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The Poetry of the Nuyorican Experience; Writers Following in the Literary Tradition of Miguel Piñero Thrive in a Poets' Cafe

By MIREYA NAVARRO

"Where are my boricuas?" Anthony Morales shouted during a recent Friday night poetry slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, asking for the Puerto Ricans in the house.

The ethnically mixed, gentrified crowd at this legendary Lower East Side space may not have known it, but Mr. Morales was paying homage in his poem to the founders of the stage where he stood, to those

stoned crazy prophets of revolution,

giving poetic solutions to political pollution,

organizing rhythmic confusion of assimilation

to this untied states nation of eggs, cheese and bacon upon wakin'.

One of those prophets was the poet and playwright Miguel Piñero. He is the subject of "Piñero," a new film starring Benjamin Bratt that has put the spotlight on the Nuyorican poets' scene, which came into being in the 1960's and 70's and is still going strong as the popularity of poetry surges nationwide.

Though Mr. Morales, a 21-year-old Bronx native majoring in English and Latino studies at Columbia University, may be far removed from the heroin-infested, crime-ridden, self-destructive world of Piñero, he nevertheless belongs to the same literary tradition, born of the Puerto Rican experience in the United States. "My poetry is about trying to make sense of the world, of being a young Puerto Rican male," Mr. Morales said. "We have incredible stories we got to tell."

In 1974 the story Piñero told in "Short Eyes," a prison drama presented by Joseph Papp's Public Theater and at Lincoln Center, won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best American play. It was developed in a workshop at the Ossining Correctional Facility (Sing Sing), where he was serving time for armed robbery. That year Piñero, known as Miky, was one of the founders of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe; he died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1988, when he was 41.

His poetry, with verses in both English and Spanish, had a strong political and social foundation, using the language of the street to document urban and prison reality. What became the Nuyorican poets' movement was influenced by Beat writers like Jack Kerouac, firebrand black poets like Amiri Baraka and Puerto Rico's oral poetry traditions. And it was informed by the discrimination, segregation and other harsh experiences suffered by Puerto Ricans who settled in New York.

In the spoken word, the Nuyoricans, or Puerto Rican New Yorkers, embraced identity and culture.

"We were coming out of the 60's, and there was a switch from self-hate to self-love," said Sandra María Esteves, 53, a published poet born in the Bronx to a Puerto Rican father and a Dominican mother and who, along with Piñero, was one of the founding poets of the Nuyorican movement. "That was an important marker for us. Embrace who we are. That was very different from the messages I got when I was growing up."

Today Nuyorican poetry can range from sonnets to the frenzied verses of competitive slams, and its themes are universal: the politics of daily life, sex and love, discovery of self. The poets function in a less cohesive, more glamorized setting than in Piñero's days. This is now poetry promoted by hip-hop and delivered in a more theatrical, performance-oriented way, which some Nuyorican poets criticize as being more often about entertaining and shocking an audience than about self-expression.

Miguel Algarin, the primary founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, says poetry today takes place in a more integrated setting. "For once," he said, "America is truly brought together into one from its myriads of ethnicities -- 10,000 ethnicities become sharply focused into an art form, and ironically, the North American Puerto Rican, the Nuyorican, has become the mainstream of American poetry."

But a preoccupation with the Puerto Rican condition still anchors Nuyorican poetry and gives it its bite, as it did 30 years ago.

Many young Nuyorican writers said they were driven to poetry by racist encounters in mostly white schools, by witnessing injustices suffered by family members or neighbors at the hands of the police, landlords or welfare workers, and by the need to express themselves, "to prove," as one poet said, "that I was a human being."

Some noted parallels to black and Chicano poetry.

"This is a survival thing," said Willie Perdomo, 34, a Nuyorican poet, who said he had his share of rough times while growing up in East Harlem. "When you see things that are wrong, you want to say it's wrong. It's a raw language for a raw experience."

Questions of identity are also thoroughly explored. In a poem called "Ode to the Diasporican," Maria Teresa Fernández, a 30-year-old Bronx poet known as Mariposa (Butterfly), takes on those who say she is not "the real thing" because she was not born in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican, she writes, "is a state of mind, a state of heart, a state of soul."

Even the term Nuyorican has often come to encompass Puerto Rican poets elsewhere in the United States. The winner of this year's individual title at the National Poetry Slam in Seattle was Mayda del Valle, 23, of Chicago, who moved to New York only a year ago and competed as part of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe's team.

She won with two poems: "Descendancy," about the frustrations of being stereotyped and limited by labels, and "Tonguetactics," a defense of Spanglish.

"It's a different experience to be a Puerto Rican from Chicago and a Puerto Rican from New York, but there are similar underlying experiences," Ms. del Valle said. "The sense of not belonging in Puerto Rico and not belonging in the United States is something everyone goes through. I consider myself part of the movement and I definitely feel the connection."

The Nuyorican Poets Cafe is still home for many Nuyorican poets and remains a thriving poetry hub, but its neighborhood has become trendy and expensive and freer of crime and drugs. The cafe has broadened its audience and core way beyond its bohemian Puerto Rican roots. At the recent Friday poetry slam, about 120 people crowded around tables and lined the bar: college-age, beer-drinking, well-behaved Latinos, blacks, whites and Asians.

Nuyorican poets today also read at places like the Point in the Bronx, Bar 13 in Greenwich Village and the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery. Some earn a living conducting poetry workshops in schools and traveling for readings at colleges; others hold day jobs in the news media and publishing.

And they are often found not only reading but also acting and singing in their own shows and performance pieces. "Spic Chic," a one-man show opening at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe this month, features poetry, music, drama and monologues to portray Puerto Rican pride in surviving life in the United States.

Luis Chaluian, 44, the show's creator, calls it "the further adventures of an unrepentant Rican with no self-pity."

"You know what a Nuyorican is?" Mr. Chaluian asked. "It's someone who finds solutions. How do I surmount this?"

But despite the vibrant scene and the poets' increasing opportunities to read, teach and be published, the work remains largely marginalized, some poets said. Most of it is not read by mainstream critics and scholars, does not find its way into major literary journals or magazines that publish poetry and is underrepresented in bookstores, they said.

Martín Espada, 44, who has published six collections of poetry and is a professor of English and Spanish at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, says this situation partly reflects the dearth of Puerto Rican editors in the publishing industry. And he says it might also show distaste for reminders of the poor social and economic conditions many Puerto Ricans have endured in this country.

"Puerto Rican poets are chroniclers," said Mr. Espada, a Brooklyn native who cites as his early influences the novel "Down These Mean Streets," by Piri Thomas; the poem "Puerto Rican Obituary," by Pedro Pietri; and "Short Eyes," which was later made into a film.

"We write about the same things everybody writes about," he said. "The difference is that the people who populate our poems suffer from the system that we live under rather than benefit from it; therefore our work is considered political."

Nuyorican poets have expressed a wide range of opinions on "Piñero," written and directed by Leon Ichaso ("El Super," "Crossover Dreams").

Founders and veterans of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, like Mr. Algarin and Mr. Pietri, who also appear in the movie, attended its premiere last month in New York. Some, like Ms. Esteves and Mr. Espada, criticized the choice of Piñero as a subject, noting that there were other worthy poets with less sensational lives, or who transcended drugs or other problems and did not die young.

"Hollywood and Broadway gave us 'West Side Story,'" Mr. Espada said. "Decades go by, and what did we get? We got 'Capeman.' Why is it that our hero has to die in the end?"

Many other poets, however, said they were moved and energized by the film, which not only recognizes an American literary movement but gives younger generations a sense of being part of a continuum.

"It was validating in saying we exist," Mariposa said. "Not only are we still here, but we have a tradition and a history."

Among some of these younger Nuyorican poets, Piñero remains an icon.

"The language that he used was his biggest influence," Mr. Perdomo said. "He made the street come alive. You could hear people on the street talking the same way. He represented poets who were giving voice to the voices."

Now Mr. Perdomo and his peers are forging their own legacy. A manager at Henry Holt & Company who has published one poetry collection and a children's book in verse, Mr. Perdomo said he wrote with a sense of threat, as the Puerto Rican population in New York shrinks.

"Puerto Ricans on the Lower East Side are being pushed toward the river," he said. "People are moving back to Puerto Rico. A lot of the writing is coming from a sense of urgency."

His goal, he said, was "to leave a solid body of work behind, so that that kid on 110th Street can go to the library and have his world turned upside down and find a voice."