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Can anyone name the great Puerto Rican novel? It’s *La charca* by Manuel Zeno Gandía, published in 1894 and first available to American readers in English translation in 1984. The lapse, of course, is symptomatic. After nearly a century of intense economic and political association, endless official pledges of cultural kinship, and the wholesale importation of nearly half the Puerto Rican people to the United States, Puerto Rican literature still draws a blank among American readers and students of literature. Major writers and authors are unknown and, with a handful of exceptions, untranslated; English-language and bilingual anthologies are few and unsystematic, and there is still not a single introduction to the literature’s history available in English. Even the writing of Puerto Ricans living in the United States, mostly in English and all expressive of life in this country, has remained marginal to any literary canon, mainstream or otherwise: among the “ethnic” or “minority” literatures it has probably drawn the least critical interest and the fewest readers.

Yet, as a young Puerto Rican friend once put it, “Puerto Rico is this country’s ‘jacket.’” In no other national history are twentieth-century American social values and priorities more visibly imprinted than in Puerto Rico’s. Puerto Rico, in fact, or at least its treatment at the hands of the United States, is part of American history. Its occupation in 1898 after four centuries of Spanish colonialism, the decades of imposition of English, the unilateral decreeing of American citizenship in 1917, economic and social crisis during the Depression years, externally controlled industrialization, unprecedented migration of the work force and sterilization of the women, ecological depletion and contamination, relentless cultural saturation—all these events pertain not only to Puerto Rican historical reality but to the recent American past as well. And in no foreign national literature is this seamy, repressed side of the “American century” captured at closer range than in the novels of Zeno Gandía and Enrique Laguerre, the stories of José Luis González and Pedro Juan Soto, the poetry of Luis Palés Matos and Julia de Burgos, or the plays of René Marqués and Jaime Carrero. Understandably, Puerto Rican literature in the twentieth century has been obsessed with the United States, whose presence not only lurks, allegorically, as the awesome colossus to the north but is manifest in every aspect of national life. Those intent on reworking literary curricula and boundaries would thus do well to heed this telling record of United States politics and culture as they bear on neighboring peoples and nationalities.

Closer still, of course, and more directly pertinent to a “new” American literary history, is the Puerto Rican literature produced in the United States. Not until the late 1960s, when distinctly Nuyorican voices emerged on the American literary landscape, did it occur to anyone to speak of a Puerto Rican literature emanating from life in this country. How, indeed, could such an uprooted and downtrodden community even be expected to produce a literature? Such relative newcomers, many lacking in basic literacy skills in either English or Spanish, were assumed to be still caught up in the immigrant syndrome, or worse, to be languishing in what Oscar Lewis termed the “culture of poverty.” But in books like Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* and Pedro Pietri’s *Puerto Rican Obituary*, there was suddenly a literature by Puerto Ricans, in English and decidedly in—and against—the American grain.

This initial impetus has since grown into a varied but coherent literary movement, and over the past decade the Nuyorican voices have come to make up an identifiable current in North American literature. That this movement also retains its association to Puerto Rico’s national literature and, by extension, to Latin American literary concerns is a crucial though more complex matter. In fact, it is Nuyorican literature’s position straddling two national literatures and hemispheric perspectives that most significantly distinguishes it among the American minority literatures. In any case, those years of cultural and political awakening in the late 1960s generated an active literary practice among Puerto Ricans born and raised in the United States, who have managed to expound a distinctive problematic and language with a bare minimum of institutional or infrastructural support.

Critical and historical interest in this new literature has also grown. Journal articles and introductions to books...
and anthologies, though scattered, have helped provide some context and approaches. Along with critics like Edna Acosta-Belén, Efraín Barradas, and John Miller, Wolfgang Binder, professor of American studies at the University of Erlangen, deserves special mention. His substantial work on contemporary Puerto Rican literature is based on an ample knowledge of the material and close familiarity with many of the authors. Further study of this kind has ascertained with increasing clarity that Puerto Rican literature in the United States was not born, sui generis, in the late 1960s and that its scope, like that of other emerging literatures, cannot be properly accounted for if analysis is limited by the reigning norms of genre, fictionality, language, or national demarcation.

In 1982 there appeared the first, and still the only, book on Puerto Rican literature in the United States, Eugene Mohr's The Nuyorican Experience. Mohr, professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico, offers a helpful overview of many of the works and authors and suggests some lines of historical periodization. I will therefore refer to Mohr's book, and especially to some of its omissions, in reviewing briefly the contours of Puerto Rican literature in the United States. How far back does it go, and what were the major stages leading to the present Nuyorican style and sensibility? To what extent does its very existence challenge the notion of literary and cultural canons, and how does this literature relate to other noncanonical and anticanonical literatures in the United States?

The first Puerto Ricans to write about life in the United States were political exiles from the independence struggle against Spain, who came to New York in the late decades of the nineteenth century to escape the clutches of the colonial authorities. Some of Puerto Rico's most prominent intellectual and revolutionary leaders, such as Eugenio María de Hostos, Ramón Emeterio Betances, Lola Rodríguez de Tío, and Sotero Figueroa, spent more or less extended periods in New York, where along with fellow exiles from Cuba they charted further steps to free their countries from Spanish rule. The lofty ideals of "Antillean unity" found concrete expression in the establishment of the Cuban and Puerto Rican Revolutionary Party, under the leadership of the eminent Cuban patriot Jose Martí. This early community was largely composed of the radical patriotic elite, but there was already a solid base of artisans and laborers who lent support to the many organizational activities. It should also be mentioned that one of these first settlers from Puerto Rico was Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, a founder of the Club Dos Antillas and, in later years, a scholar of the African experience.

The writings that give testimonial accounts and impressions of those years in New York are scattered in diaries, correspondences, and the often short-lived revolutionary newspapers and still await compilation and perusal. Perhaps the most extended and revealing text to have been uncovered thus far is a personal article by the Puerto Rican poet and revolutionary martyr Francisco Gonzalo Martín. "Pachín" Martín, a typesetter by trade who died in combat in the mountains of Cuba, figures significantly in the history of Puerto Rican poetry because of his emphatic break with the stale, airy clichés of romantic verse and his introduction of an ironic, conversational tone and language. In "Nueva York por dentro: Una faz de su vida bohemia," he offers a pointed critical reflection on New York City as experienced by the hopeful but destitute Puerto Rican immigrant.

In The Nuyorican Experience Eugene Mohr makes no mention of "Pachín" Martín or of these first, nineteenth-century samples of Puerto Rican writing in New York, though the Cuban critic Emilio Jorge Rodríguez has drawn proper attention to them. The sources are of course still scarce, and that period of political exile was clearly distinct in character from the later stages, which were conditioned by the labor immigration under direct colonial supervision. Nevertheless, writings like that of "Pachín" Martín and some of the diary entries and letters of Hostos and others carry immense prognostic power in view of subsequent historical and literary developments. In a history of Puerto Rican literature in the United States they provide an invaluable antecedent perspective, a prelude of foreshadowing, even before the fateful events of 1898. When read along with the essays and sketches of Jose Martí on New York and the United States, these materials offer the earliest "inside" view of American society by Caribbean writers and intellectuals.

Mohr dates the origins of "the Nuyorican experience" from Bernardo Vega's arrival in New York in 1916, as recounted in the opening chapter of Vega's memoirs. While the Memorias de Bernardo Vega (Memoirs of Bernardo Vega) is a logical starting point, since it chronicles the Puerto Rican community from the earliest period, the book was actually written in the late 1940s and was not published until 1977. (An English translation appeared in 1984.) Despite the book's belated appearance, though, Bernardo Vega was definitely one of the "pioneers." He and his work belong to and stand for that period from the First through the Second World War (1917-45), which saw the growth and consolidation of the immigrant community following the Jones Act that decreed citizenship (1917) and preceding the mass migration after 1945. In contrast to the political exiles and other temporary or occasional sojourners to New York, Bernardo Vega was also, in Mohr's terms, a "proto-Nuyorican": though he eventually returned to Puerto Rico late in life (he lived there in the late 1950s and the 1960s), Vega was among the first Puerto Ricans to write about New York as one who was here to stay.

Puerto Rican literature of this first stage showed many
of the signs of an immigrant literature, just as the community itself, still relatively modest in size, resembled that of earlier immigrant groups in social status, hopes for advancement, and civic participation. The published writing was overwhelmingly of a journalistic and autobiographical kind: personal sketches and anecdotes, jokes and relatos printed in the scores of Spanish-language newspapers and magazines that cropped up and died out over the years. It is a first-person testimonial literature: the recent arrivals capturing, in the home language, the jarring changes and first adjustments as they undergo them.

Yet the analogy to European immigrant experience was elusive even then, long before the momentous changes of midcentury made it clear that something other than upward mobility and eventual assimilation awaited Puerto Ricans on the mainland. The most important difference, which has conditioned the entire migration and settlement, is the abiding colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. Puerto Ricans came here as foreign nationals, a fact that American citizenship and accommodationist ideology tend to obscure; but they also arrived as a subject people. The testimonial and journalistic literature of the early period illustrate that Puerto Ricans entering this country, even those most blinded by illusions of success and fortune, tended to be aware of this discrepant, disadvantageous status.

For that reason, concern for the home country and attachment to national cultural traditions remained highly active, as did the sense of particular social vulnerability in the United States. The discrimination met by the "newcomers" was compounded by racial and cultural prejudice, as the black Puerto Rican writer and political leader Jesús Colón portrays so poignantly in his book of relatos, "The Puerto Rican in New York."

In both of these senses — the strong base in a distinct and maligned cultural heritage and the attentiveness and resistance to social inequality — Puerto Rican writing in the United States, even in this initial testimonial stage, needs to be read as a colonial literature. Its deeper problematic makes it more akin to the minority literatures of oppressed groups than to the literary practice and purposes of "ethnic" immigrants.

Another sign of this kinship, and of the direct colonial context, has to do with the boundaries of literary expression established by the norms of print culture. For in spite of the abundant periodical literature, with its wealth of narrative and poetic samples, in that period and in subsequent periods of Puerto Rican immigrant life surely the most widespread and influential form of verbal culture has been transmitted, not through publication, but through oral testimony and through the music. The work of oral historians in gathering the reminiscences of surviving "pioneers" will be indispensable in supplementing the study of printed texts. Also of foremost importance in this regard is the collection and analysis of the popular songs of the migration, the hundreds of boleros, plenas, and examples of jíbaro or peasant music dealing with Puerto Rican life in the United States, which enjoyed immense popularity throughout the emigrant community. Starting in the 1920s, when many folk musicians joined the migration from the Island to New York, the popular song has played a central role in the cultural life of Puerto Ricans in this country. It needs to be recognized as an integral part of the people's "literary" production. Only in recent years, and mainly with reference to the "salsa" style of the present generation, have there been any attempts to cull these sources for broader cultural and theoretical meanings (see Duany). But it was in those earlier decades, when favorites like Rafael Hernández, Pedro Flores, Ramito, Mon Rivera, Cortijo, and Tito Rodríguez were in New York composing and performing songs about Puerto Rican life here, that this tradition of the popular song began.

A turning point in Puerto Rican literature, before the advent of the Nuyorican in the late 1960s, came around 1950. This second stage covers the years 1945–65. Those two decades after World War II saw the rapid industrialization of Puerto Rico under Operation Bootstrap, and hundreds of thousands of Puerto Rican workers migrated to New York and other United States cities. This avalanche of newly arriving families, a significant part of the country's displaced agricultural proletariat, drastically changed the character of the Puerto Rican immigrant community, distancing it still further from the familiar immigrant experience. The "Puerto Rican problem" became more urgent than ever for official and mainstream America, as did the infusion of drugs, criminality, and the forces of incrimination into the crowded Puerto Rican neighborhoods. It should be remembered that West Side Story, written and first performed in the mid-1950s, was intended to ease this explosive situation, though it actually has had the long-term effect of reinforcing some of the very stereotypes, so rampant in the dominant culture, that it sought to dispel. The same must be said of Oscar Lewis's book La vida and its infamous notion of the "culture of poverty."

It was in this period and because of these conditions that the migration and the emigrant community in the United States became major themes in Puerto Rican national literature. In prior decades some authors from the Island had of course shown an interest in their uprooted companions, setting their works in New York and choosing immigrants as their protagonists: parts of El negocio and Los redentores, the later novels of Manuel Zeno Gandía, take place in the United States, and frequent bibliographical
reference is made to still another unpublished novel by Zeno Gandía entitled *Hu­bo un escándalo* (or *En Nueva York*), though it has not yet been possible to study that manuscript. José de Diego Padró, an interesting but neglected writer active between 1910 and 1930, set much of his long bizarre novel *En Babía* in New York, as did the dramatist Fernando Sierra Berdecía in his comedy *Esta noche juega el joker*. But these are random and rare exceptions and still do not indicate any inclusion of emigrant experience in the thematic preoccupations of the national literature.

By midcentury, though, accompanying the more general shift in the literature from a rural to an urban focus, the attention of Island authors turned decisively to the reality of mass migration and the emigrant barrio. Many writers, such as René Marqués, Enríquez Laguerre, José Luis González, and Emilio Díaz Valcárcel, came here in those years to witness it directly, while a writer like Pedro Juan Soto, later identified more with the Island literature, actually lived through the emigration firsthand. The result was a flurry of narrative and theatrical works, all appearing in the 1950s and early 1960s, some of which still stand today as the most powerful fictional renditions of Puerto Rican life in the United States. In contrast to the primarily testimonial writings of the previous period, this was the first “literature,” in the narrow sense, about the community here, in which imaginative invention, dramatic structure, and stylistic technique are used to heighten the impact of historical and autobiographical experience.

Despite the undeniable artistic merit of some of this work—I would single out the stories of José Luis González, Soto’s *Spiiks*, and, for historical reasons, René Marqués’s *La carreta*—it is also clearly a literature about Puerto Ricans in the United States rather than of that community. Mohr aptly entitles his second chapter “Views from an Island.” That these are the “views” of visiting or temporary sojourners is evident in various ways but is not necessarily a detriment to their literary value. The tendency is to present the arrival and settlement experience in strict existential and instantaneous terms; instead of process and interaction there is above all culture shock and intense personal dislocation. What these glimpses and miniatures gain in emotional intensity they often lose in their reduction of a complex, collective, and unfolding reality to a snapshot of individual behavior. Another sign of the unfamiliarity and distance between the writer and the New York community is the language: though an occasional English or “Spanglish” usage appears for authenticating purposes, there is a general reliance on standard literary Spanish or, as in *La carreta*, a naturalistic transcription of Puerto Rican dialect. What is missing is any resonance of the community’s own language practice, which even then, in the 1950s, was already tending toward the intricate mix-

ing and code switching characteristic of Puerto Rican speech in the United States.

But despite such problems, these “views from an island” rightly remain some of the best-known works of Puerto Rican literature in the United States, their literary impact generally strengthened by the critical, anticolonial standpoint of the authors. The pitiable condition of the authors’ compatriots in United States cities is attributed and linked to the status of Puerto Rico as a direct colony. This perspective, and the constant focus on working-class characters, helps dispel the tone of naive optimism and accommodationism that had characterized the writings of such earlier petit bourgeois observers of the emigrant community as Juan B. Huyke and Pedro Juan Labarte. The writings of Soto, González, and others, because of their quality and the authors’ grounding in the national literature of the Island, form an important link to Latin American literature. A story like González’s “La noche que volvimos a ser gente,” for example, is clearly a work of contemporary Latin American fiction, even though it is set in New York and its attention focuses on the subways and streets of the urban United States. The same is true of Díaz Valcárcel’s novel *Harlem todos los días* and many more of these works.

It should be emphasized that during the 1950s there was also a “view from within” the Puerto Rican community, a far less-known literature by Puerto Ricans who had been here all along and who, lovingly or not, considered the barrio home. Here again Bernardo Vega and Jesús Colón come to mind, for although the *Memorias* and *A Puerto Rican in New York* chronicle the arrival and settlement over the decades, they were not written until the late 1940s and 1950s. There were also a number of Puerto Rican poets who had been living in New York for decades and who by the 1950s began to see themselves as a distinctive voice within the national poetry; among them were Juan Avilés, Emilio Delgado, Clemente Soto Vélez, Pedro Carrasquillo, Jorge Brandon, and José Dávila Semprit. Back in the 1940s this group had included as well Puerto Rico’s foremost woman poet, Julia de Burgos. What little is available of this material shows it to be largely conventional Spanish-language verse making little reference to the migration or to life in New York, much less anticipating in any way the complex bilingual situation of the generation to come. But much more of interest may still be found with further study, and it is important to refer to Pedro Carrasquillo for his popular *décimas* about a *fíbaro* in New York, to Dávila Semprit for his forceful political poetry, and to Soto Vélez and Brandon for the examples they set for many of the younger poets.

Perhaps the best example of literature from within the community at midcentury is the novel *Trópico en Manhattan* by Guillermo Cotto-Thorner. The contrast with the Island authors’ treatment of the emigrant experience
is striking: the shock of arrival and first transitions is extended and lent historical depth; individual traumas and tribulations are woven into a more elaborate interpersonal and social context. Most interesting of all as a sign of the author's proximity to and involvement in the community is, once again, the language. The Spanish of Trópico en Manhattan, especially in certain dialogue passages, is at times interspersed with bilingual neologisms of various kinds. And at the end of the book there is a lengthy glossary of what Cotto-Thorner calls "Neorkismos."

The contrast between the observers' and the participants' views in Puerto Rican literature of this period does not reflect so much the literary quality as the relation of the writers to the literature's historical development. A novel like Trópico en Manhattan may not surpass the stories of José Luis González and Pedro Juan Soto, but it does more extensively reveal the social contradictions internal to the community and give them a sense of epic duration and process. With regard to literary history, that relatively unknown and forgotten novel, with its early sensitivity to "Neorkismos," may more directly prefigure the voice and vantage point of the Nuyorican writers is "the persistence of his interest in the colonia and his sympathy with the Nuyorican viewpoint" (116). His attempts at bilingual verse and especially his plays, from Pipo subway no sabe reir to El lucky seven, give vivid literary expression to this internal, participants' perspective. Carrero has also written a novel (Raquelo tiene un mensaje) about the trauma of Nuyorican return migration to the Island, but Pedro Juan Soto's Ardiente suelto fria estación is as yet unequaled in its treatment of that experience.

The third, Nuyorican stage in emigrant Puerto Rican literature arose with no direct reference to or evident knowledge of the writings of either earlier period. Yet despite this apparent disconnection, Nuyorican creative expression effectively draws together the firsthand testimonial stance of the "pioneer" stage and the fictional, imaginative approach of writers of the 1950s and 1960s. This combining of autobiographical and imaginative modes of community portrayal is clearest perhaps in the prose fiction: Down These Mean Streets, Nicholasa Mohr's Nilda and Edward Rivera's Family Installments are all closer to the testimonial novel than to any of the narrative works of previous years.

This sense of culminating and synthesizing of the earlier phases indicates that with the Nuyoricans the Puerto Rican community in the United States has arrived at a modality of literary expression corresponding to its position as a nonassimilating colonial minority. The most obvious mark of this new literature emanating from the community is the language: the switch from Spanish to English and bilingual writing. This language transfer should not be mistaken for assimilation in a wide cultural sense: as the content of the literature indicates, using English is a sign of being here, not necessarily of liking it here or of belonging.

By now, the Nuyorican period of United States-based Puerto Rican literature is already unfolding a history of its own. The sensationalist tenor of the initial outburst has given way to a greater concern for the everyday lives of Puerto Rican working people. The growing diversity and sophistication of the movement is evident in the emergence of women writers and female perspectives, as in books like Sandra María Esteves's Yerba buena and Nicholasa Mohr's Rituals of Survival, and in the appearance of writers in other parts of the United States. Also of key importance is the ongoing use of an actively bilingual literary field. For it becomes clear that, in the literature as in the community, the switch from Spanish to English is by no means complete or smooth, and it certainly is not a sign of cultural accommodation. For all the young writers Spanish remains a key language-culture of reference even when not used, and some, like Tato Laviera, demonstrate full bilingual capacity in their writing. There also continues to be a Spanish-language literature by Puerto Ricans living here, some of which hovers between Nuyorican concerns and styles and those of contemporary Island literature. Such writers as Iván Silén and Victor Fragoso, like Jaime Carrero and Guillermo Cotto-Thorner before them, have served as important bridges between the two language poles of present-day Puerto Rican writing.

Thus, rather than abandoning one language in favor of another, contemporary Puerto Rican literature in the United States actually exhibits the full range of bilingual and interlingual use. Like Mexican-American and other minority literatures, it cannot be understood and assessed on the basis of a strict English-language conceptualization of "American" literature, or of literary practice in general. Some of the best Nuyorican texts require knowledge of Spanish and English, which does not make them any less a part of American, or Puerto Rican, literature. And the choice and inclusiveness of a literary language is but one aspect of a broader process of cultural interaction between Puerto Ricans and the various nationalities they encounter in the United States.

By its Nuyorican stage Puerto Rican literature in the
United States comes to share the features of “minority” or noncanonical literatures of the United States. Like them it is a literature of recovery and collective affirmation, and it is a literature of “mingling and sharing,” of interaction and exchange with neighboring, complementary cultures (see Gelfant). What stronger source, after all, for the emergence of Nuyorican literature than Afro-American literature and political culture? What more comparable a context of literary expression than Chicano writing of the same period?

Perhaps most distinctly among these literatures, though, Puerto Rican writing today is a literature of straddling, a literature operative within and between two national literatures and marginal in both. In this respect Nuyorican writing may well come to serve as a model or paradigm for emerging literatures by other Caribbean groups in the United States, such as Dominicans, Haitians, and Jamaicans. Despite the sharp disconnections between Island- and United States-based traditions, and between stages of the literary history here, it is still necessary to talk about modern Puerto Rican literature as a whole and of the emigrant literature—including the Nuyorican—as an extension or manifestation of that national literature. This inclusion within, or integral association with, a different and in some ways opposing national culture stretches the notion of a pluralist American canon to the limit. Ethnic, religious, and racial diversity is one thing, but a plurality of nations and national languages within the American canon—that is a different and more serious issue. After all, if Tato Laviera and Nicholasa Mohr are eligible for canonical status, why not Manuel Zeno Gandía, the author of the great Puerto Rican novel La charca?

Yes, what about La charca? It’s a fine novel; in fact, if it had been written by an author from a “big” country, say France or Russia, or even Argentina or Mexico, it would probably be more widely admired and even held up as an example of late nineteenth-century realism. It was published in 1894, before the United States acquired the Island, and its plot is set several decades earlier, long before any significant relations had developed between the two countries. And yet, though it does not mention or refer to the United States, La charca is still, somehow, about America, a literary pre-sentiment of what contact with North American society had in store for Puerto Rico. The isolated mountain coffee plantation issues into the wider world of commerce and international dealings, represented in Puerto Rican history, and in Zeno Gandía’s later novels, by the United States. Like José Martí, “Pachín” Marín, and other Latin American intellectuals of the time, Zeno Gandía anticipated the coming of the United States’ values and power. Even at such a remove, with America’s presence still but a metaphor, La charca touches the American canon and contributes impressively to the larger task of American literature.

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After the United States invaded Puerto Rico during the Spanish–American War and the island was ceded to the Americans as a condition of the Treaty of Paris of 1898, writers and poets began to express their opposition of the new colonial rule by writing about patriotic themes. With the Puerto Rican diaspora of the 1940s, Puerto Rican literature was greatly influenced by a phenomenon known as the Nuyorican Movement. Puerto Rican literature continued to flourish and many Puerto Ricans have distinguished themselves as authors, poets, novelists, playwrights, essayists and in all the fields of liter...