

NUYORICAN POETRY

An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings

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Introduction: Nuyorican Language

// For the poor New York Puerto Rican there are three survival possibilities. The first is to labor for money and exist in eternal debt. The second is to refuse to trade hours for dollars and to live by your will and "hustle." The third possibility is to create alternative behavioral habits. It is here that the responsibilities of the poet start, for there are no "alternatives" without a vocabulary in which to express them. The poet is responsible for inventing the newness. The newness needs words, words never heard before or used before. The poet has to invent a new language, a new tradition of communication.

The first choice: my mother and father arrive at a feeling of safety when they find themselves dutifully employed to a Mr. Frisk or the Goldwater Memorial Hospital that provides them with a salary. María, my mother, has been working ever since I was born and she plans to keep on working. She feels safe when she works. She feels proud. She is entitled to honor herself and her husband and her children. María is eager to live. For many years she cut leather for handbags to be sent to Miami for sale in luxury hotels. María was so responsible, so fast, so thorough, so on time that she always got whatever overtime there was. Her boss, Mr. Frisk, loved her. He even tried to seduce her, but María was virtuous. At last she felt the need to leave, I never knew why, but she moved her HOURS elsewhere. Once María found a job in the dietary department at the Goldwater Memorial Hospital, she was determined to climb the ladder. She set out to compete. She took on the night shift: 4:00 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. She never missed a day. She became assistant to the assistant of the Head Assistant Dietician. She worked with precision during many crises. She is now assistant to the Head Assistant Dietician. María's hours are still the same. She goes in rain, snow or sleet. She is important in every way—but her take-home pay is only \$135.00 a week. Her live planet hours have been richly worked but very poorly paid. She is into the tense struggle of keeping housed, clothed and fed. She lives in eternal debt. She works to survive without embarrassment.

The second possibility is living by risks, risks of all types. There are people who will comply with a renegade's law: cheat, lie, strike, kill, deal, sell, buy, rob, cut, choke. Once there is no respect for the system, the options are numerous but very dangerous. Many rules establish the field of action that is permitted. Whenever one of these rules is broken, there is serious institutional action taken against the offender. You can either comply with the law or grab the moment. Take over a building. Go downtown and argue for the deed of ownership. The Renigades of Harlem are doing it. They risk having to learn how to pipe a building, how to gut it, how to build a roof. They risk in order to construct the life that is happening to them. The second choice of refusing to trade live hours for dollars is a choice of endless varieties. The streets are where the game is played. The consequences of street games are totally unpredictable. If you get caught, you must pay. It is true that when you get caught there are plenty of people involved in the same act as you. Yet the fact is that you (not the other) got caught. You become an example—a correctional threat to those not caught. In other words, the second choice is to get out there on the streets and "juggle" without getting caught. Joey's mother struggles with raising a family by selling food in the park. John hustles coke. Meanwhile the street cliques are involved in a transition from organized street hustling to coordinated alternative street government.

The poet blazes a path of fire for the self. He juggles with words. He lives risking each moment. Whatever he does, in every way he moves, he is a prince of the inner city jungle. He is the philosopher of the sugar cane that grows between the cracks of concrete sidewalks. The poet studies Che, Don Pedro Albizu Campos, Mao. He carries the tension of the streets in his mind and he knows how to execute his mind in action. The past teaches the young to juggle all the balls at the same time. The poet juggles with every street corner east of First Avenue and south of Fourteenth Street ending at the Brooklyn Bridge. Poetry is the full act of naming. Naming states of mind. The

rebellious, the contentious, the questioning personality wins out. And poetry is on the street burning it up with its visions of the times to be:

Now only our tomorrows
Will tell if that arrow
of love with a head
of art penetrates into
higher dimensions.

("Sad Will Be The Nights
If The Planets Will No
Longer Shine" by Lucky
CienFuegos)

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

Ismael Rivera is "*el sonero mayor*" at Joey's house. The troubadour among troubadours is the man who sings the live sweat pulse of a people. Ismael's words are about the island, his mother-in-law, his love, life. Ismael is Nuyorican rhythmic communication. Stripped, Ismael is the clean, unspoiled voice of Puerto Ricans both in New York City and the island of Puerto Rico. He is the passionate historian of both worlds. His record sets the tone of Joey's mother's two birthday parties in one. Latin music presides. Everybody dances. The eyes of those who sit dance. The room is in motion. Exhausted factory muscles ripen into joy. Children watch. The sawed-off dungarees, bobby socks, beach caps and lightly shaded shades move nonstop. Beer everywhere. Nuyorican life goes on in spite of the eternal debt for which there is an eternal hustle. Joey's sister is dressed in

black on platform shoes. She spins. She moves to the joy of her own birthday. Joey's mother passes colder than cold beer. I am settled. The record changes. The rhythm is Pacheco now. The children see everything. The risk is total involvement. The party costs as much as it costs. The need is to meet the cost and get into debt wherever necessary. A birthday party must be celebrated. Joey's mother spent her actual cash on the cake. She took the beer from la bodega on credit, potato chips provided by her sister, candles for the cake left from last year except for six that Muñeca brought with her. Joey's mother plans to sell "*frituras*" on Sundays to make up the money. She is nowadays a little afraid of the park because she was robbed last week.

Nevertheless, she'll make up this debt. The party has to be paid for because she'll need to do it again next year. She lives by risks and that means that she might be caught. Getting caught means getting arrested in the park for selling "*frituras*." If arrested she'll be removed from the flow of street life. However, to risk and not get caught is the law of the street. Most people manage it. Joey's mother is risking it all.

To stay free is not theoretical. It is to take over your immediate environment. Who owns the building in which you live? Find him out, then deal directly. Who is willing to talk his way through the legalese that puts wrinkles on the tongue? Roberto Nazario is willing. He can chew a Municipal Housing Authority contract right down to its bold deceits. So let's take it by steps. If you do not settle for selling your hours for pay, then you must juggle. If you juggle, you can do it for the moment. But there are juggling acts that can stick beyond the day's rip-off. The Renigades of Harlem, an upper Manhattan street clique, are juggling with contractors, electricians, plumbers. They learn skills as the needs make themselves felt, so that as the work on the building grows so do the native skills of the members of the Renigades. Roberto is on the streets night and day supplying information: where do I get a plumber, an electrician, a plasterer? He always knows. He works in the Lower East Side but he learns in East Harlem. The energies are dispersed but the

effort to collect them is on. The alternative is the doing. The Dynamite Brothers (a lower East Side clique) rehabilitate their adopted building. They will do whatever is necessary to own, manage and repair the dwelling. Roberto in turn will chew on a mountain of legal conceits like a rabbit on a giant carrot.

But struggle is a hustle and the struggle-hustle is experienced as a shifting balance. Sometimes you can get away with it, other times you get caught. Sometimes you drive for a week without a license and then you get stopped because the rear lights are out and then you get two tickets in one throw. Sometimes a Dynamite Brother can pull a series of hold-ups and get away, yet doing the next—the easiest pull-off—he gets caught. Roberto is saying legalize your "risks." If you protect your community, he says, it will defend you when you need it. If you threaten the community, it will turn you in. People who build their own housing will want to protect it. Roberto sees this clearly. Communities are united by small actions that return the law to the people and inspire them to trust each other.

The rehabilitation of a building on East Second Street by the Dynamites awakens the respect of the people who see the clique at work day to day. You survive by examples. You survive in the doing. You survive by gut will. If the Dynamites defend the people, the people will love and respect their right to establish the LAWS of the community.

Laws control behavior. But it is a choice that people make. If laws destroy a community's sense of safety then the laws are not purposeful, not if they make people vulnerable rather than strong.

A clique (a New York street clique) is a group of people who offer each other safety. Safety in numbers is nationalism. Nationalism is mutual protection. The clique can be small or large. Large nationalist cliques (ITT, Dupont, Chase Manhattan Bank) protect and define their laws. A small nationalist clique is any city gang that is geographically located in a particular neighborhood or city block and protects its laws. The purpose for wearing colors, designing a flag, or having an

anthem is to develop an identity. A city clique needs to have a geographical identity as inviolable as that of any nation formally recognized by the UN. But above all a clique offers protection and a sense of "national safety" for its immediate members. Once survival, street protection, is shared by a group of men and women the next step is to assert their collective will again and again and again. Roberto teaches that to adopt a building is the next elementary concrete collective gesture to make.

Work together and paranoia will be diluted. The Dynamite Brothers meet the Renigades of Harlem and the message is work. The mood is humble. Logy, Supreme Vice-President of the Renigades of Harlem, speaks about the commitment to build. The Renegade Brothers perceive the will that has brought the Dynamite Brothers to 119th Street. There is a force, a pull to cohere. Chocolate, a Dynamite, speaks from his guts because he, when in need, finds help without fear among the Renigades. Shorty speaks about taking over the fate of the Puerto Rican in the city. Roy, Supreme President, speaks about having started the Renigades in 1972. He talks about the growth of consciousness from street clubhouse rumbles to concrete decisions about rehabilitating buildings. Roy explains how the police didn't think there would be enough ingenuity. But a chute came up. The dirt, bricks, metal debris came tumbling down. The police ridiculed the idea. The police doubted, doubted, doubted. They doubted beyond doubt: "They can't do it, they don't know how." But the fact is that the Renigades can now teach the Dynamites how to hustle in the housing survival struggle.

Logy's logic is simple. The Dynamites put work into the building, the rewards for the work are clear: clean, warm, secure housing owned by the Dynamites. No landlord, no check going out to management agencies that do not provide the services they are charging for. Logy speaks the Shaman wisdom of our city tribes. Supreme Vice-President Logy speaks the words of a visionary. Logy is a poet of action. His metaphysics is to do and then see the consequences. His clear, clean pride in what he is doing

arouses the purest impulses in the Dynamites. Everybody feels the simple love and truth in him—the Supreme Vice-President of the Government of the Streets. The marriage is on the way and 119th Street has married Second Street and the results are a possible coalition government: The Dynamite Renigades.

The next day the Renigades continue their work and the Dynamites initiate their construction. The work at first is slow and there is no existing language to express the feelings and work to be done. Language and action are simultaneous realities. Actions create the need for verbal expression. If the action is new so must the words that express it come through as new. Newness in language grows as people do and learn things never done or learned before. The experience of Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York has caused a new language to grow: Nuyorican. Nuyoricans are a special experience in the immigration history of the city of New York. We come to the city as citizens and can retain the use of Spanish and include English. The "naturalizing" process for citizenship does not scare the average Nuyorican into learning English. But pressures of getting a job stimulate the need to master a minimal English usage. But really it is the English around you that seeps into your vocabulary. Everything is in English in the U.S.A., yet there is also a lot of Spanish, and Spanish is now gaining. The mixture of both languages grows. The interchange between both yields new verbal possibilities, new images to deal with the stresses of living on tar and cement.

There is at the edge of every empire a linguistic explosion that results from the many multilingual tribes that collect around wealth and power. The Nuyorican is a slave class that trades hours for dollars at the lowest rung of the earning scale. The poems in this anthology document the conditions of survival: many roaches, many busts, many drug poems, many hate poems—many, many poems of complaints. But the complaints are delivered in a new rhythm. It is a *bomba* rhythm with many changing pitches delivered with a bold stress. The pitches vary but the stress is always *bomba* and the vocabulary is English and

Spanish mixed into a new language. The power of Nuyorican talk is that it is street rooted. It is the way people talk in the raw before the spirit is molded into "standards." Any Nuyorican mother shopping for food in La Marqueta on 115th Street is capable of delivering herself of beautiful, original talk:

- 1) dame half pound de chuleta
- 2) aceite, bacon, una matita de recaó y un container de leche.
- 3) un momento Mister, no speak to me de esa manera. /

Nuyorican is full of muscular expression. It is a language full of short pulsating rhythms that manifest the unrelenting strain that the Nuyorican experiences.

Communications between Nuyoricans and the city institutions are very strained. It is mostly caused by distrust. Language breaks down easily between institutions and those laying claims on change and newfound strength. Step by step trust can be found. But it is not a balanced trust. It goes on and off: for example, Deputy Fire Chief John Hart is in the East Second Street firehouse protecting himself and his company from a City Hall investigation about a woman who died in a fire on Fifth Street. The company stands at attention. The Dynamite Brothers are standing outside. Deputy Fire Chief Hart wants to know how it came to be that "the woman's apartment blew up in flames after the fire had been tamed?" We are listening and the paranoia level rises as the firehouse lieutenant asks for privacy. First the large mobile door is lowered. We then knock on the office door. A burly, rude lieutenant growls, "Go away, come back later, just go away." Slam! We wait. We are angered and humiliated. But we wait. We wait for the Deputy Fire Chief. We discuss storming the place, stringing the Fire Chief out of the fifth floor on rotted cotton candy rope. We feel the pressure to fight. But we wait. We wait courteously. After a long time, the deputy comes out. We had waited and now is our chance.

Kool: May we have a word with you.

Deputy: What do you want?

Kool: We want to talk with you.

Deputy: Please give your complaints to the Firehouse Captain.

Kool: We're not here complaining, we want to discuss some things with you and your men.

The fire bells go off. Everybody moves. The Deputy Fire Chief has to go. But he makes a date with us. The time is set for six-thirty the same day. We agree. Later we are asked to go to a meeting elsewhere so we change the time to six-thirty the next day.

We arrive. We have been talking a good part of the day both about the lot down the street that we want to make into a park and the meeting with the Deputy Fire Chief. We know we are in two worlds. Deputy Fire Chief Hart speaks English. We speak Nuyorican. But we're ready to move to a point of understanding. The first fireman to speak warns us just to be "out there" and "open," to come out with all our grievances: "Just let it out, come out and name your complaints." One of the Dynamites says, "We're not in for a long rap about what we've done." The first fireman insists that "we have to have it out in the open." The Dynamite repeats that "the hostility between us is not the point of this meeting. We are here to discuss a needed change in our relationship with Chief Hart. The Dynamite Brothers are ready to work with the firemen, but we need their help in return. We are not here to complain." The worry wrinkles fall off each fireman's face. Chief Hart looks astonished. But we know that trust between us goes on and off. One of the Dynamites says: "We would like to acquire legal possession of the lot down the street. We are willing to clean it up. We could use your help." Nuyorican and English are running neck to neck. Both sides are being respected. The feelings of both parties are not in static. We are feeling balanced. The Dynamites and the firemen move into a coherence. Chief Hart looks at Captain

Docherty. He snaps into recollection: "That's the lot the city offered us for a parking lot, but we never got to make use of it." The Chief looks pleased. One of the firemen consents to pitch in and work. All of the firemen finally join in consent.

Two languages have met. We talked and understood each other. The outlaw meets the institution. The outlaw discovers the community needs him! "Our fighting is over and our work has just begun. This news I bring you may be hard to believe, but the day has come where the Dynamite Brothers and Sisters are here to help." (From *A Letter To The Community* by Kool, Supreme President of the Dynamites.) The community feels the change. The people's trust grows as the news travels. The need for finding safety is always present. The Dynamites' new image sends vibrations of goodwill throughout the neighborhood. Kool's announcement has traveled through every apartment on the block.

We will protect your homes, your stores—protect them from being robbed. We will protect your kids from getting in trouble like the ones we were in. We will stop violence among ourselves. What I mean is that you (the community) should trust in us so that we can trust in you.

A new day is born.

∞ A new day needs a new language or else the day becomes a repetition of yesterday. Invention is not always a straightening up of things. Oftentimes the newness disrupts. It causes chaos. Two languages coexisting in your head as modes of expression can either strengthen alertness or cause confusion. The streets resound with Spanish and English. The average Nuyorican has a working command of both and normally uses both languages simultaneously. Ordinary life for the Nuyorican happens in both languages. The factory laborer reads instructions in English but feels in Spanish. Thus he expresses responses to the conditions of his environment in Nuyorican. The standardization of a

street-born language is always perilous and never easy. Around existing, formally recognized languages whole empires of rules grow. Rules and regulations about speech are conventions that grow (at first) as patterns of self-expression which become fixed in usage—so that as all of the rules and regulations that spring from street usage become established patterns, a body of "grammatical rules" will correspondingly evolve. The evolution of a grammar is slow and at first always a suspicious process for two reasons. The first is that a language that grows out of street experience is dynamic and erratic. There are no boundaries around it. There were no boundaries around the languages that came together in the Iberian peninsula many centuries ago. It took English a good thousand years to establish itself as a formal, regulated tongue. It takes time to have disruptive, tense, informal street talk arrive at an organized respectability. Nuyorican is at its birth. English nouns function as verbs. Spanish verbs function as adjectives. Spanish and English words are made to serve the tenses of existence. Raw life needs raw verbs and raw nouns to express the action and to name the quality of experience. It is necessary to guard against the pressure to legitimize a street language that is in its infancy. Imposing a system of usage on Nuyorican would at the present time stunt its childhood and damage its creative intuition.

The second problem in evolving rules around Nuyorican speech patterns is that if they do not legitimately arise from the street people, the rules and regulations will come from outside already existing grammatical patterns that are not new but old systems of rules imposed on new patterns of speech. This will not do. The risk is on. The Nuyorican will have to continue to express himself without "legitimate rules" to govern his speech. We have to admit that speech comes first. We first verbalize the stresses of street experience and then later, in the aftermath of our street survival, we will sit and talk of our newness and how to shape it.

Get rid of the fruit that is spoiled
before it rubs off on freshness.

(Starling, the cook at Project
R.E.T.U.R.N.)

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Nuyorican Village
New York City

PART I

OUTLAW POETRY