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Face-to-Face with Loss: The Young Lords Party and the Mourning of Alterity

“They worked / They worked / They worked / And they died,” sentenced Pedro Pietri as he recited “Puerto Rican Obituary” for the first time at a rally organized by the YLP during the first take over of the First Spanish Methodist Church in the winter of 1969-1970.¹ The performance was filmed by Newsreel and a fragment of it became the opening sequence for the documentary *El pueblo se levanta*.² Pietri’s poetic performance records the lives of the abject, the countless Puerto Ricans –embodied in the archetypes of Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel– who immigrated from the Caribbean archipelago to New York in search of a better life, moved by the dreams of social acceptance and economic prosperity.³ Yet their dreams were shattered when they were the objects of racial hatred and capitalist exploitation.

¹ Darrel Enck-Wanzer, “Crafting the People’s Revolution in *El Barrio*: The Young Lords’ People’s Church,” n.d., Vertical Archive: Young Lords, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City Univ. of New York, 3.

² Newsreel, *El pueblo se levanta (The People Rise Up)*, DVD, 1971.

³ Jorge Duany, “A Transnational Colonial Migration: Puerto Rico’s Farm Labor Program,” in *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011), 81-103; James L. Dietz, “Los orígenes de la industrialización: del capitalismo de estado a la Operación Manos a la Obra,” in *Historia económica de Puerto Rico* (1989; repr., Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1997), 245-247. There are many literary works that imagine the Puerto Rican immigrant experience and among these are: René Marqués, *La carreta* (1953; repr., Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1983); Luis Rafael Sánchez, *La guagua aérea* (Río Piedras: Editorial Cultural, 1994); José Luis González, *En Nueva York y otras desgracias* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1975); Bernardo Vega, *Memorias de Bernardo Vega: contribución a la historia de la comunidad puertorriqueña en Nueva York*, ed. César Andreu Iglesias (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 2002); Emilio Díaz Valcárcel, *Harlem todos los días* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1978); Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, *Las tribulaciones de Jonás* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1984); Pedro Juan Soto, *Spiks* (Mexico: Los Presentes, 1956).

“Puerto Rican Obituary” stands as a eulogy for the forgotten, for those who have been ignored by both history and their own communities. Using common Spanish names to signify the commonality of the Puerto Rican immigrant experience, Pietri warns the people in front of him, and later the readers of the Young Lords’ *Pa’lante* when it published the poem, that these Puerto Ricans:

died yesterday today
 And will die again tomorrow
 Always broke
 Always owing
 Never knowing
 That they are beautiful people
 Never knowing
 The geography of their complexion.⁴

Lost without knowing their ‘identity’ or their place, Puerto Rican immigrants were forced to live a life of perpetual dispossession and displacement as they died without someone to grieve them. After all, Pietri’s archetypes ‘left’ this world and no one had anything to say about them, to remember them, yet “[t]hey knew / [t]hey were born to weep / [a]nd keep the morticians employed.”⁵ Puerto Rican life was defined, through Pietri, by the certainty of an unbearable death that no one challenged and in the insidiousness of repetitive violence.

Through the performance of “Puerto Rican Obituary,” Pietri both mourns the loss of those ‘anonymous’ people that were gone “[w]aiting for the Garden of Eden... / Dreaming about america [sic]” and he registers their ‘existence’ for posterity.⁶ Their names evidence their ‘realness’ but they stand as tropes of an untold shared experience, the iteration of loss in the experience of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Their names are repeated throughout the poetic performance and each repetition reiterates their inevitable and persistent death, a path towards

⁴ Pedro Pietri, “Puerto Rican Obituary,” *Pa’lante* (New York City), Aug. 28, 1970, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*

certain forgetfulness. Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel will be forgotten, left as the dispossessed excess of an empire that no longer has any use for them. Yet Pietri's poem, *Pa'lante's* publication of it and Newsreel's filming of the performance all generated an opening, a possibility to become something else and persist in memory; their history and *what* was lost in/with them could now be repeatedly heard, read, remembered and, most importantly, felt. An ideal space for belonging took form. Both a site to be, to *belong*, but also a space for *longing*, Pietri's performance underscores the confluence between community formation, absence and desire.

The force of Pietri's words moved me because his performance anticipated the themes and the emotional field that came into play with the death of Julio Roldán, a cadre of the Young Lords Party who was found dead in his cell on October 16, 1970 after being arrested and accused for first-degree arson just two days earlier. The poem foreshadowed the loss of a Young Lord to the same cold and violent political system that did away with Pietri's archetypes. His performance brought people together, face-to-face, to experience an imaginary loss that felt so real to its spectators. As his voice emanated from his small frame, they began grieving together their anonymous and forgotten brothers and sisters. Trying to grapple with what they imagined to be lost, mourning would bring them together again for Roldán's wake on October 18, 1970. His death was framed by a structure of feeling where mourning emanated from its center. Building on Raymond Williams's concept of a structure of feeling, I approach Roldán's funeral march as constituting a plane where meanings and values were actively felt while they related to systematic beliefs and forms of meaning making.⁷ Though an intricate internal process, mourning also found outward expression as an articulated emotion through material practices.

⁷ Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 132.

Grieving, hence, was the result of multiple crossings between phenomenology and ontology, an event and a process as well as a form of being that brought people face-to-face in the articulation of an ethics of alterity.

Roldán's body was originally exposed at East Harlem's González Funeral Home that Sunday when some of the Young Lords took his coffin from there, apparently without authorization from the funeral home's administrators, into the streets where they began to slowly march through El Barrio.⁸ The documentary *El pueblo se levanta* registered this moment and the people at that particular juncture seemed to stand quietly, grabbed by, perhaps, the absence of a friend, a comrade, or an anonymous body. It was a somber display of profound respect and this is what was particularly moving of the event because Roldán was only a cadre in the Party and he had joined but a few months earlier.⁹ So imagine a deep silence in a busy city like New York where the only sound you can hear is made by the wind whistling through the mass of bodies raising their clenched right fists. Or maybe, think that on the background was the heckling noise of the city, but as the coffin moved through the multitude only the breathing of those around you or the sobs of some filled the empty vastness of the landscape. This is what Roldán's funeral was (or might have been) like.

Hundreds, maybe thousands as *Pa'lante* claimed, gathered outside the funeral home to show their respects to him and the YLP. Some brought small Puerto Rican flags and they flickered incessantly next to all the clenched fists: Black Power was turned into Puerto Rican

⁸ Michael T. Kaufman, "200 Armed Young Lords Seize Church after Taking Body There," *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 1970: 26; Richie Pérez, "Julio Roldán Center Opens," *Pa'lante* (New York City), Oct. 30, 1970, 4.

⁹ There are contradicting accounts of when Julio Roldán joined the YLP. An article published in *Pa'lante* for the anniversary of his death states that he had joined during the first People's Church in December 1969-January 1970. Meanwhile, the excerpt from the Board of Correction's Report and a separate article citing Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán, both published in the *New York Times*, state that Roldán became a Young Lord four months prior to his death.

Power. The pallbearers were all male and they stood in for some of the people of color organizations of the period: Black Panther Party, I Wor Kuen, Puerto Rican Student Union, Movimiento Pro Independencia (Pro Independence Movement), Justicia Latina (Latin Justice), Los Siete de la Raza (The Seven of the Race), and the Young Lords Party. The death of Roldán facilitated a *moving* display of solidarity, both touching and in movement, across political organizations; it materialized the sentence of Ernesto “Che” Guevara quoted in *Pa’lante*: “A true revolutionary is guided by feelings of love.”¹⁰ This meeting with the passing of a beloved *compañero*, is heightened by a face-to-face encounter considering everyone at the funeral had some-body next to, in front of or behind them. The people met each other through loss, but more fundamentally they encountered Roldán’s still remains inside the funeral home and his photographed face in dozens or maybe hundreds of signs.¹¹

Emmanuel Levinas identifies face-to-face encounters as a pivotal element in his discussion of ethics. By coming into close proximity to one another, each subject beckons the other and simultaneously demands and enacts a mutual responsibility.¹² Levinas argues that behind and before any facial expression lie an inherent vulnerability that is made visible, I would expand it saying it is made sensible, by the mere exposure required from the proximity of the encounter. Nearness never quite eradicates distance, rather it marks, keeps, and diminishes it. The face of the other summons the subject to give her/himself disinterestedly in avoidance of the other’s suffering, want, or passing; it is “[a]s if the invisible death the face of the other (*autrui*)

¹⁰ Iris Morales, “Bembe [sic] en El Barrio,” *Pa’lante* (New York City), no date 1970, 7.

¹¹ I have not found any source that records who took Roldán’s photograph, for what purpose, or that state’s the photographer’s relationship to the Party.

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1996), 167.

faces [becomes her/his] affair.”¹³ The precariousness of the other moves the subject towards a common struggle for life.

It was this affective and ethical grab from Roldán’s face that I intuit became an important element in the YLP’s politics of mourning. The photograph of his face was massively reproduced and distributed so that anyone during the funeral procession could carry it. Hence, the people were brought face-to-face with Roldán everywhere they looked as the multiple pictures of his face generated a plurality of glances and resonances. The frailty of his countenance was further enhanced with how his glance was crossed by shame as it struggled to connect with its spectator and communicate the existence of trouble.¹⁴ Roldán may have been unknown to many but the proximity of his gaze opened up a space for repetitive encounters, therefore enabling the possibility of an ethics of alterity. Maybe captured right before the lowering of his gaze, the photograph presented a moment of suspension or a point of insertion in the actualization of an emotion. The tenderness of his gaze punctured the spectator and the people who carried the image through the littered city streets.

As Levinas argued, to be close to someone, face-to-face, is to expose your self and to recognize the other’s precariousness of being. I contend that, standing *besides* Julio Roldán’s body, the people gathered to honor his life and death but they were also moved by his loss to express, as stated in the YLP’s 13 Point Program, a disinterested commitment to “[fight] for the liberation of all oppressed people.”¹⁵ Their political program itself called for an ethics of alterity –of otherness– and the YLP was able to materialize their commitment to the other via the death, the funeral march, wake and posterior memorializations of Roldán. Grieving made public

¹³ Ibid., 166-167.

¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 36.

¹⁵ Young Lords Party, “Young Lords Party 13-Point Program and Platform (revised November 1970),” in *The Young Lords: A Reader*, ed. Darrel Enck-Wanzer (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2010), 11.

encounters possible as the abject was relocated in plain view and otherness became a condition to uphold. Their marching chants signaled how they hailed each other and spawned a space for the production of meaning and emotions. The people carrying Roldán's photograph over their bodies played with masking practices, simultaneously *hiding* and *calling attention* to their figures as they stood behind the face of a dead subject. Embodying death, practices of belonging materialized in the relationality between Roldán's face, their bodies, and longing the passing of a community member. Levinas' ethics of alterity was transformed by the YLP by making face-to-face encounters into a multilayered plane, not only face-to-face but face-to-body, body-to-body, body-to-image, life-to-death.

Trying to make sense of what happened and what was lost, the mourners were compelled to engage one another to feel and to understand. The encounter of a multiplicity of others resonated through the phrase accompanying Denise Oliver's article about the murder: "A warrior is dead & the people mourn."¹⁶ Mourning potentiated an encounter among grieving subjects by the identification of a commonality, the shared experience of Judith Butler's enigmatic trace – "the experience of not knowing incited by losing what we cannot fully fathom."¹⁷ Thus, we are affected not only by the parting of a dear friend, but by the impossibility to understand fully what the person meant to us, who s/he was. The politics of mourning is, thus, a powerful process to individually or collectively imagine, re-imagine, and feel bodily, ideal, and spatial remains. Face-to-face in mourning, a 'we' materializes as it imagines the various ways each subject relates to the other, mourner to mourner and mourner to corpse, in a shared space where presence and absence meet. By making Roldán into a warrior mourned by his people, a relatively stable

¹⁶ Oliver, "¡Murder!," 3.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 22.

identity was constructed and put into circulation. No longer did he stand for his individuality, but, rather, he was signified as a contemporary iteration in a long lineage of forgotten, resisting and revolutionary subjects that ‘fathered’ the Puerto Rican nation. Like Pietri’s archetypes in “Puerto Rican Obituary,” Roldán’s personal history also became representative of the lives of countless other Puerto Rican immigrants.

He was born in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico in October 27, 1936, but moved with his family to New York when he was a teenager in a period of intense Puerto Rican immigration.¹⁸ Like many Puerto Ricans, he moved back and forth between the island and the mainland. While in the United States, Roldán joined the Army as medical corpsman in 1961 and later was honorably discharged on August 29, 1963. Roldán’s affective response to what he was exposed to in this period of Army service and continuous immigration (1963-1969) was interpreted posthumously by the YLP as evidence of his revolutionary character.¹⁹ A Puerto Rican on the move, displaced and dispossessed, Roldán became an (absent) example to his community as he reminded them of their frail social conditions. The mourners grieved his and their abject displacement.

Initially, the Young Lords and the funeral marchers struggled, per Sigmund Freud’s definition of mourning, to identify *what* was lost in Roldán. Yet, the ‘*what*’ became a diffuse and incessant shift of meanings and intensities without possibility of capture other than a tenuous grab that promptly let go. Described as a warrior mourned by his people, his departure was associated with the failing fight of a nation against colonialism as well as with the defense of the nation itself. Mourning Roldán, consequently, became grieving the losses of the nationalist struggle for Puerto Rican independence. Similarly, he embodied the loss of a unified nation or

¹⁸ Julito Villanueva Roldán and Pedro Rodríguez Cosme, “Julio Roldán,” *Pa’lante* (New York City), Oct. 25-Nov. 7, 1971, 5; “Excerpts.”

¹⁹ Villanueva Roldán and Rodríguez Cosme.

how Puerto Ricans were split between their country and the U.S. through immigration. While people flooded the streets of New York to mourn his remains, they also grieved their separation from their land of ‘origin’ and their desire for return. Despite populations having moved back and forth for many decades, the irrevocability of their distance generated an irreparable loss.

Consequently, mourning was not limited to the person who passed away, to *his loss*, but it was a multi-layered and intersubjective expression of how a community came to terms with *what* was lost even when that *what* remained elusive, unknowable yet felt.²⁰ As I have showed in this paper, mourning, as event, process, and emotion makes political mobilizations possible. Loss generated a space for face-to-face encounters whereby presence and absence are both felt and understood. The death of Roldán became a key moment in the history of the YLP and their performance of an ethics of alterity.

²⁰ David Eng and David Kazanjian, “Introduction: Mourning Remains,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003), 4: “While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest,” Eng and Kazanjian argue, “melancholia’s continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects.” Judith Butler, “Afterword: After Loss, What Then?” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003), 468: The mourner cannot “work through” the ways humans “have been rendered anonymous for violence” nor how “death recapitulates an anonymity for memory” and the unfathomable is rendered as the enigmatic trace.