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Feeling Free: Poetics of Liberation in Raquel Salas Rivera and Carina del Valle

Schorske's Work

On May 10, 2019, Puerto Rican poet and translator, Raquel Salas Rivera and essay writer, and translator Carina del Valle Schorske published the epistolary essay "How It Feels to Be Free" in *The New Inquiry*. They conceived of it as a conversation about the possibilities of a political and literary practice articulated through inquiries of what liberation looks like within the Puerto Rican context. Cultural lineages, black thought and queer poetics, the intersections and clashes between diaspora and empire, the consent to colonial oppression, and media representation during the aftermath of Hurricane Maria are some of the topics intertwined in the letters. How can we read this collaborative essay as renovated poetics of Puerto Rican liberation in and beyond the archipelago? To what extent does this essay allow for a configuration of alternative conceptions of sovereignty? Following this analytical path, I will concisely analyze recent works by both writers along with the poetry anthology *Puerto Rico en mi corazón* (2019) edited by Salas Rivera, del Valle Schorske, Erica Mena, and Ricardo Maldonado. In these case studies, the editors and poets subvert notions of political action, time, space, and Boricua aesthetics. I will argue that Salas Rivera, del Valle Schorske, and



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their collaborators create a fluid and counterhegemonic space of translation, intertextuality, and bilingual writing.

Palma

Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske trace their union as kindred poet-translators to their work around late Puerto Rican poet, folklorist, and writer Marigloria Palma. “From the page, she beckoned us to listen and to write back in poems, which we called translations,” they reflect. This diasporic love of Palma merits attention as it openly proposes a search for kinship and “poetic predecessors on the island” (Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske). Del Valle Schorske understands Palma as a poet whose work intersects feminist discourses and urban explorations similar to those of the Nuyorican movement. She argues for the give-and-take between US-based artists and Caribbean islanders: “We are in danger of downplaying the long-standing and ongoing circuits of exchange between island and diaspora, page and performance, frontline political struggle, and aesthetic innovation” (Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske). By choosing



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Palma as her main subject and object of translation, del Valle Schorske is establishing ethics of care and a literary persona dedicated to circular migration and intimate reckonings. Ethics of care are fundamental to translation, proposes del Valle Schorske. She invites the reader to understand caring as an ethic that makes the personal political and that wants to diminish reliance on exploitative economic relationships while creating moments of affinity. For these two writers, ethics of care are grounded in relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to with respect, and on their terms. In the epistolary exchange del Valle Schorske is placing Palma as a voice that needs to be heard with attention. She is also a bridge that creates a sense of interconnectedness with Salas Rivera and with poets based in Puerto Rico like Nicole Cecilia Delgado and Mara Pastor, all of them interested in recovering Palma's work and dedicated to creating sustainable and transnational poetic communities.

They observe that Palma also represents a poetics divorced from the "misogyny of the Nuyorican poetry scene" (Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske) but with the same susceptibility to portraying and claiming New York as a city full of anguish and pleasure where Puerto Ricans roam. In a self-recorded video posted on YouTube in April 2013, Raquel Salas Rivera performs a fragment of "Nueva York con Paloma," a



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poem by Palma that caught the attention of del Valle Schorske. After seven years, the video has a small number of views, a fact that perhaps underscores the obliteration of Palma as a reference in poetic ecosystems. For del Valle Schorske, the video meant a reckoning of a partner, one that shared a similar disposition towards the obscure Puerto Rican lyricist. Down a Goggle rabbit hole, del Valle Schorske also found an essay on Palma by Salas Rivera that considers the erasures of the Puerto Rican canon:

Marigloria, where are you in the histories of the great próceres patrias? What hatred has ruffled you to oblivion? What indifference? Why is it I only find one of your fourteen books? Why don't they read you in all the classrooms, like swearing loyalty to a burnt flag? Where will I find the shame we lost when losing you? What are these customs that taste like a chévere and a dale? With what teeth will I arm my sadness? In what notebook will I hide to beg forgiveness without echoing all over? (Salas Rivera)

This essay titled “La invitación del lobo” describes the “otherness” of Puerto Rican women/bodies/poets in the United States and the archipelago. Through it, del Valle Schorske discovered a common love, understanding, translation drive, and care towards Palma. She remembers it as an invitation to join forces. “I felt directly addressed... You were coming from a deeper saturation in the literary culture of Puerto Rico, but I saw that you too were grappling with the lineages we inherit, make, and



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break” (Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske). The video, poem, and essay also point to an interrogation of the possibilities of poetic and political kin and freedom in an individual but also national sense.

Both Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske are interested in how Palma built urban intimacy and frames New York through “romance and contamination” (Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske). “Nueva York con Paloma” a poem in eight parts follows the flight of a pigeon/dove through menacing buildings and violent geometries. The poet has a conversation of sorts with la paloma, a figure that challenges the city but also queerly flies through and softens it. Through the poem, New York is perceived as defiant, acidic, abject, neurotic, deranged, and inhuman (Palma 81-92). Seemingly, Palma is not very far from the now-canonical Rene Marqués’ conceptualization of Nueva York as a cold and cruel system that engulfs Puerto Ricans. Salas Rivera confronts this trope when he analyzes:

These narratives we inherit, a *La Carreta*, in which we have fallen from grace, migrated to the big then bigger city in which we are ground to nothing by the machine. ¡Ay, if only it were true! But instead, we survive and become something other than what we were before, an amalgam of losses and inventions, immigrants, or residents of movement. You know, allá afuera. (Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske)



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In many ways through *la paloma*, Palma is also becoming something other, vibing with the city. I am using vibing here as an instinctive emotional experience that could imply sexuality and transformation. In this aspect, Palma is closer to the Nuyorican hustler-poets and their odes to pain, carnality, and delectation. The images of body parts, secretions, *senos* and *nalgas* are common in the poem. Via *prosopopoeia*, New York becomes an entity that forces itself onto bodies and a virgin morning, *la aurora*. Meanwhile, *la paloma* becomes an arrow, a flame that *arrulla*, sings sweet nothings to the buildings, and consoles the poet's existential dread even if briefly (Palma 81-92). "*Nueva York con Paloma*" works in the epistolary essay as an origin story that organizes Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske's union. It produces a poetics that encourages a political critique on the subjectivity and intergenerational trauma of Puerto Ricans in US cities, but also an awareness of sensual delight and the possibilities of amalgamation and interchange.

Black Thought, Nation Belonging, and Imperial Consent

Late cultural critic Juan Flores constantly argued that Puerto Ricans in New York live in overlapping diasporas. This notion accounts for the bridging between and



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among diasporic groupings. He proposed that Puerto Ricans have formed the closest bonds with the African American population. For him, both groups have come together via living and building communities in the same neighborhoods. By interacting, partying, intermarrying, and developing musical, literary, and artistic styles, both groups have coalesced and influenced each other (Flores 439-449). In *In visible Movement*, Urayoán Noel in conversation with Flores also argues that:

Nuyorican poetry must be understood in two distinct yet overlapping diasporic contexts: a specifically Puerto Rican one, shaped by Puerto Rican vernacular traditions and expressive cultures, and a broader Afro-diasporic one that encompasses African and Afro-Caribbean culture and that finds significant points of contact with African American communities in neighborhoods such as Harlem and the South Bronx. (xvii)

Noel conceptualizes the New York-centered Puerto Rican diaspora as a practice of constant representation and through an “unclosed field of signifiers” around Black culture founded on difference (xxx). By referencing these critics and their discussion on racial identification, the goal is to place Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske’s discussion about coloniality, imperialism, and its effects on poetics within that larger discourse. In a gesture similar to the ones described by Flores and Noel, they speak in “How It Feels to Be Free” on these topics by centering an excerpt of a conversation between black



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intellectuals Audre Lorde and James Baldwin. The 1984 debate “Revolutionary Hope” is centered around gender differences among black Americans. Baldwin defends the perspective that misogynoir violence is a byproduct of systemic racism and proposes joined work between men and women to analyze, confront and resist the distorted “kingdom” of white supremacy. Lorde believes that before that work starts, black men have to take responsibility regarding gender violence and transform male consciousness. Gender and racial disparity also frame the possibility of experiencing a sense of national belonging. That is Salas Rivera’s point of entry. He quotes a moment in the dialogue in which Baldwin argues for the right to citizenship and the American Dream. Lorde answers:

Deep, deep, deep down I know that dream was never mine. And I wept and I cried and I fought and I stormed, but I just knew it. I was Black. I was female. And I was out – out – by any construct wherever the power lay. So if I had to claw myself insane, if I lived I was going to have to do it alone. Nobody was dreaming about me. Nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out. (Lorde and Baldwin)

Salas Rivera uses this excerpt to exclaim that he is aware of the processes of exclusion described by Lorde. Nobody is dreaming about Puerto Ricans either. Salas Rivera thus affirms that he cannot fathom Puertoricanness without a future decolonial



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liberation. Lorde's remark "offers the possibility that to identify as [US] American is not a given." That "no one is born allied to empire. No one has empire imprinted in their marrow." For Salas Rivera the desire for US Americanness and citizenship is attached to the false promise of a better life that surpasses that of the excluded, the "bombed", "blacklisted", "persecuted" and "disappeared." For him, you cannot disentangle US American identity from imperialism. Along similar lines, del Valle Schorske proposes that the empire only has the desire to hear Puerto Ricans "screaming, whether in pain or celebration—so long as it produces a lucrative spectacle." She suggests that Puerto Ricans are conceived of as excess, a supplement, an "other" whose only potential lies in generating dividends. She also examines how a diasporic identity may seem at some point like a deliberate exercise of liberty, but when looked at closely "this sense of choice shadows our relationship to US Americanness," especially when considering "our relationship to a place our parents or grandparents were forced to leave as part of an explicit program of depopulation" (Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske). This contemporary exchange returns to the debates of la generación del 30 y el 50, national literary movements that just like Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske defend poetics in which discussions around colonialism, debates on citizenship, nationhood, and the



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consent to empire are not avoided but centered and openly displayed. It is important to note that they move away from the patriarchal, Eurocentric, and many times anti-black stands of those times.

The discussion about colonialism in Puerto Rico and coloniality in the diaspora leads Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske to a pop culture theorization about liberation. By engaging in an intertextual analysis, del Valle Schorske looks at songwriter and black power activist Nina Simone's rendition of the song "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free." According to del Valle Schorske, by adding an improvised outro, Simone "wants to know what it would feel like to actually be free, to 'remove all the chains' and 'all the thoughts that keep us apart.' Somehow in articulating the truer and more difficult ambition for actual liberation, we're closer to it." Simone is establishing a form of knowledge based on identifying what unfreedom is. The critic states, "knowing how it feels to be not free is a form of knowing how it would feel to be free. That freedom begins with saying no to unfreedom" (Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske).

Salas Rivera wraps up the essay reflecting on how ineffective forms of "freedom" such as having media representation while still consenting to empire generate rage and sadness. These feelings are not conceived of by him as negative but "as a form of hope,



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as a pointing to a way out.” He rejects disenchantment and proposes an active state of collaboration and political activism. “I want us to promise to each other that we will keep fighting until it looks like what it should until it feels like freedom because we are finally free,” says Salas Rivera setting up a path toward a poetics of struggle and independence (Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske).

The Works

The epistolary essay “How It Feels to Be Free” establishes a poetic program that supports the joined and separated projects of Salas Rivera and del Valle Schorske. For example, we see elements of the above-described poetics in the essay “Dancing Backup: Puerto Ricans in the American muchedumbre,” where del Valle Schorske analyzes a lineage of Puerto Rican female “stars.” She goes over four case studies of backup dancers in the US: Rita Moreno, Rosie Pérez, Jennifer López, and Danielle Polanco. Del Valle Schorske looks at how the U.S. cultural industries sell (and need) aspects of Puerto Rican expression—el sabor, the sensuality, and the urban poise of Boricua dancers—but for the most part, are not willing to give full artistic platforms and dignified roles to Puerto Ricans. In the essay, she reads this long practice of cultural



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erasure, racialization, sexualization, and backup service in direct correlation to the U.S. colonial oppression in Puerto Rico and the systemic prejudices against Puerto Ricans in the U.S.

Another essay in which del Valle Schorske reads a pop culture figure as a symptom of Puerto Rican dilemmas is “The World According to Bad Bunny” published in the New York Times Magazine in October 2020. Despite reggaeton evolution as global pop, del Valle Schorske recognizes the tension between Puerto Rico’s subjugated political status and “its boisterous, filthy, defiant, and now world-dominating music.” Through del Valle Schorske’s prism, Bad Bunny, arguably urbano music’s central exponent nowadays, emerges partially as an embodiment of “defiant” politics. Cleverly, she also raises doubts regarding the possibility “we’ve seized on Bad Bunny as a symbol and extracted more political meaning from him than he can take credit for himself”? (del Valle Schorske). By analyzing reception and observing Bad Bunny’s interventions within these categories: language, gender, sexuality, national identity, and creative autonomy, del Valle Schorske suggest that the reggaetón artist’s linguistic and musical output archives histories of migration, queer and Afro resistance, local idioms and intimacy barely audible elsewhere in the pop-scape.



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It is also possible to identify a poetic of defiance and Rican documentation in Salas Rivera's 2019 book *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* in which the notion of translation as an act that unveils decolonial messages and graphics is on display. The bilingual book establishes a disconnection between Español and English as a way to present communication-imperial-colonial breakdowns. Evidence of this poetic method is a poem in which Salas Rivera enumerates in English five cases of Puerto Ricans relocated to the United States. The unnamed characters are working low-wage jobs, staying with family members, looking for steady housing and relationships but are consumed by the displacement and demolishing memories of the hurricane. In a footnote in Español, he adds that they are popping pills as if they were chewing gum. They are all depressed and the US seems an antagonistic space that increases their agony as survivors. Similarly, throughout the book, Salas Rivera uses footnotes in Spanish, intertexts from songs, newspaper headlines, social media quotes, soundbites from a multitude of voices as messages of protest. They represent a record of collective grief, survival tips, and uncertainty in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

In another series of poems entitled *the independence (of puerto rico)* Salas Rivera "dismantles the idea that Puerto Rico's biggest problem is its insularism. Our supposed



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smallness, our vulnerability, and our tenderness mark moments of true independence, in which we have successfully broken away from our oppressors in order to experience our beauty in all its splendor.” Salas Rivera writes:

[...]

we are richer than stolen ports;

we are more pirates than federal governments;

we are more justice-seeking than armed gods;

we are more more than the minimum

and more more than the most.

we are insularly sufficient.

we owe no one shame.

we owe no one smallness

[...]

and in all things we are independent,

even in the most colonized hole of our porous fear;

[...]



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don't fear what you already know.
we've spent a lifetime fearing ourselves
while getting robbed by strangers.
look at us. look closely.
don't you see we are/beauty?

(Salas Rivera)

Salas Rivera switches the focus from social and natural catastrophes to an examination of the value of Puerto Ricans. The repetition of the phrase “we are more,” serves as a mantra that underscores the importance of going beyond oppressive rubrics established in the US, by the market, the media, and political parties. Salas Rivera observes the resourcefulness, sustainable ethos, and combative spirit of Puerto Ricans and thinks of these traits as essential for a decolonial future.

The epistolary essay conceptually supports too the bilingual poetry anthology *Puerto Rico en mi corazón*. Edited by del Valle Schorske, Ricardo Maldonado, Erica Mena, and Salas Rivera, the anthology embodies feminist and queer poetics of care, diasporic communion, decolonial politics, and black and Rican pride. Also created in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, the book is proposed as an artifact of angst and loss. It is



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also conceived of as a poetic involvement that promotes a sense of a borderless community.

When the storm hit, that's where we began to build- an immaterial way to survive the very material grief of our own survival. But with so much loss, we knew we'd have to make something we could hold- and something that could travel, and fly out from us as birds of protest against failed recovery and the policy that preceded it. We hope this anthology will participate in the vast ecosystem of care that calls our community into being. (del Valle Schorske et al.)

I want to call attention to the ways this notion of a borderless community amid disaster and displacement resonates with the concept of queer diaspora, as theorized by the scholar Gayatri Gopinath. In her book *Unruly Visions*, Gopinath argues that the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora “seek to reveal ... the co-implication and radical relationality of seemingly disparate racial formations, geographies, temporalities, and colonial and postcolonial histories of displacement and dwelling” (Gopinath 4). For Gopinath, these inter and transdisciplinary artistic exercises suggest alternative understandings of time and space obscured within dominant and official narratives. Similarly, in the context of the governmental neglect regarding relief in response to Hurricane Maria, the Puerto Rican diaspora consolidated virtual and physical networks of support and mutual aid. First created as a means of survival and then as a critical



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process of denunciation, the diasporic formations after Maria were, interested in taking control of a failed official narrative to turn it into a practice of accountability and care.

In the anthology, the analysis of colonial oppression is also seen through the perspective of language. The editors convey that the Caribbean is a linguistically rich region. The colonial powers have devaluated this linguistic effervescence as a way to repress the literatures and lives of Caribbean people. The editors invite us, readers, to look closely at the violence of monolingualism. They also analyze how the disconnection between islands and diasporas is often a result of the same process of linguistic exclusion. The poets in *Puerto Rico en mi corazón*, regardless of where they are based, are reunited in a bilingual Español-English dialogue, a poetic call and response. Moreover, the title *Puerto Rico en mi corazón*, a phrase coined as a direct reference to the late 60s, early 70s revolutionary group the Young Lords, signifies here anti-colonial poetics that calls for confrontation and direct action. In the radical tradition of the Young Lords, this project argues that the diaspora is instrumental in the reconstruction of counter-hegemonic poetics.

On September 28, 2019, at The Poetry Project at St. Marks Church, I was part of the audience that came together for the “Launch of Puerto Rico en mi corazón.” The



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event featured live readings by poets Andrés Cerpa, Elisa Gonzalez, Joey De Jesus, Erica Mena, Ana Portnoy Brimmer, Raquel Salas Rivera, and Vincent Toro, with an introduction by Carina del Valle Schorske. At least for two hours, the iconic Poetry Project, a landmark of the downtown poetry scene for decades, was also a Puerto Rican stage and a community space that held a broadside exhibit, a handmade artist books table, as well as copies of the then-fresh new collection. An element that stood out from the event was how the poets were not only reading their work but also amplifying the voices of fellow poets in the collection. Just like in the book, translation became a way of connecting similar sensibilities and poetic experimentations. Perhaps this is a common practice in other poetry readings but in the context of the launch of *Puerto Rico en mi corazón* it became a statement and a reproduction of the multiple community-building and fund-raising efforts post-Hurricane Maria. As the editors proposed in the introduction, the reading happened in a non-hierarchical constant switching between Español, English, and Spanglish. It was a reading that exemplified their notion of corazón as a compass: “even when no one could see us, we knew where we were at. We didn’t need a map to find ourselves” (del Valle Schorske et al.). The reading reckoned with hurt and tragedy but also collective achievements.



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The anthology *Puerto Rico en mi corazón* centralizes the act of conversation and searches to promote intimacy, affiliation, traveling, encounter, and crossing as Gayatri Gopinath also analyzes. All the works discussed here are interested in testifying “to the necessity of collaboration” and repudiate hollow bootstrap mentalities “so often a brittle mask for colonial neglect” (del Valle Schorske et al.). These writers and translators propose an alternative conception of sovereignty organized around cells of creation, study, debate, political research, and action. By acknowledging the contradictory identities of the diaspora and its flexible time and space, these projects highlight underground currents of Boricua aesthetics and cultural activism. Salas Rivera, del Valle Schorske, and all the poets-colleagues involved see Puerto Rican liberation as an ongoing project in and beyond the archipelago that requires consolidating efforts and decentralized ideas and gestures. The counterhegemonic space of bilingual writing, graphic, and textual translation in all these works creates intimate acts of literary resistance that try to feel possibilities of freedom.

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