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EXILE IN THE GRAMOLA: A JEWINICAN (RE)COLLECTION

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Livication

For my family & friends

EXILE IN THE GRAMOLA: A JEWINICAN (RE)COLLECTION

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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for the Degree of

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Preface to *Exile in the Gramola: A Jewinican (Re)Collection*

*What is a book of poetry but a collection of words and lines,
truths and lies, questions and almost-answers. –Me*

A Hybrid Identity

In *Exile in the Gramola: A Jewinican (Re)Collection*, I aim to answer one of the most difficult questions I have ever been asked, a question that will most likely continue to challenge me for many years to come. When I was a boy, it was my mother who first asked me this question. We lived in Dallas, Texas where I had a Mexican friend in the barrio named Panchito. Panchito had the straightest pitch-black hair in the neighborhood, and for one reason or another his parents decided to give him a haircut called the “bowl.” That “bowl cut” was the coolest hairstyle I had ever seen, and at seeing it, I wanted that same style for myself.

My hair, unlike Panchito’s, was a curly brown poofy-round afro (think Michael Jackson, circa Jackson 5), and feeling inspired, I went to the only person I thought could help me attain this style. It was, of course, my mother—if anyone could help me straighten my hair it was my mama. I was sure of it.

After stepping into the house, I grabbed the first hair pick I could find, stood in front of the mirror, and began trying to part my curly afro down the middle. From where she was sitting, she must have seen me struggling to straighten out the mess and asked what I was doing, to which I confessed that I wanted hair like Panchito. It was at this moment that she first raised that difficult question. With a look of motherly pride she smiled, and asked “¿Que tú eres mijo? ¿Que tú eres?” I shrugged my shoulders in silence. She focused her green eyes on mine, and held my hands in hers, “Tú eres

Dominicano mijo, tú tienes pelo Dominicano, rizado' como tu papa. Tú nunca vas a tener pelo como Panchito," and she was smiling, as if this revelation was not bad news, as if my ethnicity were a prize that I had won at birth. This was the first time I realized I was ethnically different from Panchito and the other Mexicanos in the barrio. It was also the first time I realized I was different from my mother—I now knew that my father was Dominican and I also knew my mother was something called "Jewish," but I did not know what that made me, which is why I still find the "que tu eres" question a difficult one to answer.

What am I? Can a person be one thing in this globalized world? Am I an Afro-Latino, a Taíno, a Jew, a Meztizo, a Mulatto (a mule?), an American, a Dominican? Am I all of these things, or none of them? Could I be all of the above and none of the above at the same time? This type of exploration is familiar territory, navigated by activists and artists such as Langston Hughes, who wrote on the reality of mixed race identity; W.E.B. Du Bois, who has theorized about the "double consciousness" (9) of African Americans; and Gloria Anzaldúa, who confronted, proclaimed and celebrated her double existence on a physical/metaphorical border by embracing "this thin edge of barbed wire" (25) There have been Caribbean authors such as Derek Walcott who have announced their ethnicities and origins like boat sails waving in the wind; and who have been thoroughly studied and quoted by prominent new writers like my fellow Dominican-American Junot Díaz who won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and whose writing captures the internal and external conflicts of ethno-cultural hybridity. Because of my own ethnic hybridity, these are the types of writers that I read, see as my predecessors, and to whose literary tradition I consider myself kin.

Over the years, I have continually returned to the work of Langston Hughes. His essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," is of special importance to me, and it is an essay that I read repeatedly during the course of the creation of *Exile*. What

attracts me to “Racial Mountain” is Hughes’ awareness of the pressures that artists of color feel for the need to mold their art so that it fits the standards of Anglo America, and thus shuns the possibility for them to manifest art that places their own cultural richness at an artistic forefront. He goes on to explain that “the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization” (par. 1), is what motivates artists of color to ignore a “great field of unused material ready for his art” (par. 5). Likewise it is a reality that makes a person feel as though his race is not an important enough foundation from which art can be created. In a sense, his essay urges young artists of color to “keep it real” with our various cultures and selves.

Since I am a poet of mixed ethnicity, and have experienced my share of racism on various levels from all sides of my ethnic spectrum, Hughes’ essay struck to my core. For example, there have been occasions where I felt I was not white enough, like the time my younger sisters and I, from the back yard of our home in Westchester, New York, overheard our Anglo neighbors from the other side of the fence call us “spick-niggers.” The offense made us feel as though it reflected the opinion of the entire neighborhood—we wondered if we would ever be white enough to fit in and it instilled in us a desire to be accepted by the Anglo majority of that specific community. We did not want to be “spick-niggers,” we wanted to be like everyone else.

I have also seen the other side of this type of racism where on trips to Santo Domingo I felt as though I was not black enough. On one occasion, at a beach in Boca Chica, I overheard two friends making fun of each other’s skin color—at the point where the darker one said to the lighter one that his skin was too white. Noticing the “white” one was darker than me, I interjected: “¿si él es blanco, entonces que soy yo?” The guy replied that I was “papel,” meaning that I was as white as paper. They both had a good laugh and exchanged a hi-five, but for me, it was one of those moments where I began to doubt my Dominicaness.

Both of these interactions left me in a limbo between not one, but two “Racial Mountains,” a feeling that many people of mixed ethnicity have, at one time or another, felt from all sides of their ethnic background. It is no secret that in history the idea of the mixing of races has been seen as taboo, as evident in eighteenth century paintings by the Spanish where they formed a type of racial apartheid in their delineation of fifty-three categories of racial mixtures between Africans, Indians and themselves (Mesa-Bains 116). They called these paintings castas and gave them names such as “tente en el aire,” meaning to “remain suspended in the air”; “and salta atras, which means jump back; or mulatto, a word that comes from mula, [the product of] the unnatural mating between a horse and a donkey” that produces a “sterile or non-productive mix”; and “sambo,” now a racial slur in the U.S., was also used as one of the fifty-three categories in the castas paintings (Lomnitz-Adler 273; Hutnyk 82; Mesa-Bains 116). This type of prejudice stems from the same type of “single-minded ethnocentrism” (Hutnyk 84) responsible for the “smoothing of the dying pillow” ethnocide caused by “the so-called Aborigines Protection Society in Australia [during] the first part of the twentieth century...,” where “atrocities such as the forced removal of ‘mixed and ‘half-caste’ children from the care of their aboriginal parents in favour of fostering (and domestic slavery) in white missions... and white families have long caused concern” (84). These facts however, are perhaps not as widely known as the stories of families who have secretly locked Mulatto and Mestizo members up in basements and closets for fear of others “finding out” and having to acknowledge their African and indigenous roots.

These histories and daily events of prejudice are the types of occurrences that over time influence a person’s psyche to the extent where that person begins to “... [look] at one’s self through the eyes of others...” and to “measure one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 9). In any event, these conflicted feelings about my mixed ethnicity are feelings that were generally imposed upon me from the outside world, “a world which yielded...no true self-consciousness”

but that “only let [me] see [myself] through the revelation of...” their world (Du Bois 9). It is, in fact, quite similar to what Dr. Cornel West states in *Race Matters*, where he mentions “how people act and live are shaped...by the larger circumstances in which they find themselves”(18), thus moving them to ignore, shun, and even change who they are for the unrealistic appraisal of an ethnic majority.

These negative feelings caused by ‘divisionists’ are ones that I am not afraid to challenge or attempt to eradicate, as West instructs, through “positive actions” (19) like the creation of my poetry. Unlike those who have let events such as these defeat them and unlike those who have adopted the “ni de aquí, ni de allá” syndrome, as explored in Hughes’ poem “Cross” where the voice states:

My old man died in a fine big house.

My ma died in a shack.

I wonder where I'm going to die,

Being neither white nor black? (9-12)

My poetry is the action by which I refute the concept of “cultural homelessness” (Marotta 306), and state: *que si soy de aquí, pero también de allá*.

I am furthermore indebted to Hughes and his vast work; through his explorations and unique voice, he has motivated me to stay true to myself in the hybridity of all of my ethnicities.

Like the work of Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois’ writings have also largely informed my poetry. Besides all of his accomplishments—graduating with honors from Harvard University, serving as director of the NAACP, organizing the Pan-African Conference in Paris, and being awarded the Lenin Peace Prize (Souls ix-xiii)—what moves me most about his life and work is his unending quest for the equality and uplifting of African Americans, as well as his investigations in *The Souls of Black Folk* where he coins the

term “double-consciousness.” This “double-consciousness” of the African American was explained in the words of Du Bois as a “two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (9).

Though this concept referred initially to the “two-ness” of African Americans, it is also applicable to people of other ethnic and cultural mixtures. It is a conflict I have felt as a Jewish-Dominican American, and as person who feels my mix as a unified whole, but who can also see that the world, at times, prides itself on the separation from and “othering” of people who seem different from themselves and their immediate circles. As further evidence of the “two-ness” of people of other ethnic backgrounds, we can look to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and her writing as a “Mexicana de este lado” (25) epitomized in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, where she writes:

I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times a violent clash. (3-6)

For Anzaldúa, her cultural mix is mirrored by a physical border, by a “1,950 mile-long open wound” (24). She can both feel, and see her “two-ness” and it is something that is difficult to reconcile. Anzaldúa goes on to write about the border chain-link fence:

dividing a *pueblo*, a culture
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja. (40-45)

Thus, the “double-consciousness” of Du Bois can also be found in the writing of a Mexican American, and is likewise felt by many others of mixed ethno-cultural descent. Furthermore, what Du Bois articulates so well is the yearning felt by the hybrid

to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows.... (9)

It is this same yearning that resonates within me and is what has perhaps inspired my own exploration, through poetry, into themes of hybridity and multiculturalism.

Exile is an attempt to navigate the ethno-cultural terrains in which I have found myself. It is writing informed among other things by my multicultural reality, by the authors I have read, the faces I have seen, the voices I have heard, and the places in which I have interacted. Though not every poem is about me, *Exile* is my effort “to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art” (Baldwin 3).

II A Hybrid Aesthetic

Barouh ata Adonai
Barouh aba Yeroushalaïm (2x)

From the Bible to the Coran
Revelation in Jerusalem
Shalom, salamalekoum

You can see Christians, Jews and Muslims
Living together and praying
Amen! Let's give thanks and praises

Barouh ata Adonai
Barouh aba Yeroushalaïm (2x)

Jerusalem here I am
Jerusalem je t'aime
Jerusalem here I am

African reggae singer Alpha Blondy uses his knowledge of language to combine English, French, Arabic, and Hebrew in a call for unity through his song "Jerusalem." The form of the song exemplifies what is known as ethno-cultural hybridism. Hybridism can take on many forms. As stated by Dr. Vince P. Marotta of Deakin University, it "...has become a ubiquitous idea which can explain a variety of social processes: hybridity can be located in horticultural practices, genetics, in the discourse of cybernetics, in the mixing of languages, in structural and institutional hybridization, within organizations in the idea of inter-disciplinary, and institutional practices..." (295). As can be seen, "Hybridity has come to mean all sorts of things" (Hutnyk 80) and it is seen everywhere from the mixing of languages in children's cartoons like *Dora the Explorer* to the ways in which corporate America markets its products to an increasingly ethno-culturally mixed population. However, "in addition to the general positions set

out above; hybridity is an evocative term for the formation of identity; it is [also] used to describe innovations of language..."(81) as seen, for example, in the Blondy lyrics above, and it is this definition of hybridity in which I am most interested.

Similar to the music of Blondy, I manifest my hybridity through poetry—I mix Spanish, Yiddish, English and the slang of the hip-hop community; I combine the musical traditions of bachata and rap; I also use traditional poetic forms as well as freeverse. I do this because my parents raised me in a hybrid world, and it is something that as an adult I have chosen to champion in all of its possibilities. Perhaps this is because my parents met in the spirit of a Dominican Verbena (block party) in Corona, Queens—the type of party where Latinos from all over New York meet and exchange music, dance, jokes, laughter, and little bits of their unique cultures in a place so far from their native countries. Or perhaps, it is because my Jewish mother and Dominican father instilled in me their cross-cultural sensibilities. I grew up watching my green-eyed mom dance like an African tribal woman, and with her urging me nearly every day to speak in Spanish, I saw my dad preach in the South Bronx and interact with a poor African-American, Latino, and Anglo congregation. I have traveled between my parents—lived in five states around the U.S., and have been lucky enough to travel with them to countries like Mexico, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Spain, and Kuwait; and on my own to Amsterdam, London, and Portugal. People are a product of where they have been. Thus, I swim in the ocean of my experience and pull up the treasures I have found in the creation of my art.

I have come to learn that everything around us is hybridity: all of life's sounds layered over the other, all of nature's manifestations, all of wo/man's creations, everything we see, touch, taste and feel is hybridity, is a part of the grand celestial mash up of mishmash. Too many, in denial of their own hybridity, refuse to accept this, which is perhaps the real reason I have made the hybrid aesthetic my own. I want to show people that we are all mixed in some way or another.

I disagree with some, like R. Sacamoto, who claim that the “hybrid creates another Other and therefore maintains and constructs boundaries” (123). I refute this claim because the ethnic hybrid is a joining of its parent’s ethno-cultures and s/he is authentically both. It is not as if two people of different ethnicities come together and create an entirely new species (an alien?). They create a human with arms, legs, eyes, ears and a heart—they produce a person who may or may not have more facility crossing into both worlds, but never another “other.” If anything, they create a person who carries within them the capability to unify those of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures. They create a person who is as much another “other” as any child that is born to any ethnicity. Though I respectfully negate Sacamoto’s perspective, I am more willing to accept the articulation of Homi Bhabha where he states:

the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity is to me the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and set up new structures of authority, [and] new political initiatives.... (Rutherford 211)

To further this point, I will use the example of my own family. My father, born in Santo Domingo, República Dominicana met, fell in love, and married my mother who as I have mentioned, is of Jewish ancestry. Through their love, they became unified, and at my birth, the unification of their ancestries was physically manifested. My birth brought their two families together. It allowed my Dominican grandparents, along with my Jewish grandparents, to celebrate in harmony the joy of childbirth with a people culturally and ethnically different from their own—thus, allowing them to enter a cross-cultural dialogue. It was, in fact, a relationship so important to my great grandmother

Mama Luz, that her last words to me (as she lay in her hospital bed) were that I should never forget my Jewish ancestry—ever, and that my Jewishness was something in which I should be proud. She could have gifted me a multitude of other wisdoms in her last moments, but those were the words she chose for me to remember—those were the words she wanted me to ponder.

Since “art and aesthetic experience adds ardor and passion to our principals and our beliefs” (Mohanty 3), with my poetry I aim to promote opportunities of cross-cultural dialogue, of cross-cultural negotiation, of cross-cultural *overstanding* and of cross-cultural endorsement. It is furthermore, an ambitious goal of mine that people see themselves in this work; hear their own voices, laughter and sadness—we all live and die through the same struggles and poverties, and are not as different from each other as we think, even though differences will undoubtedly exist.

One aspect of *Exile* that is intended to mirror the life of the ethnic hybrid is the sporadic use of the cadence and themes of hip-hop and bachata—a Dominican genre similar in essence to the blues. This idea follows in the tradition of Hughes, who similarly chose to fuel his poetry with movements of the blues and jazz in order to celebrate the richness of the African-American experience. I, like Hughes, choose to incorporate music because it is as jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker has said, “music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom...” and since the music we play and listen to is therefore who we are, I thought that to embrace these two distinctive genres would be a celebration of multiethnic hybridism. After all, there are young people in epicenters like New York, and Chicago and in small towns like Lubbock and Bakersfield who respect bachata singers like Antony Santos and Raulín Rodríguez as much they respect rappers like The Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur. There are kids who burn CDs with merengue and rap songs back to back; there are artists who rap over salsa and bachata music who know the demand for a music that combines all of the ethnic worlds in which American kids live. The songs of those artists are the sounds

of today. It is a music that epitomizes the multicultural reality, and which does not allow itself to be unrealistically categorized as just one thing.

Hip-hop music—with roots in Jamaican dancehall, from which it acquired the act of rapping via “toasting” and “call and response,” and its roots in “Afrodiasporic cultural forms” (Chang 545) and disco, is a style of music that among other things, utilizes digital samples from other songs and musical genres to create a style that is aesthetically relevant for the current day and age. When in the act of sampling, the producer of hip-hop appropriates that which s/he is sampling for the purpose of the song s/he is making. For example, sampling can be found in the music of groups like the Wu-Tang Clan, who recycle old school soul classics, and Kung Fu movie clips in order to add a uniquely rich texture to their music; and EPMD who have used (among other samples) the 3rd Movement of Mozart’s 40th Symphony in their song K.I.M.; and Madlib who has produced songs with clips from Bollywood films, and the reggae, soul, funk, and classical genres and who is today seen as one of hip-hop’s leading producers. What the appropriation of genres like classical states is that hip-hoppers, which were originally mostly African-American and Latino (who are now of all the colors under the sun) claim their right to access music from which minorities have had a history of exclusion, and by which this appropriation has grown to the extent that they enter this foreign genre and make it their own, and on their own terms—*we throw a deafening-obnoxious bass line around Mozart’s viola, and rap our life-stories over it too, and roll our windows down, and drive two miles per hour in your residential neighborhood, past your fancy house in our ‘78 Cutlass Supremes, and turn our music all the way up to 50, so it can rattle the very foundation of what you call home.*

Not only can the creation of hip-hop music be seen as hybrid, but hip-hop culture itself is created through the combination of its four elements, coined by Afrika Bambaataa, as the DJ, MC, graffiti artist, and b-boy/girl, all of which are hybrid art forms in and of themselves.

The hip-hop DJ is both an archeologist and alchemist of music, responsible for digging up not only those seminal songs of hip-hop culture, but also for finding the music of the emerging proletariat. The DJ that plays these tracks at events, in recording booths, and at radio stations is the sole person responsible for the discovery and manipulation of the music for his/her audience. Hip-hop theorist Jeff Chang states that the DJ can “whirl [songs] backward and forward—[in] a loop of history, history as loop—calling and responding, leaping, spinning, renewing. In the loop, there is the alpha, the omega, the turning points in between. The seam disappears, slips into endless motion and reveals a new logic—the circumference of a world view” (qtd. in Chang 549). Thus, by creating loops of the best part of a track, by blending tracks together, scratching over them, tweaking sound levels, and mixing in different forms of media (records, CDs, video) along with a multitude of other techniques, the deejay is constantly excavating new material out of the old, while at the forefront of the creation of a hybridism of sound and media.

While the DJ can be seen as the foundational backbone of the culture, and though it was once hip-hop’s main attraction—“out of the four elements, MCing (verbal rapping over music) currently enjoys the greatest prominence (Chang 546). As hip-hop philosopher and Teacher KRS One states, the MC is “a representative of hip-hop culture,” (*The MC*) and has come to be known as its spokesperson. The MC also known as the rapper (though there is an ongoing debate on their differences), has come to his/her hybrid nature through an evolution of African oral and musical traditions, Jamaican dancehall “toasting,” and the merging of the cadences and speech patterns of African-American preachers (*Freestyle*) with poetic techniques and form. This unique mixture enables MCs “to have their own distinctive sound, development, and offshoots” (T. Morris 223). As mentioned by Abiodun Oyewole of the Last Poets, their verbal techniques allow them to “weave...words in such a way that it’s in somewhere between song and speech, but it’s not a speech, and it’s not a song...” it is its own

unique poetic entity created to relate to those of its generation. The MC is very much a poet and utilizes “assonance, consonance, and internal rhyme off against the music” (T. Morris 224). S/he is the aspect of hip-hop that has made it “a major literary force for over twenty years...” and is also “the primary force behind the resurgence of the “spoken word” movement...” (227). As an example of an MC’s use of poetic technique, we can turn to the GZA’s verse on “Protect Ya Neck (The Jump off) for use of metaphor and simile:

Run on the track like Jesse Owens
broke the record flowin’, without any knowin’
that my wordplay run the 400 meter relay
it's on once I grab the baton from the DJ
a athlete wit’ his iron cleat in the ground
wildest nigga who sprint off the gun sound
the best time yet still 7.0
swift flow made the cameramen clothes blow.

Not only does he exemplify the techniques mentioned, but he also pays close attention to internal, end, and assonance rhyme—all things that can be considered difficult to do in their own right, but he achieves these things while in the same breath pushes forward the content of his narrative. Ghostface Killah, a rapper known for his impeccable imagery and wordplay, in the following lyrics to “All that I Got is You,” describes an impoverished childhood and like the GZA, maintains usage key of poetic strategies:

Family ain't family no more, we used to play ball
eggs after school, eat grits cause we was poor

grab the pliers for the channel, fix the hanger on the TV
rockin' each other's pants to school wasn't easy
we survived winters, snotty nosed with no coats
we kept it real, but the older brother still had jokes...
check it, fifteen of us in a three bedroom apartment
roaches everywhere, cousins and aunts was there
four in the bed, two at the foot, two at the head
I didn't like to sleep with Jon-Jon he peed the bed
seven o'clock, pluckin' roaches out the cereal box
some shared the same spoon, watchin' Saturday cartoons...

The verses transcribed here are only two examples out of the collective whole of the hip-hop community, and in no way represent all that the genre poetically has to offer, but from these examples it is easy to see why MCs are so revered by their generation and community. It is also easy to understand how this art form has influenced and informed the writing of many artists like myself.

Though spoken word poets may or may not use such intricate rhyme patterns or even rhyme at all, the lines between poet and MC blur a little more every day. In fact, they have blurred so much that it is hard to tell which came first—the MC or the spoken word poet. Many have attributed hip-hop music to The Last Poets, a group of African-American and Latino activists who spoke in rhythm over the sound of congas, and whose politically charged poetry emotionally fueled by the killings of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., filled some of the space left void in the wake of those African-American leaders, thus paving the way for the politics and poetics of the hip-hop generation. No matter who came first, the spoken word poet and the MC are inseparable in that they have sprouted from the same tangled roots, and travel the same landscapes. Consider the following lines from “The Dead Emcee Scrolls” by Saul

Williams (is this poetry or rap? Is he an MC or a poet? Are these poetic lines or song lyrics?):

Not until you listen to RKM on a rocky
mountaintop have you heard hip-hop.
Extract the urban element that created it
and let an open wide countryside illustrate it.

Riding on a freight train in the freezing
rain listening to Coltrane. My reality went
insane and I think I saw Jesus

.....
And my fingers run through grains of sand
like seeds of time. The pains of man.
The frames of mind which built these frames
which is the structure of our urban super-
structure.

The trains and planes could corrupt and
obstruct your planes of thought so that
you forget how to walk through the woods
which ain't good 'cause if you never
walked through the trees listening to Nobody
Beats The Biz then you ain't never heard
hip-hop. (1-7, 11-22)

The night-walking Graffiti artist him/herself is rarely seen, but the art s/he creates is unavoidable, found everywhere from traffic signs, to subway cars, to bathroom stalls, from the border wall between Palestine and Israel, to the suburban walls of gated communities. They speak in color and “tone” (Tejada). They claim their turf wherever they find it; the city is both their canvas and the museum in which their work is displayed. To those who do not understand this hybrid form of art, they are a nuisance, but to those who do, they are the Dalis’ and Picassos’ of our time, they are the Michelangelos’, the Riveras’. These artists are muralists and masters of calligraphy; their art is a modern form of hieroglyphic documentation. They are outlaws who apply a wide range of artistic theories such as chiaroscuro, perspective, hierarchical proportions, vanishing points and every other technique available to them in order to achieve their imagistic goals. Some incorporate the use of stencils while others freehand. The graffiti artist provides the visually artistic component to hip-hop culture, and is who, as I work on my writing, reminds me that art should be property of the streets, not just that of the intellectuals in academia (Sáenz 132).

No culture is complete without its dance. In the case of hip-hop, the b-boy/girl represents the culture on the dance floor, on street corners, in films and in commercials. Like the previous three components mentioned above, b-boying/girling is a hybrid art form that utilizes dance moves from various traditions and styles, though it has roots in a funk dance called the Good Foot, invented by James Brown (“History”), it has evolved to include moves from house, capoeira, and gymnastics, though these are only some of the techniques a breaker may employ in order to hone in on his/her own particular style. B-boy/girls compete against each other as individuals or in teams (crews), and people of all ethnicities and genders participate in this way of dancing. Like the other elements of hip-hop, it has received such global recognition that the b-boy’s/girl’s presence is felt in nearly every corner of the world and has grown into a multinational, multicultural art form in and of itself. With competitions like the Battle of the Year, R-16

Korea, and Red Bull BC taking place around the world each year, it continues to evolve as more people catch on and add to it their own cultural interpretations.

“For hip-hop heads, hip-hop is an identity, a way of life, a worldview. For hip-hop intellectuals, hip-hop provides fascinating insight into formations of race, gender, region, and nation, as well as culture, politics, economies and history” (Chang 546). Since I consider myself a part of this culture founded, for the most part, in the multicultural/multihistorical U.S., I am unable to deny its influence on my writing though not all of my poems seem like hip-hop. For me, it is more like the air I breathe and am surrounded by. As follows, if hip-hop is my air, then bachata is my water.

From the campos of the Dominican Republic to New York City and the world, bachata music has come a long way from its humble beginnings. Originally played by people of low socio-economic status, and seen as an uncouth vulgar style of music by the rich, it is now accepted as one of the Dominican Republic’s signature styles of music and has gained international recognition. As found in the research of Dr. Deborah Pacini, bachata was originally called “música de guitarra” and was in fact not a genre at all, but was rather something that poor campesinos did. A “bachata,” was a “spontaneous, informal, backyard get-together, principally in rural areas, with food and drink,... enlivened by either guitar or accordion-based music” (70). This Afro-Caribbean genera, like hip-hop, is a hybrid form of music and is inspired by the bolero, “Mexican ranchera, Cuban son, guaracha, and guajira, Puerto Rican jíbaro music, and the Colombian-Ecuadorian style vals” (71). In this “synchronization of styles” (N. Morris 190), bachata exemplifies the characteristics of popular music (190). The aspects that define the music are “the guitar-centered ensemble, sentimental themes, unpolished singing style, [and] colloquial language...” (Pacini 69). While, for a time, the music was performed for and by people of low socio-economic status, it has now reached middle and upper class audiences and has allowed its more popular performers plenty of financial success.

What interests me most about this genre is its ability to capture the various migrant situations of Dominicans (*Luis Vargas: Santo Domingo*). At first, during the era of the dictator Rafael Trujillo, and later with the repressive government of Joaquin Balaguer, the lyrics of the music were grounded in the Dominican countryside and in themes of amor y desamor (Pacini 73; *Luis Vargas: Santo Domingo*). However, after the reign of Balaguer and with the “sugar industry virtually in ruins”(Pacini 79), many Dominicans, like my grandfather, had no other option, but to leave their country and families in order to find more profitable financial opportunities in cities like New York. This in turn, created a “back and forth movement” (79) of Dominicans between their host and parent countries which not only had “cultural and economic consequences upon” the Dominican Republic (79), but would eventually also influence a change in the thematic content and sound of bachata. Frank Reyes is one of the bachateros who has perhaps best captured the anguish of separation between Dominican migrants and their loved ones. The following song, “No te olvides de mí” contains the sentiments of a future exile the night before his departure:

Hoy he venido a contarte que estoy triste
porque me voy mañana y tengo que alejarme de ti (2x)

Quiero que tu, siempre me recuerdes
que la distancia no te haga olvidarte de mí (2x)
de mi... no te olvides de mi

Sé que voy a extrañarte donde quiera que este
te has metido hasta en la sangre que corre por mi piel
Yo volveré a estar junto contigo
y venceré la distancia que hay entre los dos

Yo cruzare ese mar infinito
y volveré para amarte por siempre mi amor
mi amor, no te olvides de mí...

Unfortunately, many Dominicans, for a variety of reasons, are unable able to travel back across that “mar infinito,” and are left with no option but to stay in their host country for longer than they had originally planned. In “Extraño a mi pueblo,” Reyes sings from the perspective of that exiled Dominican:

Hoy, me encuentro lejos
extraño a mi pueblo, donde nací (2x)

Mi familia piensan que ya los olvide
pero no, no es así
Yo quisiera regresar pero no puedo
tengo metas que cumplir (2x)

Sufro mucho al no estar con ellos
pero es que yo quiero hacerlos feliz (2x)

Ay mis hijos seguro que volveré
no me culpen sí solos yo lo he dejado
Es que quiero para ustedes construir
muchas cosas que en mi vida yo he soñado (2x)

Ay, ay mis hijos seguro que volveré
ay, yo le juro que nunca lo olvidare (2x)

Sufro mucho al no estar con ellos
pero es que yo quiero hacerlos feliz...

In the case of this song, the voice explains that he still has “metas que cumplir” and that for his family, desires to create all the things of which he has dreamed. He suffers from guilt caused by the fact that he “abandoned” his family, but promises that he will return. In these two songs, Reyes captures the classic situation of the exile—the promise of the possibility of a better life elsewhere and the realization of what that person has lost in the process of its pursuit. Earlier, I stated that the music captures the migrant circumstance of Dominicans, and as a part of that, through the younger generation of bachateros, it now also captures a Dominican-American identity in that these youngsters are a product of immigration and assimilation—they have pride in the country of their parents, but at the same time are influenced by American cultural movements such as hip-hop. They are a part of two worlds, at home with their families they are Dominican and may speak Spanish, but in American society, though it is not my intention to over generalize, they affiliate with and are influenced by a wide range of American popular cultures. In the case of the innovative American group, Aventura, traditional bachata is fused with R&B, “hip-hop and other American pop and urban styles” (“Aventura”). The product is a bachata that flows from the English language to Dominican-street vernacular, from romantic singing to rapping, from traditional bachata rhythms, to electronic dance rhythms. In “El coro dominicano,” the group merges bachata-merengue with rap, and for the most part, situates the song in the New York City landscape:

Ima’ dedicate this song to all my Dominican peoples, no doubt
Yo voy a representar a todos los dominicanos (2x)
Mencionando donde hay coro, mujeres, y muchos vacanos (2x)

Por ejemplo allá en el Bronx, de donde somos los teenagers (2x)

En la Trinity y Gerald, los tigueros allí nos quieren (2x)

Pero tengo que decir donde beben las mujeres (2x)

Señores voy a rapear, para que lo escuchen mi gente (2x)

(Rap):

En el alto Manhattan las mujeres están...

Cerveza presidente no puede faltar

Aunque yo no la tomo me gusta mirar

El merengue y bachata en los carros suena

Las mujeres más buena bailando entrega

El relajo vacano es para disfrutar

Es el coro de nosotros, el coro dominicano...

Ok señores, ahora vamos ir pal' Bronx

Vamos a ver donde esta esa escuela con muchos vacanos

Vamos a ver, señores hagan el corrito conmigo que dice así, allá va

Mi gente de South Bronx

el coro dominicano...

Los vacanos de Boston

el coro dominicano

La esquina de Platanito

el coro dominicano

Eso por allá en Vyse

el coro dominicano

Y también por Gerald

el coro dominicano...

Pero que no se te olvide

el coro dominicano...

What we find in this song is an ode or “shout-out” to the Dominicans in the States (all of whom are products of exile), and the capability for bachata to evolve as it adopts the ever-changing culture of the people it represents.

Since music is a prominent component of identity, and since “one writes out of one thing only—one’s own identity” (N. Morris 194; Baldwin 3), it is only natural that my poetry be informed and inspired by the music to which I most identify. At times, I nod my head to bachata as though it were rap, at other times I feel sentimental about a rap song as though it were a bachata.

What attracts me most to the hip-hop and bachata genres, besides their hybrid aesthetic, is that they were both invented by marginalized people who found themselves on the fringes of their perspective societies, with nothing left to do but create music out of what was available to them.



Un Poemario Hybrid

My son is the essence of America.

His features carry inside them centuries of History, Culture, Life.

He is the hope for a better tomorrow.

He is the Dream. Black, Yellow, White, Brown.

In harmony.

He is the Song of Freedom.

He is a new people.

He is Now.

My father wrote and published the above poem during the year of my birth. It is a poem that not only captures my ethnic mix, but also captures “the dream” of “Black, Yellow, White, Brown in harmony.” It is a vision of optimism, but is one that I am not sure we Americans are close to achieving. Though the face of racism may have changed, though it hides its stench under fancy colognes and perfumes, it definitely still exists. Because we have elected an African-American president does not mean that our race problems have evaporated, and it does not erase the atrocities of the past from which minorities are still attempting to heal. A person need not even leave her/his home to find today’s manifestation of prejudice. In fact, what I have seen most in recent years is a “digital racism” aside from the divide between Anglos and minorities in accessibility to technology. What I am referring to is how people of all races hide behind internet screen names in order to air out their racist perspectives. For proof of this, all a person has to do is visit the YouTube.com internet site, search for video clips of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and read the text commentary that people leave under the veil of their screen names. It is painful to realize that racism is unfortunately as strong as it has ever been. As a result, in the spirit of Bob Marley, I respond to this racism by saying that if the people who make our world worse will not take a day off, then neither will I.

I produce an ethno-cultural mix of poetry, because I am a mix of ethno-cultures. To spin off what Benjamin Sáenz writes in “I Want to Write an American Poem:” the culture of the ethnic hybrid is my reality; it is my skin, my heart, my voice, and it is “the genesis and the center of my writing—the most authentic space I have to write from” (130). Though I am not saying the appearance of my poetry will change the hearts of the world’s racists, it will at least challenge how people view the idea of “racial purity” and will celebrate, if nothing else, through the testimony of my unique multicultural existence, the unique hybridity of others as well. I therefore see truth in what was stated by Dr. Amalia Mesa-Bains in her *Homegrown* conversation with bell hooks, that through our ethnic and cultural interweavings, “our lives and races and histories are...mixed

together, and if we examine this...social history, we might find a way to understand [our] present struggles" (116) as we evolve into a more unified human race.


Exile is an experiment in the manifestation and carrying out of the promise of my father's poem. Some of which, are poems that capture the harmonious multiethnic multicultural facets of a mixed-race identity as in the celebratory "Mishmash Vernacular," where the speaker indulges in the linguistic and musical possibilities of the meshing of various ethno-cultures. Likewise, "Mulatto on the Border" is a poem where in the following lines, the speaker attempts to encourage his fellow mulattos and mestizos to embrace and listen to their various identities:

You got to know
how to hang on
both sides, live both
lives & peep the lingo.

While at other times, *Exile* captures the internal and external clashes that American people of mixed ethnicity face when confronted by counterparts from one of their ancestral motherlands. "Exile in the Gramola" for example, is a poem that contains the different realities in which Dominican-Americans and Dominican-Dominicans find themselves. It focuses on the juxtaposition between Yenny, a Dominican immigrant living in Spain that works a menial job, and a Dominican-American male on a leisurely vacation in the same place, who by chance finds himself in the club where she works. It is also a poem that exemplifies the insecurities and actions of people who overplay one of their ethnic facets in order to fit in. This is seen in how the male character acts as if he were a better bachata dancer than he actually is in order to impress the exiled Yenny while speaking to her in his best Dominican-street Spanish:

*¡...mi madre eh de...y mi padre...pero
soy bachatero de puro sepa!*

In this passage, aside from his trying to impress her with his boasting, he also cleverly tip toes around admitting that he is not full Dominican, because (in his mind) doing so would be like admitting he was a phony just acting Dominican. This fear of being “found out” is one with which I am intimately familiar. Not only because I have felt it myself (so much so that it lead me to tattooing my chest with the Dominican coat of arms), but I have seen it in other ethnically mixed people like Bob Marley for example (born to a black Jamaican mother and to an Anglo father), who used to put black shoe polish in his hair to make it blacker (*Rebel Music*). This “making up for” is also something I have seen in the actions of other exiled Dominicans on my travels to places like New York, Honduras, Madrid, London, and Amsterdam. It is as if something happens to my fellow Dominicans when they are far from their motherland: One day they are in Santo Domingo or Santiago, plotting to get out of their circumstance, and the next, they wake up in a foreign country missing home, and become their country’s biggest patriot—Even going as far as tattooing the flag on their chest, something that would be silly for a Dominican to do at home, but is seen as cool by young Dominicans abroad, especially by those who are half, like myself, who have a tendency to idealize life in the DR without really having ever lived there for an extended period of time. It is however, a romanticism that some, after becoming established in their new country, let go of over time, while for others like the Dominican-American in “Exile” it will be a longing that is never lost.

There is a poetic sequence in the  part of the book comprised of five poems which together serve to articulate laments expressed through bachata, felt by Dominicans and many others, who out of economic need are forced to seek work in other countries usually far from home and away from their loved ones. The sequence starts with

“Soledad,” a poem in which the persona wakes up alone in bed and is reminded through a breeze from under his window of how he was silently abandon by his lover. From this poem, the sequence moves into “Coro desde Nueva York,” a poem that captures the yearning of a person now living in New York who misses his home country, as well as his lover, and who, in a way, sees them as one in the same.

Este frío no me refresca
como tu Boca Chica en el
verano, como tus ojos,
dos gemas de Larimar
que siempre ando buscando...

The poem uses the naturaleza of the Dominican Republic as metaphor for describing the sentiment behind what the character misses about his lost love. While the aforementioned captures the loneliness and nostalgic perspectives of people who seek work in other countries, other poems like “Exile in the Gramola” and “La casa de cita and Guests,” inspired by Dominican women who work the streets and clubs of Madrid, are examples of what some women are forced to suffer in their quests for a better living.

While the poems described above capture some familiar terrains of bachata, other poems enter dialogues and themes of the hip-hop community. Given that I am of the hip-hop generation, and since it is an American art form, in which I actively participate, that has reached global recognition, I thought it would be a good platform from which to critique rap’s current “perpetuati[on] of the regime of the oppressor (Woodson xvii) in its misogynistic portrayal of woman and lack of overall consciousness on issues of intellectual endeavoring, educational equality, and violence against our fellow minorities. “Unfortunate Priorities/The Master’s Trick,” is a poem in which I use irony

to paint a picture of the views of “careless rap orators”—who in the face of racial inequality and socio-economic unrest, would rather close their eyes and avoid the issues completely in order to continue orating destructive-aggressive-materialistic messages to America’s youth, which in turn, chain these youth to ideals that do not inspire healing, but rather motivate them to see their fellow people as competitors who will not stop short of killing in order to conquer their perceived opponents. Sadly, it is exactly this philosophy that enables corporations (who in actuality know nothing about the various aspects and subtleties of hip-hop) to capitalize from the drama and physical and mental destruction of minorities and people of low socio-economic status pitted against one another in order to gain recognition from the very corporations who have put them against each other in the first place.

Hip-hop culture as a whole has changed over the years by turning from its originally more festive and socially conscious messages, to commercialism and the perpetuation of a worldwide consumerism motivated by corporations that have seen the profitability of such a unique art form and its ability to reach people of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In a sense, corporations such as Boost Mobile and Sprite are using hip-hop because of the marketing opportunities found in the nature of its hybridity. Besides a handful of artists such as Talib Kwali, People Under the Stairs, Dead Prez, Mos Def, the Roots, Immortal Technique, Jay Electronica, some non-mainstream emcees, and a few of the independently owned record labels, commercial hip-hop artists have increasingly allowed their messages to be manipulated by the demands of white Corporate America and have been used in what I call the dummifying down of hip-hop culture, in that it has been turned into nothing more than a means by which sales can be increased.

Since “[we] are the music while the music lasts” (Eliot 219-220), the pairing of bachata and hip-hop, and their themes in one collection of poetry not only solidifies the possibility of what musically concerns the culturally mixed person, but it also affirms

that it is okay to embrace all aspects of a person's cultural making. After all, there is perhaps nothing that says more about a person's identity than the musical genera that informs his/her being.

"Music is what it is...people attach themselves to it in a certain way" (Marley Intro.), and it is through the ethno-synchronic nature of music that people are able to exchange thought and tradition; similarly, it is my belief that poetry can also achieve this goal.



Poetry & Cross-Cultural Unity

*It is essential that we finally understand:
this is the time for the creative
human being
the human being who decides
to walk upright in a human
fashion*

.....
*Come, come, come, move out into this world
nourish your lives with a
spirituality that allows us to respect
each other's birth. (Sanchez 29-34, 53-56)*

It was at a poetry reading sponsored by the UT El Paso African American History Department where I first heard the poetry of Sonia Sanchez and her powerfully inspiring anecdotes on peace and tolerance. It was also at this reading where she said that it is when dialogue and reasoning end, that violence and war begin. That reading and her words were particularly memorable for me and it was that same night where I realized the potential role of poetry as dialogue and reasoning.

It is difficult for me to support the military involvement of the U.S. in the Middle East, but not for the reasons that one might think. I am not against defending one's country from imminent threat (when that threat is real), nor am I opposed to *peacefully*

securing our interests abroad, but what I am opposed to is a system that manipulates the ignorance of its people through the “othering” of foreign cultures, and in turn perpetuates ignorance through false representations in the media and other sources of information.

I, for one, have never succumbed to the idea that all Muslim people are extremists, though I know that extremists exist and are partially responsible for the image that many people of the U.S. have of Muslims as a whole. Those people are also at fault, but it cannot be right to meet extremism with extremism and at the cost of the loss of innocent lives at home and abroad. When Sonia Sanchez said, “a terrorist bomb is the language of the unheard,” I thought of my Palestinian friends, two brothers whom I have known since I was in the first grade and whose family immigrated to the U.S. in order to escape the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is because of my relationship to them and their family that I know firsthand the fictitious ways in which Arab people over the years have been portrayed, and it has also been through this dialogue that my mother and I have seen the other side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while at the same time, have come to understand that not all Arabs are extremists and terrorists. Which brings me back around to the role of poetry as dialogue and reasoning—if poetry can be used to reduce the “othering” of people by helping us to see the similarities we have with those of different ethnicities, and by allowing us to celebrate our differences, it will in turn nurture cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and also reduce the likelihood of physical confrontation and even war. Moreover, culturally hybrid poetry, in its formation of new situations, and alliances demands that we should translate our principals, rethink, and extend them (Rutherford 216) so that we can regain lost ground in these areas of cross-cultural understanding and tolerance.

While the poems in *Exile* move through various wavelengths, landscapes and into realms that I am yet to understand, they also aim to familiarize readers with that “other,” and through that familiarization help them see *people*, with real lives and fears,

people who love like we do, who are heartbroken like we are, who celebrate like we do, and who have longings like any other life-seeking person. Two poems in particular where I attempt to draw on these similarities and differences are “Three Shkotzim” and “Holiday B-Ball,” where in both, the reader will find a relationship between two young Palestinian brothers and a Christian-Jewish-American of their same age. Told from the first person perspective of the American, “Three Shkotzim” juxtaposes the worldviews of these boys in order to let the reader see the contrasting realities of their childhoods:

When Firas & Samer first flew
in from Palestine, they were around nine.
We all looked like brothers, with lopsided afros
(they didn’t even know what pizza was!)
but after only a few days, I had taught them —
the pillars of American life: the Moon Walk, Michael Jordan,
& that NES Contra code for 30 extra lives, while they taught me
to say *sharmuta*. *Sharmuta!* *Sharmuta!* *Sharmuta!*

As the reader can see from the first line, Firas and Samer have arrived from their country and despite their physical similarities to the narrator of the poem, he is surprised that they, unlike him, are unfamiliar with the things that have such strong presence here in the States. Because of this, he takes it upon himself to acculturate them to those things that so strongly define his life, things that by the way, are created with the intent of entertainment, pacification, and financial gain. The juxtaposition of their realities is further defined towards the end of the poem where they teach him to curse in Arabic. Therefore, it is through what they teach each other that we are able to see the different worlds from which they come—one being raised in a world of entertainment and pastimes, while the others a world that is much more grim and unthinkable.

From those first moments of their arrival in the States, the characters appear in “Holiday B-Ball,” a poem that captures the three at a later stage in their relationship and cross-cultural exchange. In the poem, the brothers are basketball fanatics, and celebrate holidays like Halloween with their friend by going trick or treating, and Thanksgiving—a day where “Nihaya, [their mother] would serve baba ghanoush with pita bread, & stuffed grape leaves in front of the TV [d]uring *Saved by the Bell*...” Since the foods mentioned are aspects of Arabic culture, and since the given holidays and watching television shows like *Saved by the Bell* are a strong part of American culture, the idea of eating these foods while watching that show on these holidays can be seen as evidence of the cultural exchange between the brothers and their friend, but not only are the Palestinian brothers acculturating into an American existence, but the American, as well, is acculturating into their Arab existence. Thus, this mixing of culture is a process of exchange that consequently places the boys in a rich environment that lends itself to the cultivation and maturation of well-rounded cross-pollinated people.

While poems like these are important for bridging gaps in ethno-cultural understanding and for educating those who have tarnished views of people different from themselves, poetry and art are not necessarily magical cures that will solve all of our problems, but they are rather a starting point from which a healing and reconciliation process can begin. Moreover, my poetry is a channel of dialogue aimed at keeping cultural communication in motion so that vital conversations like these are not replaced with the anguish and repercussion caused when that dialogue is absent.

“We are all extensions of someone we’re related to, and not related to” (Marley Intro), we position ourselves and act according to the positions and actions of others, we give and we take, but mostly we take. Luckily, from the example love and support set by my family, friends, and mentors, and as a student of creative writing and writer of poetry, I have learned that every poem I write is an offering—a gift for those who have come before me and for those who will come after me. I have learned that each

poem is an opportunity for negotiation and reconciliation, discovery and recovery. Through my writing, I celebrate what I have picked up over the years, I display what this hard knock life has taught me about who I am, what I am, and most importantly, who and what *we* are on the face of this earth—a speck of dust in the universe.

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


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Playlist

	Page
Preface to <i>Exile in the Gramola: A Jewinican (Re)Collection</i>	v
Works Cited	xxxviii
Playlist	xlii
Ⅰ “Families fall to pieces...”	1
Bulletproof Vests and Bibles.....	2
The Driveway	3
Heirlooms.....	4
At Dasman School.....	7
"Colored" Fountain	8
Hasta la tambora	9
Last Wish in the Age of Suspicion & Paranoia	10
Point of View	11
Ⅱ “You live long enough...”	12
Three Shkotzim	13
Holiday B-Ball	14
Little Babylon Soldier	16
Press Continue.....	18
The Passing	19
Going Home.....	20
Pslam for the Downtrodden.....	21
Dominican Jew Dust (Remix)	22

Triptych Vision.....	23
 <i>"In the morning the city spreads its wings..."</i>	24
Still Dreaming.....	25
Rest in Peace	26
Blood Lines Waiting on the News from Juárez	28
Down a Sidewalk	29
Downtown El Paso.....	30
Allowences	31
To the Dude with the \$150 Pair of Air Jordans.....	32
Song for the Hard Work Beggin'.....	33
The Saint of Stolen Clothing.....	35
 <i>"Come, my love..."</i>	38
Me, My Girlfriend & Pablo	39
Domestic Dispute	41
The Sights off Rim Road	42
Soledad	43
Coro desde Nueva York.....	44
Exile in the Gramola	45
Bachata de lejos	47
La casa de cita & Guests.....	49
 <i>"Who am I...?"</i>	51
Mulatto on the Border	52

In a Texas Tech University Parking Lot.....	53
Rhyme 'n' Sample.....	54
Mishmash Vernacular	55
Exiled Tongues	56
Silent Idea.....	57
Search for the Unwritten.....	58
Evidence Typing	59
Risky Art.....	60
Reflection.....	61
 <i>"An epoch will come..."</i>	62
While at a House Party in Kuwait	63
Bodhgaya.....	64
Unfortunate Priorities/The Master's Trick.....	65
Make Heads Nod, Not Throb.....	66
A Ghetto Pantun Anthem	67
Hollowed Acapellas & Soundscapes	68
Keep Ya Head Up.....	79
Curriculum Vitae	80



*...families fall to pieces, and many a brother
never see his sister nor father the son.*

—George Lamming

Bulletproof Vests & Bibles

—*South Bronx* 1992

At dawn, after Dad's prayer,
before he buttons his white shirt,
settles his skinny black tie,
he slowly slides the vest over his head.
It's a short ride down the parkway
to the city, where he stands at
the pulpit, lifts his open Bible
towards the chapel ceiling, looks through
his glared glasses at me in the pews,
tells the congregated we're safe
guarded by the lord's word, adjusts
the vest strapped above his waist,
—while I keep eyes wide for guns
unsheathed, *God so loved the world*
Dad wears a bulletproof to preach,
God so loved the world
Dad wears a bulletproof to teach,
God so loved the world
I press the Bible to my chest
& pray this book is bulletproof.

The Driveway

— *Amherst New York 1996*

On nights like this, when it rains
slow, me 'n' Dad would tiptoe
outside to sit in the minivan
together, recline listen to gravity
pour down from heavy clouds,
until he began to snore, & I
woke up morning
next to an empty driver's seat.

Heirlooms

—for Tammy & Amber

'Cause my daddy was a flirt, he'd flirt
with every pretty lil' mami in sight,
with any cute lil' mami in sight,
 he'd coquet the girl at the bodega,
the woman at the coffee shop,
 the stewardess on the train,
the waitress from the Dominican restaurant,
even the secretary at the church,
& their cheeks would turn red,
& they'd moisten
their lips, & I'd be right there
—the most beautiful half Jew baby in Sunset Park—
carried by Daddy in my baby back pack,
chubby smile on my face, silky afro
melting these women
who couldn't help but run their fingers
through my curly hair, & kiss on me
& say ¡*Que caramelito más lindo!*
& pinch on my cheeks,
& Daddy would get kisses,
& I would get kisses!
showing me the meaning of life
is to get a lot of kisses,
& we would both be happy
on the way back home.

'Cause my daddy was a flirt,
when I got older
we'd leave my sisters & stepmom
at home para hacer "diligencias,"
I never knew why

my stepmom would get mad, would always
be mad slamming pots & pans,
looming in the dark, brooding
in that sticky kitchen
with the piled up dishes, & my sisters
with their braids half undone,
would block the front door with their bodies
'cause they wanted to go on diligencias too,
they wanted to go for a ride with Daddy too,
they wanted to help choose fruit at the bodega too,
they wanted to be there with me & Daddy,
& maybe, after all the errands were through,
we'd stop at Burger King
for some Happy Meals—
my sisters wanted to be happy
from Daddy they wanted
kisses, they wanted to feel
Daddy's itchy beard kisses
on their cheeks, they didn't want
to stay at home angry
or learn how to slam pots & pans
around a dark gloomy kitchen.

'Cause my daddy was a flirt,
he'd take me to his girlfriend's house
—the one with the big booty—
who had a daughter my same age,
& lived just outside of Riverdale,
where I'd recite Michael Jackson's lyrics
for them—*Mama-say mama-sah*,
& sometimes break
dance in their living room,
& sometimes they'd tell me
to play hide 'n' seek with her daughter,
& I'd go hide in the closet
where she'd find me,
& she & I would sit there
looking at each other,
listening through the wall
to my daddy & her mommy

playing games of their own
in the bedroom next door,
& sometimes, in that musky closet,
under forgotten coats & scarves,
through the thin fabric of the dark,
my left hand would not know
what my right hand was doing.

'Cause my daddy was a flirt,
my stepmom got mad
when my real mom came down
to visit our apartment
for a whole weekend,
she was mad
when his girlfriend from work came
to pick him up, & all
three were standing
in the same door way together:
Mom, Stepmom, & Dad's girlfriend —
I didn't think there was anything wrong
with having a woman in every doorway,
with leaving a woman in every doorway,
with having every woman in the same doorway,
I didn't think there was anything wrong
with my sisters being sad,
'cause they got no kisses from Dad,
'cause their mom was always so mad.

'Cause my daddy was a flirt,
'cause his daddy was a flirt,
'cause his daddy's daddy was a flirt,
I'm leaving my lady at home in the kitchen
so I can go handle a few "diligencias" of my own
but she's slamming pots & pans,
she's slamming pots & pans!
& I haven't talked to my sisters in years.

At Dasman School

—*Kuwait City 2009*

Pops—we don't need to talk, we're the same—even our noses
flair at the same time, in this desert heat, down these white
halls—you introduce me to colleagues in hajib & dishdasha:
your poet-son has returned, & though I never sent you any of
my poems—you still tell them my first word was "pizza."

"Colored" Fountain

—Remembering innocents

While listening to Bing Crosby's "White Christmas,"
road tripping through a Jim Crow downtown,
little Sheryl, wide-hazel-eye dreaming,
face pressed up to the rear car window—
made Grandpa Louie pull their Ford Fairlane over to the curb
'cause she had seen a sign—with black letters
above a white tin box, against the wall
& imagined hues of red & purple, shades of blue & green
tumbling out in a water-rainbowed-arc,
pouring from the box's metal nozzle—toward the sky
she hopped out of the car, into the street, a Jewish girl
chasing colors—

Hasta la tambora

Our friends en Cristo Rey call her Bomba 'cause they never seen a Jewish woman dance merengue with such explosive grace. Back when the clubs were open 'til 'round eight in the morning, most of us would be tired from too much dancing—already eating a breakfast yucca con cebolla on the other side of the deejay's booth, but as long as the perico ripiao was still booming, Mom would be on the dance floor moving her feet like it was the last time she would ever move them—shouting gibberish into the air, *Wepa! Ahora sí! Pa que lo sepan!* & when the music was real good, like if the deejay was playing Fulanito, she'd dance like an African tribal woman in a fire trance, causing everyone to stop whatever they were doing, knowing that something was unwinding from inside her—that something was there in around her every step, & through her—a frantic energy filled the room which pulled us back to the floor where she'd fling her arms & hands above the crowd her spirit rejoicing, the party starting all over again.

Last Wish in the Age of Suspicion & Paranoia

—for Mom

You want your ashes spread
out over our lil' plot
in Puerto Plata, I imagine myself at JFK
tryin' to get you past TSA X-ray machines
& how I'd probably get caught up
in some type of ethnic profilin' just 'cause
of my brown beard & olive complexion,
they'll think I'm an Osama
connection, a terrorist 'n' throw me
in one of their dark interrogation closets
force me, to explain those little metallic pellets
are just remnants of your dental work,
& not components for an explosion, or that
the powdery substance isn't the PETN stuff
Umar the "Underwear Bomber" tried use,
& most likely, I'd glance up at them confused,
then over to your urn with a shrug
the same lil' kid as always,
lookin' to your green eyes for answers.

Point of View

—for my Palestinian family

Wajdi caught polio in the West Bank
as a child, I'm not sure if he threw rocks
at Israeli tanks or if the PLO ever tried
to recruit before he immigrated
here to the dream, to the rhythm
of his limp, sold roses on street corners
in Commerce, Pampers at flea markets
in Arlington—I used to spin a dradle
underneath Mom's dinner table,
stare at his brown boots—the left too big,
barely filled by a scarred skinny leg,
the other too small under a calf conditioned
to support the entire weight of his body
—& all of this—while Mom admired
his dark moustache twisting up at each end.



You live long enough, everyt'ing wi' happen to you.

—Maas' Nattie

Three Shkotzim

—*Dallas Texas 1990*

When Firas & Samer first flew
in from Palestine, they were around nine.
We all looked like brothers, with lopsided afros
(they didn't even know what pizza was!)
but after only a few days, I had taught them —
the pillars of American life: the Moon Walk, Michael Jordan,
& that NES Contra code for 30 extra lives, while they taught me
to say sharmuta. *Sharmuta! Sharmuta! Sharmuta!*

Holiday B-Ball

I dunk like Jordan.
I pass like Magic.
I shoot like Bird.
No you don't!
Yes I do! Yes I do!
Whatever, no you don't!

On Halloween, after a day of playing hoops—we'd run home for empty pillow cases, knock door to door so our neighbors could fill them with Now 'n' Laters, Tootsie Rolls, Snickers, or whatever—we just wanted candy, but for anyone who gave us Wax Lips, plastic spider rings, or anything healthy, we'd drop three stink bombs on their welcome mat, & run like hell.

On Thanksgiving, Nihaya would serve baba ghanoush with pita bread & stuffed grape leaves in front of the TV. During *Saved by the Bell*, me & Firas would fight over the last chicken neck in the maklouba—then cross the apartment complex to the b-ball courts where Samer would show us how he could almost dunk.

I dunk like Jordan.
I pass like Magic.
I shoot like Bird.
No you don't!
Yes I do! Yes I do!
Whatever, no you don't!

On Christmas break, I'd visit Dad in New York. Have a Christian vacation with my sisters, stepmom, & all of my crazy cousins—in the kitchen Abuela would say, *Mijo, tu piel*

parece café con leche, & I'd say hers was like plain café, while my five year old nephew, in the living room by the tree, with his raspy sandpaper whisper, told the family of alligators swimming under his bed, & of how he'd beat them over the head with his b-ball when they slithered out from underneath.

Little Babylon Soldier

*...No, we aren't too ashamed to prod celestial beings
into our machines.*

—Yusef Komunyakaa

...Hey Lil' Man,
put that ball down—
Money Bags got a new toy
for you to play with now,

it has a little trigger,
& makes a loud sound,
just sign your name bigger
you'll be king of the playground.

Now go tell your mama
you'll be home soon,
forget her tears & drama,
her voice & perfume,

you're going overseas—
where black smoke looms,
out in the Middle East—
my commodity is crude.

Down in that sandbox,
it's all a bloody game,
just like your Xbox,
point your toy & aim,

shoot through fire showers,
pack away the pain,
forget about the hours,
nigga, I own your name.

Now go tell your mama

you'll be home soon,
in one shape or another,
body bag to the tomb.

Press Continue®

*—Remembering the good ol' days
when my gun was made of grey & red plastic
& didn't have no bullets.*

Playing Contra is nothing
like going to war —
you dash & buck shots
dodge & gun 'em down, get bigger
guns, one that sprays an arc
of ammunition, you live & you die,
you live & you die,
you live — & *you*
die, just to press Start
& fall out the sky, a shooting
commando, a smoking remote
controller, a manipulator of colors
in a box, sitting in your pj's
next to a bowl of Cap'n Crunch
always advancing,
but it's not like moving
into a war zone — using
the Konami Code:
↑↑ ↓↓ ←← →→ (B) (A)
SELECT START
gets you life, after life,
but in life, playing contra is nothing,
not like going to war.

The Passing

—for Eric H.

There's no need to go
to the cemetery to feel
left behind, no need to run
fingers across engraved cement, or
lie in grass channels
between the tombs, to lay crosses,
flowers, or light candles, no need
to pour out a little cognac, or leave
trinkets by the tombstone, I still
remember us climbing
the tree outside your house,
& how we used to bend its branches
back, amazed they never broke.

Going Home

There are raindrops like ice
cicles piercing cheeks
beneath these eyes,
lines of hard tears
bogged in time—my
brittle fingers burn numb
in this con-vexed world
of twisted branches,
naked to their frozen roots.

Psalm for the Downtrodden

If you can hear me, if you know I exist, show me a sign any manifestation will do,
a faint gesture, a tiny hint, even a glimpse would be fine with me
'cause things haven't been going my way lately, things have never gone my way at all.
See I'm a poor Dominican, I'm a poor Jew, & since I'm here, I'm a poor American
too—searching for an inkling, a fiber, a tinge, anything to tell me there's more
to life than this toiling, hustling, stressing back 'n' fourth, getting no place quick.

I don't have to walk on water like Peter, & you don't have to heal my withered hand,
restore my sight, cure my leprosy, resurrect me like John the Baptist. I'm not asking
to walk on water, I'm not asking to walk on water, I'm not asking to walk on water,
I'm not asking to walk on water—

Dominican Jew Dust (Remix)

brown
yesterday
 i am
brown
today
 i was
brown
always
 i never been
even
still
beneath
ground
 again

Triptych Vision

*Been such a long time gone...
my memory draws faded pictures.*

—for Nihaya, Flossilda, & Sheryl

—Hugh Masekela

I can see my mother in her silk robe,
face framed with a black flower-
embroidered hijab, working through
the kitchen, her hands are glossy-wet,
prepping tan chickpeas for a blender
that'll whirl them into thick hummus.

I can see my mother in her deep blue
Salvation uniform with red epaulets,
she's sitting on the couch, brushing out
my youngest sister's curls, nearly breaking
the comb, urging her to sit up & stop playing,
No me hagan tarde pa' la iglesia! Our home
scented with cooked salami & queso frito.

I can see my mother, red towel wrapped
around her head like a royal turban,
her bata de casa nearly touching the ground,
white feet against the burgundy carpet
as she flows around the apartment, turning
things over, looking for her Tito Puente CD,
not knowing I have it playing
in my Discman, through my headphones

As I walk this motherless desert.



*In the morning the city
Spreads its wings
Making a song
Of stone that sings.*

—Langston Hughes

Still Dreaming

Sun-spliced blinds
shred light on
tan tangled sheet
'round leg of
natty bald spot
pillow head—dread,
awakening from
a wakening rest
while sunk in bed
for five minutes more
before the unknown
—unfolding

Rest in Peace

Gunther died in my apartment, I think. Not everyone agrees. My neighbor Pepita from across the way says his body was cold when EMT's pulled him out that night on a stretcher into the ambulance... Bochín tells me Gunther made it to the emergency room & passed the next morning by the side of his son—which I don't believe 'cause Bochín owns the building & needs to rent the space out regardless of where a man died.

After I peeped the balcony, saw the view of downtown, & the smoke over Juárez, I decided to move in from my old spot, despite who might have died where—plus, perhaps channeling a spirit from the other side would help my writing. Gunther had already been gone for six months, long enough for his soul to go wherever it was going.

I didn't think it mattered much, that he lived there completely settled for thirty years, that his lungs had cancer, plus trundled his oxygen tank through the rooms & lit cigarettes while at the edge of his life—I didn't think it mattered much that the apartment was more than lived in, possibly died in too.

I just couldn't figure how to negotiate the nails he knocked in the sky blue walls. He had spent who knows how long hammering those metal pins into

cement. Many of them curved out of shape, caught between the pressure of the hammer & wall. Nevertheless, it was his will to work them in those specific places, & how could I pull them out, undo what he had already done? How could I hang my own image on a dead man's nail?

Gunther lives in the iron radiator during summer, so silent I forget he's there, until with winter comes the cold tapping on those pipes with his Zippo, but only after they're warm enough to steam, will he drift out in vague moldy clouds over my bed, looking for a cigarette & some rest—waking me down, waking me down.

Bloodlines Waiting on News from Juárez

We stand here on the edge
of the world, remembering
our other side: Abuela
sculpting adobe, the wrinkles
of her husband's eyes, us
with our primitos playing
traviesos at night, of course
we still remember, how could we
forget? Afraid now when
the anchor announces another
three shot dead, bullet shattered
windows, a person's tia laments,
padres, madres, hijos! We
stand here on the edge, looking
into that world of lights.....waiting

Down a Sidewalk

I follow a trail, drops of blood
gravity splattered, weaving me
through cells in a concrete vein,
imagine finding a head split,
open cranium of gold-ore,
an epidermis punctured
at the end of this rain,
arc of life curbed in
burgundy pools.

Downtown El Paso

This Mexican Koreatown of dollar stores
funnels border crossers to three sodas for one buck,
to chile frosted corn elotes in Styrofoam cups,
to plastic Batman tanks, & ten pound belt buckle
soldered horses, statues of one-ply toilet paper,
& pointy alligator skin boots, they come in hoards
juggle chile stained fingers against Korean
merchandise, pass through smoke at the foot
of Chihuahuan hills, because ancient costumbres
are hard to break, like skin tight jeans on big booty
manikins, like metal fences with barbed wire
shopping bags shredded sideways into the gun
powdered sky, like the retail & wholesale
of Selena blankets & cartel marijuana.

Allowances

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts...

—Jean Toomer

Where the destitute roam around cardboard
quarters, I drink from a cup of foam. Guilt
seeps through my goose feathered bubble, as I
see him draped in a frigid gray donation
blanket, teeth chattering. I'm close enough
to smell his piss stained clothing, close enough
to see morsels of something in his beard.

While Mom's five bucks bulges the fabric
of my FUBU, I feel for my cell phone
waiting on vibrations from home.

To the Dude with the \$150 Pair of Air Jordans

You're only as rich
as the poorest
dusty foot baby
in Niger.

Song for the Hard Work Beggin'

—*Everybody's broke, even the government*

Beggar Man, Beggar
Man, you brown like me,
I give you a dime
you ask for three.

Beggar Man,
you back 'round,
with that same sad story
'n' that broke down frown?

Beggar Man,
you smell like gin,
I seen you stumblin'
since before you walked in!

Beggar Man,
go get a damn job,
all this work
& you still look lost!

Beggar Man,
this just ain't cool,
you askin' me for change?
I was just gonna ask you!

Beggar Man!
Beggar Man, what?!
You waitin' on Obama?
The Stimulus gonna save you? Fix you
a better mañana? Maaaaan!

you better off livin' with your mama!

The Saint of Stolen Clothing

—for my fellow UTEP MFAers

He'd leave you with two mismatching tube socks & a long john like it was nothin', you'd walk right into Nickel 'n' Dime Suds & not even notice mO chillin' by the Pac Man machine—one eye bigger than the other—sizen' you up. If he saw you even with a tiny bit of studder, you were gettin' robbed! He'd wait 'til the spin cycle was through & then, when you'd turn for some change & that bag of Flamin' Hots—he'd just take your clothes right out the washer! Fua! You'd come back to a holey pair of Hanes & a Habitat for Humanity t-shirt like *Damn! Where'd my shit go?!*

The Nickel 'n' Dime employee wouldn't know nothin'. He'd just wipe his hands on his apron like *We're not liable for your stolen garments bro.* & the other customers wouldn't care as long as their comforters were still tumbling warm in circles. Sure, they'd look around a bit—not for your velour FUBU sweats, but out of fear for their own doo-rags & saggy boxers, yea—their eyes would be wide as the machines mO left empty.

It would be too bad too, 'cause by the time the five-o got there mO would already be home, color coordinating your clothes in outfits for himself—with you probably not being able to tell exactly what he took in the first place. Ooh—you would be helplessly mad, picturing some random dude getting your

threads all shitty, spilling cranberry juice on those Abercrombie shorts you wore the first time you got some, or wrinkling that Makaveli button up you wear to church with your mom on Sundays. You'd want your clothes to come back too, to suddenly resurrect themselves in that empty washer, & for a second you'd think it was possible mO would have a change of heart—maybe you'd get down on your knees in front of the gum ball machine, pray he'd come back with your Mecca nicely folded in a tight bundle, but it would all be in vain. Those fabrics you liked to wear on your back would never return on their own, & mO would never feel the guilt you wished he'd feel.

His stealing was God's work. Took the idea of Jesus dying for our sins real serious, thought it'd be messed up if Jesus died for no reason, so he stole, & stole, & stole so much he had a self storage container at the Easy Lock on 36th & Bogart filled with all kinds of other peoples gear—I'm tellin' you, it looked like a bootleg Urban Outfitters up in there! It was his only sin. I mean, the dude was still a virgin! Being a thief was his only fetish, & his lust for the clothes on your ass was his only way of giving God reason to send his son down to die here on earth like the rest of us. So no, there would be no way he would come back with apologies or your purple turtleneck.

By this time, the cops would've already told you there'd recently been a string of robberies of this sort in town, that they suspected thieves to be selling the clothes to swap meet vendors who'd then smuggle them through Mexico down the "Ruta de Ropas Robadas"—an underground passage where garment trafficking cartels transit fresh gear to maquiladoras in countries like Nicaragua, Guatemala & Honduras, where laborers then de-thread & re-

thread them into new fabrics which supply companies like Gucci & Prada via the “Underground Fabric Trade” where la jura has no jurisdiction—& you might believe this harebrained story & become infuriated thinking your De La Soul hoodie was gonna enslave poor people whose labor would increase profit margins for companies like Eddie Bauer & Calvin Klein. Finally, if you built up enough courage, you might leave that laundry mat with your pajamas on to scour the streets & find those clothes by your damn self.

You’d get home sad & broken to see your closet hollow & wide in the vacío of your stolen clothes, Mom would probably stop watching her telenovela to ask what was wrong, you’d break down, confess about the Flamin’ Hots & the empty washer, about the “Ruta de Ropas Robadas” & the maquiladoras, about Eddie Bauer & J. Crew, & everything would be quiet surrounding the sound of your sniffles. Then, with her hands out stretched towards the ceiling she’d say *Praise the Lord!* Gloria Dios, you wouldn’t know why, but she’d praise the Lord, while your left hand would be in your pajama pocket teasing a knot of lint.



*Come, my love
We have mountains to climb
Wilderness to wander... oceans to sail*

—Saul Williams

Me, My Girlfriend, & Pablo

Me gusta cuando callas...
is what I told her, closed
my eyes, venus flytrap
so she could disappear
como ausente
that's when she slapped me,
her five fingers a marc
across my cheek,
I said: you know what?!
Let me give you a kiss
que... te cerrara la boca
she opened it,
said I was selfish,
pushed me away
so hard she sat me down,
standing over me
—right now, see baby
you're lookin' like
la palabra melancolía
I said: this has to stop,
this *has* to stop,
'cause I love you,
I love you,
I love you more
when you're not around,
where your words can't reach me,
when you're not
como quejandote,
man, she just looked at me
as if I was crazy, her eyes
like two spinning galaxies
—I was waiting for her to laugh—

like always when I play the fool,
but her silence was

de estrella, tan lejano y sencillo

so I said it again:

me gusta cuando callas...

distante y dolorosa...

me gusta cuando callas.

Domestic Dispute

He says—
but I love you!

She says—
no you don't!

a car passes by the window,
a bird flies over the roof—

The Sights off Rim Road

I remember her in her white linen
summer mini skirt & four inch stilettos
leaping to grasp a twisted mesquite
branch, pulling herself up that tree
at Tom Lea, in El Chuco, at night, I
remember her furious laughter, the blue
flame in her eyes as stilettos rained
bark down from above

into my eyes, making me tear
up, I remember elbows & knuckles
wrapped around branches, her struggle
to position herself on a limb, silhouette
of the Franklin Mountains behind us,
warm breeze tickling our skin, strands
of hair in her face, I remember she
triumphantly swings her legs,

with one arm outstretched
asked for the pack of reds, smoke rising
up over her face, my eyes still stinging
as she gazed out from between the leaves
over Juárez, their street lights
like flickering candles, while I with my eye
stuck in a half way wink, looked up
to see the unexpected—

Soledad

Al amanecer
amanezco,
lento, lento, lento
como el viento
que entra por mi—
—ventana
que me canta,
que me canta
con su melodía
de melancolía,
que me acaricia,
que me acaricia
con pasos
de frescura húmeda,
y que así mismo se va,
se va, se va
sin sonido
llevándose mis respiros—

Coro desde Nueva York

Este frío no me refresca
como tu Boca Chica en el
verano, como tus ojos,
dos gemas de larimar
que siempre ando buscando,
entre montañas verdes
que rodean mi memoria
guardo, el reflejo
de tu piel por siempre
como ámbar oscuro.

Exile in the Gramola

Deep set under brow, her eyes are a bruised gaze rough
as coral her whispers scrape in, ramble towards—she taps her finger
on my chest, pulls my shoulder to eye level,

Etoh epañole son racita...

downs her apple juice like a shot of Brugal.

Cuquito, UASD dropout with bumpy cornrows & hazel eyes is bartending
& deejaying at the same time. All his CD's are scratched, but not *La Chupadera*.
He plays "Voy pa 'lla" on repeat, serves Yenny another juice.

Voy pa 'lla, voy a buscar...

Some Spanish girls tipsy in a corner with crispy-curled hair
add too many steps to bachata, look like they're tap dancing, a foot stumbles
out of a red pump. Mulatto tigueros seen it all before:

Así me gutan manito...

Yenny rations words like secrets, but too loud; her tuteo sprinkles my cheek:

¿De dónde tu ere?

*¡Bueno, mi madre eh de...y mi padre...pero
soy bachatero de puro sepa!*

Tu ta loco chacho...

...¿Eh verdad?

Imported through Madrid, Presidente doesn't taste like at the Chimichurri
stand in Santo Domingo, a bottle falls to the ground & shatters.

*¡Coño! ¡Deje mi familia y mi novio
pa tar limpiando de tra de eto
puerco! ¿y tú? ¿tu tiene tu papele?*

...Bueno no...no, eh que...toy aqui de...de vacacione.

Yenny's on the clock for five more hours, grabs the broom
—sweeps up the glass shards, demands more juice.

Bachata de lejos

—Desde aquí pa' lla

Quiero despertar junto
a una canción como tu —
que canta los sueños
de tus ojos dormidos,
que tiene la melodía
de las pecas en tus mejillas,
que me lleve a Boca Chica
como las esquinas de tu sonrisa,

Quiero despertar junto
a una canción como tu —
que contiene la vida
de tus suspiros al amanecer,
que cuente una historia
como el hueco de tu diente
quebrado,
que me jale
como tus lunares,
que siga el metrónomo
de tu corazón,

Quiero despertar junto
a una canción como tu —
con el coro
de tus caderas sincronizadas,
con la vibración de la bocina
de tu ombligo,
con las notas
de los dedos de tus pies,

Quiero despertar junto a ti
aunque solo sea una vez — mas.

La Casa de cita & Guests

—Madrid España 2009

He came, he looked,
Oh Yenny where are you?
Where is she?
 Can't find her,
 can't find her
so he climbed up—up to the mountain,
& there on the mountain
was a mountain woman,
she was strong—big teeth,
strong—big teeth,
but he got scared,
I don't wanna touch it,
don't wanna touch it
'cause her mountain brothers
would eat me up—Deliverance! Deliverance!
so he went down the mountain,
down into that house,
into that damp moldy house
with the rotten frame,
& there she was—Yenny,
Yenny didn't have no brothers,
didn't have no daddy,
didn't have nobody,
she had lost a lot of weight

Wait, wait, wait, wait!
Oh Yenny I miss you,
I miss you Yenny,
where are you?
My body aches,
my mind aches,

*every time I think of you,
Yenny, Yenny, Yenny, Yenny,
Yenny, Yenny, Yenny, Yenny..."*

Yenny was a worker,
she worked every day,
every night,
she'd work, work, work,
then she'd get off of work,
leave them moaning,
& be depressed, her
eyes would cry,
no tears were shed,
her eyes would cry,
but no tears were shed.

*Where were you Yenny?
Where were you?
What made you cry
without crying?
What made you cry
without shedding a tear? Yenny,*

*we don't know,
but your bowl-legs just turned
us on, & your ass up in the air
just made us craaaazy!*

*you were crying Yenny,
where are you Yenny?
Where you been?*



*Who am I if not you?
Who are you if not I?*

Mulatto on the Border

—for the world's border crossers

You got to know
how to hang on
both sides, live both
lives, & peep the lingo.

In a Texas Tech University Parking Lot

In-between exhaust
pipe dreams, we face
sun's-wake, shape half moon
round Shaman's sage,
fire, feather, listen in that
silence behind closed eyes
await, our chance to be
healed before English
class begins. *Git yer Guns up!*

Rhyme 'n' Sample

— *A brief lesson*

Off tha top cop boom box,
bump Tupac to Bach, pop
then lock, spin on your flattop
do the robot Moon Walk
in your tube socks,
flow cool old school Arawak,
tag your name in chalk on a rock,
alright stop _____ (FILL IN THE BLANK).

Mishmash Vernacular

¡Mazel tov mi gente!
I be one Jewinican Afro-mensch
with a right foot that's rhythmic
while la izquierda is stiff,
I havanegela merengue riffs,
y bachateo from el Cibao to Nazareth—
yo! Chequea el matzo,
sancocho con knish—
Im'a tostones 'n' bagle lover,
a Torah tambora juggler,
—not no “green horn,” en carnival
I rock a mascara with green horns,
Baila la calle de noche, espíritu born
to tres banderas y mas—
if the yarmulke fits,
the yarmulke fits,
scrape la güira with a pick!
raspala güira with a pick!
Y ame como sea que hables
—sound the claves.

Exiled Tongues

*Took us away from civilization
brought us to slave in this big plantation
fussing and fighting among ourselves...*

—*The Abyssinians*

En la frontera, I am the absence of
frontera, a walking microcosm of ethnicity
sloshing in a pool beneath my brown
skin—I'm you! white man, black man,
brown man, yellow man, I've been all
of you since I was a drop of sperm swimming
in Mama's womb, I was already you!
Mr. Divisionary, you want me to hate
myself, to not see myself as a whole,
you want me to kneel to your twisted
fantasies of beauty in the magazines,
on the TV screens, through the internet,
you say: *Beauty looks like rib bones
under pale skin an empty cage. Beauty is
pelvis bones protruding like elephant ears.*
& I ain't hearin' it. You can't divide or conquer
the chosen sons & daughters of every sacred
name striped from Cape Town to Jamestown!
We're tuned to our Ancestors like phantom
limbs to the cadence of the drum, we've been
kept away for so long our exiled tongues
have forgotten how to pronounce their names.

Silent idea

A short pencil is better than a long mind.

—Kings X Larry

Wanna risk losing that thought?
Do you really? Fine then, just sit there
plush, don't move a flip
flop or look at your note book next
to the TV, don't even lift a pencil.

Search for the Unwritten

There's this poem,
not *this* poem,
another poem
that lives
in *this* space,
a quiet poem,
so sacred
it don't make a word,
not even a sound.

Evidence Typing

— *Affidavit to the detective*

Underneath cracked nails,
a thin frantic film
of skin hangs pressed
between black dirt
 in the hyponychium,
revealing the assault more
vividly than his fingers can type.

Risky Art

Eventually the point arrives,
where theories can no longer help,
where the ideas of our predecessors are of no use,
where you can no longer read up on “how to start a poem,”
or on “how to end a poem,” I don’t know how or when,
I know only how it feels to walk the tight rope
without a safety net below.

Reflection

How embarrassing to be found dead,
seated limp naked on a toilet, crumpled
wad of tissue in hand, having never
scrubbed that scummy bathtub
or toothpaste crusted sink—
kinky twirled pubics left tumbling in the breeze
of strangers' footsteps, bathroom door left open,
baggy boxers hollow where legs had been
in the threshold of a bedroom, "All Eyez on Me"
playing on repeat over messy sheets
by mounds of ripped jeans & stained tees
with slogans like *It's better to die on your feet...*
Linty purple towel lying in a corner
next to a dresser full of indecipherable receipts,
a picture of Mom, Jewish, waiving her Dominican flag
from the rim of the Grand Canyon,
scattered red, black, & green beads,
a box of Philly Blunts for hidden ganja bagged
by that dorky Casio calculator watch still ticking
underneath dirty tube socks splayed
across a new wooden floor in which
you barely got a chance to see your own reflection.



*An epoch will come when people will disclaim kinship
with us as we disclaim kinship with the monkeys.*

—Kahlil Gibran

While at a New Years House Party in Kuwait City

I'm waiting in line to go take a piss, where this dude at the front is rapping "It Ain't Nothin' but a G Thang" out loud to himself with hand gestures & all, pretending he's 90's music video Snoop Doggy Dog, from under the brim of his Yankee fitted, looking towards my brown face & beard, *Where you from bro?* I ask, thinking he recognizes me a compatriot recognizing him, out from behind a few Kuwaitis, he tells me he's an American, I say: *Oh really?! I'm from the states too!* He obviously can't hear me, & starts to explain he's *from a place called Ar-i-zo-na, close to the border of Mex-i-co*, & I say: *yea? I used to live there too*, but I still don't think he hears me, all this 90's rap is playing so loud, 'cause now he asks me how I've learned to speak "American" so well. An expression of pure epiphany appears across my face—I've just witnessed a miracle in this endless bathroom line, Moses splits the Red Sea, as I imagine dunking this sharmuta's head in the toilet to be *nothin' but a G thang, baaabay*. Role of the pixilated gangsta' character tattooed to both of our souls.

Bodhgaya

Inside a club, bodies mesh
together dancing—amuck
by the deejay's booth,
three soldiers fist fight,
in one of the restrooms,
two people make
love, a couple cockroaches
sneak along the ledge
of the bar, in a corner
a barefoot-mini-skirt-girl,
mascara tears down her cheeks
outside, a circle of peeps
rap to imaginary beats
—all of them drunk
under the cipa' moon light.

Unfortunate Priorities/The Master's Trick

A sonnet "perpetuating the regime of the oppressor."

—Dr. Carter Woodson

She told me to rap a song
about police brutality in her barrio,
& the deficit in minority role models,
about poor pregnant teens,
& roaches in her kids cereal box,
about misogynistic lyrics & police brutality,
about the role of woman in music videos,
& underage drinking about police brutality,
& the resurgence of crack in the ghetto,
about the self nihilism of our people,
& racial profiling & police brutality,
& about so much more & on & on...
& I said *Woman! Is you crazy?!*
rap's about rope-chains & whips!

Make Heads Nod, Not Throb

—for Frankie

Straight from the Boogie Down
underground
comes a fresh sound,
movin' crowds from town to town—
it' all about dj's spinin',
bass lines hittin',
& emcee's rhymin' to the rhythm.

It's a culture, a culture
it *is* a culture
of beat boxin',
pop lockin',
punch linen',
spray paintin',
& freestylin', freestylin', free

stylin', see now—we're chained
down to corporate offices, usin' our
artisans to consumerizing kids,
makin' 'em' think that cars & jewelry
is all that there is, & what gets
airplay is only commercial rap,
'cause it's exactly that, a commercial
phony like dress rehearsals,

so let's just take it back
to that boom-bap
& dj's scratchin' wax,
back—to not havin' to act like killers
to rhyme on tracks,
back—to staying up late night
with sweaty foreheads paracticin' our raps!
Back—to that rec room at 1520 Sedgwick, & reinvent it.

A Ghetto Pantun Anthem

The yellow awning is trimmed with red,
on this corner unfolds a bodega scene,
chillin' are the hustlers, rhymers, & dreads,
Cash rules everything around me—scream!

On this corner unfolds a bodega scene,
Lil' Man, with shell toes & a flattop pop locks,
Cash rules everything around me—scream!
& the boom box rattles, the boom box rattles,

Lil' Man, with shell toes & a flattop pop locks,
people pause, laugh, toss change, & pass—on,
the boom box rattles, the boom box rattles
as blunts fade back into smoke & ash

people pause, laugh, toss change, & pass—on,
watchin' are the hustlers, rhymers, & dreads,
as blunts fade back into smoke & ash,
the yellow awning is trimmed with red.

Hallowed Acapellas

—for Langston Hughes & The Last Poets

Hallowed Soundscapes

Intro: We Ain't the Only Ones

...& we *still* love to watch niggas die,
we love to watch niggas kill—other niggas
I thought you knew,
I thought you been known,
 black folks ain't the *only* niggas,
 black folks ain't the *only* niggas,
 black folks ain't the *only* niggas,
I thought you knew—

...Raindrops
pour down on
a city street,
sounds of
swooshing cars
envelop a
somber djembé
drum sanja
rhythm...
—*slow fade*—

Track 1: It's What They Turn Us Into

We got Mexican niggas
 gettin' gunned down on the border
 by drug cartel turf niggas,
We got Israeli & Palestinian leaders
 slayin' dialogue & their nigga people with walls, bombs, & retaliation,
 —this is our land niggas,
We got Iraqi & Afgani niggas,
 torn by their own niggas,
 ripped by teen American *the military is my only way*
 out the hood niggas,
We got Guantanamo Bay Detention Facility niggas,

...Random
gunshots creep
in from far off
distances,
growing
louder—they
blend into a
full out frantic
drum & bass
rhythm with
heavy bass line
syncopated to
the voices of
children
speaking
Arabic—
poly- rhythmic
waves splash
against a ship's

tortured by water boardin' niggas
who say it ain't torture to nearly drown a nigga,
We got Somali pirate niggas,
abductin' Carnival Cruise niggas,
for burlap sacks filled with US dollars that fall
from clouds in parachutes niggas,
We got ideological media niggas,
I don't know who to believe
makin' us dumber by the minute niggas,
We even got poor white niggas,
economic depression
Cash for Clunker niggas,
We got—no health insurance niggas,
our health is not insured my niggas,
my niggas..... my niggas..... my niggas.

Track 2: Enter-tame-men'?

We glorify watching niggas die,
we're infatuated with it,
we pay to watch niggas go down—
on pay-per view,
in steel cages,
full contact kick to the temple—death.
We hope a nigga dies,
it's in our blood
to be silent murder—witnesses,

hull, from
where on board
rubber soled
shoes can be
heard
squeaking on
deck, while
laughter
tumbles out
slowly fading
into the sound
of crumpling
money
& many people
coughing
in a single
breath—placid
waves continue
stirring/
trickling...
—*slow fade*—

...As if at a
ringside event,
the jabbering of
fight goers,
is interrupted
by one deep
baritone
bellowing *Are
you ready to
rumble?!*
riding the
heavy
apocalyptic
trap set

We go out of our way,
make u-turns
hopping to see body's scrambled in twisted metal, but don't lend a hand
'cause we might get sued for tryin' to save a nigga,
we adore watchin' mutha' fuckas die,
We want niggas to die,
ever since the invention of tools, we were stereotypical cavemen
niggas bustin' each other upside the head
with clubs that looked like turkey legs,
& we loved it,
& we still love it,
we thirst for it.
We let—Jesus get crucified,
even made a movie out of it
so we could pay to watch him die again,
even if he did rise—& came back
he'd get crucified all over,
'cause people don't believe
intelligent life can come from any other place in the universe,
we don't believe in aliens' nigga,
matter of fact, we barely believe in life at all.
Roman niggas—
built a coliseum
just to watch slave nigga gladiators get their limbs shredded
by nigga rhinos & nigga gators,
& 50,000 niggas would cheer at the entertainment,

breakbeat of
"Mama Said
Knock You
Out"¹ spinning
at 45 rpms
scratched in &
over a shriek of
mangled
metal—the
clank of an
abrupt prison
gate slams shut
echoing
away into the
distance
across a faint
chorus of pre-
Babel whispers
layered with
guttural
movements
from the backs
of throats...
interrupted by
the thumping
of nails
hammered
into thick wood
& voices
conversing
in Aramaic
to the sound of
a single cello
weaving a note
around a
bubbling Hindi
tabla rhythm
under a
smashing
thunder of
applause.
The chaotic
chiming of
many dancing
Paiute ankle
bells
converge with
the clicking of

clap in amazement

when a nigga's head got popped off.

Native Americans is niggas too,

we gave 'em blankets wrapped in small pox just to kill them niggas off

& thanked 'em

like the hypocrite niggas we were,

& still are.

That nigga Rafael Trujillo, feeling to whitewash Hispañola,

slayed Afro-Dominicans & Haitians

for poor Castilian pronunciation

of the "R," can you say perejil nigga?

Can you say peregrinación nigga? Can you say perdición nigga?

Since 1911, during the Mexican Revolution,

affluent cattleman & rancher niggas on rooftops overlooked

Spaniard-Mexican niggas & Indigenous-Mexican niggas

blasting each other into dusty Gatling gun oblivion

while eating crumpets & clinking tea cups

above the spectacle of niggas gettin' killed.

Xhosa
tongues
—deejay pauses
music—

...A juniper flute
eases around the
sizzling sound
of a rapidly
burning fuse—
canons
explode one by
one, looped
into Irving
Berlin's
ragtime
"Spanish
Love" at 76
rpms until the
record needle
breaks
scratching the
album, & all
sounds are
interrupted by
silence...
—slow fade—

Track 3: Heir-looming

We can't be blamed, it's in our blood

passed down through the centuries,

we got this killin' moving through our veins—circulatin'

to the rhythm of our nigga hearts beats—today,

in fatigues, we creep on school campuses, unload

...A lone
heartbeat
accelerates in
thumps
blending to the
shuffling of
text book pages
& the tap of

semi-automatic weapons on unsuspecting students
 studying for final exams—
 since I've blasted so many fools in my video games already,
 since the school's quarter back made fun of my death black nail polish,
 since Daddy had guns under his bed with the triggers off safety,
 since Wal-Mart provides shotguns
 but don't sell no music with profanity,
 since the hillbilly at the gun shop was too lazy
 to conduct a background check,
 since nobody took my threatening e-mails seriously,
 since my English teacher didn't tell anybody
 about the scary shit I've written,
 since nobody could see from my [Face]book
 that I'm a depressed-angry-at-the-world mutha' fucker,
 since I got bored,
 since we're allowed to make up any damn excuse we want
 for killin' a whole bunch of clueless scholarly niggas.

chalk chaotic
 against a
 blackboard
 until the
 heartbeat
 becomes a bass
 line to lyrics in
 heavy Jamaican
 patois—
*Everyday when
 we wake up it's a
 gunshot/ when
 you hear gunshot
 a bust you better
 get flat², as the
 lyrics end the
 heartbeat-bass
 line gradually
 arrives at an
 awkward
 unsyncopated
 arrest...
 —deejay
 scratches record
 violently/sounds
 of chaos—*

Track 4: Flags in Place of People

We got footage & pictures to prove it—
 tragic YouTube viral clips
 get millions & millions of hits.
 We are obsessed with re-experiencing catastrophic events,
 we conduct video shock treatment on ourselves,
 we tape our eyelids open & brain wash ourselves,

...The voice of
 a 9/11 YouTube
 video narrator
 retelling the
 event is
 drowned under
 a plethora of
 voices that one
 by one
 converge into
 an aleph of

we want to be numb in memoriam
of death & killing—

We plant 2,740 American flags in pristine green lawns every September 11th
as if we wanted to trade these lives for 39¢ flags,
as if makin' extremists want to kill us was the patriotic thing to do,
I already remember,
I don't need to see it happen again to remember,
I want my cousin Angelito back,
I wanna blaze up another joint with him,
I wanna hear him beatbox so I can kick a freestyle again,
I wanna hear him tell me I shouldn't quit my day job again,
I wanna slap him upside his nappy head for saying that again,
I don't wanna see him hop on his skateboard or kick his way towards
the city's horizon—afro eclipsing the sun
between those two towers again.
I already remember,
I don't want no fuckin' flag.

YouTube
posts—
all clips ever
uploaded are
heard at once
in many
indecipherable
layers, when
suddenly a
new space
unfolds like the
page of a book
turning—a
channel opens
up, & a young
man is heard
beat-boxing
into the palm
of his hand as
wheels of a
skateboard
clack-clack
against a
concrete
sidewalk
rolling into the
absence of light
& sound...
—*deejay*
abruptly scrapes
needle off the
record—

Track 5: "Gimme the Loot"

But the mortician only gets paid when a nigga dies,
& we got graveyards full of the dead
so we can recall that them niggas is gone,
we give em' gifts, flowers, & trinkets

...The metal
point of a
shovel scrapes
an incision into
the earth—
the broken
earth is
monotonously

we award them for dying, we shed tears of joy,
while the mortician gets richer every day,
he sings & we sing
hymns of death.

We sing songs 'bout killin' niggas,
we rap 'bout killin' niggas,
we buy albums 'bout killin' niggas,
we talk 'bout niggas who got killed,
we 'bout it 'bout it niggas,
We got soundtracks to movies about killin',
we watch movies with niggas gettin' killed in em',
we seek death out wherever we can
'cause killin' is a huge industry,
& niggas get paid from nigga deaths.

Interlude: Business as Unusual

I wish poetry was as lucrative an industry as death,
with all these poems, I'd be rich nigga, killing
is a business,
an extremely profitable business,
with a wide & deep product line that includes, but is not limited
to: bayonets, hand guns, ammunition, land mines, rocket-
propelled grenades, bombs, missiles, military aircraft, military
vehicles, military ships, biological warfare agents, & electronic
systems that enable us to kill niggas with increased precision—

heard as it is
taken up &
thrown in
mounds by the
side of the
widening
hollow, which
kicks up subtle
vibrations of
cloudy dust—a
shakuhachi
flute plays in
undulations as
many people
marching in
line fall
thumping one
by one into to
the hollow
grave hole—for
each body that
thumps, the
bell of a cash
register drawer
can be heard as
the drawer is
opened &
closed, over, &
over, & over, &
over again ...
—*slow fade into
interlude—*

...Analog fuzz
from a
television,
microphone
feedback from
an amplifier,
a busy
telephone
signal, a dial
tone, the
revving of
engines, & the
tapping of
computer keys

Though every nigga we know already knows how to die,
we still research & develop how to kill more effectively¹!
we even kill ourselves to study death in its entirety²

converge into a
tone similar in
essence to the
frequency
emitted from a
television
screen on
mute...
—*slow fade*—

CLARIFICATION:

cocolo, honkie, spick, gusano, chink, afro-saxon, bunga, wop, onion
head, coon, gook, oreo, rag-head, kike, wetback, or any other racial
slur may be used in place of &/or seen as synonymous with the
word “nigga.”

...Silence ...

Hidden Track: Positive Possibility

I wish I could
give this poem life
with life, turn the poem
like a plot of humid soil,
press a finger in

...“Mellow
Mood pt. 1”³
eases dim from
fuzzy speakers,

over a seed, watch it root
towards the burning core
alive under the sun
of some inner city
garden, have it cared for
by ex-cons with tears
tattooed in the corners
of their eyes, & red & blue
bandanas tucked half out
of their back pockets,
have it nurtured by free people
given another chance
at life, like I wish
I could give this poem —

revolving at 45
rpms—its
bassline pours
thick like
molasses, as
guitar strings
trickle in
around a gentle
continual high
hat tap setting
a calm
meditative
metronome like
a barefoot
slapping
ground to set
pace, while
deep violin
chords
crescendo
similar to
feeling a
swelling of
tears in the
chest—as
thrashing
leaves under a
scrapping rake
emit earth
sounds & other
blessings heard
when the
mental state is
completely at
peace with
everything &
everyone.
Suddenly the
song has the
pungency of
patchouli
leaves...
—*slow fade*—

Outro: Re-growth

I wish community gardens were as lucrative
as death, I wish living were more profitable than killing
...on earth as it is in heaven

Ebe Yiye³! Ebe Yiye! Ebe Yiye!

Āmīn-Aum-Amen

...the sounds of
many children
playing/
laughing...
—slow fade—

Shout-outs From the Emcee:

¹ Subjects of this research include, but are not limited to:

Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, Che Guevara, Emperor Haile Selassie I, Lucky Dube, Huey P. Newton, Fred Hamton, Sam Cook, Marvin Gaye, Emmitt Till, Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, Tupac Amaru Shakur, Christopher “B.I.G.” Wallace, Jason “Jam Master Jay” Mizell, Raymond “Freaky Tah” Rogers, Brandon Lee, John Lennon, Phil Hartman, Dimebag Darrell, Carl “Alfalfa” Switzer, Aaron Sinegal, Eric Hancock, Selena Quintania...

& feel free to add as many names to this list as you want my nigga
or insert your own name if you’d like—

...“Redemption
Songs”⁴
—slow fade—

² Auto-subjects of this research include, but are definitely not limited to:

Walter Bejamin, Earnest Hemingway, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Yasunari Kawabata, David Foster Wallace, Eleanor Marx, Vincent van Gogh, Ian Curtis, Kurt Cobain, Vince Welnick, & that nigga Adolf Hitler—

³ “It will get better,” a saying coined by the Akan people of Ghana, & championed by American poet Sonia Sanchez.

Shout-outs From the DeeJay:

¹ LL Cool J: “Mama Said Knock You Out.” *Mama Said Knock You Out*, 1990.

² Shy FX & T Power: “Everyday.” *Diary of A Digital Soundboy*, 2007.

³ Barry White: “Mellow Mood Pt. 1.” *Can’t Get Enough*, 1974.

⁴ Bob Marley: “Redemption Songs.” *Uprising*, 1980.

Keep Ya Head Up

Anything could fall out the sky right now.

Curriculum Vitae

Roberto Alejandro Santos was born August 7th, 1981 in Sulphur Springs, Texas. He is the only son of Roberto Santos and Sheryl Santos-Hatchett. Roberto began his career in higher education at Bakersfield Community College in California, where he received a certification in Business Management and began a retail clothing business named Illustrious Apparel. Roberto then majored in Spanish at Texas Tech University, where he received the opportunity to study abroad in Seville, Spain. After graduating Magna Cum Laude in 2006, he entered the Bilingual MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso. While there, Roberto served as Vice President of the Bilingual Creative Writing Student Organization, worked as an Editor of *The Rio Grande Review*, taught Expository Composition, Introduction to Creative Writing, and English as an Upward Bound, Valle Verde Community College instructor. From his MFA program classmates, Verónica E. Guajardo and Trent Hudley, Roberto inherited the Barbed Wire Open Mic Series, which he organizes and hosts the last Saturday of each month. His poems have been published in print and on-line in publications such as the *Rio Grande Review*, *Multicultural Education Magazine*, *BorderSenses*, *Newspapertree.com*, and *EP Culture Beat.com*. Roberto is a recipient of the Marc and Pam Bernat Scholarship, and has performed his poetry and conducted various writing workshops for the El Paso community during his stay on this historic border.

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This thesis was typed by Roberto Alejandro Santos in the Palatino Linotype font.