

Cities of the Dead: Performing Life in the Caribbean

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Facebook, crean una comunidad de lectores distinta a la clásica moderna: una comunidad de lectores “otra” que atraviesa el campo de lo literario hacia el mercado, hacia lo virtual, hacia lo *pulp* y viceversa.

Quizás sea cierto lo que argumenta Ludmer sobre la emergencia de “literaturas postautónomas” y, en dicho giro, ya estamos dentro de un nuevo ciclo ocupado totalmente por la ambivalencia. Como habitante de un lugar de dicho carácter, difiero en mirar la ambivalencia como un lugar yermo y al cuál temer. Me parece a mí que, en las ambivalentes islas de Puerto Rico, el Caribe y sus diásporas, el desdibujamiento de fronteras ofrece nuevas estrategias e imaginarios para que sujetos invisibles se inserten en los circuitos literarios de la era global actual. Cierta es que el mercado puede fácilmente vaciar de contenidos a estas nuevas literaturas postautónomas y convertirlas en meros simulacros. Pero también se abre una nueva posibilidad de discursividad que completa y redefine los diálogos del mundo.

San Juan, marzo de 2015 ■

Pa/ís
Sí / pa

Anagrama del
desorden
de las banderas plurales

Al no saber mentar el padre

Al presente ausente

A la ausencia quedada

Hacemos grandes histerizaciones

De los puestos fulguración de fanatismos
de madre.

Eduardo Lalo, “Necrópolis” (2014)

Performing Life

Living and dying but particularly surviving have become ritualized practices in our global times. Individual and collective forms of survival are tied to the ways capital directs our lives, intentions, and emotions. As Antonio Negri (1999, 9) argues, capital produces a spectrality that corresponds with common experiences: “There is no longer an outside, neither a nostalgic one or a mythic one, nor an urgency for reason to disengage us from the spectrality of the real.” While time is money, survival might seem to the passive observer as an über-transaction where bodies live to invest or to create inversions in present and future schemes. Survival is related in many ways to the networks created by informal labor and markets, and appears, at least in the Spanish Caribbean and Latin America, with what James C. Scott (2005) has labeled “infrapolitics” or the “hidden transcripts,” unorganized, clandestine, or evasive practices of the working class and the underclass. Defined historically by a form of “state capitalism” and by the third wave of globalized economies in San Juan, Havana, or Hispaniola, *la lucha* or *la brega de todos*

los días consists of a certain doing and waiting. Waiting for the next deal to come through, waiting to buy food for the next meal, waiting for the car to get fixed, selling whatever is read by the state as “illegal,” be it drugs, food, or medicines. Between *bregar* and *luchar* there is also *inventar*—all performative ways of living defined by the creative in-betweenness of the present and the future. Time is abolished when *inventar* is part of life. Contemporary cities in the Spanish Caribbean survive. Survival is the narrative of our times. The timeless forms of *brega*, *lucha*, or *inventos* may differ, but they do survive due to their human energy and capacity. To discuss the dead and mourning in cities that survive will seem like a complete paradox. Is survival part of what political philosophers have termed “life”? She who survives is always in fight or flight response, showing her scars, moving forward. The questions posed by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* (2006) about the violence of global times are pertinent in relation to those who survive. Whose lives count as lives? What makes for a grievable life? Is the survivor real? And what about death? Who mourns and how? Is the survivor always dehumanized? How?

In this article, I would like to offer a reading of the vulnerable bodies that live and die in the Spanish Caribbean.¹ Their vulnerable status as spectral entities in contemporary economies of capital has entitled them to be called survivors. They are part of our decayed and/or restored contemporary city landscapes. They are part of informal economies. Survivors are spectral laborers, in a process more real than any other. San Juan and Havana, and Santo Domingo, have produced interesting works in literature, film, video, and collective imaginings in which the tropes of ritualistic death, survival, and collective mourning are interrelated. While

historically, colonial genocide and enslavement of native and black populations inaugurated violent spectacles of death, it is also true that in these contemporary works, visual art and sociability are intertwined with collective performances. For example, Puerto Rican writer Eduardo Lalo has identified the contemporary condition of Puerto Rican and Caribbean cultures as one of “invisibility” (2008). His statement, in a contradictory fashion, comes at a moment when Spanish Caribbean literature and cultural production have become market commodities and when several Caribbean literary authors have become stars in the global publishing market. While there are writers who decide not to publish or who are served by local publishers, some writers and publications are associated more with formulas or with what the media likes.

My main thesis is that literature and culture in the Spanish Caribbean have incorporated the language of the spectacle to create what I define as “Caribbean mediascapes.” In this discussion, I would like to engage with these questions of visibility, invisibility, and discontent, as well as spectacle and the marketability of literary texts and media technologies. Caribbean mediascapes mix the uses of media technologies derived from film, television, the Internet, and YouTube and the ways they engage and are used and read in the Spanish Caribbean. I analyze the cultures of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception, as well as the texts themselves (representation). Some of the key questions I am looking at are these: How do Caribbean writers/performers negotiate the politics of globalization in how they represent themselves in either the digitally enhanced or real worlds? How is daily life performed and how are local cultures framed? Are there possible forms of agency in these Caribbean mediascapes?

The racialized and diverse geographies of urban Caribbean cities are key for understanding these mediascapes—cities in which life, death, and survival have been enhanced or commodified by the algorithms of the Internet and the images of tent cities or the decayed and uninhabited spaces within. “Cities of the dead,” argues Joseph Roach (1996), “are made for the living”; and in Havana, San Juan, or Santo Domingo, the role of the living-dead, spectacular death, or death as collage for the living reflect contemporary realities of violence, postcapitalist market economies, and mourning. Mediascapes rely on “spectral cities” where the dead or the living-dead organize rhetorical devices for the living, rituals for themselves and for the others who rely on them or organize their “sur-vival” (über-life) in their longing for togetherness. There is an affective turn in these works and performances that questions neoliberal market economies, while it makes clear what the role is of bodies that are vulnerable, discarded, or disappeared, that are not seen as useful labor, bodies whose sources of energy are usually read from their entrance in the world of the living as “dead.” If the state uses dying (military action, torture, crime, violence) as a strategic tool for “cleansing” (in economic and political terms), these works attempt to take a step back, to look and mourn.

How should we mourn if the corpse, in many instances, is not there and has disappeared? Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott argues: “Ashes, waste, and the ghost are anachronistic forms of presence that break with meaning and identification, subverting the mechanical forms built by the tensions between sovereignty and accumulation, making possible the formation of the ruin, the common grave, and the cenotaph as markers where historical meaning is related only as a natural history of destruction. [La

ceniza, el resto y el espectro son formas anacrónicas de la presencia que interrumpen la identificación y alteran el engranaje maquínico constituido por la tensión entre soberanía y acumulación, haciendo posible la aparición de la ruina, la fosa común y el cenotafio generalizado como lugares en los que se juega el sentido de una historia que cada vez más parece ser la historia natural de la destrucción.]”²

To make the living accountable for the disappearing corpse, for the dead, has been key for discussions on the politics of violence in the Southern Cone and contemporary Mexico. In Caribbean spaces it is not the disappearance but the overt presence of dead bodies as ciphers of capital, power, and death, their insistent presence and afterlife, which calls my attention. What about the living dead and their negotiation vis-à-vis these politics of destruction? What happens when dying corpses become manipulated in funerary rites to create some kind of meaning? In these processes of mourning I read, with Freud, melancholia for that which was lost, which in the case of Havana, San Juan, or the Dominican Republic is not necessarily the past. I believe that zombies, the living dead, and the performative dead are all part of the same process, as they reflect sites of melancholia where social action, be it individual or collective, is required. I will be cautious to read these actions merely as forms of agency against the state or neoliberal economies. These “necropolitics,” to use Achille Mbembe’s term (2003), are more than forms of agency. They also “frame” forms of precarious subjectivity and existence in contemporary Caribbean societies (Butler 2006), where melancholia is pretty much related to the present. In this sense, Caribbean cities are, in their *jouissance*, melancholic cities and desacralized (unconsecrated) spaces where the dead, the

living, and their mediums create a narrative of survival whose scripts are rewritten in disorder in the violence of daily lives.

Zombies

Zombie characters and stories are present in contemporary Caribbean narratives to reflect on the colonial living-dead condition, labor, love and sexuality, and the hauntings of Caribbean histories. In Pedro Cabiya's novel *Malas hierbas* (2010), the narrator realizes that he has been made a zombie by a woman who is seeking revenge for her haunted past. Having lived on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, this woman has survived her ordeal to realize her wish to make a living zombie who could tend to all her wishes and desires. A love that wishes to control but also S and M sexual fantasies define the zombie narrative in Cabiya's novel. Nevertheless, the zombie controls consciousness and not necessarily the body. In Rita Indiana Hernández's *Papi* (2005), Papi, the long-desired object of the protagonist's affection, becomes a zombie at the end of the novel, but contrary to the bodily strength in Cabiya's zombie, we see a body that is decaying, smelling, and rotting from the inside. The daughter, in a melancholic act, makes him the leader of a new cult (modeled on the cult of Olivorio Mateo's Palma Sola messianic movement). Papi is not Olivorio but an embodiment of Trujillo and *trujillismo*, still surviving in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the narrative takes place. To break the cycle of melancholy she lets him rot but places herself in his place in a symbolic embrace of language and power that finally returns to her mother's body.

The Havana of Alejandro Brugués's *Juan de los Muertos* (2010) is a contemporary city where zombies appear randomly in houses and streets, their zombification read as a

"polluted anomic state" (a virus) mainly associated with capitalism and neoliberal ideologies coming from the outside. Juan, his best friend, his daughter, and his son fight together to destroy the zombies that attack them. The film keeps the structure of the comic book where the zombies appear mostly in groups, making Juan and his small group of brave defenders heroes in their fight against the living dead. Their fighting scenes as well as his business are organized in the logic of survival, against all odds. The ironic motto of the business—"Matamos a sus seres queridos"—places affect and emotion in the only site possible: the state. If it's difficult for you to kill your loved ones, Juan does the job. In a post-ideological apocalyptic scenario only Juan remains standing—as the one living consciousness in a sea of death.

John Torres's poetry collection *Undead* (2013) makes of San Juan a space where the living dead perform in a carnivalesque fashion the "la inanida historia" of suspended time.

En esta *inanida* historia yo soy yo
y el reverbero de muertos vivos
que me persigue —entre segmentos
deshilvanados por la fuga—,
una estela hedionda que acecha
a las hordas,
la suma de las partes
sajadas por vicio.

En la vida real no hay música de fondo
y el resabio de la conciencia gira
desarticulado.

Acá los zombis ríen y bailan
cual fuegos fatuos
y sus manos son retoños
que macerados nos tocan,
elevando el tacto al orden del juego,
sondas virtuales que eculizan
el acecho.

El resto del relato es sencillo
Las muertes se retratan solas
sólo hay que saber mirar.

In his documentary *La ciudad perdida* (2005), Eduardo Lalo traces the death of urban spaces in San Juan, Río Piedras, and Santurce, Puerto Rico. In his words, Puerto Rico is the symbol of a postcapitalist environment where desolation, ruins, decay, and abandonment are part of our present. Naomi Klein's model of "disaster capitalism" describes the death of many of these urban spaces. A difference of Klein's model is that there is no other option that substitutes for what has disappeared beforehand. The supermall or the Walmart are already there, coexisting with these dying spaces. Lalo portrays these ruins of capital through graffiti messages that talk back to those who want to see and to the reactions of the living that "wander" through these spaces. The image of a dog that runs in schizoid ways, just runs, opens and closes the documentary. He signifies these desperate and wanderer conditions. Man and animal, as Agamben (2003) argues, share a similar consciousness in our global present today, where the present becomes everything and nothing.

Funeral tableaux

In these spaces of decay where violence—collective, individual, self-inflicted—is the order of the day (anonymous and also ever present) and where "exceptional violence"³ is part of daily life, the interactive processes of death become spectacular, ritualized, visible. Angel Luis Pantojas, 24 years old, knowing that he would die young, had a final request: "Do not put my body to rest. I want to stay standing." By requesting this, he was asking for the performance of a funeral aspiring to erase the mark of what he foreshadowed as an early violent death,



Figure 1 “El muerto parao.” Courtesy of GFR Media, “El Nuevo Día.”

to be standing, as others will be, after death, a type of life that doesn't end with death (figure 1). Pantojas's body was found in a swollen state in the watershed of a mangrove area close to his house in the caserío Quintana, Hato Rey, with 11 gunshot wounds in various areas including the collar bone, chest, and head. He was a statistic—another young man in his early twenties, poor, of racially mixed origin—another number in the weekly drug-related deaths that happen on the island. What historian Carlos Pabón (2013) has read as a “social war in Puerto Rico” creates a society of fear “in which it seems that indifference and silence are strategically posed to let these ‘others’ kill themselves, which results in a distance from this other, and the writing off of these murders [parecería que la indiferencia y el silencio se traducen en una estrategia de dejar que ‘otros’ se maten entre sí, lo que implica un alejamiento del otro y cierta condonación a los asesinatos].”

Funeraria Marín in Río Piedras performed the funeral rites. Pantojas's body was exposed in his house, in the living room, standing in the corner, dressed in his “rapero clothes” as he requested. Antonio Martorell's exhibit of 2012 entitled “Velando, mamá, velando” paid homage to Francisco Oller's *El Velorio* (1893), a representation of the African tradition of “baquiné de angelito.” Martorell describes these paintings as encompassing shots of film images where a Puerto Rican “proto-

film” is performed. Showcased at the Havana International Film Festival (2012), “Velando, mamá, velando” plays with the double meaning of the popular song “Jugando, mamá, jugando,” filled with sexual overtones. *Velar* means to observe, to witness, and also refers to the notion of bearing witness. The performative text written for the exhibit (what Martorell calls the *no-vela*) plays with Oller's “El Velorio” to suggest the opposite, of not-seeing, “*no ver*” as the fictional role of the *no-vel* (figure 2). In an article for the Cuban journal *La Jiribilla* Martorell adds, “Our citizen and human rights are being violated by a police state in the name of national security,” a comment that has transnational and also specular overtones. These types of violence in Puerto Rico or Havana are all about “seeing” and “not seeing.” Rubén Ríos (2010) has acutely identified this condition as “the uncommon ways that mourning is assumed in times of catastrophe, one that mixes mourning with desecration [la forma inusitada que asume el duelo en los tiempos de la catástrofe y que mezcla el duelo con la profanación].” The distance assumed by artists and others of “la danza macabra” or the mix between dance, *sonéo*, and performance is recreated in these “tableau vivants” which convey the



Figure 2. Antonio Martorell, “El muerto parao,” 2011. Carbón, crayón y papel sobre lino, 72 x 48 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. “El muerto en motora.” Courtesy of GFR Media, “Primera Hora.”

ways dwelling and mourning have been represented today.

In 2010, in “El muerto en motora,” David Morales Colón, 22, posed as in a music video with his 14K motorcycle, the one he used for his job as a messenger. He died on his motorcycle in Santurce when several men shot him. Knowing that his days were numbered and that “he already had a price on his head” for drug trafficking, he requested to be seated as if alive with his motorcycle (figure 3; “Repsol” is the Spanish multinational oil company). After showing this image to my students we could not deny the irony (or not) of the beats of Daddy Yankee's “Gasolina” as a sonic motif for this image. In contrast to the first funeral, “El muerto en motora” relied on the aesthetics of motion and speed. In Philadelphia, Julio López, 39 years old, who was a member of a motorcycle club, copied Morales Colón and was seated on his motorcycle at his funeral, which was performed by the Mitchum Wilson Funeral Home in Philadelphia (<http://www.mitchumwilsonfuneralhome.com/obituaries/Julio-Lopez/>).

As Manuel Ramos Otero has forcefully argued in his poetry collection *El libro de la muerte*, it is as if funereal rituals in the island and the diaspora have been reconciled in these aesthetics of collective mourning;

Otravez.
 No es carnaval pero es espejo
 El pellejo adivina la nada del payaso.
 El utilero ha puesto un flamboyán en
 esta esquina,
 Y la gente nunca habla cuando camina.
 La vieja de la montaña se ríe de camino
 al cementerio.
 La comadrona está vestida de violeta y
 de miedo.
 Es medianoche de mujer que se vuelve
 caballo blanco.
 En los bares del barrio se comenta:
 El Cojo de la Norzagaray, los Rosarios
 de Cruz,
 Las Luces de Bengala en la Perla, los
 títeres
 achicharrando a Cristo en su altar de
 gladiolas y azucenas,
 y el lucero punzó sobre mi abuela
 (“El libro de los muertos,” 19–20)

The commodification of death, while present in these tableaux, is more complex here if we look at the ways it plays with the materialization (value) and dematerialization (nonvalue) of the body. While in Havana there is a masculine (but fragile, comical) body instituting a telos of survival, in San Juan and the diaspora collective performances of death are part of the other coin, as they claim a “consumer body that becomes visible” only when it is dead. The class-capital part of the ritual should not be disregarded. There has been strong criticism and a clear rejection of the Puerto Rican Health Department and the government, which have tried to create new legislation over these untraditional funerals.

In all of these examples, it is the masculine body that is projected as vulnerable while women, particularly mothers, comply with the last desires or institute the wills of their sons. In these funerals, their sons look as if they are alive; in a way they constitute the mother who loses a son to crime as a type of “public mourning.” In many ways, more than the last wishes of the sons, these women are claiming their role of “sister citizens” or “muerteras” of those who remain, the holders of memory and memorialization.⁴ They perform their suffering publicly, they are held accountable, as they have paid with the lives of their sons.

The “Abuelita en sillón” was the name given to a recent untraditional wake that was requested by Doña Georgina Chervony Llóren, 80 years old, when she could not overcome her grief at the death of her younger son. Dressed in her pink wedding dress from 36 years ago, Doña Georgina sat on her rocking chair accompanied by her favorite book and flowers from her garden (figure 4). Through this gesture, she became a symbol for her family, an “ancestor” in the flesh. Although Doña Georgina’s act breaks with the histories of violence behind most of the untraditional funerals taking place in Puerto Rico and the diaspora since 2010, it is key to see



Figure 4. “Abuelita en sillón.” Photo by Ángel Rivera, courtesy of GFR Media, “Primera Hora.”

these rituals in all their complexity. To dwell on the suspension of death and the material in these performative funerals is a way to answer to the violence of death itself, but also a response to the violent politics of the real and the dismissive role of the Puerto Rican state regarding life, all forms of life.⁵ As Guillermo Rebollo-Gil argues in a recent poem,

En mi país, se producen más fármacos
 por milla cuadrada que en cualquier
 otro lugar en el mundo.
 Doce hombres han matado
 a doce mujeres
 en lo que va de año.
 Hay cerca de veinte mil abogados,
 diecinueve mil policías,
 doce mil confinados en Puerto Rico.
 Cuarenta y cinco por ciento de la
 población
 vive bajo niveles de pobreza.
 Es un país pequeño comparado
 con casi cualquier otro lugar.
 Doscientas personas emigran cada día.
 Otras desaparecen.
 Entre ellas, doce mujeres
 en lo que va de año.
 Según los pronósticos, sus muertes
 no afectarán los niveles
 de producción en la industria.

A final question arises. What’s left for the dead? If the performance does not end with dying, and all mourning is in many ways an affirmation for the living, are these zombies, or are funeral tableaux a meditation on a present that does not argue for any futurity? Or is it precisely in the abjection or nurture that they evoke where we could find the chore of our intrasubjective dilemmas? Maybe they take

us to the possibility of a timeless suspension of the act of sovereignty itself, a moment that happens only when the body dies, which instead of being completely ejected and abjected as the sacrificial other, becomes the articulation of a new signification, a body in a suspended and timeless order.

Notes

- ¹ Here I am following Guillermina de Ferrari's reading of Caribbean bodies as vulnerable in a racial, social, and anthropological sense. See De Ferrari 2008.
- ² See Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, "Las edades del cadáver: dictadura, guerra, desaparición. Postulados para una geología general." Presentación en la conferencia "Crossing Mexico: Migration and Human Rights in the Age of Criminal Politics," Princeton University, March 13, 2015.
- ³ Here I am using Deborah Thomas's (2011) term to follow these forms of citizenship and embodiment in the case of Puerto Rico.
- ⁴ The term "sister citizens" comes from Melissa V. Harris-Perry's (2011) analysis of the role of grief and anger in black womanhood as a form of citizenship.
- ⁵ I am referring here to all forms of life including animal life. In the town of Ceiba, funeral home owner Eusebio Ochoa performed a traditional funeral wake for his best companion, a German shepherd named "Brownie." Brownie had an open casket and was buried in a niche located in the funeral home, <http://www.eldiariiony.com/funeral-perro-brownie-puerto-rico-eusebio-carrasco-ceiba-video>.

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