

**Martín Espada**

**THE LOVER OF A SUBVERSIVE IS ALSO A SUBVERSIVE:  
COLONIALISM AND THE POETRY OF REBELLION IN PUERTO RICO**

My great-grandfather, Buenaventura Roig, was the mayor of Utuado, a town in the mountains of Puerto Rico. When he died in 1941, thousands of mourners flocked to his funeral. Almost fifty years later, my father and I searched for the grave of Buenaventura Roig.

We never found it. Instead, we wandered into a remote cemetery, high up in the mountains, with row after row of stones dated between 1950 and 1953. These were men killed in a faraway place called Korea, among the 756 Puerto Ricans who died fighting for the United States in the Korean War.

My father, Francisco Luis (Frank) Espada, was also a Korean War-era veteran. He fought another war, on a different front, refused service at a segregated diner in San Antonio, Texas, jailed in Biloxi, Mississippi for refusing to sit at the back of the bus, subjected to apartheid in the same country he was sworn to defend.

What the dead in that Utuado cemetery and my father had in common is that they were born in a colony of the United States, where the inhabitants cannot vote for President and have no voting representation in Congress, yet can be drafted to fight and die in the wars of the U.S. Puerto Rico is the oldest colony in the world: four

centuries under Spain and more than a century under the United States. In five hundred and twenty-two years, Puerto Rico has not determined its own destiny for five minutes.

In the early years of U.S. occupation, poet and political leader José de Diego wrote, “Puerto Ricans do not know how to say no.” And yet, he pointed out, “the ‘no’ of the oppressed has been the word, the genesis of the liberation of peoples.” De Diego warned: “We must learn how to say no.” He set the tone for a century of Puerto Rican poets to come.

The poets of Puerto Rico have often articulated the vision of independence, creating an alternative to the official history of the kind propagated by occupiers everywhere. They have been imprisoned for their words and ideas, despite the rhetoric of free expression favored by the United States. These poets have taught the next generation the arts of resistance, so that even poets living in the United States and writing in English continue to clamor for the island’s independence.

Puerto Rico is a political anachronism, a throwback to the days of gunboat diplomacy and the handlebar mustache. On July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1898, U.S. troops landed at Guánica and seized the island as a prize of the Spanish-American War. General Nelson Miles, a decade removed from the Indian Wars and the capture of Geronimo, promised Puerto Rico “the blessings of the liberal institutions of our government.” That government turned the economy over to four North American sugar companies, brutally exploiting the labor force; imposed a series of North American

governors appointed by the President; established a military occupation; forced English on the public schools and the court system; and repressed the independentistas, or pro-independence citizens of the island.

In the 1930s, the world sugar market collapsed, and the economy of Puerto Rico collapsed with it. There was, as historian Kal Wagenheim put it, “virtual starvation.” Julia de Burgos, who would become Puerto Rico’s most beloved poet, articulated the rage and bewilderment of the population when she wrote (in the translation by Jack Agüeros):

Where is the little one who in rickets unleafed his life?

Where is the wife who died of anemia?

Where is the vegetable patch she helped plant, she dead today?

Where is the cow?

Where is the mare?

Where is the land?

The reference to “the little one” is not a coincidence. Julia de Burgos was the eldest of thirteen children in rural Carolina, Puerto Rico; she watched six of them die. The poet proposed a revolutionary solution:

Sharpen your hoe  
whet your machete  
and temper your soul.

Descend from the cliffs  
and cross the fields drunk with cane.

    Come close!

(...)

Look at the sugar mills:

    There is your dead wife!

Contemplate the savage banquet of the machines  
grip your hoe  
and proceed  
and say: "Til I return!"

    Come close!

The movement for independence reached its peak in the mid-1930s with the rise of the Nationalist Party, spearheaded by a fiercely brilliant Harvard lawyer, Pedro Albizu Campos. Albizu led a cane-cutters' strike in 1934, "a machete march/ of calloused hands and feet," in the words of committed Nationalist Julia de Burgos. Two years later, Albizu and seven other leaders were rounded up by the U.S. government and charged with seditious conspiracy. In fact, the U.S. law of seditious conspiracy has been applied almost exclusively to Puerto Ricans.

There were two trials in 1936. The first resulted in a hung jury. The second resulted in conviction, but only after the prosecutor hand-picked a jury of ten North Americans and two Puerto Ricans. (The prosecutor, Cecil Snyder, flashed his list of jurors at a cocktail party to

none other than Rockwell Kent, the renowned North American artist, who made this information public.) The defendants were sentenced to terms ranging from six to ten years for, in essence, conspiring to overthrow the government of the United States on a Spanish-speaking Caribbean island. Albizu, the most dangerous man in Puerto Rico, would spend most of the next three decades incarcerated.

The protests continued into the following year. In Ponce, on Palm Sunday, 1937, police fired on a Nationalist Party march, killing twenty-one people and wounding more than a hundred and fifty. One independentista recalled: “My mother left in a white dress and came home in a red dress.”

The uses and misuses of language are critical in such a situation. The bloodletting was characterized on the front page of *The New York Times* as a Nationalist “Riot.” However, an American Civil Liberties Union lawyer, Arthur Garfield Hayes, conducted his own investigation: the police, in fact, were the ones who rioted. Hayes published his report in *The Nation* magazine, exposing the incident that came to be known as “La Masacre de Ponce,” or the Ponce Massacre.

The collective memory of such events, repressed in the interest of the colonial power, must be perpetuated by word of mouth, by song, and by poetry. When Bolívar Márquez, a Nationalist shot down and dying in Ponce, wrote in his own blood on the sidewalk, *Long Live the Republic! Down with the Assassins!*, Julia de Burgos recorded his dramatic gesture

in a poem of the same name, assuring him that, “Your blood is planted in a thousand living signs.”

Not by coincidence, two of the eight defendants in the 1936 trials were major poets: Clemente Soto Vélez and Juan Antonio Corretjer.

The orphaned son of landless peasants, Clemente Soto Vélez was born in the mountain town of Lares in 1905. Lares was the site of a historic 1868 revolt against the Spanish, an insurrection still celebrated today on the island every September 23<sup>rd</sup> as the Grito de Lares, or Battlecry of Lares. Though the revolt failed, the symbolism of Lares is deeply embedded in the national psyche, “alive, “ as Julia de Burgos puts it, “in the great and ferocious Puerto Rican lament/ that drips through the lips of the crazy palm trees.” (This did not prevent the United States from making the 4<sup>th</sup> of July an official holiday in Puerto Rico.) Soto Vélez became the living link between 19<sup>th</sup> century resistance to Spanish colonialism and 20<sup>th</sup> century resistance to North American colonialism.

Soto Vélez co-founded a surrealist literary movement called *La Atalaya de los Dioses*, or *The Watchtower of the Gods*, in 1928. They made common cause with the Nationalist Party, resulting in a fusion of the literary and political vanguards on the island. As Soto Vélez expressed it, these poets committed themselves to “making revolution from the podium.”

Clemente Soto Vélez was a visionary in every sense. He was not only an independentista, but a socialist; not only a socialist, but a surrealist who invented his own phonetic alphabet, so no one lacking an education could misspell a word. Soto Vélez was also the editor of the Nationalist Party newspaper, called *Armas*, or *Weapons*. The slogan on the masthead read: "Puerto Rican, the independence of Puerto Rico depends on the number of bullets in your belt." This statement, by itself, was enough to earn Soto Vélez a six-year sentence.

His first book, *Escalio*, or *Fallow Land*, was published in 1937, the same year the poet was shipped to a federal prison in Atlanta, chained to fellow poet Corretjer for the voyage. *Escalio* ends with a poem called "Solitude." (I co-translated this and the next three poems with Camilo Pérez-Bustillo.)

To fly, alone, to fly  
through the skies  
of the most incendiary  
imagination,  
and so, alone, to create,  
create the infinite  
flight of life.

To think, alone, to think  
as all the gathering armies  
of creation think,

and so, alone, alone,  
alone, to listen  
for the original cause  
trembling in the light.

To sing, alone, to sing,  
as the atoms sing  
the will into action,  
and so, alone, to sing  
as the true awareness  
of energy tells it.

Solitude, solitude!  
Nimbus of magnetism  
balancing all things  
within the life-force  
that repels it—  
solitude, solitude,  
heart of life!

Indeed, Soto Vélez must have experienced this sense of solitude at the Atlanta penitentiary. Forbidden to correspond in any language but English, the poet—who was actually fluent in English—refused on principle to correspond with anyone at all. This spirit of defiance characterized him. When he was released from Atlanta in 1940, on the condition that he not make any more speeches demanding



independence, Soto Vélez returned to Puerto Rico and did exactly that. He was immediately re-arrested and served two more years in prison at the penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

Soto Vélez was a master of paradox. He addresses one such paradox in the next poem: the fact that he lost his freedom for the love of freedom, that he was walled off from his island for the sake of his island. The poet speaks of himself in the third person, and visualizes himself as a letter of the alphabet, sitting in isolation. This is poem #3 from *The Wooden Horse*.

I met him  
living like an h incarcerated in the honey of his bees,  
but the bars of honey were bittersweet,  
and because  
he lost himself  
in love with liberation,  
and because he did not abandon  
his love nor she her lover,  
the earth for him is a hurricane of persecuted stars,  
since liberation cannot  
love anyone  
except whoever loves  
the earth, with its sun and sky.

Upon his release in 1942, Soto Vélez migrated to New York, where he edited and wrote for the weekly publication *Pueblos Hispanos*, joined by fellow poets Juan Antonio Corretjer and Julia de Burgos. Soto Vélez also served as an organizer for radical Congressman Vito Marcantonio and the American Labor Party. He was, above all, a teacher in a community denied any access to its own history. Over the years, he mentored countless writers, artists and activists, myself included.

He became the bridge between the independence movement in Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican community on the U.S. mainland. Far from being a Hispanophile—a charge sometimes leveled at the Nationalists--the poet connected resistance to North American colonialism in the present with resistance to Spanish colonialism in the past, drawing parallels between the independence movement and the battle of the indigenous Taínos to expel the conquistadores from their island.

One such poem retells the fable of Urayoán and Diego Salcedo. By the early 1500s, the Spanish in Puerto Rico had acquired the reputation of being immortal. One cacique, or chieftain, by the name of Urayoán decided to test this belief. When a Spanish noble, Diego Salcedo, passed through Urayoán's village and demanded bearers to carry him across a nearby river, the cacique instructed the bearers to dump Sr. Salcedo into the river and hold his head under the water to see if he drowned. The bearers conducted their experiment, and returned with their report: the

Spanish die too. This news triggered a revolt of the Taínos against their Spanish overlords.

Though the uprising was crushed—the Spanish were fond of hanging and burning Taínos in groups of thirteen, in honor of Christ and the twelve Apostles—centuries later Clemente Soto Vélez would cite Urayoán’s rebellion as an example for the independence movement of his time. The poem is #14 from *The Wooden Horse*, and again the poet refers to himself in the third person.

I met him  
offering  
an island’s tribute to the dare, shimmering  
underwater, that puts the immortal  
to the test, to death  
by drowning, and the water washes up  
this soaked discovery  
like an expired flower;  
blunders like claws of contempt drain blood  
from the aboriginal tranquility  
at the edge of gunpowder and the smoke of humiliation,  
but still the longing gleams  
and moans in the meditation that drinks  
the waters,  
so the heart goes on  
like an Indian harvesting

stars.

Soto Vélez understood that independence for Puerto Rico was not the last step, but the first. In 1976, he published an epic work called *La Tierra Prometida*, or *The Promised Land*. For the poet, the promised land was not only an independent Puerto Rico, but a socialist society. His passionately utopian vision saw Fanon's "wretched of the earth" as the very source of liberation, even as life-force. This is an excerpt from poem #35, where he expresses this vision through the simple and delicate use of anaphora:

the promised land  
becomes  
one  
with the hands of the shunned peon...  
with the hands of the peon  
that  
thunder in the cartilage of the future  
with the hands  
of the peon  
that  
push away  
the goldsmiths of plunder  
so that  
the savored taste of knowledge  
is not stolen...

with the hands  
of the peon  
that  
are  
rainshowers of uncommon poetry  
with a fresh breeze of frenzy  
perfect  
like the violent disturbance of spirit  
that  
opens  
doors wide  
to the most  
insubordinate sunrises  
with the hands  
of the peon  
that  
snatch  
the future away  
from what it would become...  
with the hands of the peon  
that  
plant  
sensations of sun  
to  
become  
the nightingale

that does not  
sleep  
singing  
to his existence...  
with the hands of the peon  
that  
unionize  
gerunds of flurrying verbs...  
with the hands of the peon  
that tame  
the two-headed clouds  
with the hands of the thinking peon  
that  
are  
the backbones of the word  
peon of the word  
may the word  
become  
your servant

By poem's end, the vision is clear: for those who work with their hands, the key to liberation is literacy. This is a revolution of and by the word. Perhaps Soto Vélez had in mind the tabaqueros of his island, who listened to readers as they rolled cigars in the factories and therefore made up the most radical sector of the working class.

Clemente Soto Vélez was not only mentor, but friend. My wife and I named our son after him. The poet died in April 1993, and was buried in Lares, the town of his birth. When we visited his grave the following year, we found it unmarked and untended, an apt metaphor for the interment of the independence movement to which he had dedicated his life.

He was the first of many fathers I would lose. I wrote an elegy for Clemente Soto Vélez called, "Hands Without Irons Become Dragonflies." This is the final section:

Klemente, today we visit your island grave.  
We light a candle for you in chapel  
beneath a Christ executed with beggar's ribs  
and knees lacerated red.  
He is a Puerto Rican Christ.  
In San Juan Bay, a tanker from New Jersey  
bursts a black artery bubbling to the surface,  
so troops along the beach  
in sanitary metallic suits  
scoop the oil clotted into countless bags  
while helicopters scavenge from above.  
Lares now is the property of the state:  
the tamarindo tree  
planted for independence  
in the plaza

blotched and gray, a rag  
tied around one branch  
like a tourniquet.

At the Lares cemetery nearly a year ago,  
your box sank into a hole  
brimming with rainwater.

Today the grave we find is desolate clay,  
parched and cracking, a plank marked M75.  
He is here: burial mound 75, says the gravedigger.  
So the poet who named us  
suffocates in the anonymity of dirt.

This is how the bodies of dissenters disappear,  
beneath oceans coated with tanker's blood,  
down to the caves where their voices still drip,  
as the authorities guarantee  
that this stripped and starving earth is not a grave,  
and no one pays the man who carves the stone.  
We bury a book with you, pry red flowers  
from the trees to embroider the ground,  
negotiate the price and labor for a gravestone  
as the child with your name races between the tombs.

Klemente, you must be more  
than the fragile web of handkerchief  
you left behind.



You claimed your true age  
was ten thousand light years,  
promised that you would someday explode  
in atoms, showering down  
on us in particles beyond the spectrum  
of our sight, visible only to the deities  
carved into the boulders by original people  
slaughtered five centuries ago.  
Now a dragonfly drifts to the forehead  
of a vagabond declaiming groggy rebellion  
in the plaza, insect-intoxicated,  
protesting his own days blindfolded with bars,  
his faith louder than an infected mouth.  
He says that he remembers you.  
On the road to Lares, a horse without a rope  
stands before the cars in glowering silence,  
infuriating traffic, refusing to turn away  
his enormous head. We know  
what the drivers must do to pass:  
shout *Viva Puerto Rico Libre*.

*Hands without irons become dragonflies,  
red flowers rain on our hats,  
subversive angels flutter like pigeons from a rooftop,  
this stripped and starving earth is not a grave.*

Equally important was Juan Antonio Corretjer, the other major poet imprisoned with Clemente Soto Vález in 1936. Corretjer came from Ciales, another mountain town with a revolutionary history; his father and uncle took part in the Levantamiento, or Uprising, of Ciales in 1898.

Corretjer envisioned a movement for a “liberated homeland” that was not only working class, but multi-racial, based on a shared history of labor and exploitation. This was expressed in his epic ode, “Obao-Moin.” The translation is my own:

Glory to those native hands because they worked.

Glory to those black hands because they worked.

Glory to those white hands because they worked.

(...)

Glory to the hands that dug the mine.

Glory to the hands that fed the cattle.

Glory to the hands that sowed the tobacco, the sugarcane, the coffee.

Glory to the hands that cut the grasses.

Glory to the hands that cleared the forests.

Glory to the hands that rowed the rivers and the channels.

Glory to the hands that built the roads.

Glory to the hands that raised the houses.

Glory to the hands that turned the wheels.

Glory to the hands that drove the wagons and the cars.

Glory to the hands that saddled and unsaddled the mules and the horses.

(...)

For them and for their country, Praise! Praise!

Corretjer served as secretary general of the Nationalist Party, and like his compañero Soto Vélez, wrote about the experience of incarceration, finding his voice in the attempt to deprive him of it. This is from "Jail Cell," translated by Roberto Márquez:

Here is my foot, so small it cannot walk.

Here, without shadow, is my hand.

Here are my lips that neither kiss nor talk.

Here is my voice that dreams but lacks command.

(...)

Here is a face gone pale for lack of sun,

A heart that beats but beats without a pulse,

Slack, skinless vein, where life's lifeless contained.

Triumph of thought that will not be detained:

Uplifted in your hand, your heart catapults,

Flowers over the wall, beyond where walls can run.

Corretjer saw the North American occupation of Puerto Rico in the larger context of empire, an empire that consumed everything in its path and would eventually consume itself. From his colonized island and his tiny jail cell, he visualized the eventual self-immolation of U.S. militarism. This is from a later poem called "The Convoy," addressed to his wife Consuelo and translated by Márquez:

Silence reigns inside the house.  
But on the road  
the military convoy roars its inferno.

Don't wake, my love.  
Let your breathing remain tranquil.  
And your eyes, in the dark,  
blue pursue their sleep.  
Don't wake.

Along the road the convoy's  
thunder. And inside  
my fists the rage.  
Don't move.  
Let your hand lie next to my heart.

The tyrant convoy  
loaded down with guns and worms  
is already heading into the darkness.

And the darkness has names:  
Jungles, Vietminh, Andes,  
Guevaras...

The convoy will collide against that darkness.

Don't wake.  
This is a pause  
for love. Just  
A brief pause.

Corretjer returned to Puerto Rico after his release from prison, and found himself embroiled in another insurgency. In October 1950, there was an armed Nationalist revolt on the island, called the Grito de Jayuya after the town where the uprising began. The U.S. Air Force bombed Jayuya, and the rebellion was suppressed within a week. Thousands were rounded up and jailed, including Corretjer and another poet by the name of Francisco Matos Paoli.

Like Clemente Soto Vélez, Francisco Matos Paoli was born in Lares and absorbed the insurgent spirit of that mountain town, rising to a position of leadership in the Nationalist Party. Like Soto Vélez, he would struggle against isolation and silence in prison; unlike his fellow poet, he would lose the struggle. Matos Paoli went mad in solitary confinement, scribbling on the walls. He was ultimately pardoned five years later.

A Christian mystic, Matos Paoli would publish his dreamlike *Song of Madness* in 1962. Here is an excerpt from that long poem, translated by Frances Aparicio:

Now my feet become dust in the foam.  
And the obscure night  
erases Spring,  
robs me of the full moon of Lares,  
urges the orphan in me  
to abandon the golden bread  
of all constellations.

It so happens that I am mad.  
I return to my mother, the mystic,  
crowned with the poor  
in that sealed, spreading  
penumbra of my village.

(...)

If you want to call me madman,  
I will not oppose the affront.

I know I am the small prisoner,  
the unforgettable vileness of the shadows,  
the conquered yet calm man,

the slave who forgives the light.

I trust those simple men  
who drift toward  
the iridescent sea.

I sell my skin,  
and who will buy me?

(...)

If you want to dent my sword,  
go ahead.

If you want to steal my poems,  
go ahead.

If you want to mistake me for  
a crazy John Doe,  
go ahead.

(...)

But you cannot take from me  
the delirious feeling that draws me to  
the fallen dahlias...

There were other forms of punishment. Whenever Juan Antonio Corretjer was not incarcerated, he was pursued relentlessly by the FBI. They would have one final confrontation in February, 1984. The poet was invited to Boston by a coalition of Latino groups. (I was one of the organizers.) He was slated to speak at a church in the Puerto Rican community, and on the campus of Harvard University.

On the morning of his first scheduled appearance, nine FBI agents, guns drawn, surrounded the house where the poet was staying. They arrested his host, a young musician by the name of Mariano Viera, and accused him of being somebody else: Julio Rosado, a fugitive and member of the FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional), an underground group charged with numerous bombings in the U.S., including one that resulted in several deaths. We were emphatically not FALN, but no matter: our office phones were wiretapped. The authorities made no distinction between bard and bomb-thrower.

The FBI established that Viera was not Rosado, but insisted on holding him anyway, moving their prisoner from one jail to the next as his lawyers scrambled to find him. Viera turned out to be claustrophobic, and suffered a breakdown in jail, an eerie echo of Matos Paoli's breakdown years before.

Corretjer was seventy-six years old, with serious coronary problems. He was shaken by the chaos swirling around him, yet insisted



on speaking at the church and on campus. The poet's health collapsed in Boston. He returned home to Puerto Rico, and died less than a year later. His daughter Consuelito always maintained that the FBI hounded him to death. Mariano Viera returned to the island, where he was institutionalized. The organizations that brought Corretjer to Boston, plagued by rumors of an informer in their midst, never worked together again.

If this seems like a description of McCarthyism—decades after Joe McCarthy disappeared from the political landscape—then it must be understood that McCarthyism got a head start in Puerto Rico, at least for the advocates of independence. In 1948, two years before McCarthy's notorious claim that the State Department was “infested with communists,” “La Ley de la Mordaza”—the Law of the Muzzle—criminalized dissent, making it a felony to “foment, advocate, advise or preach, voluntarily or knowingly, the necessity, desirability or suitability of overthrowing, destroying, or paralyzing the Insular government.” Over the years, independentistas were jailed, beaten, blacklisted, fired, slandered, spied upon or simply driven mad. Some felt they had no alternative but to take up arms.

This next poem of mine was written about an artist-friend on the island, and a case of guilt by association:

### **The Lover of a Subversive is Also a Subversive**

*For Vilma Maldonado Reyes*

The lover of a subversive  
is also a subversive.

The painter's *compañero* was a conspirator,  
revolutionary convicted  
to haunt the catacombs of federal prison  
for the next half century.

When she painted her canvas  
on the beach, the FBI man  
squatted behind her  
on the sand, muddying his dark gray suit  
and kissing his walkie-talkie,  
a pallbearer who missed  
the funeral train.

The painter who paints a subversive  
is also a subversive.

In her portrait of him, she imagines  
his long black twist of hair. In her portraits  
of herself, she wears a mask  
or has no mouth. She must sell the canvases,  
for the FBI man lectured solemnly  
to the principal at the school  
where she once taught.

The woman who grieves for a subversive  
is also a subversive.

The FBI man is a pale-skinned apparition  
staring in the market.

She could reach for him  
and only touch a pillar of ash  
where the dark gray suit had been.

If she hungers to touch her lover,  
she must brush her fingers  
on moist canvas.

The lover of a subversive  
is also a subversive.

When the beach chilled cold,  
and the bright stumble of tourists  
deserted, she and the FBI man  
were left alone with their spying glances,  
as he waited calmly  
for the sobbing to begin,  
and she refused to sob.

In Puerto Rico, as in any colony, there is change without change.  
In 1952, the island became a US Commonwealth or “Free Associated  
State,” with its own constitution, which was identical in every respect to  
the United States constitution, and subject to the approval of the US  
Congress. Puerto Ricans could now exercise a limited form of self-

government, including the election of their own governor. The island would be represented in Congress by a non-voting Resident Commissioner, which is still the case.

However, in every way that mattered—politically, militarily, and economically--the U.S. continued to hold the reins. The status of Puerto Rico had not fundamentally changed. Puerto Ricans kept paying the “Blood Tax,” as the draft was called, loading the graves of Utuado with Korean War dead. Nationalists kept going to jail; their last desperate act came in 1954, when four Nationalists opened fire on the U.S. House of Representatives, wounding five Congressmen. By the time Puerto Ricans were allowed to vote on their status, in 1967, the independence movement was no longer a threat to the status quo.

Repression continued even after the Nationalists were neutralized. In July 1978, two young independentista activists were lured to a government radio tower at Cerro Maravilla and executed by a police firing squad. This incident, and the coverup that followed, provoked outrage on the island across the political spectrum. In 2005, Filiberto Ojeda Ríos, founder of the clandestine militant organization known as the “Macheteros” (or Cane-Cutters), was shot to death by the FBI, again triggering outrage, in no small part because the killing took place on September 23<sup>rd</sup>: the Grito de Lares.

In the United States, many still cling to the illusion that the U.S. is not, and has never been, an imperial power. Therefore, by definition,

Puerto Rico is not a colony. North Americans have internalized the mythology that Puerto Ricans do not desire or deserve self-government. Somewhere beneath lurks the assumption of racial and cultural inferiority.

This is true even on the left. Perhaps the cause of Puerto Rican independence is not sufficiently romantic. To paraphrase Earl Shorris: it's like having dinner with the janitor. There are no peasant armies in the hills, no coffee beans at the café on the corner. There is only the ugliness of poverty, and the colonialism that spawned it.

The same mentality assumes that the Puerto Rican economy must benefit from U.S. control. Yet the per capita income is less than half that of Mississippi, the poorest state in the U.S., and the official unemployment rate is in double digits. Puerto Rico is still a colony, not because of North American benevolence, but because the island remains a captive market for U.S. goods, a source of cheap labor for U.S. corporations, and a haven for U.S. military bases.

There is still an independence movement, and there is still protest. In May 2003, a campaign of civil disobedience forced the U.S. Navy to cease war games and live target practice on the inhabited offshore island of Vieques, which the independence movement had condemned since 1941.

The poets, being poets, still won't shut up. The compulsion to tell this story transcends the borders of geography and language. Jack Agüeros was a Puerto Rican born in East Harlem, who wrote in English; nevertheless, he would sum up five centuries of Caribbean history, the frustration of being the world's oldest colony, and the failure to rebel in "Sonnet After Columbus, II." Note the metaphor of paper, representing dollars, contracts, and laws. The reference to the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution in the last line brings the historical argument full circle.

We watched the stiff starched sails, the cotton and wood  
On the scale of little boy boats blow onto our shore:  
Our burned out tree canoes were larger and sleeker.  
The Caribbean was quiet, tranquil as ourselves, but

These men were all more hellish than any hurricane,  
And nothing good came after, government after government,  
English, Dutch, Spanish, Yankee, twisting the tongue,  
Jail some, buy some, scare some, dope some, kill plenty.

Do you know the names of the ones in jail or why?

Sailed in our bays and put paper feet on our throats,  
Paper hands in our pockets, papered the trees and land,  
Papered our eyes, and we still wait wondering when.

As for the names of the incarcerated? You and me.  
Charge? Not throwing tea in the bay.

In another sonnet, Agüeros re-imagines the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse to reflect the reality of Puerto Rican colonialism in “Sonnet for Ambiguous Captivity:”

Captivity, I have taken your white horse. Punctilious  
Death rides it better. Dubious, I try to look you in  
your eye. Are you something like old-time slavery, or  
are you like its clever cousin, colonialism? Are you  
the same as “occupied,” like when a bigger bird takes  
over your nest, shits, and you still have to sweep? Or  
when you struggle like the bottom fish snouting in the  
deep cold water and the suck fish goes by scaled in his  
neon colors, living off dividends, thinking banking is  
work? Captivity, you look like Ireland and Puerto Rico!

Four horsemen of the apocalypse, why should anyone fear  
your arrival, when you have already grown gray among us  
too familiar and so contemptible? And you, Captivity, you  
remind me of a working man who has to be his own horse.

The new generation continues to write in this tradition. Aracelis  
Girmay—among the most talented of these younger poets—picks up the

motifs of imprisonment, survival and resistance in her poem, "Then Sing:"

Now what do you do now  
with a chain around your foot  
or the doors all shut & the phone-wires cut?

Make music with the chain,  
make raw the ankle.

Locked, locked, locked & thrown away.  
Fall asleep, fall asleep, Houdini, they say,  
we've knocked down all your trees & Albizus.

(...)

It's prison,  
I know they tell you.  
You will not be anything, you will not even grow.  
Grow anyway.

They will have you believe  
that your body is sick.  
Tell it Live.

When they take away the sunlight,  
even the sunlight, be  
the sunlight.



Let them tell you  
you cannot sing in hell, good man.  
Then sing.

Five hundred and twenty-two years of colonialism would be enough to discourage even the most ardent poet, prophet or visionary. Yet, there is reason to hope that Puerto Rico will one day be an independent and truly democratic nation.

Words have wings. They fly, across time and space, across oceans and centuries. Sometimes they fly from the dead to the living. Some years ago in San Juan, I came across a festival organized by *Claridad*, the island's socialist newspaper. Roy Brown, a singer and guitarist long associated with the cause of independence, was singing the words to a poem by Juan Antonio Corretjer, and thousands were singing along from memory, some in tears, verse after verse that somehow slipped through the keyhole in the jailhouse door and took wing.

Ultimately, for independence to happen, Puerto Ricans must reject the empire's definition of Puerto Ricans and do battle with the colonized self. The poets will be there. Julia de Burgos addressed both the empire and the colonized self when she wrote (in this translation by Agüeros):

When the multitudes shall run rioting

Leaving behind ashes of burned injustices,  
And with the torch of the seven virtues,  
The multitude will run after the seven sins,  
Against you and against everything unjust and inhuman,  
I will be in their midst with the torch in my hand.