various other kinds of spoken word and performance that flourished at his Nuyorican Poets Cafe) emerges as an alternative to the impasses of communal visibility/invisibility; his essay "Nuyorican Literature" (1981) theorizes Nuyorican poetics in terms of communal performance, of reading aloud, of the public sharing of poetry as a means of collective healing.¹

As a founding Nuyorican poet and author of the Nuyorican movement's foundational epic "Puerto Rican Obituary" (1969), Pedro Pietri (1943-2004) shared Algarín's community- and performance-centric conception of poetry, but Pietri's own poetics also opened up towards conceptualist, experimental, and

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¹ One might further read this performance-centered conception of Nuyorican identity in light of Algarín's account of how he came to embrace the term. In an interview with Carmen Dolores Hernández, Algarín recounts how the term began as an epithet hurled at him by locals while visiting the island of Puerto Rico in the early 1970s; a "Nuyorican" in this sense was a second class (inauthentic, uneducated, deterritorialized) Puerto Rican. In this light, the performance poetry that emerged out of his Nuyorican Poets Café a few years later would serve as a revisionist speech act, refashioning the island Puerto Rican's insult into a self-reflexive diasporic cultural identity that was unabashedly outlaw and cosmopolitan and, like poetry itself, defined only provisionally, in its unmanageable circulation.

deterritorialized horizons; as Israel Reyes suggests, Pietri's is an antifoundationalist (Reyes 128) poetics that locates identity not in the discreet confines of Puerto Rico or the New York Puerto Rican barrio but in and across a range of eccentric textual (and, I would, add, vocal and corporeal) practice. Much of Pietri's conceptual work engaged with questions of visibility/invisibility: from his use performance props such as begging cup that reads "Help me I can see" to textual experiments like *Invisible Poetry* (1979), a chapbook consisting entirely of blank pages, to the dada-surreal and metaphysical charge of such later works as *Lost in the Museum of Natural History* (1980) and *Traffic Violations* (1983). This essay considers a later project, Pietri and visual artist Adál Maldonado's web installation *ELPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* (1994), as both extending and complicating Algarín's theorization of Nuyorican as a performance identity. Pietri and Maldonado's project, while perfectly attuned to the deterritorialized coordinates of cyberspace, also posits Nuyorican identity as blurry (by turns visible and invisible, readable and illegible). Since these are, as the title of Maldonado's photo exhibit puts it, "Out of Focus Nuyoricans," identity is only legible in performance, in a network of art and poetry actions that underscore the provisionality of identity. The last part of this essay reflects on my own attempts to work through a New York Puerto Rican "performance identity" in the context of *Noricua*, an ongoing performance and multimedia collaboration with poet/performer Edwin Torres, curator/conceptualist Libertad Guerra, and musician/producer Monxo López. Can performance identities link poetry and art worlds, from the 1970s Lower East Side to the South Bronx of the present to cyberspace, and how do changing social, aesthetic, and technological contexts impact the valences of these performances?

One reason I am drawn to the *Embassy.org* project is its historical and conceptual sedimentation. Maldonado and Pietri's collaboration dates back to their involvement in the New Rican Village, a Lower East Side club and performance space founded in 1976 by community activist and former Young Lords Party member Eddie Figueroa.² Whereas the Nuyorican Poets Cafe

² The Young Lords Party was the New York offshoot of the Young Lords Organization, which began as a Puerto Rican gang in 1960s Chicago. Despite its militant politics, some of its community initiatives, such as its famed "Garbage Offensive" had a distinctly performative dimension, and Pietri performed "Puerto Rican Obituary" at Young Lords events long before its publication in book form in 1973. By the mid-1970s, FBI persecution and internal divisions had diluted the group. Still, Algarín's Nuyorican Poets Cafe and Figueroa's New Rican Village can be seen as attempts to meld the communal, performative politics of the Young Lords with a downtown art sensibility. For more on the Young Lords, see Meléndez. For the significance of the Young Lords to the original Nuyorican poets, see Algarín's introduction to the 1975 *Nuyorican Poetry*

focused on poetry and independent theater, the New Rican Village emphasized live music, especially Latin jazz (interestingly, the locale would go on to become the famed postpunk dancehall The Pyramid Club), and was buoyed by Figueroa's utopian sensibility, a contrast to Algarín's far more pragmatic brand of cultural politics. It was Figueroa who coined the idea of a Puerto Rican Embassy as a counterinstitutional and counterpolitical space for what he called the "Spirit Republic" of Puerto Rico, a translocal and non-juridical utopian space that cut across the upheavals of colonialism and diaspora. As Ed Morales has noted, in the early 1990s, after the demise of the New Rican Village, Figueroa sought a physical space for his Embassy, yet it has been online, as a multimedia installation and archive of Maldonado and Pietri's daring works, that the Embassy has survived. *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* collects assorted paraphernalia from the Embassy project, some of which had been displayed at museums and gallery and community spaces throughout the years, from Maldonado's Embassy passports to a Pietri manifesto, alongside Pietri's "Spanglish National Anthem" and images from Maldonado's "Out of Focus Nuyoricans" photo exhibit. Despite its relatively modest size, the site's archival importance should not be underestimated; archival documentation of poetic actions from the New Rican Village era (or even of the physical space itself) is quite scarce, and the contributions of the Nuyorican poets to the downtown/Lower East Side poetry scene (not to mention to postwar U.S. poetry more generally) are often minimized, when not occluded altogether. In this context, *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org*, for all its concept-heavy problematizing of visibility politics, also serves a conservative purpose, making visible the art and poetry actions of two key innovators (Pietri and Maldonado) whose work is intent on decoupling Nuyorican cultural politics from traditional politics of "ethnic" or minority representation.

In my attempt to think beyond visibility politics, I am following performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan's critique of how both political progressives and the avant-gardes equate visibility with empowerment. I will not expand on my reading of Phelan here, as I do so in my book on Nuyorican poetry; suffice it to say that I value not only Phelan's insistence on the potential value of a poetics/politics of disappearance, but also her insight that performance might help us "to learn to value what is lost, to learn not the meaning but the value of what cannot be reproduced or seen (again)" (152). While the documents on *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* can be viewed over and over again, the poetry and performance actions that inspired it, like the New Rican Village itself, are mostly lost to history; in this sense the site functions as both archive and performance (in Phelan's sense): it makes visible but it also haunted by the ghosts of poetics past, by a "spirit" (in the sense of Figueroa's "Spirit Republic") that is perhaps

anthology. For a general reference, see Ed Morales's excellent contextualizing of the Young Lords within the Nuyorican movement.

the ultimate coordinate of a performance identity. The very form of the project, then, embodies a tension (it is performance, it is archive) that is at the heart of Pietri and Maldonado's out of focus aesthetic.

I would like to now turn my attention to a close reading of the website, but first I want to suggest how the visibility/invisibility framework I am proposing can help us rethink the genealogies of "downtown" poetry since the 1960s. A book such as Daniel Kane's *All Poets Welcome* helps us see the Lower East Side in the 1960s and beyond not merely as a backdrop for a variety of innovative American poetries, but as a poetic agent in itself. In Kane's perceptive reading the idea of a poetry "scene" becomes a site where alternative poetics are possible; the scene exceeds the physical space of the Lower East Side and extends to its alternative practices (what, following Charles Bernstein, we might call its "provisional institutions"): little magazines, reading series and open mics, and alternative institutions such as the Poetry Project and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.

As an alternative to Kane's inclusive and vitalistic conception of the Lower East Side scene, we might consider Lorenzo Thomas's theorization of how the Umbra poets occupied the same Lower East Side spaces that Kane describes while remaining connected to a decentered "shadow world" of scenes and spaces spread throughout New York City and beyond and representing a breadth of black poetics and politics.³ Playing with the meaning of Umbra ("shadow") allows Thomas to evoke how the Umbra poets sustained a high "literary" project while nurturing their poetics with a range of aesthetic and political influences and affinities, from T.S. Eliot to John Oliver Killens. Within this shadow world, Thomas mentions Puerto Rico-born and Lower East Side-based street poet Jorge Brandon, widely regarded as the grandfather of Nuyorican poetry, noting the spiritual charge of the "ventriloquist poetry" (66) he would recite on Union Square. The difference between the discreet (and well known and comparatively marketable) downtown scene Kane analyzes and the decentered sites of affect and affinity that animate Thomas's "shadow world" (where Brandon and Umbra meet) can be framed in terms of the interplay between visibility and invisibility, one that animates Pietri and Maldonado's work and lends added political and conceptual force to their out of focus and eccentric web archive.

On the homepage of *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org*, the project is defined as one that "represents a new generation of experimental Puerto Rican artists working at the margin of established art movements - who take risks which illuminate contemporary issues, question established cultural aesthetics and challenge

³ Poets associated with Umbra, such as David Henderson and Ishmael Reed, have long been linked to the Nuyorican poets, as friends and collaborators. Both movements remain largely invisible within critical accounts of downtown and innovative American poetry. For a valuable attempt to link Umbra and the Nuyorican poets within an Afro-diasporic framework, see Wilkinson.

dominant political issues.” This connecting of the margins and the experimental to both radical Puerto Rican aesthetics and radical Puerto Rican politics is characteristic of Maldonado’s method and vision. Critic Wilson Valentín-Escobar cleverly describes the scene in and around the New Rican Village in terms of a “bodega surrealism” which he sees as epitomized in the work of Maldonado, and which appears to involve a fusion of experimental art and community politics that blurs the limits of both (he also uses the term “artivism”). Following Valentín-Escobar, we can read *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* as a project that proposes that overcoming political reality (colonialism, oppression, discrimination, etc.) might mean overcoming reality altogether.

At a simplistic level, the out of focus passport photos posted on the site make a blunt satirical point about the political situation of Puerto Rican colonialism, but on a deeper level they embody what I call an “out of” aesthetic. (Two Pietri books are titled *Missing out of Action* and *Out of Order*, the latter a book of his absurdist “telephone booth” poems.) At one level, “out of” means peripheral or literally “eccentric” (without center, though also in Reyes’s sense, as antifoundationalist, deterritorialized, non-juridical). At another level the phrase “out of” might indicate the exhaustion of the avant-gardes. As Peter Burger famously noted, the vanguards delivered on the promise of institutional critique until their success ended up swallowing the category of political art; similarly, *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* mobilizes the Nuyorican vanguards of the New Rican Village, but its archiving gesture also risks a fossilizing of its political *impetus*, something, that, as we shall see, Pietri’s manifesto willingly confronts. Lastly, “out of” has a historical connotation, as in “emerging out of.” The domino that serves as avatar and metonymy for the website evokes games of chance, and the ludic sensibility of the avant-gardes, but it also roots and marks it as distinctly Puerto Rican (domino-playing as a hobby that links the island and the diaspora). History here is both unknown (as in the invisibility or stereotypical hyper-visibility of New York Puerto Rican culture) and exhausted (as in the self-implosion of the avant-gardes); it is in both senses out of focus.

The New York Puerto Rican visibility/invisibility politics of *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* also push against one of the trademarks of the historical avant-garde: its programmatic nature. What is a vanguard without a manifesto, a pilot plan, a shared program? Accordingly, Maldonado titles his contribution “Blueprints for a Nation” and yet he depicts its presumptive citizens as out of focus. We can rethink this tension if we consider Pietri and Maldonado’s poetics as “out of order” in the sense of disorderly, disorganized, against the militant/military variety of countercultural organization epitomized by the Black Panthers and the Young Lords (the latter of which Pietri was involved with early on, though his own quasi-anarchist politics led him farther away from countercultural movement politics of this kind). The non-hierarchical structure of the web, with links opening up to other links, reads as a counter to the

programmatic politics common to 1960s movement politics and to the historical avant-gardes. Maldonado and Pietri's insistence (via Figueroa) on "spirit" as organizing principle marks a further distance from the Marxist materialism common to various revolutionary and vanguard poetics. With its (mock) passports and anthem and blueprints, the Embassy project offers the paraphernalia of the nation-state seemingly as a parody of its hollowness, as if to underscore that it is spirit and not the accoutrements that vouchsafe the nation-state that animates this republic.

Pietri's manifesto presents itself as an "aesthetic sancocho" (sancocho is a Puerto Rican tripe soup, in this case a gumbo or bouillabaisse in its connotation of an Afro-diasporic mixture), and while its projection is as futuristic as any of the original vanguard manifestos, its "future" is also 1898, the year of Puerto Rico's passing from colonial hands as booty in the Spanish-American War. 1898 here serves as limit, as liminal moment, the degree zero of self-definition when Puerto Rico is wholly contained neither by Spanish nor American imperial designs. In this moment of transition, a new blueprint becomes possible, and Pietri's poetics of spatiotemporal dislocation allows for this blurring of chronologies and topographies. Invoking "our eternal tropical contemporary urban lifestyle," Pietri bridges island and mainland, and against the colonial imposition of first Spanish and then English, he posits a counterlogic of Spanglish, both here and in the "Spanglish National Anthem." The anthem is a parody of the classic Puerto Rican song "En mi viejo San Juan," a poetic remembrance of Puerto Rico's capital city that concludes with the narrator's vow to one day return to San Juan to find his love. In Pietri's Spanglish parody the city is a far more prosaic place, it is the capitalist city where "They raise the price of pan" (bread), seemingly a reference to the dire economic situations faced by the generation of Pietri's parents, many of whom left Puerto Rico for New York to flee poverty and in search of a better future. (Pietri and his family settled in New York when he was three years old.) In true utopian fashion, then, Pietri's anthem rejects this transnational city of capital in favor of a return to the island which is, once again, a space of creative becoming:

De plane takes off again
 I know that there will be
 No return trips for me
 Back to New York City
 (Island blessed by the sun
 Here I come Here I come
 Donde my roots are from)
 And with my family
 We'll struggle and believe
 That one day we'll be free.

As Efraín Barradas and others have noted, the longing for return to the island is a recurring trope in early Nuyorican poetry, but Pietri's is not a conventional narrative of return to the homeland. Notice that Pietri's utopian longing appears to be not for freedom itself, but for the opportunity to struggle towards and believe in freedom in the company of family. Freedom is belief. Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez suggest that the "Spanglish National Anthem" can be read as a parody of anticolonial politics more generally (34-42), but in my reading parody *is* anticolonial politics, inasmuch as it blurs the original, making it at once more visible and unrecognizable.

Like the anthem, the manifesto embodies the project's insistence on a cultural (or socioaesthetic, to use Michelle Joan Wilkinson's term) nationalism that equates independence with the creative act ("we know how to sing and dance and paint and educate") while sidestepping the pitfalls of the culture industry (the exhaustion of the avant-garde, for instance), by returning to Puerto Rico's pre-Columbian past: "We all remember being taino indians" and "the power of memory eliminates the threat of extinction." While the spatiotemporal politics of the manifesto do not preclude actual political struggle (for Puerto Rican independence, etc.), we should keep in mind that one of the aims of the Embassy project is, according to Maldonado's accompanying text for his mock-passports, "to question the significance of [...] citizenship, either assumed or bestowed." Pietri's manifesto is surrealist inasmuch as it defines freedom non-juridically by insisting on each individual's power to dream and on dream logic more generally, but it also seeks to mobilize a collectivity, something André Breton struggled with in his "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" and in his complicated relationship to communism. For Pietri, the possibility of a "nation of one and many eternal Ricans" is perhaps epitomized by the "plena," the Afro-Puerto Rican music and dance that becomes the metaphor for the creative fusion of individual style and social bodies in loose lockstep, a "collective of indigenous survivors" whose destinies are linked from island to mainland just as the dancing and playing bodies are linked, and as the many parts of the Embassy website come together in a poetics of non-hierarchical interrelatedness.⁴

If the "Spanglish National Anthem" is Pietri as diasporic everyman, his "Prologue Poem" to Maldonado's unsettling "Out of Focus" series is Pietri at his most textually radical: a long reverie/essayistic poem presented as 17 text blocks, each in a separate numbered link. Though its run-on prepositional clauses immediately remind us of Ginsberg's "Howl," the haphazard line breaks and lack of all punctuation except for the occasional exclamation mark point away from Ginsberg towards the prose poem, closer to automatic writing than to Ginsberg's breath line. The lack of punctuation and the streamlined visual presentation (the words "out of focus" and "Nuyoricans" appear italicized

⁴ I have written about a very different (but similarly daring and experimental) use of the "plena" in my note on Victor Hernández Cruz's poem "Airoplain."

throughout the text) underscore, as elsewhere in Pietri's work, writing as process, as an experience in the now that collapses past and future. The following passage from the first page is typical of the poem:

[...] Because the rent has to be paid and the car
Needs a new transmission & the children need high tech sneakers
On the latest cyber layaway conspiracy plan of Miss Uncle Sam!
Who has no tolerance for *out of focus* immigrants who do not
Want to be figured out anytime soon in the near & distant future
Of our indestructible verbal forest of lost revelations recovered
Recalling the magic of a darkness so great that equality prevails!
And though we were paid minimum wages and some wages
Were higher than other minimum wages It was still minimum wages
Anyway your minimum wages looked at it from all distorted angles:
We became astronauts who conversed with coconuts about legendary
Progressive mermaids who served rice n beans to heads of state
For them to be original with their musical instruments [...]

The mixture of social satire and fantasy is trademark Pietri, as is the rapid-fire shift between landscapes and people wherein the social satirist's third person ("the children need high tech sneakers"), the reflexive direct address of the second person ("your minimum wages") and the trans-historical utopian first person plural ("We became astronauts who conversed with coconuts"⁵) blur and intermingle. As evinced by the image of mermaids feeding rice and beans to heads of state, it is the creatures of the imagination that are progressive; they are the ones that make heads of state possible and not vice-versa. Like Peggy Phelan, Pietri is arguing that there might be advantages to remaining strategically invisible/illegible; for the "out of focus immigrant" it is about not wanting to be figured out by the U.S. government and its "cyber layaway conspiracy plan." The equation of consumer culture with colonialism and mind control cuts through Pietri's work and was already evident in "Puerto Rican

⁵ The image of conversing with coconuts is almost certainly an allusion to the aforementioned Nuyorican street poet Jorge Brandon, who developed a performance persona entitled "El coco que habla" (the talking coconut). There are various similar instances throughout the poem, where a seemingly nonsensical image is in fact firmly rooted in personal and communal history. I note this so as to emphasize my earlier point that Pietri and Maldonado's project can be antifoundationalist and simultaneously rooted in history (albeit an eccentric and nonlinear history, the only one possible from an out of focus perspective).

Given Pietri's anarchist take on social identity, we might read the antifoundationalism of the Embassy as the point in itself, the politics. In that sense, we might read the Embassy as a Temporary Autonomous Zone, famously defined by Hakim Bey as an "exquisite seduction carried out not only in the cause of mutual satisfaction but also as a conscious act in a deliberately beautiful life" (6).

Obituary;” what is new here is the cyber dimension. The web and digital space add yet another level of control, another technology of oppression against which one must guard, remaining out of focus. The embassy website, then, functions as a counterbalance, using the reach of the web to spread a gospel of misreading, an unreadable gospel that cannot be deciphered by the technocratic powers that be. The “indestructible verbal forest” represents the mountains and rivers of Puerto Rico now becoming a tangle of verbal signs in run-on succession now becoming a series of links in a maze-like online installation. Just as the last surviving Taínos fled to the forest to escape death under Spanish colonial hand, the vanguard of out of focus Nuyoricans remains not fully visible, not fully readable, seeking out a utopia of negative space, of darkness: “the magic of a darkness so great that equality prevails.”

The conceptual territory of the Embassy is both pragmatic—a response to the U.S. government’s refusal to address the colonial reality of Puerto Rico—and utopian: a space for becoming, remembering, relating, and embodying counterhistorical alternatives, much like Kane’s Lower East Side or the “Loisaida” of Maldonado, Pietri, Figueroa, and their fellow Nuyoricans and New Ricans.⁶ At once universal and spectral, it is, in that sense, a virtual space. If we think of utopia as an overcoming of visibility and abjection as the impossibility of doing so, we can read the visible/invisible out of focus politics of *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* as a scrappy medium: for out of focus Nuyoricans, the invisible is possible (“a nation of one and many eternal Ricans”) and the impossible is visible (a different 1898).⁷



So far, I have read Pietri and Maldonado’s *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* as a project that rejects the visibility/invisibility binary, positing instead an “out of focus” identity rooted not in the juridical, the geographic, or the documentary but in eccentric art and poetry actions that allow for utopian imaginings. I would like to conclude by briefly considering my own collaborative project Noricua in light

⁶ The term “Loisaida” is a Spanglish corruption of “Lower East Side” used by the area’s Puerto Rican community to refer to their neighborhood. The term is attributed to the poet Bimbo Rivas, whose poem “Loisaida” appears in the *Nuyorican Poetry* anthology. One of the subtexts to our Noricua project is the attempt to reconcile two very different yet overlapping downtown art traditions: that of Loisaida (and its shadow worlds) and that of the much more visible downtown scene.

⁷ My thinking on utopia here is fueled in part by my reading of José Esteban Muñoz. In *Cruising Utopia* he argues for a queer valuation of utopia against queer theory approaches that insist on radical negativity or abjection as sole political possibilities. Muñoz makes clear that he is not denying the value, or the necessity even, of such approaches, but rather insisting on the interdependence of the abject and the utopian, of negative identity and possible identity.

of my analysis of Pietri and Maldonado, and by suggesting how performance identities of the kind interest me here need to be rethought across differing social and aesthetic contexts.

Noricua begins as an inside joke. It is the summer of 2005. Edwin Torres and I perform at a backyard barbeque and festival in the South Bronx hosted by Libertad Guerra and Monxo López, my colleagues in the arts collective Spanic Attack. López, Guerra, and I were born and raised in Puerto Rico and are based in the South Bronx, whereas Torres was raised in the South Bronx but has long been associated with downtown poetry, initially as part of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe slams of the early 1990s, but now as an experimental poet, performer, and sound artist. Despite our divergent backgrounds, all four of us are Puerto Ricans who share a playful, urban, experimental aesthetic. That night at the barbeque, “Noricua” (a corruption of “Boricua,” a slang term for Puerto Rican) is the label we come up with to describe our shared aesthetic and sensibility. Like Pietri and Maldonado (of whom we are all big fans), we are Boricuas of radical negativity (the “no” in “Noricua”) but also constructivists who embrace art, and the city itself, as becoming, as shareable experience (the full title of our performance is “Noricua: the living city”). The “no” in Noricua signals a difference from conventional art of Boricua representation/visibility (the experimental spirit we inherit from Pietri and Maldonado), but it also punningly signals our shared interest in the postpunk music known as “No Wave,” Japanese Noh theater and other decidedly non-Puerto Rican art forms.⁸

So far, Noricua has produced a couple of poems—Torres’s “Noricua BBQ Summit,” and my own “hi din sites,” a response to Torres that was composed for performance at Noricua events in mind and can be read as my attempt at a partial manifesto—and a few soundtracks by López, but it is mainly a live performance project that we have presented in Berlin, Puerto Rico, and in a handful of New York City locales. Noricua performances typically feature

⁸ For more on No Wave, see chapter 9 of Reynolds. Curiously, Alan Vega, the lead singer of Suicide, a band that Reynolds sees as helping define the raw, hypnotic No Wave sound, is of mixed Puerto Rican and Jewish descent.

poems and sound pieces of Torres and mine and soundtracks of López's interspersed with skits and concepts (curated by Guerra), all celebrating an identity unafraid to empty itself out and replenish. If for Pietri and Maldonado identity is blurry or out of focus, for us it is similarly provisional, mattering most when it is almost emptied of meaning. Performances often include a closing skit where we wave empty wire hanger flags to the tune of an anthem called "Zeroes," a parody, sung by Torres, of David Bowie's song "Heroes" complete with guitar and keyboards (played by López and Guerra) and our collective attempts at experimental choreography. (Bowie's status as proto-No Waver and his interest in pantomime make him an obvious reference point for a Noricua identity attuned to negativity and emptiness.)

Recent scholarship in Latino Studies has looked to reclaim negativity, from Antonio Viegó's Lacanian approach in *Dead Subjects* to Frances Negron-Muntaner's reading of abject bodies in *Boricua Pop*. We Noricuas share these critics' interest in complicating poetics of visibility, but we would like to think of ourselves as doing more than lobbying for a trendy negativity (Viegó's subjects are dead, but ours, remember, is a living city). Thus, in my poem "hi din sites" I propose that gnosis (knowledge) emerges from a "nosi dialectic" where affirmational and negative identities blend into and as an ambient, like the city itself, a space where presence and absence, plenitude and solitude, meet. Another such pun in my poem plays on the difference between "noise" and "no is." (One might think of Noricuas as "Out of Focus Nuyoricans" with a No Wave edge, attuned to noise as meaning.)

The Noricua dialectic is perhaps most forcefully captured in Torres's stunning epigram "Barrio barrier"⁹ which appears, along with his Noricua poem, in his book *The PoPedology of an Ambient Language* (106), but which we use as a banner backdrop for some of our performances. Torres's phrase marks, among other things, our distance from both conventional poetics of Rican representation (where it's all about the barrio) and the work of non-Rican experimentalists (for whom it's all about the barrier, the social remove of radical form). To embody the dialectic is to find the barrio in the barrier and vice-versa, and to break down or complicate, as Guerra has also done in her research and curatorial work, the barriers between downtown and South Bronx and their respective scenes and energies.

But there is a more problematic dimension to our barrio barrier politics. For the foundational Nuyorican poets and artists of the 1960s (Pietri and Maldonado among them), the barrio was the organizing space (the Embassy is, in a sense, a virtual barrio): poets wrote to, for, from, about, and against the barrio and the fate of their art was intimately linked to its fate. The situation is much different now, as the barrio has increasingly come into tension with what Arlene Dávila

⁹ See <http://joaap.org/issue8/libertadguerra.htm>

calls “the neoliberal city.” Given the “cleaning up” of New York by the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations, gentrification, and the rise of what Richard Florida calls the “creative class,” art (and especially experimental art) would appear to be the enemy of the barrio; the equating of art vanguard and community interests no longer seems to hold.

The web would appear to hold for us some promise for communal mobilization (as it did, to an extent, for Pietri and Maldonado), and yet Noricua has deliberately shied away from the web, both as a conceptual space and as an archive (there are a couple of short Noricua clips available on YouTube and little else). Instead of the virtual barrio, Noricua pushes for an embodied city. I can only speculate, as I have not discussed this with my fellow Noricuas, but I think one reason for our insistence on live performance has to do with seeking out alternatives to 2.0 culture, which Jaron Lanier has recently criticized in “humanist” terms for its obsession with gadgets and wikis and crowdsourcing at the expense of imagination and experimentation. Both “Out of Focus Nuyoricans” and “Noricuas” begin as performative gestures, beyond visibility politics and attuned to the fringe benefits of a blurred visibility (them) or a shared ambient language (us), but what was lost in the translation from their virtual utopia to our embodied city? One answer to the above question is Puerto Ricans themselves. The New York Puerto Rican population has decreased steadily over the past two decades, even as new Puerto Rican communities are booming in central Florida and throughout the American South. These non-New York-based Puerto Ricans might well identify with Pietri and Maldonado’s virtual identity project, but I am not sure what they would think of Noricua. And yet I want to suggest that the embodied city that animates our project matters precisely because it is spectral, haunted by the languages and gestures of the Out of Focus Nuyoricans that preceded us and live within us. Perhaps the web will allow for its own “scenes” so that Rican experimentalists in the future can expand upon Nuyorican traditions without ever having set foot in New York. There is a barrio barrier, but the dialectic defines us.

Ultimately, then, the performance identities of *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* and our Noricua project exceed the physical space (of New York, of the page, of the web); they are closer to what Deleuze and Guattari call BwOs or “Bodies without organs,” defined neither by place nor scene nor phantasy: only “intensities” (153). For Deleuze and Guattari, the enemy is the organism (158), by which they mean both political organisms/organizations and the medical/psychoanalytic establishment, which sees itself as ensuring the integrity of the organism. Against organization, Deleuze and Guattari posit BwOs defined by disarticulation, experimentation, and nomadism. Out of Focus Nuyoricans and Noricuas emerge out of a crisis of political organization; instead of insisting on a proper organization of identity, they embrace experimentation

and displacement as survival mechanisms and as horizons of becoming. This does not mean that these identities are incommensurable with juridical or geographic identity formulations—after all, Deleuze and Guattari note that BwOs need something of the organism: they must be organized enough to survive and to signify, if only to turn those meanings against themselves, just as the Embassy evoked the nation-state so as to resist it. What matters for these performance identities is desire (186), the desire to mean; not the meaning itself (which would just become fodder for facile psychoanalysis or ideology critique), but the sheer physical and psychic fact of desire—as in Pietri’s framing of identity, in the “Spanglish National Anthem,” as a matter of desiring a shared experience, not a specific outcome. New technologies and demographic shifts have made questions of identity trickier, complicating conventional notions of visibility and representation, but no less necessary. Poetics and aesthetics help us rethink these questions by bringing them simultaneously into and out of focus.

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