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Borinquén Record Shop & Botanica

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In this essay Dr. Nieves uses her family history and memory to illuminate the conflicts and reconciliations as it pertains to exile and the Puerto Rican 1950s Diaspora. When is exile self-imposed and at what cost? What is gained and lost by exile?

Drive west toward Kimball Avenue and you'll see abandoned lots on the corner of Division and Spaulding Street. On one lot Fuentes's open market *riendita* used to welcomed the neighbors with blood sausage and breadfruit from Puerto Rico. Adjacent to Fuentes's store was the lot where my uncle, Tío Freddie, established Borinquén Record Shop & Botánica. Everyday as I drive by the abandoned lots, I fill in the spaces with the music that spiced the air: Celia Cruz, El Grán Combo, and El Gallito de Manatí. The breath of boiling rice still lingers and a dizzy swirl of people long gone wave at me from their windows and front steps. It's a conjuring of ghosts—the kind that cast their own light and make you pinch yourself hard with remembering. These dislocated spirits are always calling me. Exile is a fertile place for memory to thrive. To exile these ghosts would be like nailing the coffin shut on the life we once had on Division Street. Borinquén Record Shop & Botánica was a home away from home and a country away from a country I had never known. This is the way I came to know Puerto Rico intimately. In that shop my family's exile did not exist.

My clan was one of the first Puerto Ricans families to move west of Humboldt Park—the first brown faces owning a home and business in a predominately Polish-Jewish neighborhood. As we settled on North Spaulding Avenue right after the 1964 Division Street riots, the Chicago real estate brokers unleashed a whirlwind of racist fear upon the residents, and the historic “White Flight” of Humboldt Park was in full swing. That's how my uncle made his fortune. He bought a storefront on Division Street to make his dream come true: to return to Puerto Rico and never cut cane again.

It was a custom for the Puerto Rican markets to give credit to their customers, much like the sharecropping system in the South. Unlike the South, customers could count on the generosity of the store owner to forgive their debts. Sadly, El Señor Fuentes went out of business giving everybody credit. Since Puerto Ricans were a disposable labor force, and many of the neighborhood factories were forsaking the city for the suburbs, it was difficult for El Señor Fuentes to collect cash from unemployed workers. Smudged with the grief of joblessness, many of our neighbors would complain about my uncle wanting payment for merchandise upfront, but Tio Freddie had a nose for business. He smelled the recession of the 1980's as its black cloud descended upon hand-wringing families.

Nevertheless, Borinquén Record Shop & Botánica was a place of refuge when the “No Puerto Ricans Wanted” signs would Lynch our dignity with the knots of hate. In my uncle's shop neighbors looking for community and *convidencia* could meet and linger without having to buy anything or have anyone suspiciously follow them around the store. Men sitting at a bridge table playing dominos created an informal community network that helped many an island newcomer find a job. Women would chat with each other behind the shelves of holy candles, trading gossip from Manati or recuerdos from those mystical places referred to as *el campo* or from *bien adentro*: places of memory that resided deep inside, and rattled like little stones in your head for the rest of your life.

The front part of the store was the family's record shop and botánica. The back part was my uncle's apartment. Only a thin wall divided the space. One felt as if one was always working. At the same time, it felt like you never left your home, and every one that came through the doors was family—just like in Puerto Rico.

Borinquén Record Shop & Botánica seemed to have its doors opened morning, noon, and night. That wasn't what my uncle's wife, Tía Carmen, envisioned when she emigrated. She wanted to be an actress. Tía Carmen could croon boleros with a weepy voice that spread musical notes in the air like melted butter. But she was considered homely due to her chocolate-colored skin and long straight black hair she refused to cut. She was bow legged, too. Besides, Hollywood already had a Puerto Rican actress, Rita Moreno. Exiled from her dreams, the shop had a voice of its own, and for over twenty years it called her to work. Once I saw her silently cry into her own shoulders until her eyes shrank from the tears, an inflection of a terrible longing I couldn't understand until much later.

In 1970, I was ten and my uncle would let me work the cash register. At the counter, I would practice painting my nails red while listening to Tía Carmen argue with Tio about one thing or another. She'd yell from the back of the store while she cooked rice and beans, and Tio would yell from...
the front of the store as he opened boxes and arranged the merchandise on the shelves. By noon time, when their blacked-clawed words seemed to have tucked themselves into a restless sleep, the vinyl long-playing records would stop spinning, customers would contentedly leave with their purchases, and the shop would close for lunch.

In the afternoon, Uncle Freddie played the latest bolero hits from Puerto Rico and South American tangos loudly on his record player. As the aroma of the candles and incense settled into my pores, I tried to keep step with the rumba from Cuba, twirled to tangos from Argentina, and crooned along with the mountain music from Puerto Rico. Maracas would hang right next to the Spanish castañets my hand would clumsily grasp and attempt to clap. Bongos would be snuggled next to the Maja soap from Spain, and the blue Evening in Paris miniature perfume bottles were always a favorite purchase amongst the ladies. His customers would sway, tap their feet, dance, or sometimes even weep.

Many customers trusted my uncle to read their government letters, help them write home, or borrow thick tape that would be spider-spun tightly around the thin boxes that held precious toiletries the now-defunct Eastern Airlines used to airlift to the island. Having arrived in Chicago before so many others of his country men and being able to manipulate the English language, albeit somewhat broken and heavily accented, you could say that my Uncle became the unofficial mayor of Puerto Rican Division Street. Tío Freddie was known to get up in the middle of night to help a neighbor whose child was ill or whose wife was ready to have a baby, and ambulance them to the hospital in his old red Buick. He'd stay with them to help translate.

During the summers, while keeping vigil over imported merchandise, I got to know everyone in the neighborhood. Some customers were regulars, like Doña Feliciano who'd usually have the same request. Could you help me get my husband back? That puta, Marilyn, put a spell on him. But I know he is unhappy because she refuses to wash his underwear. How do I know this? It came to me in a dream. Or Don Juanito, who spent a large portion of his wages on la bolita, the underground Puerto Rican version of the lottery, and would spend whatever was left of his wages on hope. I am behind on my credit at Fuentes' and eating rice and beans without steak is tormenting me. What candle will help me win la bolita? There was Señora Maria Jesus who'd confess, my son is turning into a tecato. That ingrate has no idea of the work I do in the factory to keep the TV going on day and night. He is an anchor tied to my feet and stirs up poison in my heart. To help business along, Tío Freddie made sure I remembered the Lord's Prayer as well as the names of the seven African deities. Over and over I would recite a poderes que rodean a nuestro Salvador: Yemayá, Obatalá, Ochún, Ogún, Elegüí, Oya, and Changó. He'd advise, call upon the gods with respect. There are people who think they know the gods, but have no business invoking their names. And don't boast about knowing them either. African deities: the exiled among the exiled. I wasn't sure anyone ever got their petition granted by the Seven Powers of Africa, but everyone left feeling a little better because the evil that weighed upon them became a little less potent after buying magic at the store.

As I navigated the terrain of our diaspora and exile, a mélange of cultures and oral histories penetrated my consciousness. It was staggering to learn that my Tío Freddie had arrived in the United States in a cargo plane with men sitting in lawn chairs, everyone and every chair tied together with rope. In 1954, my uncle went to work in the Wisconsin tomato fields, to fling vegetables into crates right next to Mexican field workers. Some people think only Mexicans were Braceros, but many Puerto Rican men also worked the fields under the same government migrant program. Many Puerto Rican country men and families even ventured to Hawaii, half of the globe away. Theirs was a dice-roll of fate and a permanent exile, money and stamina standing in the way of a return to the island.

Borinquén Record Shop & Botánica was a strange marriage of space, time, and culture. It was as if time froze there. Even in the late 1980's, when Tío decided to retire and return to the island, we were all still living in the Puerto Rico of the 1950's on Division Street. Although Operation Bootstrap
had engendered an exile that had transplanted Puerto Rican culture to the States, specifically Division Street, Chicago, the Puerto Ricans from the 1950’s Diaspora had preserved a mid-twentieth century culture and history that would never allow them to feel completely at home on the rapidly transformed and disfigured island. As Puerto Rico became more Americanized the people on Division Street resisted acculturation. When my grandmother died, my mother returned to the island for the first time in thirty years to attend her mother’s funeral. Upon seeing the mountains of cement rather than the mountains of flamboyán trees, and when she smelled the air full of sewage rather than the perfumed air of flowers of so long ago, she decided not to be buried there. Like my mother, so many Puerto Ricans have made the conscious decision not to return as residents, even though they have the option to do so. My mother imposed her own exile.

Sadly, the romanticized Puerto Rico of my uncle’s generation has disappeared. Yet, several months ago a compatriota that had recently moved from Puerto Rico to Chicago related his astonishment that he was able to recover his identity as Puerto Rican by participating in Chicago’s Puerto Rican cultural scene. The Puerto Ricans here are more Puerto Rican than those of the island, he said. Might exile have some benefits?

I’m always saddened to think of how colonialism can serve people exiled from their culture and history in their own country. All around the world millions of people have no choice but to see the present and future in light of their dislocation. When exile happens in your own family the far-away nuances of refugee-ism are as real as cold stares of rejection because you are not from “here” and you are no longer from “over there.”

Dislocation, for many groups, can be a historical phenomenon. For example, because Puerto Ricans had been granted citizenship in 1917, they acquired the right to vote. Yet, my grandfather born in 1915 never saw the need to cast a ballot in any municipal or federal election. In his mind, he was not a citizen of the United States. Rather, my grandfather thought of himself as a subject of the Spanish crown, due to Puerto Rico being a colony of Spain before being a colony of the United States. By using his right not to vote, he resisted his perceived exile from Spanish-controlled Puerto Rico. The contradictions of exile and displacement can transcend the past, present, and future. My family is living proof.

Tío Freddie eventually returned to Puerto Rico. In the early 1990’s he established another business in Vega Baja, near his hometown of Manatí, but somehow his heart wasn’t in the endeavor. After several years, he returned to Chicago because he said las cosas no son iguales—things are not the same. The sky was not as blue as the one he remembered. The hearts of his compadres have been lost to commercialism, and there was too much violence and selfishness among the people, he said. Did he mean there was an exile of traditional goodwill and compassion? Or was it that exile has a strange way of changing your perception of reality because it stalks you wherever you go?

Beneath my uncle’s bravado I always sensed a profound sadness. I would venture to say that the minute he was airlifted out of Puerto Rico in the cargo plane of 1954 and alighted on the tomato fields of Wisconsin, his spiritual exile from his country was imminent. Like him thousands of Puerto Ricans unknowingly became people twisted around dislocation like a curl of hair around a finger. No jobs on the island? Come to the States. Lost your job in the States? Return to the island. The transnational migration patterns and the ability to travel back and forth did nothing to alleviate the dislocation of place and culture so many of us felt. In one way or another it burned a hole in our hearts. Talk to any Puerto Rican and you can sense how the yearning for patria seeps out like blood on a wound that cannot heal—even in those of us who have never lived there. The years of my family’s estrangement from the island still feels like the troubled silence between strangers who speak different languages. Although we vacation there, no one in my family dreams of going back. The gap created by colonialism, dislocation, and time has become wider than the Atlantic Ocean.

There’s no sign that anyone is interested in developing the abandoned lot where Tío Freddie so proudly labored in his store. But that’s O.K. Ironically, regardless of all the types of exile he suffered, my Tío Freddie’s dreams came true. Every time he drives in from Florida, we take time to sip coffee together and remember the breadfruit tree he used to climb as a youth. Plus, I’m not going anywhere. Neither are my memories. At least my ghosts still have a place to live and someone to remember them. Like me, all they ever wanted was to belong to a country, even if it’s only in my heart or on the abandoned lots on Division Street.