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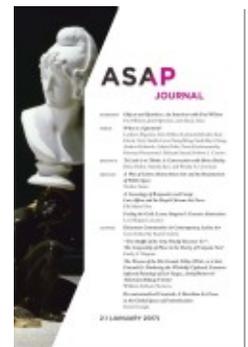
“The Shuffle of the City Finally Becomes Us”: The
Corporality of Place in the Poetry of Urayoán Noel

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“THE SHUFFLE OF THE CITY FINALLY BECOMES US”:

THE CORPORALITY OF PLACE IN THE
POETRY OF URAYOÁN NOEL

*I*n his recent study *A Transnational Poetics*, Jahan Ramazani argues that much twentieth- and twenty-first century poetry is inherently transnational in nature, to the extent that even the work of the most canonical English language poets (Eliot, Bishop, Stein) cannot be contained within the confines of the nation.¹ If this is the case, however—if modern poetry, and poets, can be seen as on the move—then surely Puerto Rican poets offer a particular exploration of transnational and translingual poetic flows, due not only to the movements of people between the island and the United States but also to the particular political relationship between the two.² The Puerto Rican poet and literary critic URAYOÁN NOEL, a San Juan native-turned Bronx resident, protagonizes—and sometimes agonizes—this condition

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// in a conscious, knowing, and often humorous way. The home page of his website begins by identifying Noel himself as “a stateless poet.” It then offers up the author’s own definition of statelessness: “The moniker ‘stateless’ refers to the poet’s

flux between island and mainland, and between textual forms (print, body, web). Of course, it also alludes to the ultimate ‘statelessness’ of identity, and to a poetics of unstatement by turns deterritorialized and (dys/ut/opian) in its damaged/unmanageable bodies.”³ In Noel’s work, “stateless” is a legal condition, a reference to Puerto Rico’s status as an unincorporated territory of the United States, as well as a declaration that identity is not forever tied to one’s place of origin. But his conception of “statelessness” also returns to poetry as an embodied enunciation, an act of errantry that in its plurality

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[A]gainst the backdrop of its linguistic and literary transnationalism, Noel’s poetry is firmly rooted (or is it rhizomed?) in the concreteness of physical geography.

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and diversity becomes seen as “damaged” or “unmanageable.”

Through the intertextual dialogue he establishes with Puerto Rican poets on and off the island, as well as with U.S. and Latin American literary figures as diverse as John Ashbery, César Vallejo,

Décio Pignatari, and Osvaldo Lamborghini, Noel locates his work in a trans-American, cross-continental corpus informed by multiple aesthetic impulses. The deterritorialization he identifies in his poetry also extends to language itself; occupying an interzone beyond Spanish and English, his texts employ relentless code switching, punning, and translation to produce a language linked to multiple linguistic traditions and yet centered in none of them.

Noel’s own characterization of his “statelessness” suggests a fluidity—an identity in movement—that might lead one to think that his writing steps away from a connection to place. In fact, the opposite is true: against the backdrop of its linguistic and literary transnationalism, Noel’s poetry is firmly rooted (or is it rhizomed?) in the concreteness of physical geography. His poems in *Las flores del Mall* (2003), *Kool Logic/La lógica kool* (2005), *Boringkén* (2008), and, most recently, *Buzzing Hemispheres/Rumor Hemisférico* (2015) mine the particular

character and contradictions of places, with a special attention to and affection for the localities and contradictions of Puerto Rico, as *Boringkén's* playful title indicates, and New York City. *Edgemere Letters* (2013), a multimedia collaboration with the artist Martha Clippinger, delves even more deeply into the nature of place, offering a photo-meditation on a suburban development in the Rockaways. In what follows, I examine the presence and role of the city in Noel's 2010 book, *Hi-Density Politics*, to show how the poetic voice in this collection uses the cityscape as an anchor for his errantry. Tapping into the rhythms of a space of being that is more than/other than a state of belonging, Noel's poems suggest an experience of the city as lived (performed) experience, of place as repertoire, produced through an interaction between body, site, and text.

Hi-Density Politics introduces the idea of an interaction between urban space and the human body even in its structural conceit. After an introductory poem ("HI-THEN (salutation)"), the book is divided into three discrete sections: "CITY (erode movie)," "POLIS (pop lists, oulipolips)," and "TICS (tongues)." These sections are not merely a punning, anagrammatical play on the book's title. Rather, moving progressively through the text, one could say that the language "tics" of the last section are implicitly produced via the interaction of the city (place) and the polis (the citizens).⁴ If "HI-THEN (salutation)" acts as the beginning of a conversation, the initiation of an interaction between the urban body and its human inhabitants, then the second section more explicitly references the site of this interaction. Including poems whose titles play with different parts of the New York area ("co-opt city," for example, references the Co-op City housing development), it offers an exploration of "[hi]dden cities"—a gradual revealing of the multiple, heretofore unseen worlds contained within the urban landscape. True to the classical Greek understanding of the *polis* as both the city-state and the citizens who comprise it, "POLIS," the third and longest section, develops in a dizzying heteroglossia of voices and different poetic shapes. Although the city is never far away, the emphasis is on the bodies and the voices interacting in and engaging with cities both literal and literary. "TICS," the last section, is dominated by the sub-section "trill set," a series of poems Noel created by reading the Peruvian avant-garde poet César Vallejo's 1922 collection *Trilce* into English-language voice recognition software, a poetic praxis that explores the boundaries of mediation and translation. As these musings connect the island of Puerto Rico to the island of Manhattan,

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Exploring the union of city, bodies, and language, these poems offer up the solidity that exists in relationship, even as they show how this solidity may be disjointed, contested, fleeting, or constrained.

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evoking other kinds of islands along the way, the speaker chronicles the different encounters—both physical and lyric—that shape the complex communities that belong in this poetic archipelago.

In her review of *Hi-Density Politics*, Sueyuen Juliette Lee argues that Noel “weds witty word play to a call for a protean identity politics.”⁵ Certainly, the collection plays expansively with language and poetic form as it explores the changing outlines of both individual and collective identities. The adjective “protean,” however, implies something too shifting and transformative to get a handle on. The use of the corporeal in Noel’s text suggests that he has something “meatier” in mind: the meeting of corporeal bodies and place(s) within the space(s) of the poem itself. Exploring the union of city, bodies, and language, these poems offer up the solidity that exists in relationship, even as they show how this solidity may be disjointed, contested, fleeting, or constrained.

IN SEARCH OF A DISSONANT COMMUNITY

Not quite a manifesto—Noel’s manifestos are always tongue-in-cheek—“HI-THEN (salutation),” the first poem of *Hi-Density Politics*, nevertheless offers itself to the reader as a kind of touchstone, a forecast of the journey to come that sets the stage for the rest of the collection. Noel presents this literary voyage as a pleasure cruise with a catch, as the first-person poetic voice announces, “Hi then, neighbor! Welcome to the city— / Cool! You’re still in time to see the sites! / There’s still room in the tourist-trap committees— / All you have to do here is work nights. . .”⁶ The perky apostrophe simultaneously locates the reader in familiar and unfamiliar positions; he or she is both a “neighbor” and someone seemingly on their first visit to the city. Although Noel has something far more serious at stake here, I can’t help but think of the “Howdy, neighbor!” with which Fred Rogers addressed his young viewers on

the 1970s children's television show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. Noel's city may lack the innocent good will of Mr. Rogers, but as with his neighborhood, this is a city created through participation. Yet whereas Mr. Rogers engaged in his neighborliness after the workday was over, taking off his work clothes to put on his sneakers and casual sweaters, the participation that "HI-THEN" solicits relates to work rather than leisure. The last line hints at the cost of this sight-seeing: behind every carefree tourist is the shift worker; to "see" the sights, you will have to put in the work. It should also be noted that Noel sets his poem in *terza rima*, a formal structure that, in contrast to the contemporary setting, connects the text back to Dante and the beginnings of more metaphysical poetic journeys. As Krysten Dykstra observes, Noel's text "dangles the option of epic before us," only to then undercut or satirize the epic impulse.⁷ Yet a reference to the *Divina Comedia* through the use of the *terza rima* may be more than a parodic subversion. While not epic in the traditional sense, the collection does traverse multiple levels of this urban environment, ending in the final poem—revealingly entitled "consignas para el fin del mundo / slogans for the end of the world"—with the image of people dancing beneath the blazing sun. It is a scene evocative of Heaven, even if it only occurs as an imagined articulation of desire.

For readers of Noel's previous books, some of this urban scenery is familiar territory: the overstuffed, overwhelming consumer environment produced by late capitalism, where "someone in a fanny pack is jocular / Watching global banking's clipped collapse."⁸ As with his earlier *Kool Logic/La lógica kool*, there is an implicit critique of capitalist excess, of the rampant commodification of everything and everyone. In "HI THEN," however, a critique of late capitalism's operations is, to some extent, a secondary operation, the backdrop for the speaker's other points of interest. Here, it is not so much tourist attractions or capitalist spectacles but poesis that attracts: we arrive in time to see not just the urban sights, but the site of poetry as well. Noel's salutation-manifesto locates the poetic process at the center of the urban encounter. Yet even poetry is at risk of cooptation by the forces of commercialization: the urban scene already contains "corporate def poets" who "workshop street speak."⁹ When poetry itself is in danger of becoming a trademarked voice—"World Poets™"—ready to spit out the right thing at the right time, the need for a creative process that can counteract the artificiality of pre-fabricated, cookie-cutter production acquires a particular urgency.

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[Noel] advocates poetry as “scrawl”—rough, instinctive, in movement—rather than as a static or choreographed production.

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As an antidote to the threat of commodification and “prefab” poetry, the speaker urges embodied poetic praxis, an interaction between city, bodies and the body of the text: “Make poetry less *petro* and more *glyphic!* / Readable as a scrawl of city bodies.”¹⁰ This is urban poetry, but not verse “set in stone.” It is poetry “written on the body,” with bodies, inscribed in physicality (the

physical incarnation of the verse as symbol, glyph) yet simultaneously responsive to moment, unfixed. It is precisely through these physical encounters and engagements, the speaker suggests, that poetry in its most genuine form can be produced. He advocates poetry as “scrawl”—rough, instinctive, in movement—rather than as a static or choreographed production.

In promoting an embodied and spontaneous poetics, “HI-THEN (salutation)” reveals its debt to postwar American poetry, particularly that of the Beats. Yet while Beat writers protested the rise of consumerism and other ills of social control, they also sought to escape these trends through various means. In contrast, although Noel’s text offers a clear critique of some of the effects of global capitalism, the poem’s speaker sees poetry as not only drawing on and responding to its diasporic, globalized environment but also as intimately linked to it.¹¹ This is not meant to suggest that an organic poetic praxis in this environment will be effortless. In fact, Noel’s text highlights multiple ways in which this writing is neither fluid nor easy. The poem not only reveals but also seems to celebrate the difficulties in negotiating language as a medium of both communication and creation. Some of these struggles are playful, as with the poem’s incorporation of mistranslation and multilingualism: “Selling your *saudade* to the Saudis” plays with both alliteration and oxymoron in its commodification of the Portuguese concept of nostalgia, while “O, say, can juicy?” offers a pronunciation mis-translation (mis-hearing?) of the national anthem, thus subtly overwriting a patriotic gesture. The poem also includes numerous moments that reference the physical struggles to produce language: the speaker “traffic[s] tics,” and mangles the national anthem’s lyrics due to a “(darned retainer!),” implying that the mouth itself is being controlled. Yet the speaker nonetheless appears to celebrate the very imperfection of these enunciations, for he rejects

“the poem/ That represents—that narrates or ‘gives’ voice” in favor of the poem that “disjoins.”¹² If poetry is “disjointed,” this is because the community—the “polis”—from which it emerges is similarly fragmented. The repeated use of parentheses, which give the poem a heteroglossic texture on the page, enacts this fragmentation formally. The poem as disjunctive dialogue, as a space for multiple voices to converge and disagree, is something that will continue throughout the collection.

Even as he puts forth a vision of “poetry *as* community,” the speaker recognizes that a “we” is a difficult proposition: “I can do my best to rhyme with “soothe” / And when I say “we” I truly mean it— / Only “we” is painful— we’re a groove / Without a nation (we’ve already seen it— / Thanks).”¹³ The reference to being “without a nation” can be read as a reference to Puerto Rico and the conflicts over its political status; the “we” is painful because it is a contingent, not officially recognized, first-person plural. More broadly, however, the pain produced by the creation and/or acknowledgement of this “we” is a recognition of the difference and potential disjunction between nation and community, between writer and reader, between different poetic elements, and between different languages.

In his exploration of black internationalism, Brent Hayes Edwards argues that disjuncture, or *décalage*—as he refers to it, borrowing from Derrida—is fundamental to diasporic discourses of race, adding that “its return in the form of *disarticulation*—the points of misunderstanding, bad faith, unhappy translation—must be considered a necessary haunting.”¹⁴ Noel’s poems outline similar kinds of disarticulation on both spatial and textual levels. The introduction of “statelessness” (and, implicitly, the political condition of Puerto Rico) in “HI THEN” suggests that diaspora is one of the reasons for the disjuncture of the poetic community that the poem describes. If poetry—and, surrounding it, the city—provide a space for coming together of bodies and languages, then the result of this urban reunion is what I will call a dissonant community, born out of the mistranslation that accompanies diasporic encounter. Limning the contents of the collection itself, “HI-THEN”

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***Produced in and through
disarticulation, the poem is an
imperfect means of engagement, but it
is the only form the poet can propose.***

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closes by acknowledging “The poem as a difficult relating / (a city, a polis, and its tics)— / As urgent as the day—an urgent fading.”¹⁵ As if to echo this fading, the poem’s carefully plotted *terza rima* structure ends without the consonance of a final couplet, thus underscoring the way in which the coming together of the elements necessary for this communication—place and people, poet and poem, or poem and reader—is momentary and transitory. Produced in and through disarticulation, the poem is an imperfect means of engagement, but it is the only form the poet can propose.

THE SELF IN THE CITY

“HI THEN (salutation)” lays out both the risks and the rewards inherent in the poetic creation of dissonant communities. The book’s subsequent section, “CITY (erode movie),” provides a series of opportunities for exploring the “difficult relating” of urban spaces and their inhabitants through the enactment of a localized poetic praxis. The subtitle’s pun—“erode movie” instead of “a road movie”—hints at the localized spatial containment of this section. In contrast to road movies, which, as Brazilian director Walter Salles argues, “trace the internal transformation of their characters” in the midst of rapid movements through space (via car or motorcycle) and unexpected encounters, the four poems that make up this section of *Hi-Density Politics* all play with the intimate, sometimes marginal landscapes of New York City’s five boroughs, especially those of the Bronx.¹⁶ The distance covered is far less than that of a typical road movie—another way in which Noel plays with and upsets expectations of the epic; yet the poems in this section similarly engage in a questioning of self-positioning stimulated by these particular urban spaces.

“babel o city (el gran concurso),” from the “CITY (erode movie)” section, exemplifies the productively disjointed meeting of city and lyric subject. The poem’s dateline, “Joyce Kilmer Park, the Bronx, 8/06/09—3:41-4:27 pm,” locates the speaker very clearly in this large green space just off the borough’s Grand Concourse, a boulevard built at the turn of the twentieth century with the aim of connecting the Bronx to Upper Manhattan, now the heart of a neighborhood in the midst of gradual gentrification.¹⁷ The speaker, it becomes clear, is dictating his poetry into a BlackBerry smartphone, and the visually fragmented text cuts back and forth between detailed descriptions of the act of speaking the poem and reflections on the location of its enunciation. As the speaker records

his walk from the Grand Concourse to Yankee Stadium, a few blocks west, he muses on both the conditions of the urban environment around him and his own positioning in a broader sense. The poem represents this fragmentation visually on the page through the use of two-line stanzas in which words and phrases are irregularly spaced. In the first lines, the speaker rejects the idea of fixity itself: “no identity but in hi-density proximity of buildings of bodies.”¹⁸ The self is made at this moment, in this urban environment, “on the Concourse,” in “this park with the Lorelei that spouts to hip-hop beats.”¹⁹ At the same time, this is an urban environment in transition: the Lorelei statue erected in 1899 to honor German Romantic poet Heinrich Heine shares space with Bronx teenagers listening to hip-hop. Present disjunctions are also necessarily shaped by past cultural encounters.

A strolling urban observer may call to mind the Benjaminian *flâneur* of the late nineteenth-century. Yet both the speaker’s evocation of the cultural transformations in the Bronx and his own positioning relative to them reveals the differences between Noel’s wanderer and any such *fin de siècle* figure. Where Benjamin saw the *flâneur* as strolling through the heart of modern Paris, loitering by the luxury goods on display in the genteel pedestrian shopping arcades, Noel’s speaker traces a route on the margins of New York’s consumerist glamour. What he instead observes—and participates in—is a different kind of cultural, temporal, and spatial disjunction: the meeting of German Romanticism and hip-hop through lyric poetry composed on the BlackBerry. When the speaker spots a tractor unexpectedly driving down the Concourse, he observes that “Lorelei can / only watch this isn’t Kilmer’s Concourse after WWI comes two to too tú comes / opposition depositioning.”²⁰ The juxtaposition of the Lorelei statue and the John Deere tractor running down the grand boulevard offers a kind of visual disjunction, but the mid-line transformation of two to *tú* also offers a subtle reference to other complicated encounters and transformations, specifically the post-war demographic shifts in the Bronx (from Irish, Jewish, and Italian to Puerto Rican and African American). This broader historical context is also personal: the speaker acknowledges “my introjective / turning my trajectories as a child of colony / empire makes us instruments and I’m a function of one.”²¹ If the Grand Concourse’s post-War demographic shifts were connected to the migration wave of Puerto Ricans who began to arrive in the city in the late 1940s thanks to Operation Bootstrap, the speaker is himself conscious of the ways in which his own condition—“still in transit”—both shapes

and is shaped by the Bronx and its history.²²

In his essay “Walking in the City,” Michel de Certeau argues that the movement of a pedestrian through a city resembles a speech act: “Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks.’”²³ Seen this way, “babel o city” contains at least two poems, the poem that the poetic voice speaks into his BlackBerry and the “poem” created by the particular path that his rambles trace as they take him through this section of the Grand Concourse and Joyce Kilmer Park. The poem’s figuration plays with how these two kinds of movement reflect and echo one another: the speaker states, “I’m concerned with another kind of traffic strophic,” only to urge, a few stanzas farther on, “call me the / Robert Moses of bad BlackBerry verse.”²⁴ The spoken poem and the perambulated poem intersect through the way in which the speaker retraces the history of the Concourse, connecting the urban cycles of upward mobility and subsequent white flight associated with the expressway system inaugurated by city planner Robert Moses to the speaker’s arrival in the Bronx and his own position as another Puerto Rican “child of colony.”

In the relationships “babel o city” traces between verbal and spatial poetics, there is another important connecting device: the speaker’s cell phone. After all, the poem is not just a speech act but also a recording, a technologically framed monologue dictated into the BlackBerry’s digital recorder. This mediation ensures a spontaneity that would be impossible in a carefully crafted written poem, but it also indicates the capacity for the device—as a material object and thus, implicitly, as a commodity—to shape aesthetic production. The ease of communication provided by the BlackBerry belies the challenges of real communicative exchange: “what we have / are nations of niche markets propped up and held together by tech instruments / rudiments of communication no unique no common.”²⁵ Although the use of the BlackBerry as a poetic recording device can be seen as a reappropriation of this technological tool, the speaker still worries about what, if anything, he is able to communicate: “in / the economy of unmaking of positioning is meaning to be made at all?”²⁶ A poetic journey through localized, site-specific urban space may be an antidote to global capital’s dissociations, but can it really be seen as anything more than an attempt at evasion? Have the speaker’s rambles taken him anywhere, or are they just babbling?

The only way to create something meaningful in the midst of the dissociation produced by globalization and globalized technology, “babel o city” implies, is through personal encounter, both physical and emotional: “they claim the territories as we constrict back into speech acts seeking out constructivist / potential in our bodies shared in cities.”²⁷ Yet the speaker admits that this kind of communication takes energy he may not have:

...and the most radical thing you could do vis-à-vis politics is to
call these tics by name
to document my seizures not just my searches and the struggles of
my neighbors but I
don't have the heart for it the courage I'd much rather scat into
the box tap into a
meaning that's built in sidestep the certainties of skin.²⁸

The altered spacing of these lines simulates a kind of verbal seizing, as if to indicate the halting, imperfect communication pattern. The BlackBerry-produced poem allows for mediatized coming-together beyond the limited territories into which history and biology may have placed us, but the poet's stated lack of courage—an ethical breach—limits the full potential for encounter. The poem's last lines produce a slippage between the shared space of the city and the shared space of the poem, with the speaker “sidestep[ping] the certainties of skin” to share a sense of meaning “with the few who filter through the laughtracks and work their way through / the wound.”²⁹ The “wound” of a potentially shared past and the wounded space of Joyce Kilmer Park (torn up by construction) come together in the sometimes painful poetic space. Yet the poem implies that this poetic space is only a resting space, a respite, perhaps, for those trying, and willing, to work their way through difference to a kind of understanding beyond the page.

PERFORMING THE CITY, THE CITY BECOMES US

If the self-conscious monologue of “babel o city” questions how and with what means to create shared understanding out of diverse narratives and experiences, then the response of the book's following sections, “POLIS (pop lists, oulipolips)” and “TICS (tongues),” seems to answer: through verbal interchange, understood not as a measured dialogue but as a coming together of voices, an articulation of sometimes discordant perspectives and positionings. The meeting of city and

body in *Hi-Density* occurs on two levels: it is produced discursively within the poems themselves and also through the multivalent vehicle of performance. Noel is certainly not the first Puerto Rican or Latino poet to do this; his own critical monograph, *In Visible Movement*, explores the performative impulse and techniques in Nuyorican poetry, tracing the relationship between performance and text in poets such as Pedro Pietri, Víctor Hernández Cruz and Tato Laviera.³⁰ In his reading of the work of these poets, Noel coins the term “encounterpolitics” to explain the way in which Nuyorican poetic performances “brin[g] together a number of disparate and seemingly incommensurable personae, forms, voices, and discourses in self-reflexive performances that underscore the interdependence of identities.”³¹ Although Noel may not be as interested as some of his Nuyorican predecessors in exploring the encounter between different strains of Puerto Rican politics, he does employ performance as a way to explore the conflicts and co-dependencies of urban [Latino] encounters and to highlight the tensions and crises that are made visible in these meetings.

Hi-Density's texts suggest, create, and sometimes even demand performance, placing the reader in the position of performer. Even though we may come to the book via an individual reading, many of the written texts—particularly those within the “POLIS” section—contain performance strategies embedded in their structure. “POLIS” is the book’s most heteroglossic section; the poems represent a multiplicity of voices through poetic intertextuality, performative gestures, and multilingualism. As the reference to the OuLiPo poets indicates, the poems contain plenty of word games and compositional constraints. But whereas the OuLiPo movement, and the poets who have followed them, such as Christian Bök, emphasize the creative possibilities of working within rigid poetic frameworks, Noel weds formal experimentation to an exploration of the conditions of poetry’s production. Playing with the Platonic definition of the polis, the Greek city-state, as formed through the participation of its citizens, his poems both advocate for and stage a poetry brought into being through the dynamic, noisy encounters between lyric subject(s) and reader(s).

“east village conviviality imperatives,” the second poem in *Hi-Density's* “POLIS” section, exemplifies some of the ways in which Noel asks the reader to actively engage in the production of a text’s meaning. The poem appears on the page as two distinct columns of text. At first glance, it would seem that these are two voices, organized in a call-and-response format:

Nostalgic for big hair days

Days when there were heroes

Real bohos

CBGBs stood

Immigrants on stoops withstood

[with whom?]

To claim /

[for what?]"³²

Amidst the competing presence of multiple publics—immigrants, bohos, punk rockers, goths, wealthy hipsters—these lines appear to trace a narrative of gentrification. Read as a two-part dialogue, the columns express a nostalgia (genuine or feigned) for what used to be but is no longer, implying that we are witness to the moment in which a certain kind of East Village—a neighborhood with “real” artists and immigrants—begins to give way to another, implicitly inhabited by people merely performing a bohemian lifestyle. The poem does not definitively identify the speaker(s) as long-time resident(s) or interloper(s). Closer inspection, indeed, reveals that this narrative may not be so straightforward. The columns are not parallel but staggered, and although it is certainly possible to view the right-hand column as responding to the enunciation on the left, the fact that the “answer” on the right occurs a line down calls into question the call-and-response structure. It is possible to read the poem as one speaker’s observations and his editorial “asides” in reaction to those observations. It is equally possible to imagine that we are listening to multiple speakers, even a crowd of voices, or that the two columns represent entirely separate and non-interacting monologues that are forced to “live together” in the space of the poem. The poem’s structure demands that the reader envision a performance of these “imperatives,” even if she is reading the book alone.

With a more clearly defined structure than “east village conviviality imperatives,” “scenes from an apocalypsync,” the third poem from *Hi-Density’s* “POLIS” section, appears to dictate a straightforward performance scenario. Yet the clarity of this structure proves deceptive, for the poem ultimately reveals a more complex interrelating of text and performative context. Subtitled “chorus + soliloquy,” the poem is laid out as if it were a play, with stage directions that locate us in place: “*INT. a downtown supermarket.*” Like a play, the first half of the poem sets the scene in typical, if peripheral, spaces of the urban landscape

such as the “downtown supermarket” or the near-suburban tollbooth; the “chorus,” in turn, appears to present the voices that inhabit these spaces. The poem’s second half is dominated by the “soliloquy,” which, true to form, is a single monologue. The text further gestures to the role of sound by adding, on the far right-hand side of the printed page, an additional set of parenthetical interjections that can be assumed to be the reactions of an audience: “{applause},” “{nodding},” “{hell yeah!}.”³³ The text thus gives us both the actors’ lines and the audience’s reactions. The chorus provides descriptive phrases that evoke the poem’s late capitalist settings, while the soliloquy comments on the rampant commodification that circulates in and through them: “I’ve never bought it / I’ve never bought that we’re anything other than buying / when we drive by the storefronts and deface the mannequins / with ‘Fight the Power’ graffiti.”³⁴ The two streams of conversation form an uneasy dialectic: the soliloquy’s speaker does not, or cannot, completely reject this commercialized, monetized (sub) urban world. These contrasts connect back to the poem’s richly suggestive title. Just as a “lipsync” is a “fake” singing performance, the scenes evoked by the speaker seem to portend the demise of a certain world—“the West is caving in’ say the headlines”—while simultaneously revealing the existence of another: “Besides, isn’t it clear to them that caving in defines us?”³⁵ A lip-synched performance fakes the singing, but it is a real performance nonetheless. The speaker knows that there remains something of substance in the city’s marginal spaces, that beyond the gentrifying avenues “people speak brown French black Spanish English blues / every possible coloratura, you dig?” It is this city, a city of other kinds of encounters, he observes the *potential* city that remains “hidden in plain sight.”³⁶ The contrapuntal performative construction of the text suggests that this potential city exists in and as the forgotten, near-marginal spaces inhabited by the poem’s chorus.

Although the theatrical format of “scenes from an apocalipsync” gestures to the potential for verbalized performance, the poem’s status as a performance piece is complicated by other elements of the poem that assert the importance of the written text. Within each stanza of “dialogue” assigned to the chorus there are numerous spaces indicated by brackets: “here { } what the city of dreams looks like { } piecemealed into the possible.”³⁷ The meaning of these empty brackets is ambiguous. Are they signaling the space that the “hidden city” occupies or could occupy? Or are they communications that in these environments remain unsaid or unrealized? Or are they spaces for yet-to-be-voiced audience reaction, given

that the audience's dialogue also appears within the same brackets? Whatever the case, these marks highlight the tension between the printed text and its performative possibilities, since their communicative potential only fully emerges in the complementary textual and oral readings of Noel's poem. Someone listening to a reading of "apocalipsync" might miss the brackets and their suggestive presence entirely; the alternative city would remain at least partially hidden.

Perhaps the most interesting of the dialogic and performative gestures in Noel's poetry, and one that occurs with increasing frequency in the last sections of *Hi-Density*, is the presence of and emphasis on translation. Although Noel's poems demonstrate a multilingual vocabulary from the beginning, including words and phrases in Spanish, Spanglish, Portuguese, and French, the "POLIS" and "TICS" sections include entire poems presented in translation and as translations. These simultaneous self-translations reveal the urban space described in the poems to be inhabited and shaped by both languages. If, as Carmelo Esterrich asserts, the writing of some Nuyorican poets "reveals the battle over choosing one language over another or of deciding to create a new language springing from both English and Spanish," Noel's poems allow the same text, the same enunciation, to exist in both languages.³⁸ Granted, the linguistic differences in each poem reveal subtle variations in style and meaning, but this only highlights the different communities and embodied experiences that are expressed in each language, each cultural register. For example, in "consignas para le fin del mundo / slogans for the end of the world," the last poem of the "TICS (tongues)" section and the book as a whole, Noel explores this linguistic double voicing in the context of San Juan. The poem appears in English and Spanish versions, printed side by side. We are in "the city of ugly museums," San Juan depicted as a space of economic crisis, with its "Remnants and ruins, winds whipping the dangling stoplights."³⁹ Yet this is also the San Juan of tourism, a characterization that gestures to the commercialized New York we find in "HI THEN (salutation)." Here, however, our "tourists" actually appear to be older female residents of the city, whose wanderings through the city become a means for reflecting nostalgically on other cities and other journeys. The presence of English and Spanish versions of the poem on facing pages produces a kind of echo of such reflections, a ripple effect in which the city in crisis is experienced twice, as both "la ciudad en grado cero, / grosera, grande, degradada" and as "the city degree zero, / vulgar, big, degraded."⁴⁰ Different parts of each version emphasize different sonorities;

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Split into two languages, the city becomes two cities that recombine and commingle, two linguistic experiences that become united through the poem’s bilingual speaker.

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whereas the alliterative “g’s” in the Spanish “grosera, grande, degradada” are lost in the shift to English, a similar alliteration is revealed in the English lines “Source / of songs. The telluric truth of one who no longer dreams.”⁴¹ To the extent that the poem engages in a “[m]ontage and dismantling of the city,” the shimmering multifaceted views are refracted through both languages. Split into two languages, the

city becomes two cities that recombine and commingle, two linguistic experiences that become united through the poem’s bilingual speaker.

Noel’s critical writing further highlights how the difficulties of translation explored in his poems are fundamental to shaping the construction of urban diasporic subjectivities. In a 2007 essay that analyzes the musical group El Conjunto Típico Ladí’s 1947 *seis con décima* song “Un jíbaro en Nueva York,” Noel argues that the song’s construction of the jíbaro, the archetypal Puerto Rican peasant, in New York is built through the disarticulations of a bilingual, performative context. He observes, “To make sense of ‘Un jíbaro en Nueva York’ one must, in a sense ‘become’ a ‘jíbaro en Nueva York’ and work through the competing demands of English and Spanish; to become so is to allow oneself to be constituted by the difficulties of an impossible or implausible translation.”⁴² In *Hi-Density Politics*, bilingual poems allow the reader to follow his or her “becoming” in two languages at the same time that those readers who want to do so—or who are able to do so—face the challenges of translation. The selves—and the cities—constituted through this bilingual journey are built on and through these difficult gestures of articulation.

Beyond the performative gestures of the page, the poems of *Hi-Density* are complemented by Noel’s own talents as a performer. In this way, he recalls how Christopher Grobe, in his work on confessional American print and performance poetics of the 1950s and 1960s, challenges the notion “that there exist two such pristine realms as print and performance.”⁴³ Grobe observes, “For poets writing under pressure of the reading, the excellence of a poem lies not in the segregated perfections of page and performance but in the richness of the

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[Noel's] performances of a particular poem can vary widely, depending upon the audience, the venue, and the nature of the event.

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interaction between them.”⁴⁴ Noel is no shrinking wallflower of a poet: he came of age in a New York poetry environment heavily influenced by both Nuyorican poetry of the 1970s and 1980s and the more recent slam poetry scene. Highly conscious that a poetry reading is a *performance*, he pays attention to—and plays with—the details of costume and soundtrack. Both *Kool Logic* and *Boringkén* were published with accompanying audiovisual material—*Boringkén* with an audio track, *Kool Logic* with a DVD—that allow readers not lucky enough to see him live to understand his poetry as a multisensory experience, “Poems living—breathing—circulating— / Formal—neural—social—in hi-density!”⁴⁵ Noel’s performances often include the musical accompaniment of guitarist Monxo López, whose stylings add an additional layer of sonic expression to the poetry, and Noel appears in a wardrobe that plays with (and on) the various elements of his identity: *jíbaro*-esque straw hats, sparkly guayaberas, hot yellow driving caps. For Noel, performance is not simply a manner of communicating with his audience; it forms a crucial part of the life of the poems themselves. His performances of a particular poem can vary widely, depending upon the audience, the venue, and the nature of the event. As “HI-THEN (salutation)” announces, “¡En performalismo está la fuerza!”⁴⁶ Formalized as an “ism”—*performalismo*—the speaker’s performance becomes an ideology, an attitude, a way of being. If the poetics of *Hi-Density* is formed through the interaction of place and body, then Noel offers his own performing body as a mediator of this creative moment, a body through which these encounters can be written. Perhaps for this reason, although I have made a conscious attempt throughout this essay to always refer to “the speaker” in Noel’s poems, it sometimes becomes difficult to separate the speaker from Noel himself.

FROM THE BODIES, THE CITY

The coming together of bodies and urban spaces in Noel’s poetry is not merely a question of shared physical space or the exploration of cultural and political

identities. In many of *Hi-Density's* poems, the search for connectivity is affective and emotional as much as it is intellectual. The long poem “hi-din sites (*body slam*),” which closes the “POLIS” section, reveals how the political and the diasporic intersect with the emotional. The poem begins with a witty riff on Walt Whitman that references the (neo)colonial status of Puerto Rico: “sing the proles proliferative / zip-driven aggregate of cuerpos / bodies usb’d / (some still floppy from / the days of la colonia).”⁴⁷ These are bodies coming together—the image of the zip-drive suggests that they might be gathered together to facilitate travel, another reference to diasporic identities—but at first they appear united more by their post-colonial status. More than a coming-together, this first part of the poem charts a kind of un-making; the speaker proposes the transformation of previous narratives and constructions, suggesting that someone “repost the founding text / as spam.”⁴⁸ Yet the poem’s fourth and fifth stanzas track a move from diasporic rewritings to physical encounters: “besides borders / aren’t just metaphysics / or crossing sites / they’re also the impasse / between bodies, the untouched skins, / unchecked assumptions, desires / dreams of setting fire / to the self, the order, / the embrace.”⁴⁹ The disarticulations experienced by the coming together of individuals in diaspora are charged with varying emotions and desires. Yet borders separate physical bodies as much as they delineate space. The difficulties in connection that the poetic speaker has charted in previous poems also emerge in the midst of eroticized interpersonal relations. All we can hope to do, the poem suggests, is accept the challenges and make the attempt to come together, whether physically or through poetry.

The last section of “hi-din sites” makes more explicit the parallel between the difficulties of physical encounter and the challenges in creating poetry as a space of engagement. The speaker states the need for both a body and a poetics, “a bo-po,” as he mockingly calls it, “found, gestated, or prosthetic.” Poetry and the body are once again linked: both of them function “in relation” to listeners, to interlocutors, to other bodies. The poem celebrates the imperfect nature of both physical and poetic meetings. It is the damaged bodies, “the cropped and crappy, cripp and queer, / flopped and failing” that open a space for engagement, “make the night what it is, our blessed ruin.”⁵⁰ Catalyzed by affect, this kind of embodied poetics produces something paradoxically bounded by and greater than the sum of its parts: “we are what the mind makes / what the body allows / the cosmos and the chemistry / the error and the errancy.”⁵¹ In the space created by imperfection lies the possibility of liberatory creation.

Through the relationships that emerge between urban spaces and corporeal spaces, between text and performance, the poem itself appears in *Hi-Density Politics* as a space of optimistic, if fleeting and imperfect, understanding. Even as Noel's poems explore the discomfort of statelessness, the fragmentations and disarticulations of diasporic subjectivity, they simultaneously celebrate the messiness of urban encounters, the formation of a dissonant communitarian *we*. This "we" is forged in the coming together of the poetic moment: it is after the poetic encounter, "the many ways that we begin / to make this music / this mawkish morning" that "the shuffle of the city finally becomes us."⁵² The poem may be a difficult negotiation, an imperfect performance; but in the complex, living urban space that Noel's poetry creates and inhabits, it is the reaching out, the making of the music, however mawkish, that counts. The city suits us, we are at home in it, and through our relating, however difficult, we make it ours.

————— / **Notes** / —————

¹ Jahan Ramazani. *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

² With *guagua aérea* (literally, "air bus"), I am referring to Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez's short story of the same title in which he describes the way in which a significant segment of the Puerto Rican population is engaged in an almost constant coming and going between the island and the mainland United States. Sociologist Jorge Duany has christened this demographic practice with the title of his book *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

³ From Urayoán Noel's home page, "urayoán noel: stateless poet," <<http://urayoannoel.com/>>. Emphasis in original.

⁴ It is also possible to see the division of *Hi-Density Politics* as a play on/response to Tato Laviera's groundbreaking collection *AmeRican* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 2003), which is divided into three sections: "Ethnic Tributes," "Values," and "Politics." If Laviera's divisions reflect the pressing issues surrounding the construction of Nuyorican identity that the texts try to address, Noel's collection sidesteps the question of hybridity (taking it in some ways as a given), bringing it back to the way the global encounters the local.

⁵ Sueyeun Juliette Lee, "Hi-Density Politics: Urayoán Noel," *The Constant Critic*, March 14, 2011, http://www.constantcritic.com/sueyeun_juliette_lee/hi-density-politics/.

⁶ Urayoán Noel, *Hi-Density Politics* (Buffalo, New York: BlazeVOX, 2010), 15.

⁷ Kristin Dykstra, "On Equal Footing: A Review of Recent Works by Urayoán Noel," *Jacket 2*, April 25, 2012, <http://jacket2.org/reviews/equal-footing>.

⁸ Noel, *Hi-Density Politics*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Allan Johnston sees Beat writing as articulating a dialectic between "east-coast-centered, need-focused, secular vision of economic realities" and a "spiritualized attempt to escape from economic realities" connected to a "west-coast-centered, Buddhist-anarchic synthesis." See Allan Johnston, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writing of the Beat Generation," *College Literature* 32, no. 2 (2005): 104.

¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14.

¹⁵ Noel, *Hi-Density Politics*, 17.

¹⁶ Walter Salles, "Notes for a Theory of the Road Movie," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 11, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/11/magazine/11roadtrip-t.html? r=0>.

¹⁷ Noel, *Hi-Density Politics*, 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²² See the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Lehman College, "Puerto Rican Migration: Operation Bootstrap," <http://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/Bootstrap.htm>, modified August 26, 2008: Operation Bootstrap, known in Spanish as *Operación Manos a la Obra*, refers to the process of industrialization of Puerto Rico that began with the Industrialization Incentives Act of 1947. As the island's economy was moved from one based primarily on the production of sugar to one driven by urban manufacturing, there was a similar shift in population from the rural countryside to the cities and, eventually, to manufacturing centers in the mainland United States.

²³ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 99.

²⁴ Noel, *Hi-Density Politics*, 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See Urayoán Noel, *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).

³¹ Ibid, 22.

³² Noel, *Hi-Density Politics*, 35. The italics are mine, inserted to indicate the column divisions of the poem.

³³ Ibid, 38-39.

³⁴ Ibid, 38.

³⁵ Ibid, 39.

³⁶ Ibid, 40.

³⁷ Ibid, 38.

³⁸ Carmelo Esterrich, "Home and the Ruins of Language: Víctor Hernández Cruz and Miguel Algarín's Nuyorican Poetry," *MELUS* 23, no. 3 (1998): 44.

³⁹ Noel, *Hi-Density Politics*, 91.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 92.

⁴¹ Ibid, 95.

⁴² Urayoán Noel, "In the Decimated City: Symptom, Translation, and the Performance of a New York *Jíbaro* from Ladí to Luciano to Lavoe," *CENTRO Journal* 19, no. 2 (2007): 130.

⁴³ Christopher Grobe, "The Breath of the Poem: Confessional Print/Performance Circa 1959," *PMLA* 127, no. 2 (2012): 216.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 216.

⁴⁵ Noel, *Hi-Density Politics*, 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Noel, *Hi-Density Politics*, 57.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 58.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 64.

⁵¹ Ibid, 65.

⁵² Ibid, 66.