

La Bodega Sold dreams: a reading of Miguel Piñero's poetry – seeking identity¹

La Bodega Sold Dreams: uma leitura da poesia de Miguel Piñero – Em busca de identidade

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Resumo

Mesmo os chamados países de primeiro mundo já foram algum dia colônias cujos habitantes tiveram que enfrentar processos de assimilação de língua e cultura. Entretanto, nem todos os indivíduos submetem-se a tais processos adotando, assim, uma identidade híbrida, combinando elementos das duas culturas e até mesmo língua. Este trabalho aborda teorias de identidade e de fronteira com o objetivo de analisar a obra poética de Miguel Piñero, porto-riquenho de nascimento e criado nos Estados Unidos, o qual foi um dos fundadores do movimento artístico, social e político chamado Nuyorican. Através da análise literária de alguns poemas de Piñero é possível perceber a criação de uma nova, híbrida e auto-intitulada identidade.

Palavras-chave: identidade, fronteira, Nuyorican.

Abstract

Even the so called first world countries have been, some day, a colony whose inhabitants had to face assimilation processes of language and culture. However, not all individuals relinquish to such processes, thus adopting a hybrid identity, mixing elements from both cultures and even the language. This study presents identity and border theories aiming to analyze the poetic work of Miguel Piñero, a Puerto Rican born who was raised in the United States, and who was one of the founders of the artistic, social and political Nuyorican movement. Through the analyses of some of Piñero's poems, it is possible to observe the creation of a new, hybrid and self-claimed identity.

Key words: identity, border, Nuyorican.

The subject of self identification, the struggle of the individual to be known by terms that differ from the ones given by others, is the major theme in the poetry and art of the Nuyorican identity. This can be analyzed through the poetry of Miguel Piñero, a Puerto Rican poet who grew up in Manhattan,

adopting the Lower East Side as his home. Piñero and other Nuyorican poets claimed an identity which is defined by them, denying a binary identity of black and white imposed by the American culture. Such action is one of the first attempts by Latinos to claim their own and unique sense of self. The idea of not belonging,

¹Trabalho de conclusão orientado pela professora Jane Thompson Brodbeck.

of being displaced, and to be defined by others on the basis of race are very strong feelings.

In the last decades, the so-called first world countries have been receiving, willingly or not, thousands of immigrants each year. These people are prone to experience some of, if not the same feelings Piñero experienced. However, the poet managed to overcome these feelings of inadequacy and inferiority and found his home in a “third country” – “the borderland”. Borders, or borderlands as defined by Gloria Anzaldúa, can represent more than just physical boundaries. The limits and frontiers become wider and greater than walls and checkpoints by the American immigration, they become cultural concepts that are unique to each group and individual. Anzaldúa states in her book that the self uses many defense strategies to “escape the agony of inadequacy” (1999, p.67). These feelings generate rage and contempt specially towards oneself. In order to escape these feelings, “one takes on a compulsive, repetitious activity as though to busy oneself, to distract oneself, to keep awareness at bay. One fixates on drinking, smoking, popping pills [...]” (p.68). Perhaps because of that, Piñero was addicted most part of his life to alcohol and substance abuse which led him to prison numerous times.

Though living on the border may appear to be living in an in-between world, a limbo zone, border literature offers an account of a stand of “not settling down on either side of these divisions imposed by culture” and “border texts disturb rigid constellations of power. Voices and identities situated in a hybrid land”, the third country according to Anzaldúa, “carve out spaces laden with possibilities of liberation” (CASTRONOVO, 1997). Border identities constitute a bold infringement on normalcy, a violation of the canon of the *bourgeois* decorum, a space where one can tear apart the narratives of repression or deal with them critically. A literary discourse from the border is in a space of cultural articulation that results from the collision of multiple codes and systems. Such encounters can create hybrid significations whose meanings mingle and match, spilling on each other

becoming a vehicle for culture, identity and conscious awareness.

Another aspect of the border identity is the language. Spanish speakers, among them the ones who are born and live in Puerto Rico, consider a *pochó* to be a cultural traitor, one who speaks the oppressor’s language by speaking English, thus ruining the Spanish language. Piñero was accused by various Latinos, specially the islanders, of being one. New Yorker Spanish is considered by the purist and by most Latinos to be deficient, a mutilation of Spanish. The political character of language is made apparent when the dominant class attempts to create a common cultural environment and transforms the popular mentality through the imposition of a national language. This notion of a common culture brought on by a common language which would regulate and normalize the differences can be considered as a myth. Homi K. Bhabha (apud McLaren, 1994) states that this common culture, like all myths of nation’s unity is a profoundly conflicted ideological strategy; the common culture is perceived to be an ethical mission whose value lies in revealing the imperfections and exclusion of the political system as it exists.

American language and thought are constructed as a system of differences organized in a binary opposition of white/black, good/bad, national/foreigner, English/other. Thus, there is not a consensus of what an American identity is. In order to be independent, to stand on his own legs, a person, a group, a community and even a nation must first see themselves as a whole, separate, unique and differing from the others. However, Puerto Ricans have always agonized and suffered from insecurity and doubt over the cunundrum of something seemingly as easy and basic as who they are.

[...] So here I am, look at me
I stand proud as you can see
pleased to be from the Lower East
a street fighting man
a problem of this land[...]

These lines are from the poem “A Lower East Side Poem” by Miguel Piñero, circa 1974. The poet and the poem are examples from what

is called the Nuyorican movement. The term “Nuyorican”¹ is often used to refer to all Puerto Ricans who have lived their formative years in the United States. The term is probably a reference to a Puerto Rican character that appeared in the title of the island author Jaime Carrero’s 1964 collection of poems, *Jet neorriqueño: Neo-Rican Jet Liner*.

Puerto Ricans find themselves in a singular situation as American citizens who do not enjoy the same rights and privileges that other American citizens do. During the 60’s, around one million Puerto Ricans went to work in New York City and other places in the US. All Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States; therefore immigration laws and officers were not then nor are they now a reason of concern for them. Because of their legal status, they can keep straight connections with the island. For many of these citizens, their predicament in the inner-city barrios, like the Lower East Side of the poem, is directly connected to the political destiny of Puerto Rico.

Therefore, since the Spanish American War, when the island became a colony of the US, the cultural identity of the Puerto Ricans has been crippled. In an attempt to regain cultural identity, cultural nationalists turned to Boriquen (native name of the island) in the late 60’s and early 1970’s. Their literary production and political ideology reflected a romantic and idealized vision of the island. Boriquen was transformed in an ethnic myth that previous generations had fed to their young. In his poem “This is not the place where I was born”, Piñero said that:

puerto rico 1974
this is not the place where I was born
remember – as a child the fantasizing images my
mother planted within my head –
the shadows of her childhood recounted to me
many
times over welfare loan on crédito food from el
bodeguero [...]

Clearly, to the generation that followed, Boriquen was a dream that their parents had

¹ In this paper it is used in its original sense, as specific to those raised in New York City.

embraced in an effort to hold onto an identity. The first-generation of Puerto Rican migrants in the United States lived with the dream of returning to the homeland. The poets became spokespersons for the people from the inner cities, from the barrios. The Hispanic and Latino communities turned these poets in prophets. They became the outlet for expressing the injustices, discrimination and persecution they found themselves in. Many Puerto Ricans, mostly the ones who live on the island, consider that Nuyoricans are endangering the island’s culture and language.

For this generation of poets there was a need to return to Puerto Rico and it became not only part of a personal quest, but also a collective search for a cultural protection to shield their identity. Many were disappointed with what they saw and experienced; Boriquen was not the paradise that *mamacitas* had described to them, the paradise that they had imagined. Besides that, not all Puerto Ricans welcomed the long lost brothers living in the mainland, according to the same poem. Piñero reports to his fellow companions’ and his own disillusion in his poem “This is not the place where I was born”:

[...] have no right to claim any benefit on the birth
port
this sun drenched soil
this green faced piece of earth
this slave blessed land
where nuyoricans come in search of spiritual
identity
are greeted with profanity [...]

Piñero returned to the barrios in New York and decided to carry on the struggle at home. He wanted to depict the reality of the life in the Latino ghettos in New York and, through his work, claim his identity of a hybrid, a mix of Puerto Rican and New Yorker, not worse, not better, just different.

The poet helped create the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. He and Algarín then edited *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975). In 1980, Piñero published a volume of his collected poetry, *La Bodega Sold Dreams*. This is the only collection of his poetry work. He believed poetry had to

be from the streets and on the streets. He seldom used to write down his poems and most of them are now only in the memory of his friends and audience. One could say that he is the creator of what is called today as Slam Poetry, which are improvisational poems.

The language plays a major role in his poems, which is very colloquial and, as the proposition of the Nuyoricans, it came from the streets. The poems are mostly written in English, but often present both languages in themselves, English and Spanish. Such are the cases of "Jitterbug Jesus", "The Book of Genesis According to San Miguelito", "Cocaine Nose – Acid Face", "New York City Hard Times Blues" and some others. The excerpt below is from the poem "Jitterbug Jesus":

Tiempos is longin' lookin'
for third world laughter [...]
latino eyes that chase el ritmo del güiro
en los vagones del tren on school mornin'
shoutin' broken spanish dream [...]
jitterbuggin' in wrinkled
worn out jeans
bailando new found pride in bein' nuyoricano [...]

When the poet mixes the two codes, sometimes in the same verse, it reproduces the speech pattern, marked with a strong accent of a "nuyoricano". This resource resembles the floating in between the two languages, the refusal of settling down on either side of these divisions imposed by culture and language, thus disrupting the linguistics and power structures. In doing it so, the poet introduces the reader to voices and identities situated in a hybrid land, the "third country".

Again, in the poems "No Hay Nada Nuevo en Nueva York" and "There Is Nothing New in New York", the reader can observe the poet's manipulation of the language. The poem with the Spanish title has only one line in English, the second one:

No hay nada nuevo en nueva york
there is nothin' new in new york
te lo digo en inglés te lo digo en español
la misma situación de opresión
es la única acción en todas
las esquinas de esta nación...

The poem in English is a translation of the one in Spanish – or the other way around, however, the first line remains the same in both poems, in Spanish.

No hay nada nuevo en nueva york
There is nothing new in new york
I tell you in english
I tell you in spanish
the same situation of oppression
it's the only action in all the corners
of this nation [...]

Piñero makes it clear that he can use either language to express himself "I tell you in english/I tell you in spanish"; however, in spite of the language chosen to convey his ideas, the Latino's situation in America remains the same: «oppression». The message of the poem has to be understood by all, hence the choice of expressing it twice in both languages.

This poem was written in the early 70's while Richard Nixon was the president of the United States (1969- 1974)². In 1971, the United States army took possession of almost all of Culebra Island and at the same time Nixon declared Christopher Columbus' day a federal public holiday, also in Puerto Rico, on the 2nd Monday in October. Christopher Columbus introduced the island to a life of colony, being dominated by a white European force. Nixon honoring Columbus seems to be an offense to the native Puerto Ricans. In fact, Puerto Ricans celebrate the date as *Día de La Raza*, in honor to many races coming together. While Anglo-America celebrates its white ancestors, Puerto Ricans celebrate their brownness – the mixing of the races.

Through the poem "The Book of Genesis According to Saint Miguelito", the poetic voice "parodies the Bible and provides the reader with his version of the origin of time, one that explains the present course of events in places familiar to the speaker" (WILLIAM, 1997, p. 59). Besides that, the reader can infer from the poem that the figure of God can be paralleled to Nixon. God was responsible for the creation of the world, with its ailments and diseases "in the beginning/ God created the ghettos & slums" and he decorated these places with "lead base

² Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/rn37.html>
Accessed on June 18, 2004.



paint" and "rivers of garbage & filth to flow [...] through the ghettos". After that he said "my fellow subjects/ let me make one thing perfectly clear/ by saying this about that:/ NO..... COMMENT!" ". This can be construed as a reference to the political scandal the president went through that led to his eventual resignation. God replied with the same words associated to Nixon's style of expression: "my fellow Americans ". Piñero's God (in the poem) is bilingual, and Nixon was fluent in Spanish".

Piñero's ghetto and its inhabitants are "goin' nowhere"³; the "ghettos & slums" were created by God and "God saw this was good...so god created the backyards of the ghettos & the alleys of the slums in heroin & cocaine" in his "The Book of Genesis According to San Miguelito". "Hustlers & suckers meet" in Piñero's poems, "faggots & freaks will all get high... dope wheelers & cocaine dealers" are all depicted and living in the same place, New York City. His description of the Hispanic ghetto calls the attention of his community to bring them awareness, consciousness to their situation and to the struggles of their diaspora⁴. In the poem, he is the figure of Satan who in opposition to God—the government and Nixon, is too marginal and has his own version of the creation, where he is the one responsible for introducing change.

In Piñero's poem "La Bodega Sold Dreams", the author wishes to be a poet, wishes to fit in a group. This privileged group has the ability to denounce, to stir things up, to awake the "minds weak & those asleep". In this poem, even though the poet expresses his wishes regarding who he wants to be, he, in fact, already is.

dreamt i was a poet
 & writin' silver sailin' songs words...
 i dreamt i was this poet
 words glitterin' brite & bold
 strikin' a new rush for gold
 in las bodegas
 where our poets' words & songs are sung ...

He can still transit between the two worlds

³ Piñero, Miguel. Poem: *Running Scared*

⁴ The dictionary definition available at: <http://www.pro-researcher.co.uk/encyclopaedia/english/diaspora>

The term diaspora (Greek ἀποδημία, a scattering or sowing of seeds) is used to refer to any people or ethnic population forced or induced to leave their traditional ethnic homelands, being dispersed throughout other parts of the world, and the ensuing developments in their dispersal and culture. Accessed on June 18, 2004.

feeling comfortable and at home, whether he is reciting his poems "en las bodegas" or on a "tenement sky" in the Lower East Side. He knows who he is and takes pride in it.

The poet was a product of the Hispanic ghetto and the ghetto was in him. He regarded the ghetto, more precisely Lower East Side, as his land where he belonged and wanted to become part of when he died. His poem "A Lower East Side Poem" functions as his confession and his living will (p.56): "but this ain't no lie/ when I ask that my ashes be scattered thru/ the Lower East Side". Piñero found his space and considered it his home.

The feelings and the consequences for discovering a new world are different for border writers and the great navigators and colonists of past centuries, while the former envisions the possibility of cultural autonomy and empowerment, the latter aims to create a history of conquest and genocide (CASTRONOVO, 1997, p.201). Although the boundaries of the colonized borders of conquered lands are visible, the borders of the "fronteirizas" narratives can be limitless. Piñero's description of the borders of his chosen home, his place in "A Lower East Side Poem" can be read in his poem:

[...] From Houston to 14th Street
 from Second Avenue to the mighty D [...]
 and let all eyes be dry
 when they scatter my ashes thru, the
 Lower East Side
 I don't wanna be buried in Puerto Rico [...]
 so when I die [...]
 don't take me far away
 keep me near by
 take my ashes and scatter them thru out the Lower
 East Side...

Human beings identify skin color to mark or symbolize the others in a variety of social contexts including and excluding people in light of their race. When this occurs, social inequalities are produced and structured. Piñero knew why the black woman in his poem *Black Woman with the Blond Wig on* wanted to be 'whitened'. He understood that African-Americans, much like Puerto Ricans, were (and still are) many times discriminated and excluded based on their skin color, their race. However, he realized that skin color is something that is

part of one's self, part of one's identity, and he demonstrates that through his subtle mocking of the black lady trying to look blond.

Therefore, race is a major factor for the condition of Puerto Ricans in America. However, it is not the only aspect that molds their lives in the US. It is impossible to ignore the importance of language and its particular impact in shaping the cultural, social and economic conditions of this population. Although Puerto Ricans on the island and on the mainland may seem united by a history of conquest and colonialism (first the Spanish people and later the Americans), a history of proletarianization and disempowerment, and a common language – Spanish, Piñero's poems demonstrate that this is not quite the reality. When he went back to Puerto Rico many years after he had left, he was very disappointed because his Puerto Rican heritage was questioned by his own country mates.

To be or not to be Puerto Rican, that is the question of who is and who is not Puerto Rican. Piñero, self-identified as a Nuyorican, had a way of intertwining his dual identity – Boricua and New Yorker, and he was not apprehensive about being bilingual and bicultural, "I tell you in english / I tell you in spanish". Linguists and academics have recognized the use of two languages as a practice with a high degree of competence, whereas dual identities are still not accepted as a competence. This ability combined with the unique condition of the American Puerto Ricans in New York calls for a new vision of identity that requires a vision of power and organization across borders that ends up leading to an expansion of the boundaries of citizenship beyond any single nation/state.

Miguel Piñero came to terms with his dual citizenship, dual language, and dual culture and embraced his identity as a Nuyorican: "so here I am, look at me/ I stand proud as you can see/ pleased to be from the Lower East". Despite the problems of being Nuyoricans, or Puerto Rican immigrants, they decided not to remain the same and to remake themselves; otherwise others would remake them. Although Piñero lived an existence that can be criticized by many, especially due to his arrests and drug use, he reinvented and situated himself through his poetry. His poems, at times raw and pulsating with the low street lives, were some of the first cultural and artistic expressions of this identity, proud and aware.

The works of the Nuyorican artists are greatly relevant for the study of identity. This small group of artists managed to de-colonize themselves and instead of trying desperately to identify themselves with the colonizer, they brought into existence a new, effective and rich personality that depicts their cultural consciousness. In a world that is becoming more and more globalized, instead of homogenizing ourselves trying to fit in and correspond to the expectations of the dominant cultures and colonizers, we should seek our own identities and not leave up to someone else to label us and categorize us.

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