

INTRODUCTION: By Way of Sharing Perspective

In this sector of the planet (misnamed the *Americas*, subplotted the state of *New York*, polybureaucratic into a city by the same name), anybody can cop a halfway decent nickel bag and call it smoke. Can walk into any one of the numberless politically-connected, gangster-installed (quote, unquote) *variety/ grocery/ health food* stores, talk through the partitioned plastic-covered (bullet proof?) counters, pay the youngster playing hookey, and walk away with a gamble. But the herb will not be *Yerba Buena*. Not as good, not as real as what they grow, smoke up, ship in from Turkey, Arabia, Iran. Not as mean as what used to be smuggled back across the demarcation line by South Vietnamese traders moonlighting as generals of the army, authorized by CIA field reps to use Airline America in supplementing their isolated incomes.

Back then. Before smoking dope was eased into New York lawbooks (minus, of course, the corresponding statutes on distribution, quality controls & income taximus), three and four hungry lips could do in one joint and be lifted for days (as the saying goes). And even that was a suspicious brand.

But today, more than ever, aerosol chemicals are sprinkled over pounds of dirt to add the kind of kick that can send your innards into crouching pain. Dust. Powder. Moisture sprayed to eat away young and growing braincells that might have held the key to feed an entire nation, now locked up and smothered somewhere inside a fifteen year-old brainwave of silent questions left unanswered behind the veil of smoke. Gnawing at you!

The same is true with books. The word. The strength. The guidance. The story. So much can be gotten from one single book. One page. One image. Clear, concise, powerful dares singing into the ear, recorded through the eye. The meaning of one word expressed has been known to cause men to double up in tears, women to rise up against the abuse of their worth, and children to dream the possibility of doing, Yes! learning, Yes! trying, Yes! Until finally, when we are confronted with our true worth, cowards must become warriors or face their defenses in the knowledge of their streak; talkers must become doers, or make the adjustments to their sham, their shame, their loss for life; searchers have to find themselves, have to recreate worlds out of misery, or remain still standing on line; and the poet, thus given birth, arrives to overcome the complexity of thought or betray the people's gift.

On the one side, there are millions on top millions of pages no longer available; hidden in vaults, collecting dust on a Vatican shelf; scrolls as ancient as our sweat listed in the *Index of Prohibited Books*, kept from the purview of the people until such time as the facts contained therein no longer threaten the controls over the people's minds. We become slaves to the images fed. We remain slaves from the information withheld. The path to our liberation can only be realized when knowing it all.

Confronting us, however, are volumes upon volumes of lies, distortions, half-dented misinformation pushed into us every day in articles, tabloids, classrooms, at cocktail parties, on lecture circuits and billboards.

Columbus discovered America, when the maps he used were taken from Ghana, the people he met already thriving, and the word for the land wasn't even anywhere near the sound of that name.

These people are backward and savage and innocent. We are forced to save them into slavery, when, in fact, the Cherokee, Aztecs, Mayas, Olmecs, Zimbabweans, Azanians, "Aegyptians," all had built pyramid structures for prayer or burial *after* they had built their cities, established their civilizations; all had understood the concept and application of pi (meaning: to have struggled through a more sophisticated level of mathematics); all had applied forms of knowledge completely unknown to the conquering invaders, those thieves and moneymongers, who themselves were known by the Chinese throughout the centuries as being *barbarians*.

Interesting to me, the Boricas (los borinqueños), whom my research indicates were probably *Caribs*, prayed before *el cemi*, a pyramid-shaped altar in the center of the village circle. Meanwhile, Columbus and 100 of his men were stranded on the island of Jamaica, in 1504, and did not even know enough to hunt or fish, but instead depended totally on the local Arawaks for survival. The same as with the pilgrims in Massachusetts, who in their first year here (1620), had to be taught to hunt, plant, fish and celebrate the harvest; they turn right around and kill their teachers, then incorporate into the national character a day of feast to thank the giving/ or rather 'taking' of the land.

All men are created equal, automatically omitting all women, while cutting down on the use of these superfluous words: *All (paletoned mutatto) men (who might pass for northern europeans) . . .*

Just yesterday, the same, the very same preyed on Alex Haley's debts, turned the work of the documentarian into a profiteered soap opera distorting the story of a people enslaved. Black Studies separated from Caribbean Studies separated from Puerto Rican Studies separated from History, Sociology, Science, Math, English Lit., when not one of any can correctly learn to appreciate the full value of our total aspect, our single self, the multisided gathering of knowledge used blatantly to separate each clan from the tribe of Africa. A mainstream of lies continues to produce schizophrenic youth. And no one in academia is being challenged into changing the curriculae.

On the other side, the poet exists, the warrior rises, the people continue reaching out, furthering our breathstruggle. The legacy that is our own; Cato in the Carolinas, the man turned slave made into rebel and martyr-leader; Gabriel Prosser, Cato's preaching brother insurrecting in Virginia; Tecumseh, the prophet/unifier readying to cleanse the entire land from war; Denmark Vesey, he who could have died in comfort, chose to plan conspiracy with the rest of us instead; Alexandre Pushkin, exiled Afro-Russian, daring poems to speak conviction in the people's tongues; Frederick Douglass, cutting words into echoes of conscience; Ramon Emeterio Betances, the poet/doctor living and rising against the slave/master spaniard; Lola Rodriguez de Tio, Puerto Rico's armed poet woman song author of the anthem before it was rewritten; Segundo Ruiz Belvis, murdered by star and stripe in Chile before he could buy the guns Lares cried for; Crazy Horse, plunged blade in the back stopped his warrior thirst for freedom; Emiliano Zapata, who held the spirit of revolt against the U.S. annexation of Mexico; William Edward Burghardt Dubois, the researcher synchronizer theoretician documenting it; Paul Robeson, the artist remaining true to his responsibility against all odds; Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, the collector of as

much of our story as he could get his hands on; Malcolm X, the convicted voice, paid guns fired before more of his words could flow; Pablo Neruda, Chile's proud poetheart who died at the hands of gringo dollars bought the fingers that squeezed the triggers at Presidente Salvadore Allende; Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Pedro Albizu Campos, Ho Chi Minh, Agostino Neto, Hubert Geroid Brown, Lolita Lebron, Nicolas Guillen . . . poets and warriors and so many others not known, not found, not remembered or recalled . . . from Watts, Harlem, Soweto, Jayuya, Ponce, Yara, the Dakotas . . . everywhere a city under siege, a country under domination, the poets and warriors searching and sharing, inspiring a thought here, a moment to consider there: we are possible! We exist!

In the middle of it all, it is hard enough to learn enough to want enough to sneak out of work one day and find the 'right' college lecture hall to hear about those sacred testimonies that have left a trail of hints on the genius of our strength; much harder still to use the clues in search of corroborating the possibility of tomorrow. Today is rough enough. And yet, in this sector alone, there are hundreds of small groups, penny squeezers all, who search the spirit force of our own worth: singers, miners, artists, welders, thinkers, farmers, changers looking for each other, turning over misconception as they grow.

One earth. One ocean. Many rivers, many drops, many lives rolling into that one single continuum of conscience. Our own energy as deep as wide as necessary as the spectrum of our differences and commonality of desires. For who would be a slave, a servant to another, less than what is altogether in fact, in existence?

On this side of the planet wall, the land mass has already been defined. Ameriopeans do not discuss their crimes; do not face up to and correct the distortions they teach. Manifest Destiny never meant to stop at the border, California facing the Pacific. The hemisphere in its entirety was the first half of that dream, and *all* of that much has been taken, and *all* of that much comprises the arena for contention. Who will rule? The people or the rich? The laborers or the corporations? The value of ourselves or the principles in a bank investment?

From this one land mass, once called mother feeding her fruit, runs a stream into that ocean. And from her womb springs the caretakers who grovel with the word earth leaves them to tend. Among them, those who would not be governed into condition, but who seek instead to realize how accountable we are, how interconnected we are, each recording the actions to which we commit ourselves. One such droplet. One such poet/worker. One such woman child toiler song spirit breath: Sandra María Esteves. And in her work is how she nurtures her psyche spirit mind of flesh wanting to contribute to the recreation of this *mess* called *world/ life/ survive/ the way to do*.

“Oye me/ que mi espiritu habla . . .”

Hear her, that her spirit speaks. She was not raised knowing who Agueybana was, had not heard of Utuado, was not instructed to understand the Outcry of Lares, or why it was that Pachin Marin, the Puerto Rican poet of the blade, died in battle for the sake of Cuba's freedom instead of bearing witness to the treason that led Marines to invade and take the island that should have been her homeland.

“ . . . Me dijo/ que la gente nacieron a ser libre . . .”

Her spirit told her that the people were born to be free. But she was born in the Bronx, raised among the tenements, “. . . amidst hills of desolate buildings/ rows of despair/

crowded together/ in a chain of lifeless shells. . .” (*For South Bronx*); a place where many are forced to live “. . . by the tickings in the belly . . .” on an “. . . isle of spit and hate . . .” (Manhattan). She was not born in Caguas,

Isla o isla mia
 en cada dia te buscare . . .
 Palmas y montañas
 amaneciendo llena del sol . . .
 (Homeland)

where palm trees and mountains are awakened each day and filled with sunlight. She was reared in a grey convent. Learned how discipline comes from a tennis racket enforcing the law against every word she spoke in spanish, age six thru teens. She did learn to draw and paint, read and write in english early, but it took her a bit longer to realize that in this hemisphere, children are made to watch their fathers hang from a tree limb, surrounded by sneers and laughter. Drunken voices sick with lust. Minds lost in greed, in drugs, in fear of the vengeance from a future generation. But these lessons are bitter to take. Still the taking of women and children, still the pain of knowing ignorance face to face, neck to rope, slave wage, and babies born in ditches because the tobacco and the cane stalks must be picked and cut and coffee beans laid to dry. The clans must be kept separated from their roots.

. . . brown men subduing brown men
 while the invisible perpetrators go free
 but remain captive to the visions . . .
 (*Report: for the National Record*)

Home/ black silence/ night
 blood
 trickling thru wastelands/ home denied
 flesh dissolving
 exotic island crying out
 liberal tongues sucking dry
 stale death
 dwellings destroyed
 (*The rain muddles against tracks*)

Yo entiendo la muerte
 que roba el aire de mi voz
 sin mano abierto y puerta cerada
 vida llena de choteria
 (*Esclavitud*)

She understands the death that robs the air of her voice. But she had to learn about the contradictions of being traded from one 'master' to another, from spanish to english, from the Caribbean to the mainland,

As slaves we lost identity
 assimilating our master's values
 overwhelming us to become integrated shadows
 undefined and dependent
 (*From Fanon*)

where everyone must cling to the tribalism of los gringos, must accept their yardsticks for human worth in yet another, stranger language pushed on slaves, molded by slave sweat, cultured in slave songs, developed upon the backs of cheap labor and soaring taxes. The slave is the only one who pays, she knows.

children are crying they have no food
 their mama's breasts stolen from the womb
 broken from the land like bred cattle
 butcher shop entrance to reality
 lincoln hospital, bellevue
 some die sick eaten alive by their own stomachs
 Biafra is not a fairy tale . . .
 (*Improvisando*)

And neither is New York, what with the ways in which we are pushed into turning losers, hating ourselves into killing our own seeds, as in, *I look for peace great graveyard*:

Bedroom wall bare stagnant water
 drenched colorless laugh
 the same voice haunting pillowcase
 the same the same I have no face
 or bones to hold my walk . . .

The meat is rotting fast inside
 my womb disintegrates in anal slurs
 hopes tied in metal flavor ribbon
 tied to kill the dream born with mother
 tied to kill the child within
 tied around my hands frozen fresh daily . . .

The further contradiction of feeling the inner clan tribal wrath from misguided *latinos* (descendants of Rome?) who refuse to give deference to those who are called traitors for daring to use *la idioma de los americanos* (as if the 'states' comprise the only America to speak of; as if spanish was our original tongue—not so. Not so.). To them she writes, "I am more than the night and day of things, a mixture of something unique. . . ." As well as in the second stanza in, *Pienso en los momentos*;

I think much of my culture
 always searching the pieces
 and more, always arriving
 close(r) to the woman that I am . . .
 (translation)

She has come to grips with understanding that "El puertorriqueno que no habla el español," becomes enveloped in dichotomy.

I speak the alien tongue
 in sweet borinqueño thoughts
 know love mixed with pain
 have tasted spit on chetto stairways
 . . . here, it must be changed
 we must change it.
 (Here)

In the same breath she is not afraid to offer the challenge. For even more complex is the contradiction that nobody really wants an obvious mulatto hanging around reminding everyone for the sins against the worth of souls taken and abused. Separate the people: Black *and* Puerto Rican, West Indian *or* Dominican, as if one could forever remain apart from the other when the music says NO! The colors of the skins say NO! The position we each suffer through says NO! The guiro (gourd), "la bruieria/ la religion/ Santeria" the batey, the azabache, "Chango y Oshun/ Obatala y Ogun/ Yemaya, Elequa Y Oya," the drums and the persecution all say NO!

But while our confusion exists, the manipulators of tribal strings keep playing the same old song: divide them up, this time by language and favor, then push each one into the other's throat!

In learning all of this, she still had to maintain some form of dignity within her craving compulsion to draw and blend her colors with sounds and push and drive and search out a reason in her all.

rainfall
 and roses blooming
 I am trying to find you
 with words that are eyes
 and eyes that are sounds
 and whispers
 of more windchimes
 blowing into brilliance . . .
 (Windchimes)

Who exactly is she?

This entire volume is adequate testimony, but, "A Julia Y A Mi," brings out much of the spectrum of her total self. Written for Julia de Burgos, a Black Puerto Rican woman, all three

in the same breath, poeta (not poetesa), a *Weaver* of songs who was driven out from among the poorer district on the island by the stranglehold that lurks over our economy to migrate and eventually drown in the warm embrace of a wine bottle on a cold street in an alien city, smothered in snow to die there. For Sandra María Esteves, Julia de Burgos has much from which to learn and clarify:

A ti Julia, ya sera tarde
 pero a mi no
 Yo vivo!
 y grito si me duele la vida
 y canto con la gente
 y bailo con mis hijas
 no soy lagrimas de ser
 soy el rio . . .

For you Julia, now it is late
 but for me no
 I live!
 and scream if life pains me
 and sing with the people
 and dance with my daughters
 I am not tears of being
 I am the river . . .

(translation)

As in this particular work, her spirit chooses to utilize two of the five tongues forced upon every living being here in this hemisphere. For she has come to know the secret, peep the holecard, many others have seen but few have shared: when you speak the language of your oppressor, you either absorb all of its values or you recreate the tongue to change each image and syllable into weapons for the people's awakening. She uses both idioms, gearing them towards understanding the power of the image hanging over the minds that are lost to superstition. We cannot afford to believe as much as know! And she searches through each word, seeking out its own force.

The eyes that she uses to measure herself include the many people for whom poems are dedicated, in addition to the many who've helped and encouraged her growth. Poets, prisoners, musicians, laborers, graphic artists, victims, initiators and sufferers who bear the brunt of the weight of crosses dumped on our whipped backs: a condition that remains until we all come to shirk off every misery, to struggle against each scar lingering until the spirit is healed and the real work begins.

There are no loose joints here. No dope. No dust. No excuses. No discussions or disclaimers on the age-old depressing argument that art must be expressed for the sake of the state. Instead, a rich, earthy, healthy series of herbal incantations that may prove useful to the strength we claim and, in having, recognize within ourselves.

Louis Reyes Rivera
 3 April 80 Brooklyn