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Attempt at an Open Letter to the Bronx

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Attempt at an Open Letter to the Bronx

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
and
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Chris Valdivia

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

To the dead poets of the Bronx,
and its young poetry always-already happening, in spite of everything.

For all of the ghosts restlessly waiting for the future to arrive.

For all the mutual aid groups bubbling up in the Bronx and in the city.

For my family, all of them, who I am always reaching a hand out to...

For

Mario Santiago Papasquiaro,
feral poet of Cretin America

Acknowledgements

All the hands that have touched this (incomplete, always incomplete) project are innumerable, and many, and fleeting.

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Hugs (big ones) and kisses to my dear friends, my loved ones, and to you.

And all the thanks to solitude, spent en los rincones del Bronx and Bard and Tivoli and never really alone, really, really never alone at all, tender, queer moments spent with language and with writers, in pursuit of praxis and alternative futures.

Contents

Introduction	1
I.	11
II.	20
III.	22
IV.	48
JOURNAL ENTRY 10/29/22	64
JOURNAL ENTRY 11/1/22	65
V.	67
JOURNAL ENTRY 11/15/22	72
JOURNAL ENTRY 12/6/22	79
JOURNAL ENTRY 12/10/22	80
JOURNAL ENTRY 12/12/22	86
VI.	87
JOURNAL ENTRY 6/23/22	92
JOURNAL ENTRY 1/3/23	101
JOURNAL ENTRY 1/4/23	102
JOURNAL ENTRY 1/27/23	105
VII. “A Parable of Non-Recalcitrance”	106
JOURNAL ENTRY 2/5/23	128
JOURNAL ENTRY 2/15/22	129
JOURNAL ENTRY 3/23/23	130
JOURNAL ENTRY 1/8/23	131
JOURNAL ENTRY 3/1/23	132
JOURNAL ENTRY 12/25/22	133
JOURNAL ENTRY 2/10/23	134
JOURNAL ENTRY 3/26/23	135
JOURNAL ENTRY 4/1/23	137
VIII.	138
Bibliography	141

Introduction

This project attempts to be written for the Bronx, a reader of the Bronx. I am primarily guided by a trust in the emotional and affective, and in their capacities for communicating experiences of the world in ways that social analysis may not be able to. This project is inherently fraught with failure: failure to provide the necessary nuance and care to a number of its subjects and objects, to treat the innumerable parts of this “whole” with the time and energy they may, individually, deserve. But I am trying to experiment with a style of writing and form that can be at once anthropological and poetic (as if both could not already exist) dissatisfied with anthropological ethnographic work that feels, otherwise, like a compromise. I’m taking seriously Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson’s curiosity of “other forms of dwelling” in which something like “an accretion of the subtle detail so necessary for ‘thick description’” can be acquired, and deployed, from having conducted “a lifetime of ‘fieldwork.’”¹ What is it to write “insider ethnography,” about the context one is from, and to do so “ethnographically”? My investment in the Bronx as a “site” for “study” is a primarily emotional one. I know the Bronx, and yet as a result of my anthropological studies, aiming to defamiliarize the familiar, the Bronx starts to become foreign. Things are strange in the Bronx... however, my concern is less with communicating something of the oddities that I see and experience in the Bronx but rather *how* exactly to do so, and for who.

¹ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “1. Discipline and Practice: ‘The Field’ as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology,” in *1. Discipline and Practice: “The Field” as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology* (University of California Press, 1977), 1–46, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520342392-002>, 31.

A charged, political style of writing that I am attempting to invoke aims at interrogating how I might write “anthropologically” and “ethnographically” about the autoethnographic hyperlocal, *with* the local in mind. While the reflexive turn provided necessary interventions in ethnographic writing, anthropology still occurs within the bounds of the university. Where does writing go? Following Jafari S. Allen and Ryan Cecil Jobson, my writing attempts to invoke the spirit of their argument that, as they write in “The Decolonizing Generation: (Race and) Theory in Anthropology since the Eighties,”

While it has become popular of late to denounce the reflexive turn as a passing experiment from which anthropology has triumphantly returned, we argue that the reflexive project was not capacious enough – that is, it was limited to the fieldwork encounter between the anthropologist and her informants. To insist that “everything is ethnography,” as John L. Jackson (2013: 53) has, requires an openness not simply to questions of identity and positionality vis-à-vis research sites and subjects but to a political economy of knowledge production and the relationships therein between academics, administrators, editors, and publishers. This includes a reflexive attention to “the ways in which the [ethnographic] text is constituted in and constitutive of larger relationships of power” (Jordan 1997: 57). A scholarly text, after all, is a commodity like any other. *Its subversive potential cannot be taken for granted.*²

I believe in the subversive potentials of anthropological writing and seeing, though its methodological and bureaucratic expectations seem to compromise the practical potentialities of writing that might occur outside of the traditional ethnographic style. I did not fulfill an IRB; it didn’t make sense, to ask for permission to write about something that I had already conducted “fieldwork” for over the course of a lifetime, or to write the things that I saw and heard, as if I wasn’t seeing and hearing them already, and writing them down. Conversations, *things*, happen, and their fleeting and ephemeral nature is precisely through which encounters with the Bronx –

² Jafari Sinclair Allen and Ryan Cecil Jobson, “The Decolonizing Generation: (Race and) Theory in Anthropology since the Eighties,” *Current Anthropology* 57, no. 2 (April 2016): 129–48, <https://doi.org/10.1086/685502>, 136. Italics mine.

as a constructed “home” within late stage capitalism – can be experienced. Methodological inquiries such as the interview are not present in my project, save for a single instance with my parents over FaceTime. “Doing” ethnography felt constraining; I was much more interested in writing the quotidian and banal, and doing so fleetingly. This felt not only more honest – a much deeper engagement with the “site” that is the Bronx and the area of Bard – but seemed to also allow for a capaciousness that was only possible through prose and poetry.

And yet I don’t think that such writing needs to fall short. I wondered about a combination of styles of writing, of poetry coupled with something like “analysis,” as if poetry could not also be analytical; I wanted the journal-esque and ephemeral to supplement, and *ground*, the more distant and critical synthesizing *back* into everyday life, prose and poetry functioning as both catharsis and the grounding mechanism, even the vehicle itself, for actively intersectional work. Per Jacqui German, in a virtual interview with the poet Ariana Brown: “The sharper our analysis, the quicker we get free.” This critical need for analysis is not lost on me... but I wanted to write for the Bronx. A distance from traditional ethnographic writing tries not to deliberately elide other voices and experiences of the same Bronx I occupy, but rather hone in on my subjective experience of and encounter with it. Even the most exciting contemporary ethnographic writing seemed to fail to recognize the positionality from which it was being written, bordering on an omniscience that erred on the side of analysis rather than on the anthropologist’s careful and yet flawed, subjective, internal experience(s). I worried that a project that did not adhere to traditional ethnographic methods would fall short of honoring the subjects and objects I write about, perhaps even myself (for I am perhaps the project’s primary

subject). But I also believed, like those of *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*, that

Experimental writing, sometimes errant, at times even literary, can also *know* something of the world – something that has no less of a claim on the truth of the world than the sciences or the social sciences, perhaps even a great deal more to claim than some institutionalized forms of knowledge.³

How to reach out to my neighbors if all I wrote was academic? I can trust my neighbors to read anything; despite popular belief, the Bronx *is* reading, and has always been. But academic writing not delivered to the academy (an irony that is not lost on me either, submitting this), writing that aims for political praxis and on-the-ground improvisation and vulnerability, rather than claims to truth, must be interesting, and poetic, and *of* the Bronx. I'd like to think that a first-person style of writing that *sprawls*, sometimes frenetically, as is the city's wont, might be but one way to pull people into how "everything is ethnography." And I draw much of my political aspirations in writing from a number of Latin American poets, primarily, right now, the *Infrarrealistas* and *Hora Zerianos* of 1970s México and Perú, respectively. Poetry, in whatever forms it might take in this project, could not simply be embellishment, as if it ever were. "Rather, life itself," as Nicole Cecilia Delgado writes, "insofar as it permits the creation of poetry, is really the primary project."⁴ This project had to engage in this "life" that was and is the everyday, and the articulation of the everyday necessitated a shift away from ethnography as I know it.

I too, wanted to "call up the stereotypical specter meant to scare young poets: *you're going to die of hunger.*"⁵ Emphasizing, *aclareciendo*, to myself the importance of poetry, an

³ Anand Pandian and Stuart J. McLean, eds., *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 13.

⁴ Nicole Cecilia Delgado, *A Mano / By Hand* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

absolutely unprofitable gesture that could yet mobilize, and touch. My project, trying to “live with/in poetry,” with “poetry [as] the project’s basic unity,”⁶ tries to call upon my trust in language and poetics as a worthwhile intervention in what is deemed “anthropological.” Poetry allows for me to engage in something akin to what the Mexican anthropologist Meztli Yoalli Rodríguez Aguilera refers to as *una antropología “senti-pensado,”* which translates to a “*felt-thought*” anthropology.⁷

The overall goals of my project are many, alongside this. It should never be “complete.” This project, concerned as it is with the everyday, *my* everyday, must, naturally, be something of a life project. I also have hopes, in keeping with the belief that writing about the Bronx should make it to the Bronx, that I could excerpt this alongside the work of other Bronxites and we could self-publish some perzines. There are exciting queer anarchist, anarcho-communist, Marxist-Leninist, etc. mutual aid and community spaces bubbling up in New York City, as they always have been, though I feel like the North Bronx has been left out. Part of this project’s conception is a desire to connect with others. A perzine, spread around the Bronx on cheap paper guerilla-style, might allow a different kind of literature to enter spaces of mine in the Bronx; my hope is that a medium such as that, rather than the Senior Project, would be more capacious, and exercise a necessary subversiveness I have not yet encountered in the North Bronx or in anthropology generally. Something like a “queering” of ethnographic writing through the prosaic and poetic subjective everyday hopes to channel what seems to have, already,

long been the promise, largely implicit, of anthropology itself: to affirm that actual, existing circumstances are always imbued with the possibility of being otherwise – that actuality is never coincident with itself, that the real is always more than what is actually

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lina Berrio, ed., *Antropologías feministas en México: epistemologías, éticas, prácticas y miradas diversas* (Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2020), 415-427.

present somewhere. Ethnography is wagered on the possibility that a given reality's difference from itself – and the kind of empirical commitment this expectation demands – can be revealed most powerfully through writing.⁸

I'm inspired by many writers, poets and anthropologists alike, who believe fervently in such possibilities, the possibilities of things being otherwise. I find myself largely influenced and taken with many Black writers working to unpack concepts of diaspora and ontology, and my hope for future revisions to this project is to recognize this much more explicitly, and move carefully with the invocation of Black thought that might otherwise, if done carelessly, deploy a monolithic Blackness as a vehicle for understanding “Latinidad,” or “Peruvianness,” or other identities. My effort is in line with what I believe are the indomitable belief in the future, in alternative futures to our capitalist lives that can be heard, as Mark Fisher believed, in “the unactivated potentials of the past.”⁹ I try to question cultural understandings of history and historiography, in the spirit of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's influential *Silencing the Past*. And in an obvious, implicit way, my interest in Derridean hauntology extends into my interest and love for the writers I invoke, as I call upon them and their language, and try to protect them as I bring them (back) into the world. Though, I am also aware of their being here, on the corners of the Bronx, already.

In any case, it's through something like this “autoethnographic” writing that I attempt to reach out to my neighbors of the Bronx on paper, as I muster the courage to do so in actuality. All of these writers, all of these poets, in their reach, as Latinx, Black, Indigenous, feminist, anticolonial, queer, white, European, old, share, for me, two things in common, either explicitly

⁸ Pandian and McLean, 19.

⁹ Mark Fisher, “The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology,” *Dancecult* 5, no. 2 (2013): 42–55, <https://doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2013.05.02.03>, 53.

or in between their lines. 1) An abnegation of capitalist society as it exists, and 2) a belief in an alternative – or, better yet, alternatives –, that are informed by bodies and identities-in-difference, informed by the deeply affective and emotional, and, in turn, the political.

“I am resolutely a man of my time.”

— Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

“Casi siempre me ha gustado leer, pero no es cierto...”

— Yásnaya Aguilar Gil, *Un nosotrxs sin estado*

“Now that local voices have become loud enough to question the innocence of a little *gringo* wearing a Davy [Crockett] cap, mom and dad may think twice about buying one, and the custodians of history shiver, afraid that the past is catching up too fast with the present...it suddenly matters how real Davy was.”

— Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*

*“no eres el único al que el mundo le parece
– en 1 momento pesimista –
1 ghetto sin puentes ni caminos*

*& a veces también tú cojeas & te oscureces
te rascas la nariz & la costra del recuerdo
la Existencia toma el cuerpo de 1 policía
que te pasea su macana último modelo a todo lo largo de la cara
& tú todavía preguntas: ¿Qué onda mi lobo feroz?
¿Qué tal de salud la represión?
mientras tiemblan las matas de marihuana
sembradas como zanahorias en el subsuelo de tu mente
& tu corazón es 1 vecindad populosa
con las coladeras & el techo derrumbándose
por el puro miedo
por el puro miedo”*

– Mario Santiago Papasquiaro

“...Read them twice
and I will touch you
if I want to hear
it again.
Read them thought-
fully
slowly”

– Jesse Murry

I.

B has a debt no one knows about. He has had it for longer than we know.

B is my father, my papá: a large, strong man with big forearms and a gut, wear and tear in his feet, his knees, and his back, and, recently, his heart has been dealing with palpitations. B is tired all the time. I know him.

Whenever I used to get home from school

I would ask him “how was work?”

and he would say:

“terrible.”

We wouldn't say a thing after that.

And I still ask him. And he says

the same thing.

B lives somewhere on ___ Avenue with his family, us.

B. Me, Ortiz-Valdiviazo. My mom, X. My older brother, V.

Here we are. By the Grand Concourse, on 2_3rd Street. Right here.

I wish we knew each other like that, *you* and me. Sé que no me conoces.

Pero me haces falta.

And the Bronx days are beauty, and they are long, and we share them in our singular lives. Cities are brimming. This one is no different in that respect. Ride into the underground, under, watch everything overhead and forget the sleeping feeling of what it means, while living in the Bronx, to be still.

I am writing, neighbor,

He never does. At some point he's in an accident, before they met, a car accident, being run over (a truck? Holy shit.) but making it out, and maybe it changes something in him. Making a bit more money (a lawsuit? I don't know), B gets a little frivolous, happy-go-lucky. *Coño*, B, his family said, *guarda tu dinero*. Or maybe he didn't make any more money at all actually and had just decided to live a little, he deserved it, we deserve to feel like we are alive a little, as if we had already gotten free, like he had achieved what he had trekked here for in the first place, tired of feeling like one Langston Hughes poem,

*It's such a
Bore
Being always
Poor.*

done with being held back by unknown forces. Somewhere along the way, I learn, B makes a deal, or comes across money, or meets some folks, or something else, and he finds himself in some money trouble, some government trouble, and they resort to sucking the life out of him.... They eat him silently and from afar. He receives letters, phone calls, just having tried to do good by himself. One never knows how we get here in the first place, into these circumstances....

Then he meets X in Queens through his brother, and he falls in love, visiting her tipsy but warmly but smelling also of cigarettes, and she likes him, and they move to the Boogie Down...one little boy born in 1998 at St. Barnabas Hospital...another little boy born in 2001, same place...and X has her own little girl back in Perú, not having seen her in 18 years (¿18? Yea, I know.). “Si él me amaba, tenía que amar a mi M.” He did. He loved them both anyway.

Mother and daughter won't see each other again until the 2010s. Time, like circumstance, is out of their hands.

But now *both* of them, B and X, together, still feel like that Langston Hughes poem *and then some*, but there's not much B can do because they're on his ass, remember, remember, more details I refuse to disclose. X takes up work herself (not knowing, at this early point, about B's "deal," about the calls or the letters or the hunt, not knowing "they're" on his ass). Fordham Road, CONWAY: retail, boxes, stocking shelves. And it's okay, it gets better, or, rather, we do what we can. But the tax returns aren't hitting like they should...not hitting at all, actually...and X is confused.

She waits for me at Head Start – I'm stumbling, little – overhearing the other Bronx mothers talking about being able to finally buy a stroller, some Christmas presents. X sees a glimmer in these mothers' eyes. She watches, unable to join in on the chorus, the sense of relief and deliverance.

And she wonders: "*what the hell is going on?*"

My dear X, feeling small. My mommy. My mamá.

And so B has a debt X finds out about. That it exists, at least. The deal, the circumstances and context of something shameful, leeching, are a mystery, but its effects are better known. X, in a move of rebellion, or (and?) exhaustion, or (*and*) refusal, sits with the tax documents. Looking at the head of household name on the tax documents.

Under B's name, we're kaput. Under X's? We start to breathe a little.

A little more. Maybe.

X, hearing the voices from Head Start. X, unable to sit back. And she writes her name.

Reasserting her existence on paper, putting it out there.

Signing herself up for the future.

And so B, in *whatever* he might have done to try to make ends meet aside from the grueling work of pipes and slabs and sewers, shortly after his hopeful arrival, added to his debt. The debt did not start with whatever he might have done. I'm talking about the one he was born with, the debt of always-already illegal immigrants who seek out life in the United States. Owing the country his money, his labor, and his life upon – before – stepping into it, catching all but a break. B would work in construction until his 40s. B would, then, sweep the floors of stories-high tenants into his 60s.

B would never, however, catch a break.

Reader, lector@, por si acaso no confías en mí, let me prove myself, that I am here, too. Here are some of the things I am familiar with. The D train, the 4 train. The Bx1. The Bx2. Bedford Park Boulevard. Lehman College. Mosholu Parkway, since way back when there were no trees and no crosswalk, and there was football. P.S. 8, free summer lunches. P.S. 280, M.S. 80. Rest in peace Mr. Barcelo. Kawah Chinese Takeout; Sky Blue Laundromat; CTown; Fine Fare; La iglesia pentecostal “Luz en medio de las Tinieblas Inc.”; Kumon, which must have never been open, because I've *never* seen the inside of it; Bronx Community Board 7, with its gate down since *quién sabe*. Who knows. Oval Park; People's Park; NYPD's 52th Precinct; the NYPD. Bainbridge, a few friends, a few (fewer) lovers; Jerome, some old friends – “lost,” “perdidos,”

last I heard; Dewitt Clinton High School (“hell.” But James Baldwin went there. I held out hope.); the Botanical Garden on free days, the corner of the Bronx Zoo and Fordham Road; Fordham Road. Corners, cumbia, drill, *bullas*, and EMTs, sometimes, after *bangs* and *pops*; stretchers and blood; vigils, and crying, and stress. 6:00 AM bus rides to Kennedy (*not* Bronx Science, or Stuyvesant, or Brooklyn Tech or American Studies. You thought I was nice like that?), Marble Hill; button-ups and ties and broken escalators and acne; Van Cortlandt Park, Broadway (231st); afterschool at Mickey D’s, Dunkin’, Inwood, Dyckman, The Heights; turning corners, long bus rides home with my guy Stress; long train rides home with my guy Stress; and sneaky links. Sweat, and after JV baseball, the 1 train into Wall Street from 225th Street, into Bowling Green, the belly of the beast and among *big men* as we stumble small, 15, 16, 17 and brown and Latino at some afterschool programs told to plan out our futures thinking not about today and the Bronx of now, but of the distant future. One program gave me a pin that said “TO COLLEGE. TO CAREER. TO THRIVE.” We knew very well what to do. Stumblin’ by the ferry by towering suits, overwhelming skyscrapers that scratch the polluted skies of some other dimension, up there, “huge backflows of populace” I think Charles Baudelaire said; wobbling, at the end (*dique*) of the days, all the way back to the dirty, derelict Boogie Down. The Bronx is always a somewhere else. I’d ride the train home, *slumped*, and with one eye open. Sometimes it was no use. The days were long. I woke up, an hour later, shaken awake by the train hissing to a stop and confused, still intact, and I got off and walked quick... Montefiore Hospital, the Montefiore ER (hours waiting for an aspirin, and they keep you waiting, make you feel like there is something worthwhile at the other end of the night, something promised since immigration, down the block, across the border, something that never comes); Woodlawn Cemetery – before

there was Herman Melville (1819-1891) there was only Florinda Salazar Meneses (1926-2019), my father's mother, descansando, por fin, contra un derrame cerebral que le había dejada paralizada para años. (*¿Descansando?* I don't know.) We did what we could in those 3 years she was bedridden. Christmases, Thanksgivings, birthdays in the nursing home. Waiting – we wait already so much, don't we? – for the arrival of either life, again, or death.

It was always dark out when I headed home. Turning corners, I look over my shoulders, walking to Bedford Park, Harris Park, lonely D trains huddled together and cold in the large Bedford lot, walking to sirens and music and the sounds of conversations, my gait *fast*, listening also to the 4 train overhead – *¿dónde andas, hijo? Cerca, casi abajo del puente. Apurate, Ok, ten cuidado, Ok.* Churches, funeral homes, and cops; walking under the Grand Concourse, the long Grand Concourse overhead: dead birds splattered by speed and *dead*, chirping, overhead within the steel beams holding it all up, the living dead. Turning corners, another train shoots by, muffler pops, and un reggaetoncito. Flickering lamp posts, neon bodega lights, and shadows – dry, chipping wall paint, decades-old brick, mortar, and the city walls are a palimpsest; and light, darkness, speed. I walked quick past all of it. (You know what I mean?) I walk past all of it with fear, with speed, feeling forever like there's danger afoot. (You *know* what I mean.) I walk with a sense of urgency. I walk under Bronx lights and in Bronx shadows, in speed: in the city.

And, recalling those nights, *living* those nights, I think I see some ghosts on the corner.

Something lingers, piercing and fixing itself in the air and under every surface imaginable, and I fear it, and grow up with that fear. Like a body that doesn't know how to quit.

I don't really totally want to do this. *WRITE*. But I have to do this. I'm torn, doing this. I'm overwhelmed, doing this: writing and thinking about the Bronx, *MY* Bronx, my living here, and writing that life down for the archive, and also for me, for you. Maybe for you, too. Whatever collective you + I make up. And for the impossible gaps between reader and poet.

Being young in my barrio feels precarious.

That's how I feel.

And I feel busy, stressed, under a weight.

That's how I feel. And I feel precarious.

That's just how I was raised.

You know what I mean?

I get home and I settle in, safe, *safe*.

(you know?)

I get home and I see my parents, and we hug and kiss mejillas. My mom, X, holds them with her hands. Her palms are warm. She feels my red cheeks and she frowns at the frigid Bronx, and she smiles, looking into my eyes, but does not say anything. My dad kisses my head as he holds it, and I hold his, briefly feeling his balding. It's all I ever needed tonight.

I ask my mom, X, "¿cómo te fue el trabajo?"

and she says

"ay, hijo, demasiado."

I look at my dad, B,

and I ask him the same thing.

“Terrible,” he says.

And all of this,

really,

all of it,

it happens for

something like

decades.

II.

Walking home, on no particular instance, I look up and I try to find the moon but I can't.

Buildings here are tall and brick, beige, red, gray. Recently some newer, brighter ones have been popping up. Up the street. Around the corner. Very close and quickly.

Headed up to the D train on 2_3rd is a shiny one with glass windows, hasta un *security*. My mom tells me that the news tells her (*someone* told her) that it's public housing. I can't and don't believe it. I could be wrong. But it's very nice, elegant. The lobby is bright, too bright, and there are too many elevators inside, as though it were the financial district, and there are couches in the lobby. I don't tell my mother how I can't imagine that all of the apartments haven't already been bought out. By a *gringuito*, someone not really from here, waiting to flip them when the "public housing" shtick is done. It's smart, no? A big bag? And then the rest of our rents are *jodidas*.

My brother, V, just applied to one next to the 4 train, she says, a few years' wait for a shot. He's still here, in our cracked, beige building, our little apartment, working. The super just installed a new security system downstairs, a complex intercom keypad, because some jóvenes who don't live here have been coming through. My mother told me. Around the corner, another building is being built, after some houses get torn down. Murals get obscured. Parking spots get taken. Citi Bike stand installed around the corner. *Here? Really?* And sunlight doesn't get through to us because that glass building, the one I refuse to trust, is much taller than our own, and its contractors failed, managed, to take us into consideration. We don't get any sun.

Is it the same for you? Do you notice? Do you agree with me? Do you care?

A veces no me importan a mí. Me entretengo, en el Instagram y el Facebook. Veo lo que quiero y aún más lo que no quiero. I do this forever, brain off, hasta que me he quedado sentado o aplastado en el sofá (mi cama) durante horas, sintiéndome haber gastado la vida. Straight up. Sintiendo inútil. Arrestado por una vergüenza incómoda. Pasaron horas y horas y no recuerdo ni una. Suelto suspiros. De vez en cuando, miro hacia la ventana esperando ver alguna fase de la luna, something real to help me come back into the world, pero no veo nada más que ladrillo. Escucho ruido, voces. El mundo, afuera, viviendo. Oigo gritos. Risas también. El Bronx en penumbras.

I try to go outside for some air, but X doesn't let me. Es demasiado tarde, she says.

I have trouble going to sleep. I look hard at my ceiling, in the dark. Everything is quiet. The people of the Bronx must sleep. I can't sleep. Illusive, elusive rest. A patrol car sits on the corner, waiting.

I chase around uncertainties: the day that comes after dawn, school, health, dreams. I'm cold. My radiator hisses. Hey, I'm cold.

A car pierces by, and the sirens come on, washing the ceiling with sweeping light.

I lay thinking of writing a poem or two.

III.

6/5/19 – Bedford Park Boulevard, Bronx, NY.

Some three years later – now, in the fall of 2022 – I find a dreadful, beautiful poem from mid-2019 that I wrote post-breakup with an ex. June 6th, 2019.

Things were changing. The future was coming. I was under quite a spell:

*And regardless of the factors:
 You, barrelling towards Oregon
 Me, matching your swaying
 I'm certain we'd manage to slip past
 the other in that familiar way,
 that inevitable way
 things have been as of late.*

But that's alright. No impact.

Dreadful, in that I recoil finding it again, this little boy. I cringe right away. I give it a chance, then, and listen. I was sad, just, hm, just under the weather, really. Aware of a present (is it a specific day, a sense of routine, or a moment of realization?); aware of a sudden change being led up to by circumstances, whatever they were, where things, *people*, arrive at opposite poles of having known each other. At the point where things end. But there was still a lot of hope in my quick little poem, which is to say that there was hope in my body that needed and wanted to be expressed in some way, either as a belief in things staying, things *not* ending, or as a way to grieve. Hope in my young body. I was just a kid. That relationship ending was all in the moment – it was all in the past. I scribbled some words down, words that helped explain, or at least locate, those feelings elsewhere, outside of me.

I wince, and I can honor my past self and how he might have felt. The continuities, though, shock me now, finding it again and reading it. I find the poem again. I am shocked at something of the *feeling*, the poetry, in that adolescent voice of long ago:

*Hades clapped his herpes hands
to shake my convoluted and
fantastical hopes of working it out.
I'm just glad he had the faith.*

I stole some words and lines from Charles Bukowski for these verses in something of an homage to them, because they liked that grumpy man Bukowski, and also because of my desire (I wouldn't admit it to myself then) for triumph, or a return, or clarity. "*What happened?*" I tried to say it all without saying it. We fell in love (if that's what it was, whatever that is) and life was lovely, and loving, and safe. Put all your marbles in one basket and lose parts of yourself and your "being," your very young understanding of your self, from day to night, and melt into them, the other. They become a diosa. Lose yourself in the fiction and believe in it. Sink into images, ideas of love from T.V. Avoid really talking. Have little idea how to help yourself when things aren't rosy in the story you write, the story you *thought* you were writing, and (try to) tend to your heart and insecurities, your moments of feeling very small. And then it all went downhill from there for us. We broke up, which was for the best, really, and it was high school, and then we fell out of touch. The fire of youth, young, naïve lover days, days and sticky feelings, and skin. You don't forget about those days, good and hard, lonely, sensual days; reckless, reactive, intensely young days, in retrospect. The poem, at the time, was heartbreak, and it was also moving on.

Not realizing it until much later, they had become an idea, like “love” itself, a thing in my brain to hold onto, to regret or to mourn in that relationship’s end, even if the idea wasn’t totally true. It wasn’t totally true. Part of which wasn’t healthy, no. People aren’t things. It felt intense.

The intensity of one José Rosas Ribeyro poem:

*En silencio
mi amor
no me hables
no me digas nada
no me digas que me quieres
quíereme*¹⁰

Unrealistic.

A few quick years slogged by (a lot happens in cities) and you (hopefully) learn a few things about yourself and how you love: what your tendencies are, the many moves of your loving, the poetry of hands, unhealthy moments, poise, what traumas of the past you hold, how they affect your relationships now. All of these are learning moments, occurring whenever they do at crossroads between the ideas of what the relationship was up to that point, as it was, and what it might, and can, become after the point, hopefully for the better. There are multiple crossroads to encounter, I think. And those are scary moments, being in them, even if they mean you grow.

Years passed. Eventually, I looked back with clarity.

...Clarity?

¹⁰ José Rosas Ribeyro, “Sueño y lamento de Juan Racotongrave (¿Quizás un homenaje a Charles B?),” in *Perros habitados por las voces del desierto: poesía infrarrealista entre dos siglos*, ed. Rubén Medina (Fondo Editorial Cultura Peruana, 2015), 92.

Well, in retrospect, the *convoluted and / fantastical hopes of working it out*, working out a romantic relationship, still enliven some little nerves from back then. I remember, a little bit, even if I was just a kid. I remember what it felt like, in my heart and my body. It's never totally "past."

But, yet, it feels like those hopes have shifted. The little nerves aren't *all* the same.

Work *what* out? Is it still *love*? What *else*?

Work what out, exactly? What can't I reconcile with, let go? Something sticks, can't be shaken. Fall in and out of love but always rub against bodies, one another – the city's entropy. Strangers. Cities always falling apart and fucking us, together.

It feels, nowadays, like it's also *la cosa ésta*, which is to say *everything*, *la mierda*, *la historia*, *who/where/how* we are. A *mouthful* of confusion. Feel too many things on the corners of the Bronx and feel them viscerally. Have trouble explaining them. "*Eso falso realismo que consiste en creer que todas las cosas pueden describirse y explicarse.*" Julio Cortázar. Maldito realismo. Damn realism.

And I never was, when I was much younger, really bothered too much by *este realismo* en lo cual vivimos día tras día, realities that take on myriad forms. But it was there. I think you know it, too. Feel the realism; I had always been aware of some sort of discontent. The feeling of the days.

It was there, in my walks home from school. My parents sigh when they come home, and within that exhaustion is also anger, desire, wishing. Frustration, at... *something*. A young woman, an older woman, a girl, someone in my life no doubt, one of the women in my life, rushes to wherever she is going, wherever she is coming from, and *always* looks behind her,

tensely, fiercely. A mother works a counter, standing all day in the middle of a department store with no heating, no air conditioner, no union, and her feet ache, and it gets real bad. One sweeps floors. Another washes clothes. Another in pants, in leggings, in shorts, the clothes she has, really, and they just won't stop *looking* at her. When no one sees you, something still pokes.

CALIGRAMA

A
ún
sin

brasier^e

algo aprieta.

11

Another paycheck, not enough; another, on the way to the second job; another, a CUNY student who can never finish her work, and she boils, brims, feeling *guilty*, feeling *guilty*. (*Mami, ¿porqué me regañas? Why are you yelling at me, the way they yelled at you?*). Another, feeling alone in the middle of it all, a child lost in a crowd; another, *crying*, and no one ever sees or knows; another, who never cries at all. Another person wakes up for work, while another lays in ache. And before you can say *pero mijo así es la vida, no jodas, quejas demasiado, ya callate con esas tonterías, hay que trabajar, hay que hacer ___*, I'll look you in the eyes.

Hopefully softly,

¹¹ Claudia Kerik, "Caligrama," in *Perros habitados por las voces del desierto: poesía infrarrealista entre dos siglos*, ed. Rubén Medina (Fondo Editorial Cultura Peruana, 2015), 238.

lovingly,

angrily, too.

I'll look at you. I'll tell you que *veo cuánto trabajas así, ya cansad@ como eres*. That I see *cuánto odias a la madrugada, cuánto te molesta perder la cena con tu familia, cómo la preocupación te quita el sueño*. Everything, everything I've seen since I was a baby boy. And I'll say, if you look into mine, *yea, papa, yea, mama, I know. I know*. And I'll wonder always in my head, and maybe aloud with you (you don't know how much I want this):

But what if things were different?

What if things were different?

How did we get here?

Cuánto lo merecemos saber.

Algo se está pasando en la ciudad.

I make sense of it however I do. I'm not the bearer of absolute truths, and yet I don't think I'm wrong. Coping. Writing, Reading.

I'm inclined toward books. I don't know when that started.

I'm told that I've "always loved to read." And *this* is the thing I want to stamp out, make clear, that I was *told*; I didn't feel this intuitively or suddenly, in a single, revelatory moment, it wasn't something I knew for myself or had decided for myself. I wanted to like books as a kid in the Bronx because they felt like one of the things people admired you for. It was best, it seemed,

if you did. Don't and watch the love fade away. This is something that happens to us very early on. Pick up books and hold them, just hold them. Preoccupied, with just holding them, being seen with them. Watch the world love you.

I don't remember when I arrived, *actually*, at language, and at history.

This is, largely, the expectation and unwritten rules of schooling. And it's also... something more pervasive. The point is that I did not hold books just to hold them, randomly, unprovoked. Always provoked. Moved to act and *feeling* that deeply, believing. Books served a purpose, not the words inside of the books (at least not yet) but the image of a child holding a book. A Brown boy holding a book. Not one conversation happens where a young boy or girl in the Bronx, the *subject*, runs into someone (say, a family friend, an aunt, an uncle, a friendly stranger) who is overcome with a sense of care, responsibility, or authority, and needs to say something. "Stay in school". "¡Mira que grande está la nena/el nene! ¿Estudia, okay?". "School?" and I nod. "*That's* what I like to hear." There are infinite iterations of the same thing, a logic of preference and expectation underneath, and yet at the surface.

And they smile. A really beautiful smile. I nod my little nod, and believed them.

Everyone seems to like that, you know,

so I felt like I had to keep doing it.

I wonder where we learned to like that from.

Now: I want to smile – because I care about you – but say "get that shit off me please."

I'm told I always liked to read. That was supposed to be a good thing.

Please stop telling me that.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I don't know! Fed?

Anything with no regard to money, a “making it” story worthy of local news coverage, results in a less enthusiastic look, a worried look.

“You can be anything you dream of.”

And I smile when you praise me, tell me I'm good, exactly who you want me to be.

What do you dream of?

And there is, simultaneously, the stunning, crushing fear of not being enough.

Of failing you. Failing you, and failing the Bronx.

It is what it is. But that's precisely it! “It,” which is not just reading but *many* things, which we might say is “just how it is,” or is “just how the world works”, (*no jodas, cállate, shut the fuck up.*) is always something we all agree with, a *fact* that we accept without any clear reason, not for any reasons of our own. At least I don't think so. Not in the Boogie Down. Because somewhere along the way we sort of just pick up ideas. Dreaming after them. Living by them. Various intricate, invisible, “*unspoken but profound assumptions on the part of the people,*”¹² as James Baldwin writes. “Hidden laws.” Engaged in his own schooling, learning who knows what, not far from here. *Right here, actually. Right here.*

I feel those “laws.” Laws they certainly feel like.

But I don't know where they are from.

¹² James Baldwin, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American.” *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (The Dial Press, 1961), 11.

I fell in love with books, eventually, for real, *genuinely*, so I say. On my own. So I say. It would take many years; it would take a different approach. Books always *did* feel important. Holding them, I came to like not the things inside of books but rather the idea of them. The people around me, which is to say *everyone*, the family friend, the aunt, the uncle, the friendly stranger, agreed. Reminded me. Whatever their hopes were for the future youth of the Bronx, books were undoubtedly a part of them, and no specific ones in mind. And yet they, even and especially with the idea of them, possessed... *something*. Something was inside of a book. There was an apparent authority, and at the very least mystery, in words on pages united and compiled, chosen, bound together and sitting dormant, so it seemed, forever... even if I didn't actually, truly, read them. I wanted – and I was made to want – to be known as someone who read a lot of books, who housed them in his brain. It was something to aspire to. I aspired. It was only natural.

What does it mean to read for oneself?

I read when I had to, and I never liked it, not under those laws.. Reading was a task. Homework. Words. What a drag!

Only in the past 2 or 3 years has reading – though still a task, though I'm still in school – felt like more. Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, in her essay “LOS ACTOS DE LA LECTURA, ESTÁN INMERSOS EN UNA RED TEJIDA POR EL COLONIALISMO”, takes the words right out of my mouth; I take my own out of hers. *Writing* (what pungent, piercing irony) on a indigenous tradition of speaking rather than the written word, she laments the latter's overshadowing of the former, growing up with an expectation for one over the other. Wanting to

speak, refusing to, as demanded, *write*, she realizes: “*Casi siempre me ha gustado leer, pero no es cierto.*”¹³

Two differing, respective relationships with books. And piercing similarities.

Casi siempre me ha gustado leer, sí, pero tampoco es cierto.

Having rummaged through words, finally. Finding meaning. Histories. In our hands.

Certain books crack your heart open to the world. They don't give those to us in the Bronx. Books deserts. There are many school libraries with their shelves unstocked. Go to the Scholastic Book Fair, *popped*, as a child in the 2010s and get nothing because you can't afford a \$20 book. Nothing, ironically, justifies it. Lose the only bookstore in the borough, in 2016, all the way North, as it becomes another boutique in Bay Plaza.¹⁴ Let the Department of Education allow you to be taught only so much. I went away, unaware of what to expect, as there were simply only ever limits.

Get cracked open, angry that you had to leave in order to really start learning. Be given things to read, uncanny things. Bump into other things. I've read too much and, yet, not enough about us, at school, at college, trying to figure things out.

... Trying to figure things out. I've been crushed under the weight of language. Temples, the stone and minerals, the debris that makes up apartment buildings, cities. It is in that rubble, in *tragedies*, where I have also been able to think about what it might be like to get out of it. Only years later, only about a few years ago, four years ago, did I arrive at what those words could say. And only about two years ago did I realize what they should.

¹³ Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, “LOS ACTOS DE LECTURA, ESTÁN INMERSOS EN UNA RED TEJIDA POR EL COLONIALISMO,” in *Un nosotrxs sin estado* (Ediciones OnA, 2018. Cartonera), 44.

¹⁴ “Bronx's Sole Barnes and Noble Set to Close at the End of the Year,” *PIX11* (blog), November 1, 2016, <https://pix11.com/news/local-news/bronx/bronxs-sole-barnes-and-noble-set-to-close-at-the-end-of-the-year/>.

What we're all maybe sighing about and tired about.

And man, I've seen some fucking ghosts.

I mull over moments like those, pivotal reading moments, *learning* moments, understanding them as their own crossroads: crucial turning points where my understanding of my existence, my ser, as it might have been in the Bronx, *as it was*, shifts toward possibilities of what it can be, moving forward, searching for some kind of future.

But I meet the crossroads with difficulty. This, too, breaks my heart.

Shield my child eyes from "lo malo" and you spare me some confusion, some; spare me from the world.

But eventually, I learn that my Brown skin hides skeletons. I learn about my, our, many lives and many deaths. "*Aún no tengo claro si para bien.*"¹⁵ I learn of time periods, events, names, places. Too many to count. Not enough to remember. Brown and Black events, Brown and Black names, Brown and Black places; words and bodies drowned and erased from the archives. Ancestors and predecessors, very, very alive.

The late Cedric Robinson urged us to *conceptualize*: "how are we to conceptualize what we were, what we are, what we are becoming?"¹⁶ How can we understand ourselves, as Brown and Black people, as we were, as we are, as we *can be*, and with one another? In the Bronx, according to whom? How might we live differently, for we no doubt already do, and yet also think about the intersections of our walks and stories? As I read I find, interestingly, that what feel like my crossroads are also *past* crossroads, moments accumulating, stacked onto one another, and although I can't experience them as they happened – and I may never want to – I

¹⁵ Aguilar Gil, 41.

¹⁶ H.L.T. Quan, ed., *Cedric J. Robinson: On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance* (Pluto Press, 2019), 1-2.

encounter glimmers of them in texts, like psychopomps. A heartbreak poem circa 2019 gets read differently. Words are, suddenly, still dormant, and yet alive. And they guide. The fuck is a book? Some of them are pretty horrid glimmers into the past.

And I didn't know about them. And, yet, I couldn't deny them.

And the past was kept from me by the DOE, by mayors, by the city of New York.

And "past" is not even quite the word.

Little, uncomfortable nerves from nowhere.

Things are never really "past."

¿Cómo?

Tato. This is where it's started for me. It should be noted, however, that our histories, which are undoubtedly different, undoubtedly similar, do *not* start with this year, with the name of a certain killing man or of certain killing men that follow. There was much more about us. There is always much more. We were, we are, much more than Taino, Aztec, Incan... these names of history and of myth. There is much else about us, you, me, worth honoring – I haven't read enough of it yet to write about it confidently, to do right by it all. Though we should always try.

I am a young man, however, mientras voy ideando estas líneas, and I live by my days.

And, as befits my rage, *my* crossroads begins here.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus – Cristobal Colón – (remember him?) starts poking around the world for spices and lands in Haiti and La República Dominicana...

In 1519, Hernán Cortés follows in Colón's footsteps, searching for resources and riches in modern-day México. The following year he writes to his king, Carlos I de España, absolutely *boquiabierto* at what he finds: "una grandísima provincia muy rica...en la cual hay muy grandes ciudades y de maravillosos edificios...entre las cuales hay una más maravillosa y rica que todas, llamada Tenustitlan...."¹⁷ It's a jackpot, the biggest lick, the biggest bag.

He goes on, and wanting to know the secret of two tall, marvelous, steaming mountains close to the city of Churultecal, he sends some men up there. He couldn't believe it, couldn't crack it, the mysteries of the mountains; no lo creía, y quería los secretos, and because the Mexica-Aztecs wouldn't tell him, Cortés searched their pockets. Something like him searched mine too, undeniably, on school mornings, metal detectors. And someone tried also to pat me down. Cuando no se lo dieron, les llamaba vasallos, y los mataron:

*hice poner fuego a algunas torres y casas...y así anduve por la ciudad peleando, dejando a buen recaudo el aposento, que era muy fuerte, bien cinco horas, hasta que eché toda la gente fuera de la ciudad por muchas partes de ella...*¹⁸

I'm no Aztec. But did you know he said that? That that's what happened? I didn't. The Aztecs were strong, but in five hours they were defeated. Cortés and his Spaniards walked to the city of Tenochtitlán and more men and women and children gathered to watch, llenando, per one Bernal Díaz del Castillo, "las torres y cúes y en las canoas y de todas partes de la laguna,"¹⁹ not knowing what was to come of the spectacle. These ancestors, predecessors, let them in; Moctezuma, the Aztec Emperor, approached Cortés and his men kindly, the records show, thinking they were gods, which, of course, strong as they were, they weren't. Malintzin, "La

¹⁷ Hernán Cortés, *Segunda carta de relación*. 1520, 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Historia 16, 1984), 368-369.

Malinche,” we may call her, translated between the two men, between Nahuatl and Spanish. They entered the city, and that’s when everything started to fall apart. There’s not much else for me to say about that that hasn’t already been written, that doesn’t live outside of the DOE’s curriculum, that doesn’t make it into high school History. They tried to take gold. Everything.

Dominaba en todos el terror, como si todo el mundo estuviera descorazonado. Y cuando anocheía, era grande el espanto, el pavor se tendía sobre todos, el miedo dominaba a todos, se les iba el sueño, por el temor.²⁰

In front of treasures, los conquistadores “estaban dominados por la avidez.... Todo lo cogieron, de todo se adueñaron, todo lo arrebataron como suyo, todo se apropiaron como si fuera su suerte.”²¹ Then the Spaniards asked the Aztecs to join them, always through Malintzin, Malintzin, and the Aztecs didn’t, out of fear; it was dark on the other side of burning Tenochtitlán, on the Spanish side; it, like Cortés’ prose, like the Spaniards, was cold. Like an alleyway.

*Ya nadie se atrevía a venir por allí: como si estuviera allí una fiera, como si fuera el peso de la noche.*²²

Un mundo repentinamente descorazonado... Amidst cannons everyone ran. “Unos cuantos *icnocuicatl*, cantares tristes, verdaderas elegías” transcribed by the cuicapicque, or unos “poetas nahuas postcortesianos,”²³ document the Aztecs’ terror during the conquest of Tenochtitlán by Hernán Cortés and his men. It also documented their heartbreak, at this chasm

²⁰ Miguel León-Portilla, *Visión de los vencidos: crónicas indígenas* (Historia 16, 1985), 100.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 165.

opening up beneath them, the sudden crossroads between life as they knew it and life as it would be from now on, *after* Cortés, “postcortesiano.” What would become, in this colonial world, marginal Indigenous life and blood, Black life and blood, Brown life and blood in South America: a stage set for future bloody escapades. Many ancestors blown out of the historical archives, out of the halls of memory. A lot of fucking ghosts. One *icnocuicatl*, “Los últimos días del sitio de Tenochtitlán”:

*Y todo esto pasó con nosotros.
Nosotros lo vimos,
nosotros lo admiramos.
Con esta lamentosa y triste suerte
nos vimos angustiados....*²⁴

I couldn't believe it. I needed some fresh air, but X wouldn't let me go outside. It was too dark outside.

Fuck. ...I didn't know what to make of this history.

What then? What happened after? I sat in a great silence. Where did they go after? There was, undoubtedly, an after. Imagining myself, trying to immediately conceptualize regardless of the distance between past and present and me and a Mexica-Aztec of the 16th century, I wondered.

And us? Where did we go after?

*“¿Adónde vamos?, ¡oh amigos!”*²⁵

I began to weep: he searched their pockets, man, he took *everything*, and it felt, from the other side of the page, like he didn't believe me, *either*, regardless of the distance, didn't like my

²⁴ Ibid., 166.

²⁵ Ibid.

answers or my silence (what say did I even have here, in this history?), and he tore me apart. He pulled my hair (I imagined him pulling my hair), jumped us (I imagined, *us*), fucked us (*us*, I dreaded), popped them for a fucking bag.

Us?

He broke Aztec hearts. Pizarro would break my little Incan heart not long afterward.

...Incan?

Incan for sure?

Reading history, really real history, never having been exposed to it before in the Bronx. Look down, the hands holding the pages, and know that you are Brown, Latin@. I started to try to make some connections, some bridges of then and now, there and here, that felt already there. Who tells you about *you*? Who tells your parents, if you have them, who *they* are? I was given history, a very small part of it, and I had questions. The impulse to answer them. Read the “past” and imagine yourself in it. As Saidiya Hartman writes in *Lose Your Mother*, “I felt both the pull and the impossibility of regaining the country lost.”²⁶ I did, honest. The city is hard; try to find fuel against it, elsewhere and immediately. I didn’t like this feeling and I wanted out. But I am being generous saying “our,” “we.” “The” country of pastness, a mythical past of no return but longing; love the object enough to create it entirely, unable to let it go. And yet, I felt the pull of these histories. And, yet, I am also located profoundly outside of them.

²⁶ Saidiya Hartman, “Come, Go Back, Child,” in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 99.

I don't know what I am.

Pero coño... *conchale*... “¿fue verdad?”²⁷ I began to weep. Feeling profoundly a part of the story. Not knowing just how much.

Engulfed in the reading act and feeling, I try to pull myself together; boca arriba, I try to pull myself out of the hole, out of this impossible encounter with the crossroads, but a Spaniard appears to pull me back down by the hair. I imagine him calling me names: “*¡maldito Albino! Barzino! Cambujo! Calpamulato! Mestizo! Coyote! Cuarterón! Chamizo! Chino! Cholo!*” I realize he's screaming not just at me, but into the rift, at some others I don't see... and I take it personally. “*¡Ahí te estás!*” “*¡Tente en el aire!*”²⁸ I struggle against him and history's great sadness, just one of its many, weeping, losing hairs; canas. “*¡No te entiendo!*”²⁹ he yells, and I think back: *no, you don't... neither do I.*

“*¡Maldito Lobo!*” Un animal. Is that what I am to you?

I hear crying coming from outside. The imaginary struggle stops. I come back to my body like nothing happened. Nothing happened. I look outside, onto ___ Avenue, derelict Bronx night, and I think I see a black man, or a brown man, some figure engulfed by shadow sitting alone on the pavement in front of the closed pizzeria, by a fire hydrant, at the intersection of my street. I see him curled up, hugging his knees, and weeping.

Then I blink. Wiping my own eyes. And he disappears.

Fucking psychopomps. *Texts that bring me to the ghosts, and the ghosts to me.*

²⁷ León-Portilla, 166.

²⁸ Ben Vinson III, *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 46.

²⁹ Ibid.

I didn't know what to make of this history. I really don't know. I make sense of it however I do. Colón and Cortés and Pizarro (to name just a few conquistadores) continued their journeys and destruction, converting the Tainos, Aztecs, and Incans and ___ and ___ and ___, the ones we choose to forget about, and others I don't yet know, to loyal Christians, enslaving them, rounding them up like *animals*. They would go on conquering, each time announcing themselves with what they called el Requerimiento, screaming out a long announcement from their approaching ships:

...y los han obedecido y servido y sirven como súbditos lo deben hacer, y con buena voluntad **Y SIN NINGUNA RESISTENCIA** y luego sin dilación... Si así lo hicieseis, haréis bien, y aquello que sois tenidos y obligados, y Sus Altezas y nos en su nombre, **OS RECIBIREMOS CON TODO AMOR Y CARIDAD** (*they scream from their boats*) y os dejaremos vuestras mujeres e hijos y haciendas libres y sin servidumbre... Y si así **NO** lo hicieseis o en ello maliciosamente pusieseis dilación, os certifico que con la ayuda de Dios **NOSOTROS ENTRAREMOS PODEROSAMENTE CONTRA VOSOTROS, Y OS HAREMOS GUERRA POR TODAS LAS PARTES Y MANERAS QUE PUDIÉRAMOS, Y OS SUJETAREMOS AL YUGO Y OBEDIENCIA DE LA IGLESIA Y DE SUS MAJESTADES, Y TOMAREMOS VUESTRAS PERSONAS Y DE VUESTRAS MUJERES E HIJOS Y LOS HAREMOS ESCLAVOS, Y COMO TALES LOS VENDREMOS Y DISPONDREMOS DE ELLOS COMO SUS MAJESTADES MANDAREN, Y OS TOMAREMOS VUESTROS BIENES, Y OS HAREMOS TODOS LOS MALES Y DAÑOS QUE PUDIÉRAMOS, COMO A VASALLOS QUE NO OBEDECEN NI QUIEREN RECIBIR A SU SEÑOR Y LE RESISTEN Y CONTRADICEN;** y protestamos que las muertes y daños que de ello se siguiesen sea a **VUESTRA CULPA** y no de Sus Majestades, ni nuestra, ni de ellos caballeros que con nosotros vienen.³⁰

Ugh. They said so much. And I'm still not over them. A casta system was born shortly after and they took on new names like "Albino," "Barzino," "Cambujo," endless, contradictory names that made no sense, not even to them. But the Spaniards needed to be anything other than

³⁰ Juan López de Palacios Rubios, "Requerimiento," *Ciudad Seva - Luis López Nieves* (blog), 1510, <https://ciudadseva.com/texto/requerimiento/>.

these ancestors, higher than them. Rounded up like animals, these ancestors served these Spaniards (not without resistance), who commanded them with all their blah blah blah, wanting to be big white men so bad...

I was heartbroken. I had no idea how to work this out, the Spaniard in me, the whiteness in me, the colonizer raping his way, it seemed, into my DNA. La idioma ésta que también hablo. I hear a patrol car zoom by. I think of the gaps between then and now, here, sitting, writing atop my fold-out table, the corner of my living room.

I think of the “past.”

It's so different, now, I think. Looking out the window, into the Bronx.

I mull over that sentence.

Where does one fit into history, all the documented and forgotten? All these narratives, these stories... I'm in them, but I don't know where. I read the conquests with a spatial and temporal distance of the future, reading the apparently past and ancient, completely ignorant of the continuities, that there are Mexica-Aztecs in México today, that strange things are always happening... I arrive at language and history, but it doesn't meet me where I'm at. I don't immediately feel in them. If I do, I don't know if I should. I insert myself, wanting to know. Looking at my Brown skin. The damn mirror! But not all ghosts are mine. I'm grasping. One imagines ancestors, explanations to rising blood pressures in the Bronx, debility, death, trajectories bringing us and our families to these points, these days, not knowing that nothing is quite a satisfactory explanation of how we got here all worn and trying. I try to see myself in the fall of Tenochtitlán. Trying, for answers. But let the poet Ariana Brown remind us that:

*The Aztec Empire controlled central Mexico, though destroyed and enslaved people as far as the Pacific Coast. Europeans did not introduce empire to the New World – they only created empires that lasted.*³¹

X tells me pridefully about the Incan *chasqui*, a messenger, perhaps not knowing if we're Incan at all. Perhaps looking for some kind of golden mythical past (as if there also aren't Incans still) that none of us were alive for when we, or our past selves, or some parent of a blood vessel, a molecule living in such fucking cities. X's face and its contours are brown, and still a deeper brown is within her wrinkles as I watch her on the phone with her widowed mother, my Mamita, Theodora, in Perú. The famous Lima neblina through the phone. Something about the market today. Something about being alone. Mamita says something in Quechua, her lexicon shrinks with time. My mother and grandmother carry more than I do.

And yet, perhaps, I carry everything they do, too. Everything none of us can name.

Nothing that answers our unnecessary pains, what we did to live in the beautiful Bronx.

How long has it been since X and Theodora sank, together, into that Lima fog? How long? Laughing, on the roof, and seeing the desert. How long since all there was to eat for my mother was platanos con pan?

I'm torn between different worlds, and between competing spatial and temporal demands.

And I'm lying to you, and I'm lying to me. What *I* don't know is where I fit in the archive. What *you* don't know, what I hate to admit, is that I'm not actually all *here* right now, on 2_3rd, on the Grand Concourse, that I'm also two hours north, at a college, in a town, feeling like a gringo. The fuck are these words? Words happen in conflicting places. I study my books, and I read them with care, voraciously, fastidiously, genuinely, so I say, and I try to make sense

³¹ Ariana Brown, *We Are Owed*. (GRVLND, 2021), 32.

of things... But my little anthropology, this thinking, perhaps, doesn't seem to fit with my little poetry, this living. My perennial Brownness does not seem to reconcile with my, this formal education up North's oddity, its remove, its perennial whiteness.

For how long?

I'm pretty desperately looking for the pieces between you and me,

I'm pretty desperately looking for the pieces between you and me.

I'm pretty desperately looking for the words to honor both you and me.

I'm pretty desperately looking for alternatives for you and me.

What it is is that you and I are different, and you and I are both Latino but you and I are also Brown, and also Black, and not Black, and not Brown or Black but not quite white either, and we are many things, and we are different, but we are connected. We are different, very different, and our stories differ. We can, also, I'm hoping, find the spaces between us within which we may declare a Bronx solidarity, bear witness to it, and deny "the notion, the false assumption that we are not connected."³² Let words explain my longing.

...Identities in difference. How? José Esteban Muñoz, in his posthumously published *The Sense of Brown*, wondered about a Brown commons, a space within which we might (always-already) meet each other in an individual and yet collective "Brownness."

*Brownness as a grounded experience, for a brown commons, [often] born out of what, following John Dewey, we could call a shared sense of harm. But it is not just harm, it is also the shared flourishing that transpires and unfolds despite and in the face of systematic harm.*³³

³² bell hooks and Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism* (South End Press, 2006), 3.

³³ José Esteban Muñoz, "Brown Worldings," in *The Sense of Brown* (Duke University Press, 2020), 121.

Notwithstanding our differences, our histories, our contexts. Watch, as the Bronx walks past each other. “Brownness is a being with, being alongside.”³⁴ *I miss you*. Muñoz’s “Brownness” attempts not to be akin to a “fixed identity marker” like skin tone, though no doubt speaking to *colored* bodies, bodies “colored,” but... tries to reach out its hand... to the “coexistent, affiliates, and intermeshes with blackness, Asianness, indigenouness, and other terms that manifest descriptive force to render the particularities of various modes of striving in the world.”³⁵

Reaching out... before the whole thing goes up in flames, goes up in flames, again... neglected apartment buildings in the winter, going up in flames, again...^{36 37}

And I don’t know how connected we are, really, and we might not even *like* each other.

Saidiya Hartman writes that “Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past.

Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on. The past depends less on ‘what happened then’ than on the desires and discontents of the present.”³⁸ The impulse is to look for oneself, for ourselves, the root of some Brown and Black Bronx collectivity against the present in the distant past, in the stories of diaspora, though the effort for that root is crushingly difficult, futile. The past is hard. Naturally, I look to the present and the future. But *you’re* in my present, as I walk the blocks; no doubt you are in my future wanderings here, too, in the touching places we call “home.” A “Brown Commons.” Whatever we might want to call it, maybe, what isn’t utopian or

³⁴ Ibid., “The Brown Commons,” 2.

³⁵ Ibid., xxxi.

³⁶ Azi Paybarah and Jeffery C. Mays, “Bronx Fire: Apartment Building Fire in Bronx Is New York City’s Deadliest Blaze in Decades,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 2022, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/09/nyregion/bronx-fire>.

³⁷ Anjali Singhvi et al., “The Chain of Failures That Left 17 Dead in a Bronx Apartment Fire,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2022, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/07/08/nyregion/bronx-fire-nyc.html>.

³⁸ Hartman, 100.

yet *another* future dream but just reality. Our intersecting stories. The constellation it makes.
And I look for it in the Bronx.

And I don't know how connected I am to my *own* self (*who am I?*) up here with the whites who aren't all bad but it's *white*, feels like it, and *fuck* I miss the homies, and I miss my barrio, and I miss a Peruvian history which I was never actually alive for, never alive to, and clueless. Search for the past, all of them. See it in your family. La cosa ahora esta jodida con Dina Boluarte y los tombos y lo demás. I feel empty not knowing.

And I'm desperate for that history. Who I am in it.

Trying to be here, right now.

Can one find connection, through the past and its reading, in the now, and in the future?

After many years of holding a book to impress, the book breaks my heart, and the books give me little bits of what I need to know. James Baldwin writes about "hidden laws, "unspoken but profound assumptions," and though he does not write for me or my specific American experience I find his words profoundly resonant; I find the echo of his eyes, of what *he* might have seen *here*, and only a few blocks over.

I am told I always liked books. And I always liked books, yes, but that's also not true...

They crack me open. Expose my insides. The body out of time; the body is a vessel.

I arrive at literature. At history, bodies, words. At ideas in my head. Ways of expression.

Futility, and fight.

These pestering annals of language.

Heartbroken about a break-up, and grieving... Over three years later, I realize that my hopes and heartbreak concerned other important matters.

...you can't live in your country
the country you have lived in your entire life
but since you speak our language so well
since you are a proud embodiment of our culture
we will punish you and pay you at the same time
you can do our dirty work in the prisons we built for you
we can beat you as we pay you and love you
we can hate you as we pay you and love you and deport you³⁹

(What a "good" kid)

(What a "good" kid)

How to say it all? *My head hurts.*

I can feel, though,

vibrations of an oratory I've never
been able to replicate.
I still find myself waiting to
feel how much can make me
scream, can make me cry

a long overdue press of the guts,
smeared neatly, for once and
stepped on twice as quickly,

and have you ever seen (*read?*) that? Because
it sure does feel like a lot.

(*undated, 2019*)

That's not poetry. It's a plea. And how prophetic.

How to write it all? Where to start?

³⁹ Daniel Borzutzky, *Memories of My Overdevelopment* (Kenning Editions, 2015), <https://www.kenningeditions.com/shop/memories-of-my-overdevelopment-ordinance-1/>, 14.

I sense continuities across time and space. Generational inheritances. I look around and feel breaks, glitches, in the innumerable corners of the Boogie Down. Like a man, a woman, out of time and weeping on my corner. And I'm in New York, the Bronx, the Boogie Down, and also in upstate New York, not Tenochtitlán nor Chile nor Perú; in 2023, not 1492 or 1519 or 1521, not even 1960 or 1962, when my parents were born; not 1998, when my brother was born; not even my poem's melancholy 2019. And yet, there's the feeling that our histories, our racial, gendered, sexual, social, fiscal histories – which every textbook from the DOE tells me is “past,” and which differ – bleed into the barrio, today. And that feeling is far-reaching.

nevertheless, (*for example,*) a variety of news reports in 2015 make it clear that since the 1970s and 1980s (during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship) the Chicago police have been brutally and systematically torturing our citizens in ways that for me evoke experiences in Chile on February 24, 2015 Spencer Ackerman of *The Guardian* published an investigative article entitled:

“The Disappeared: Chicago police detain Americans at abuse-laden ‘black-site’”⁴⁰

A “black-site” under wraps...

- Beatings by police, resulting in head wounds
- Shackling for prolonged periods
- Denying attorneys access to the “secure” facility
- Holding people without legal counsel for between 12 and 24 hours, including people as young as 15⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

⁴¹ Ibid.

...and another patrol car shoots by... one more on loudspeaker tells the neighbors across the street to turn off the music, “**GO HOME**”... a slip under the door: “RENT OVERDUE PAY AT ONCE”... a fight breaks out outside... check the locks... gut reactions... a bang rings through the street... a firework?... and a woman on the news is being interviewed on News 12, on NY1, the same news cycled every 30 minutes... a murder in the Bronx, two murders in Brooklyn, another murder in Queens, a young woman dead outside last week with no trace of coverage, another women just walking home at 10pm, the same Brown as the women in my life... all this happening at once... intersecting, to the point of silence.

“*Animales*,” she calls them, he calls them, live on air, we, me. “*Animals*.”

Cierra las cortinas. No salgas. Tense up. The city suggests that we cannot trust each other.

I sense that something is very wrong. That there are continuities across time and space.

Wait...

...What did you just call me?

...Where (else) are the “black-sites” now?

IV.

And I read, and I started to walk around, too.

Walking – not running, not speed-walking. The Bronx gets seen at a slower pace. My eyes stop simply glazing over. The Bronx: there are strange things going on here... a piece of trash, a pack of bud, with an Asian caricature, flotsam on a stream... advertisements, for schools, for work, for things outside of the Bronx, pointing more or less in the same upward direction... children wearing the same clothes, and stressed, and not *really* happy, school wasn't *really* "okay"... opps, or rather that they need to exist... daycare signs, the same brands of food... buildings, signs strategically placed... the letterings of old spots still on storefronts and buildings, the same oxidized ghosts of their names that we remember, in spite of everything.

And because this is *our* Bronx we tell stories about it and us in it, however long they are, stories about our own individual Bronxes. And yet I might've seen you at ____, and we might have breathed the same air, and you *definitely* know my tía, and we tell stories of when we linked up at ____ not because we were *trying* to be "bad" or "malcriado" but because we just wanted to *chill*, and we tell about how we used to link, or how we used to visit __ for years, regardless – and in spite – of blocks and memories changing, in spite of ____ closing down, and before... he... well... you know.... In spite of our Bronx, and our memories of it, being changed; being canceled by other forces.

I see my old spots, some decrepit, some replaced altogether, at a slower pace. Dreaming of simpler times.... But has the Bronx ever been so "simple"?

At a slower pace, the Bronx might come into view. At a slower pace, if we can muster it, against all that says to keep going – *pero mijo, así es la vida, no jodas, cállate, hay que trabajar* –, we might see things we hadn't before... we might notice some things, with a different, helpful eye. An eye that needs to look around. I think we might get something of a larger picture of where the home that is our Bronx enters our hearts, where our memories of and in it live: the subtle space within which they are born and created and fed. Whether this space, this “sphere,” and the Bronx inside of it, are totally as ours as we might have imagined them to be.

The Boogie Down was always just a “fact.” I walk(ed) the Bronx. “It is what it is.” And I took, *take*, pride in it.

But it has never been so simple.

I want to point things out, and see if maybe you see them the way I sometimes do.

When I'm slow.

Zora Neale Hurston wanted to return home. In *Mules and Men*, her early-20th century study of Negro folklore, she famously opens with the acknowledgment of the place, the position, where she is coming from and with *what*, prior to returning to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida:

It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have *the spy-glass of Anthropology* to look through at that.⁴²

That spy-glass. Hurston returned to Eatonville, Florida because the town was “full of material,”⁴³ content that could be gotten for her research. What came out of her listening and seeing, and writing, was beautiful. The “spy-glass of Anthropology” was a lens, a pair of glasses

⁴² Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (HarperPerennial, 1990), 1. Italics mine.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.

even, through which Hurston saw her worlds, hers and those she knew and didn't know in Florida. *Mules and Men* deployed this spy-glass gained from books and an education elsewhere, at college, at Columbia University (once they accepted women), in order to see the world in ways she had not otherwise seen. Her worlds in Florida came into view, "like somebody else" seeing them. Hurston returned to Eatonville and saw her neighbors, and listened to their stories, *their* stories, which in a way were also partly her's. In a way, putting the spy-glass up to her face, perhaps not noticing when exactly or how often she was doing it, seeing simply through a pair of glasses, Hurston saw Eatonville differently than she had before as a girl, and saw deeper into it and its people's stories. Simultaneously, holding up the spy-glass of Anthropology, she was both of Florida and "somebody else." A stranger, outside of it entirely.

And yet, could she ever *not* be of Eatonville? Hurston wanted to look at Eatonville some other way(s), through someone *else's* eyes, some man named "Anthropology." Distant eyes, historical, white eyes that travel to the so-called "Third World" and look, *exoticize*, then scribble down some observations, create meaning. Come back to Europe, or the States. Write a great paper that your "subjects" never see, the ones you went to admire (needing to *know* about them, as if one could know everything about anything), about how great and interesting they are, telling your colleagues how great and interesting "these ___ people" are, maybe even what "we" ought to learn from them ourselves... and get back in your cars to sit in the armchair at home. "Anthropology" was a man and, for a long time, he looked only in certain, outdated ways. Like the Bronx, like our memories in and of it, "Anthropology" changes. Somewhere along the way, it begins to mean many things and take many different, contradictory forms of seeing. This change is messy, and imprecise, and subtle, but also necessary.

Hurston's seeing in Eatonville was not, however, arguably, the same exoticizing gaze of Anthropologists past and then-present. She went home. And her writing, in the best way she could, attempted to honor those she called her neighbors. Still, Hurston utilized the spy-glass, this antique little glass of European men; still, Hurston looked, specifically for "material," writing up her findings both with her heart within the folklore she would listen to and as someone else entirely. Her work was delivered to her professor, Franz Boas. *Mules and Men* was, as much as it was for her and her own, per many white reviewers at the time "a straightforward, non-threatening depiction of the humorous and exotic side of Black culture in the rural South".⁴⁴ The book's resurgence into the Anthropological canon in recent decades highlights its beauty – this, and the force of its writing and folktales, should not be missed. Still, through whose eyes might Hurston have been hoping to see, and for whose was it, in the end, for?

I recover my own spy-glass from a similar trajectory, in *my* books and *my* college education. I took it home without really knowing. And it was different, much different from 1935, and yet inside the lenses seemed to be particles of dust, crystallized, like amber. One looks through a pair of glasses – an aid – and selects and sees a clear image from a distance or up close, and it comes into focus, but what breathes in the peripheries of one's vision are completely obliterated.

Hurston looked for "material," with deliverance to someone in mind. Her return home was part of a larger research project that I'm not totally sure lived inside Eatonville after its completion (if it can be called "complete" at all) but instead might have taken Eatonville, in

⁴⁴ Susan Meisenhelder, "Conflict and Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*," *The Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 433 (1996): 267. <https://doi.org/10.2307/541531>, 267.

pieces and fragments, out of itself, and given it to the university. She returned home, and she brought it out of itself, for better or for worse.

For me, like Hurston, I didn't want to come back to the Bronx so that everyone could admire me, because I had been up North to college and had come back with almost a diploma and an Infiniti my uncle sold us for cheap. I knew that none of those really mattered, in the end. I certainly didn't want to come back, to remember the Bronx I knew, in order to "see" it in any particular ways and write about it for anyone else; I don't plan on coming back to visit home in order to "see" and write.

But it happens.

Eventually, slowly, I experienced a different kind of seeing upon reading my books, after some Anthropology, Anthropology having changed over centuries and decades and turned inward. Years of reckoning with the men inside the glass. Ways of seeing began to creep up on me, for better (I believe) and for worse (also). The Bronx was still the Bronx. It was still everything it had been for me. And it was also completely foreign, under a certain light.

Upon further inspection, of one thing at a time, this kind of seeing began to feel necessary. Peripheries were obscured. I could only look at one thing at a time. The city is overwhelming. One book later, I was seeing contours, colors I hadn't before. Another reminded me that there were peripheries at all. Another had sharpened the focus. Another had turned the spy-glass on me. Another honed my ear, and I listened into conversations, commotion, broadcasts. Eventually, the spy-glass becomes akin to a pair of glasses, and one may never look at the world the same again. A close look and old spots, and memories, and feelings change

entirely, are given context, peeled back, and upon further inspection I locate them roughly within the stinking hallways of history. And home is no longer the same. And this seeing feels like change itself; somehow, it is necessary, even sobering. Like a necessary change, which changes “Anthropology” with it. Which changes the way I remember the Bronx.

With our constellation of intersecting identities, face the Bronx. Face change. And “summon the courage,” as Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw urges us, “to challenge groups that are after all, in one sense, ‘home’ to us, in the name of the parts of us that are not made at home.”⁴⁵

“This takes a great deal of energy, and arouses intense anxiety.”⁴⁶

I mourn the Bronx as simply “home.” As idea. As myth. Looking for it, actually.

As I try to kill it off.

As I try to rescue it.

There are ways to see and to remember the Bronx, with brand new eyes.

The Bronx comes into view at a slower pace. The Bronx – Norwood and Fordham, and Harlem and Kingsbridge and Soundview, and Inwood, and Marble Hill – starts to get seen. The spy-glass doesn’t play around.

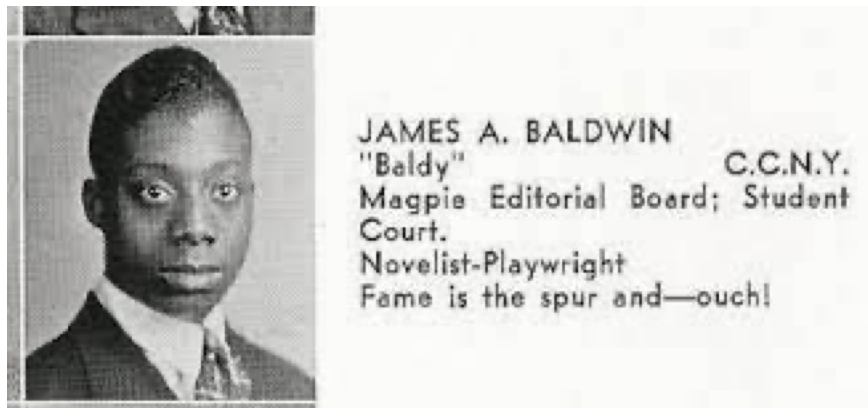
See the Bronx through new Bronx eyes. Never stop being from the Bronx, *no, never stop that*. But never stop wondering what exactly we say when we say its name and hold it close. Never stop looking around.

⁴⁵ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>, 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

And so I walked around, too, caminando con la mente, *universitado*,⁴⁷ and I conjured up voices from books. I read, and I saw what I read in what I lived. In turn, words escape their dormancy. Alguien aparece en la esquina de Kumon y Kennedy High School, y las esquinas del Grand Concourse; alguien aparece en las puertas del tren 4, y en los barrios demás; brand new eyes are delivered to me by an older writer, now dead; “new” eyes that are actually not “new” at all... Suddenly, *everything* becomes “material,” delivering itself to *me*, because upon closer inspection of the Bronx that I remember, leave, and come back to, everything out and inside home needs explaining.

James Baldwin, though he lived most of his New York City life in Harlem, went to a white DeWitt Clinton High School a few blocks away from me (and you?). He might have walked under the 4 train, if it was ever something else, or by National Bakery before the women working it migrated from some places in Central or South America, or by Montefiore, or by the Burger King which was once a McDonald’s, or by Steuben Avenue, my P.S. 280. One can never know.



48

⁴⁷ Word adapted from an untitled Mayra Santos-Febres poem. Mayra Santos-Febres, *Poesía casi completa* (lineaimaginaria Ediciones), accessed April 29, 2023, <https://edicionesdelalineaimaginaria.com/product/poesia-casi-completa-mayra-santos-febres/>, 49.

⁴⁸ Nicholas Boggs, “‘Read Everything You Can Get Your Hands On’: James Baldwin at The New York Public Library,” The New York Public Library, accessed March 27, 2023,

In “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American,” Baldwin, like me, also needed distance. The spy-glass would not give itself to him so long as he remained in the United States. It was difficult to see the country, New York, while caught up in it. In 1948, he sought refuge in Paris, as a 24-year-old, from the claustrophobia of Blackness, of being Black in the U.S. and of “becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them.”⁴⁹ Neither Harlem nor the Bronx would grant him this connection, nor this escape. He is awfully serious in his graduating portrait. It was in Paris that James Baldwin could look at the United States with a critical, even sober eye. Not completely swallowed in its movements. It was also in Paris that he could miss, *remember*, Harlem, and long to come back “home.” He would, in 1957, come back home. The Civil Rights Movement was already screaming.

Perhaps he never wrote for me, as he wrote about Blackness, being Black in the United States, something and someone I am not. Yet his writing, his observing, manages to hit close to home. Quite literally. The spy-glass can be “discovered” and embraced by the Bronxite, in all of its limitations, in the peripheries it might fail to see, and look at only so many things. But my regular eyes do that failing already. In that looking, still, Baldwin read his country like a text, and in its words, its stories, its images turning over each other, its walls painted over and again, he exposed its many contradictions. Looking for others, too, for connections. People.

I look and now I can’t see without my glasses.

Take a deep breath, my love. Para. *Respira*. Profundamente.

<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2022/08/02/read-everything-you-can-get-your-hands-james-baldwin>. James Baldwin’s DeWitt Clinton High School yearbook photo. Class of 1941.

⁴⁹ Baldwin, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American,” 3-4.

The Bronx has never been a “fact.” It cannot be exempt from a similar reading. Peter L’Official, alive, writes (reads) with a similar, disconcerted eye of his South Bronx, specifically, about how certain narratives *become* fact, despite the things that immortalize such narratives and images, along with the borough’s people, never actually happening. His example is a burning Bronx of 1977.

“There it is, ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning.” You, like me, can watch the entirety of this [second] game – indeed, the entirety of the 1977 World Series [between the Yankees and the Dodgers] – and never hear announcer Howard Cosell say the words that he is so renowned for saying. No matter how irresistible it sounds to our ears today, no matter how many times the broadcast cuts away from the game to check the progress of the fire [of an abandoned school building nearby], no matter how perfectly it seemed to capture the historical and situational moment, *it didn’t happen*. Neither Cosell nor play-by-play announcer Keith Jackson spoke the words that came to define an era in urban history...⁵⁰

Read the Bronx like a text, like a book. Can we ask the Bronx questions? See it with our *own* eyes? See it differently, with a certain skepticism?

Walk the Bronx and see things, small things that warrant explaining. Estoy quejando, sí, pero con cierta razón. The spy-glass wasn’t mine to begin with, but I try to turn the gaze around. I interrogated it, burned it, and lamented it for not being mine. I try. And I realized it might be a useful tool, trying to understand the things I think are made at “home,” as Crenshaw urges. Looking. Interpreting. “I became attracted to the Bronx that I found in the archives, entranced by voices” (*there they are again*) “that I had not heard before, beguiled by views of a borough that I realized I only thought I knew.”⁵¹ L’Official’s Bronx, a symbolic South Bronx of ruin, hung over

⁵⁰ Peter L’Official, *Urban Legends: The South Bronx in Representation and Ruin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 6. Italics mine.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

him, “loomed large”: “Saying one was from the Bronx meant certain things; one received certain looks, in response, depending on the respondent.” God forbid you didn’t hold any books in your hands, or deviate from your roles, refusing. “I was curious to see how far the shadow of that symbol stretched.”⁵² He says it with love, still. I once heard Pete say that he couldn’t write without the sounds of the Major Deegan outside of his window.

How far *has* it stretched? The looks L’Official received linger, though I see the symbols as somewhat different. Or maybe there are just more of them.

A young person in the Bronx becomes a symbol of possibility, prospect. Look towards the future, the kids that are supposed to make it up, and you might forget to remember – uncover, resuscitate – the past.

There’s “good” and “bad,” you know.

Have you ever felt “bad”?

Have you ever *wanted* to be “good”?

Have you felt it, the pressure on your shoulders, and have you ever wondered what it is?

And try to run through the Bronx laughing and causing a ruckus until you find it overwhelming, exhausting, too much. *Phew... qué cansancio*. Run around with your friends, tired of living through historical events (LOL); teenagers of the Bronx, in the ‘80s, escaping underground. Walking today over avenues and streets and playing, in that same spirit (in ways, nothing has changed), as trains tremble above and underneath you. Ride: past walls painted over and again, the ghosts of that decades’ tags painted over and silenced. Ed Koch, scared of them. The mayor recruiting the whole world against us.⁵³ The South Bronx crumbling... not “burning”

⁵² Ibid., 10.

⁵³ Ed Koch’s campaign against graffiti in NYC recruited celebrities, even the ones we admired, to fight against us and also call us criminal.

but *burnt*, by the realtors who had the power to decide its reputation; the Bronx burned and not even President Jimmy Carter visiting in 1977 could make things better for the many Bronxites living in it.⁵⁴ Ed Koch chasing down teenagers that just wanted to create, nothing less, nothing more, and yet also rid their subtle antagonisms of authority and the city from its subway cars by washing them clean (spending a lot of money to do so), or abandoning them in large lots altogether. And the ghosts of

TAKI 183

JULIUS 204

PAPO 184

JUNIOR 161

CAY 161

STITCH

BARBARA62

EVA62,⁵⁵

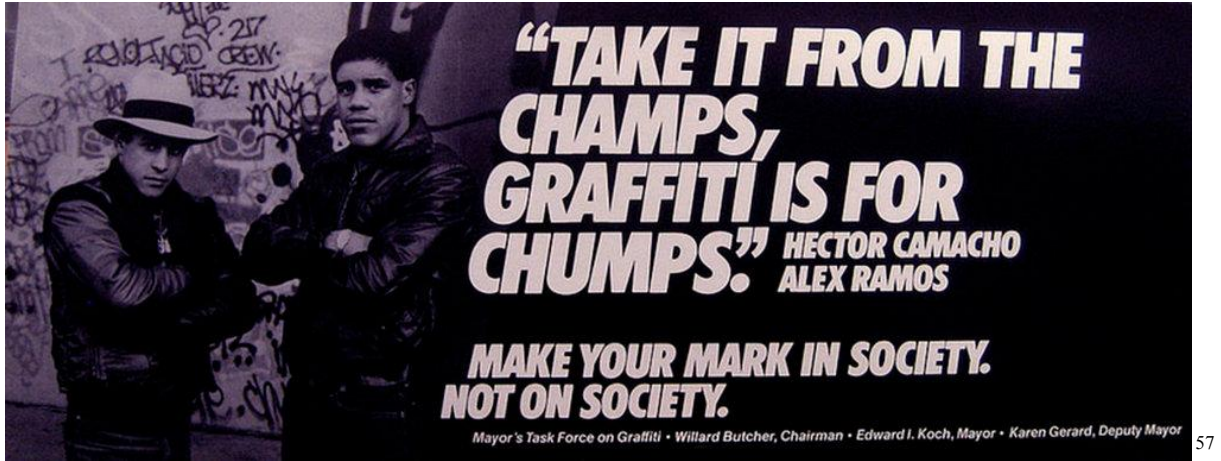
the tags of only a few Bronxites, are villainized, and are conjured up again whenever another Bronxite gets tired... wants to throw up something they *feel*, something inevitably “criminal.” Watch the city of New York, *hasta tu familia, los vecinos*, even the celebrities you love, do everything they can to arrest you.⁵⁶

<https://slate.com/culture/2013/02/ed-kochs-legacy-in-hip-hop-how-the-new-york-city-mayor-will-be-remembered-in-rhyme.html>

⁵⁴ L’Official, 4-6.

⁵⁵ *Style Wars, 1983 (Classic Hip Hop Documentary)* | *Black/Current*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgUwNkr-B3k>.

⁵⁶ “CELEBRITIES JOIN MAYOR IN NEW BATTLE AGAINST GRAFFITI WRITERS,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 1982.



Eric Adams painting over the 191st Street Tunnel, sterilizing it.⁵⁸ Trying to be made bare, pure. Trying to be erased of the voices that ring and feel before, always, the same voices one grows up in the Bronx, in the long 21st-century, *fearing* and being told to stay vigilant in the face of. What's a stranger if not dangerous? A narrative is created. Symbols, and cultural myths. In reality, things get easily said. Things get covered, torn down, obliterated. "GRAHAM AV AVE. OF PUERTO RICO" in Brooklyn, taken down, replaced.⁵⁹ Things that need breaking, staying.

The Bronx, like every other place in the city, every other corner of the United States, has a ghost problem.

It feels fitting, haunting, then, that the acknowledgment of ambiguous "bad" afoot on the streets in the Bronx that occupies our collective cultural attention, located in criminal bodies that

⁵⁷ "Take It from the Champs, Graffiti Is for Chumps," New York Transit Museum, 1983, <https://nytransitmuseum.catalogaccess.com/archives/149392>.

⁵⁸ "Surprise Graffiti Cleanup at 191st Street Subway Tunnel Causing Controversy," ABC7 New York, January 23, 2023, <https://abc7ny.com/nyc-191st-street-graffiti-subway-tunnel-cleanup/12728829/>.

⁵⁹ NYC DOT [@NYC_DOT], "An Overhead Sign on Graham Ave in Brooklyn Was Mistakenly Removed This Morning. The Proper Graham Ave-Ave of Puerto Rico Sign Has Been Reinstalled (Photo Taken This Afternoon) and Will Remain. Thank You to the Members of the Community Who Brought This to Our Attention." <https://t.co/FXc88LZ5AG>, Tweet, *Twitter*, January 13, 2023, https://twitter.com/NYC_DOT/status/1613969725947793413.

are often, always already black and brown (though even the white boys threw up tags), the “bad” that families fear the “good” young and almost “pure” colored Bronxite can suddenly *turn* to, to their family’s dismay, breaking their hearts, threatening their conception and hopes of the *future*, is imprinted on the very flag of the Bronx, which I forget we have. Since 1912:



60

Ne cede malis. Do not give way to evil.

Boys must become men. Forgetting that men were boys. Girls must become respectable women – aspire and *never* feel enough, feel always still behind. Young women can’t ____; do ____; *gord@*; _____.

The stuff of cultural panic.

⁶⁰ “Bronx, New York (U.S.),” accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/us-ny-bx.html>.

The Bronx has never been “fact.” The Bronx is also not just “symbol.” The Bronx is my “lived experience.”⁶¹ My dear Bronx. Sometimes the Bronx, what is in it, does not feel like it is for me. No matter how many times I was born here. *I love it*. No matter how much I just want it to feel mine.

What claustrophobia.

“The time has come, God knows, for us to examine ourselves, but we can only do this if we are willing to free ourselves of the myth of America and try to find out what is really happening,”⁶² Baldwin writes, and I take those words and they easily become my own. Growing up in the Bronx, one becomes familiar with narratives from an early age. They hang over Bronx youth like phantoms, and they point me in different directions. I hate to disobey them; I didn’t dare go against them. *I just want to please you. I just want you to love me*. That recalcitrance, refusal of authority, felt like a deadly one.

What can I say? A Brown boy with a book... a Brown boy all pampered up, and everyone *loved* it, and the tie was always too tight... after school, riding a Manhattan-bound 1 train to the Financial District, to 85 Broad Street (this I will not obscure), and I learned to shake hands, to “network,” and none of it ever stopped the shot of anxiety at the sight of a cop... or even the sight of another brown or black Bronxite... damn... and I looked around, above ground, after the transfer from the 1 to the 4, already told in one way or another down in Manhattan that *this* is what it meant to be “successful,” like my mom wanted me to be, like my family expected of me, and entering once again back in the Bronx with the thought now placed in my mind that *this* is not the goal nor the place to be, as if we could help it, as if in my heart of hearts I didn’t

⁶¹ L’Official, 248.

⁶² Baldwin, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American,” 11.

also know that the Bronx is the *fucking blueprint*, and that it was yet another “Third World” created by another empire (the U.S.? New York City? Both.) that lasted, that *lasts*. Business cards... intonations... ideas of the future... tore me away from you.

Because of this privilege of rare familiarity afforded the born-and-bred Bronxite, said Bronxite may also wonder what tales might be obscured by these grand narratives, what sources might still lay untapped, what other stories there are to tell.⁶³

Something stinks up in here.

Something’s stinking up under my beautiful Bronx. The air’s been bad... this we know... but for *how long*?

James Baldwin has a ghost on the corner, and as I whisper, read aloud, simply exist, he might be conjured up, again. He has never left. Neither has his eye. Nor that urgency, to find “what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them.” Do the ghosts of dead kin rest? And do the dead writers beside them? The urgency, also, of uncovering the myths that keep us from one another, and that keep the dead buried.

The cultural understandings that have us looking forward – look forward, of course, but behind too. The future *and* the past.

And I am but one more measly writer, another Bronxite.

I will be dead, someday. Ghosts there will always be.

But I try to pass along his memory and try to *see*.

“It will be no easy matter.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Adaptation of a brilliant sentence by L’Official, 11.

⁶⁴ Baldwin, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American,” 11.

Pero esta es la encargada de los espectros urbanos. De los muertos.

Los acabados, gastados, los fusilados.

Los presentes.

Try, to ask the Bronx questions.

JOURNAL ENTRY: 10/29/22 – The Bronx, NY

Driving us to Havana Café. Diego, talking about the moon in the backseat (I'm writing this at a table, already at the café, though. *I see my name!* Him watching me write). *What is the moon?*, I ask. *Outside, small. It's not a planet*, he says, my 8-year-old nephew, but tries to remember what else it could be called. I don't know either. *It's cold on the moon*, he says. *Colder than the Bronx?* Then he can't remember and says he's also learning about maps, and I say how classroom maps, maps of the world, are actually wrong and inaccurate, and they (him and my mom, in the backseat) talk about it while I drive, about hypothetical interactions between him and his teacher, with this new knowledge, this new meaning, him saying to her, next time, *teacher, miss teacher, but my uncle said this* and maybe they'd say *oh, Diego, that's very smart*, or tell him that that's wrong. Or doubt. *It's not, though*, I say (*What are you writing?* he asks, right now, a tiny personal pizza he won't finish in front of him. *About my day*, I answer, *about when we talked about the moon and maps.*). *Muestra*, I say, my eyes to the road, *que los EEUU es más grande que realmente es*. I know my mom is also listening. *If they say you're wrong* – I look at Diego in the rearview mirror – *you're not*. And then I look ahead, again, and spend the rest of the drive wondering who he will end up believing.

JOURNAL ENTRY: 11/1/22 – The Bronx, NY

They're here. From Perú. Family.

Visitando a casa, otra historia larga de inmigración. My second cousin, Miguel, who is my age, just up and left Lima one September day. He's not here. Instead, his parents, Patricia and Bernardo (my first cousins (somehow)) and his 13-year-old brother, David, are here. Coming to visit us, some company. Not knowing what to do. It's a brand new country, and they came to the Bronx.

According to them, Miguel disappeared one day from Villa María del Triunfo saying he was going somewhere else, and it was only ("*only*") a few months later, in December, that they heard that he had made it to the U.S.-Mexico border and was being held in a detention center. They couldn't sit still with this news. They followed his tracks, stepped in his shoes. Perhaps they never imagined ever making the journey themselves, or believed they simply couldn't. They trekked restlessly to the border, themselves. And they got there.

It was only when they got there, thank the Lord, *qué milagro*, that they learned he was in a California holding center. Somehow, they had all made it to the border alive. And, somehow, the three of them were allowed into the country, and it was on another of the migrant buses sent from Texas to New York that they arrived in Lower Manhattan, to the disgust of many in the city, to the disgust of Mayor Eric Adams, and brought into the Bronx by my uncle. They're in our living room, right now, on the couch. Already, they are talking about work. Patricia and X compare work between Perú and New York.

"Los precios suben y los sueldos se quedan iguales" my mom says to them. Not talking about either place in particular.

Two continents nod in agreement.

I'll write about these migrant stories sometime. About this rage.

Ibuprofen... Motrin... Advil... we give them these essentials.

And we head out, walking seeped in night across Mosholu Parkway toward my uncle's where they will all stay and for how long... and we crack jokes along the way – we're able to crack jokes – smiling. B, X, V, and I point in the directions of things. We give directions they cannot retain, the names of streets and stores. "*Aprenderán con tiempo,*" we say, as if we were experts, "*hay que aprender,*" and I try to remember, though I wasn't around, then, the figure of a slender B arriving in the U.S. at 18, in 1983. How he came right to the Bronx.

Their youngest son is supposed to be my nephew, they say. He's 13, but he's *much* taller than me. Kids seem taller nowadays. *No me llames tío, le digo, tan alto que eres. Háblame como tu primo.*

And then we sit in Tío Ernesto's living room with a bit of wear.

Not really saying anything.

And then the truth. What ends up simply being true.

"Entonces," I say, "llegaron al *Bronx*."

"Al *Bronx*," my dad echoes.

"Sí."

V.

Entonces, B llega a Nueva York en el año 1983 a los 18 años desde

la ciudad jardín

la ciudad de los reyes

la perla del Pacífico

desde Lima,

la terrible.

O sea, asumo que fuera, todavía, tan terrible en su juventud, para animarse B tanto que un día se fue de Villa María del Triunfo, at 18 years old, and arriving at New York City, in 1983.

There are many details in his story, as there are many details in every immigration story from Latin America to the United States, but the myth of the U.S. as *the* desired destination was the loudest detail, no doubt. It's often the most obvious, the most identifiable detail. It's the motive that is repeated over and over again, and it, almost invariably, ties itself to stories like B's as the principle factor for orienting one's look toward the North and away from home. It is certainly not the only factor.

However, B's departure from Perú for the Global North, for the fabled "promise" of the U.S. that permeates minds outside of it like his and his family's, echoes the gaze of countless immigrant narratives. Though contextually and circumstantially its own, with details we may only continue to learn about, if we so choose to, B's departure from Villa María del Triunfo, Perú, during the economic crisis under the de facto presidency of U.S.-backed Francisco Morales

Bermúdez,⁶⁵ and the beginnings of the Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru (MRTA) and the cult communism of Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), among other things... follows the brothers who departed before him as well as an impulse of what José Orozco calls a “collective imagination...that helped normalize the idea of leaving the country as a life strategy.”⁶⁶ This collective imagination that Orozco identifies, specifically of prospective migrants in Los Altos de Jalisco, México, had persisted “since the late nineteenth century”⁶⁷ and into the twentieth; the glimmer and wanderlust in Alteño eyes “when they talked about el Norte”⁶⁸ revealed a shared mythology that was as much about the past – how they may have arrived at their present social, economic, and political circumstances – as it was, also, about how the future could be different. For Orozco, the letters of one elderly Luz Moreno in Jalisco, to his beloved daughter Pancha Moreno in California, highlight the transnational and temporal shifts between conceptual and affective understandings of “family” and “home” caused by the departures of sons and daughters in search of “the American dream.” Ideas of “family” and “home” changed as a result of immigration to the U.S., and they also persisted. Though different, these immigrant stories of Los Altos, México highlighted by José Orozco inform B’s departure from Villa María del Triunfo as he and his Peruvian siblings, too, looked hacia el Norte, looking not quite at places but at *ideas*: of what they *hoped* and *expected* an arrival to the United States to be. Leaving was about the future. It had everything to do with the future, and the idea of it.

B left.

⁶⁵ Documents reveal that Bermúdez cooperated in the U.S.-backed Operation Condor, which involved numerous CIA-backed coup d’états and assassinations of left-wing leaders in Latin America.

“Perú: Socio de Condor,” accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.johndinges.com/condor/documents/Peru%20and%20Condor.htm>.

⁶⁶ José Orozco, *Receive Our Memories: The Letters of Luz Moreno, 1950-1952* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 38.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

And “it was not only that people were leaving; it was that people were changing,” changing with the immutable force of futurity’s, “America’s”, myth, “and with them, and because of them, [their] towns and [their] families were changing also.”⁶⁹

X left, too.

Like B, X left for the United States for the same reasons of “promise,” primarily economic. She wanted to have a family, or perhaps that was simply the natural course of things for her, as a young Latina, and somehow for myriad reasons, Lima was not, and could not, be the place for one.

My mommy left Rimac, for the United States. What stayed, was “left behind” for her, were her parents, her own respective what-if future in Perú, and her presence in the foreseeable future of her daughter, M. X’s decision to immigrate to the United States was fueled by economic circumstances: there was no “good” future in Rimac. Staying would not be feasible for a promising, decent life, according to both her parents and the cultural imagination that seems to cross national borders in Latin America. Leaving was a difficult and yet “natural,” decision; naturally, leaving was as much of a choice *for her own life* as it was for her parents’. X’s move toward el Norte was both a practical and symbolic move for them *all*, as it allowed them to imagine that things could be otherwise, that there were other, more possible, realities out there, up North, even if all of them weren’t physically in them. It was, and continues to be, an almost irresistible trek predicated on the *idea* of a (better) future that is, in actuality, not nearly as simple. X had left her young daughter, M, in the care of her parents as she was urged and urged *herself* to seek out a better future as a poor Limeña – as a Peruvian and a woman of color. Her

⁶⁹ Ibid., 40.

social standing as a woman invariably places particular expectations on her – family, gendered work, heteronormativity, reproductivity – and yet her family let her go, even staying with the family that was already her young daughter, though like the Alteño men of Luz Moreno’s life in *Receive our Memories* perhaps “no power on earth could stop [her],”⁷⁰ not even what she might have “left behind.”

In reality, conceptually, and in her heart, “leaving” was not necessarily akin to “abandonment” but rather in the service of those she would leave behind, and as much as she may have been thinking about the future that might have been waiting for her, hopefully, she was also, already, thinking about how much better things would be by the time she came back.

Poverty, however, did not let up. Such moves into brand new countries like the U.S., *especially* the U.S., do not construct themselves with caring for immigrants in mind. In reality, the idea that was the United States in 1980s Lima and Latin America remains an idea, and that sense of promising futurity is something that I continue to understand as a longing-in-progress, as things, even after so much time, even after the “future” should have already *arrived* by now, are still not yet “enough.” Better things might be, yes. B and X left Perú because they *knew* that things could be better. B and X arrived in New York City and the sight of rascacielos – on television, on calendars, in advertisements, then in real life – insinuated something of the abundance and modernity deprived of in the “Third World.” New York City is “better” than Lima; in a way, when Patricia and Bernardo and David come looking for Miguel, they are also looking for the future *Miguel* saw, but perhaps only saw vaguely, as if in a dream, convinced of its reality. They trust him, and as much as their trek across the U.S.-Mexico border was a mission

⁷⁰ Ibid.

to find and rescue their son, it was also a belief in their son and the cultural symbols he represented: he's *family*, unable to be left behind; he's a *precarious, colored body*, out there in the world alone; he's a dreamer, with a vision of futurity in wait; he embodies all of them, as Peruvian, one of the youngest of their family in Villa María del Triunfo; as their biological child and a *child*, on the path to adulthood, he is orbit of their attention.

B left. X left. They didn't know each other, then, but they had both left.

You arrive in New York City, and you end up in the Bronx.

You meet your neighbors, maybe. Some of them are really good friends.

You work hard, and you have that family you wanted, or perhaps expected, and there is struggle.

And things are "better," debatably.

But if the "future" is still in wait, not yet here, if we have not reached the desired point, the hoped-for point of our histories... then what exactly is "better" if not still, always, in progress, redefined?

I'm not really sure what that really, truly, looks like.

The idea of the United States as "a promised land" is predicated on it being a "land," static, floating, physical. A place. Somewhere to go.

B and X, growing up in Perú. Leaving, trying to leave Perú for the United States.

Not knowing that it is, in fact, everywhere.

And yet always out of grasp. *Haunting*... slipping between immigrant fingers.

JOURNAL ENTRY 11/15/22 – Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

¿Y qué del Perú, qué de nuestro sangre, lo aparentemente pasado?

I call my parents, on FaceTime, barely awake from a nap and still in bed. Looking to get an assignment done. I muster up some idea about generations, the uncles and aunts I don't know, the ones back home.

“¿Hallo?”

“Hola, mami.”

“Hola, hijo, ¿cómo estás?”

There are a lot of folks I wouldn't know about if I didn't ask. One never asks. Sometimes one doesn't want to. Though stories slip her, here and there, of Perú, and I may, if I actively set the intention, remember them and whatever names emerge. I didn't know of my mom's uncles or aunts the way I knew my own, and I was curious to know, and I needed to know. (I felt confident asking her instead of B, mostly because she would egg him to spill something, too). An assignment was the perfect opportunity to learn about my Mamita and Papito's brothers and sisters. That they, at the very least, existed.

My mom's abuela, though. We knew her, my brother and I. We used to visit her. She ran a little store a bit down the hill from Mamita's house on the Cerro San Cristóbal, a shanty town, un pueblo jóven; her house, the Cerro, the store all covered and dusted with the dirt – as if recently dug up – that is all of the corners of Lima. One would easily miss her store if it were in the Bronx. We'd get our chocolates there, our Sublime's and Triángulo's and our Inca Kola. Somehow, it escaped me that she was my great grandmother.

I had met my great grandmother. She was sweet. She hugged me a lot. Bedridden, she had a large bump on her nose that pussed, and caused her a lot of pain. I don't think that was what did it. She died years ago.

“Ha ver,” X says, thinking over the phone. “Hay, en el lado de Mamita, mi...

PAJITA ^(d. 2015)	TÍA PANCHITA	TÍO AURELIO
TÍO ALEJANDRO ^(“¿Es hermano de Mamita? Ni lo sabía.”)		TÍO SIMON
	TÍO BENITO	TÍO JESÚS.”

“Y al lado de Papito hay...

TÍA FLORA	TÍO DIONISIO ^(d.?)	TÍO JUAN
TÍO PANCHO	TÍA CHEVA (ÁNGELA).”	

I hear the nostalgia in her voice. My mother says their names, and naturally, begins to remember.

“Había que comer por la tía Vichi,” she remembers, laughing and seeing something I don’t, love in her throat. I picture my mother as a stubborn little girl playing and nagged, chided, “no nos dejaban salir hasta que comíamos *todo*,” as the adults refused to let the children go out without eating first. It makes me think of the caldo de pollo she makes me, smack in the middle of summer. I wince. I push it away. I imagine X, her mischief. I imagine my mother, playing.

There were reunions from both sides of the family, her mother’s and father’s sides, that became a big “festival.” I don’t know how often it happened. I couldn’t imagine it. Brothers and

sisters came together for a time. And when all was done, this past communal space of ancestors that I could not imagine would begin to fall apart, and each one left going their separate ways, the elders and the parents and the uncles and the aunts and the children, back to their own little pueblitos.

“¿Y daddy?”, I ask.

“B, ven.”

My father doesn't remember many of his uncles or aunts. He doesn't say any names. B reveals that he had never even met his grandparents. We wonder why.

The T.V. pierces the connection and fills my room with a shrill: “GOD! OH MY GOD!!!”

“¿¿Qué es eso??”

“¿Qué?”

“¡Ese ruido!”

“Es la televisión, tú papá mirando una película de guerra.... *¿Qué más? ¿Qué más, hijo?*

Pregúntame, hijo, ¡pregúntame!”

I'm not sure what else to ask. Had never gotten this far.

She continues anyway, thinking about her father, my Papito, and his family.

“Fíjate... tu Papito sabía que tenía un papá... pero se crió sin una... y tenía ansia de conocer a su papá, *sabía* que tenía hermanos con otra señora... Yo me recuerdo que tu papá, cuando estaba de visita a Lima hace mucho, fue con Jonathan, el hijo de tu Tío, a Chiclayo...—“

—“y *después* fuimos a Nueva York,” B cuts in. “Mm, digo, a Lima.” He corrects his slip.

“Hehe, ‘a Nueva York’.” She giggles, and continues. “Pero cuando mi papá y tu papá y Jonathan los fueron a buscar, los encontraron, y ellos lo recibieron a tu Papito con los brazos

abiertos... ya en ese tiempo el señor, tu Papito, el Ceferino, ya estaba viejito.” My grandfather waited. He waited for his daughter, X, to send him the money with which this trip could be made, and he waited for B’s company. Who knows how long he might have waited, if he would have ever up and left and gone himself. He likely waited a few presidencies, as is the case in precarious Perú, and watched the fog oscillate between thick and thin. He waited, restless, I imagine, shaking from his Parkinson’s or from anxiety or both, with my Mamita by his side, helping him. Waiting, his loved ones out there – en “el Norte” and also *al norte*, in Chiclayo –, and not even President Alberto Fujimori (that *other* Latin American dictator), walking, in front of the house my Papito had built with his hands, to proclaim the reconstruction of roads circa 2000 – a cover up for everything else he’d done, human rights violations, corruption, embezzlement, forced sterilizations... – could make things come sooner.



⁷¹ From family photo albums.

He made his pilgrimage soon enough. Before his Parkinson's would take its toll, and before it would take him. A fall.

“Ese Ceferino... pero, mira, él era un *genio*. Sabía de todo: de fierros, circuitos, máquinas, de todo, *de toditas*.”

“¿Pero porqué no conoció a su papá al principio?” I ask, still on that.

“No sé de verdad,” X says. “...¿Se separaron? No sé qué pasó.... Ella, su mamá era fuerte. Muy fuerte.” I don't know what that means. We get quiet. “...Pero mira, yo te mando la foto de la mama de mi abuela. La *otra* historia que mi mamá me contó hace muchos años, cuando se juntó mi abuelo con mi abuela... eran que la obligaban a casarse con una persona que no quería... todavía hay eso hasta en otros lugares, en Perú, sur américa....”

The conversation begins to dwindle.

My dad. Not knowing what to say of his own: “Hijo, ¿cómo está el carro?”

“It's fine. It runs fine.”

“Hijo, check the sticker, the other sticker, the registration... not the skinny one, the big one that comes with the windshield. Check when it expires, I'm not sure if next year or this year, take a look for me, let me know.”

“...Conocía a mis abuelos, pero ¿más allá? No...” My mom continues. Then:

“...Hijo. Tienes *tus* abuelos y es una gran suerte... disfruta a tus abuelitos. Disfrútanlos. Ellos saben más que nosotros.... No necesitas a Google.”

We stay quiet for a little bit, as I take her in.

My maternal grandfather, my paternal grandmother.

“...Hijo, hicieron el *estatu*e de Tom Seaver afuera del Citi Field!” my dad says, suddenly.

“Yea,” I reply, “I saw.”

...

“¿Qué más?” my mom asks.

“No sé.” I reply. “No creo que tengo nada más que preguntarles ahorita. Ya hemos estado hablando por 45 minutos.”

A pause. My mom: “...¿me estás tomando el tiempo...? ¡Oye! Mira, B, escuchas?”

I blush. “¿Y cuando vienes, mijo? No te dan descanso?”

“No. No tengo.”

“¿Pero si Diego no tiene escuela ahora?”

“Bueno, uno recién cumplió 8 años, Diego, y el otro tiene 21.”

“¿No descansas?”

I stop to think about it. “¡Claro! Pero a veces sí me gusta estar en mi cuarto leyendo.”

“Ay hijo. Pero ¡salga!”

I think of a joke and laugh to myself in its anticipation, knowing their responses.

“Okay,” I smile, “*Sí* salgo. Me voy de fiestas, y bebo, bebo vino, cerveza. Hasta *tequila*.”

I’m laughing to myself.

“...*Oye*. ¿Escuchas, B?”

And we’re laughing.

“Jajaja. No te preocupes, ma. Sí salgo. Me cuido, lo más que puedo, aunque estoy bien *busy*. Hoy, ahora, simplemente me gusta estar en la noche con mis libros.”

“Ay, hijo,” she says. The night is warm. “Okay. Come. Cuídate. Pórtate bien. Tate juicioso. Te extrañamos y te queremos. We miss you everyday.”

“Les quiero también, mami. Hablamos mañana. Saludos a V.”

I hang up. Sitting at my desk, taking things in. Before my attention is elsewhere.

JOURNAL ENTRY 12/6/22 – Lower Manhattan, NY

Walking down Broadway by the World Trade Center with Patricia and Bernardo and David: the new Peruvians, the Limeños, who just crossed the border.

Latinos, taking pictures of each other at the Oculus.

Turistas, tomando fotos en el parque Zuccotti.

Hispanos, con el toro perenne de los financieros.

We take them to the Staten Island Ferry, where we glide along the sea alongside the swinging gulls. And they smile at the sight, the wind breaking through our open sides.

JOURNAL ENTRY 12/10/22 – The Bronx, NY

This is an exercise in walking.

1:48 PM, and I head back north, on the Taconic, in 2 hours. Class at 5:10 PM, where we'll be talking about *this*, precisely this. This writing. And when it ought to be “done.”

Downstairs to 1 bodega for 1 butter roll. \$1. What was once a Korean video store is now a renovated, extended bodega. Fancy schmancy. I see cereal and snacks of all different names, all of it Kelloggs, General Mills. Amitav Ghosh following oil, or maybe a Twinkie.

Down Mosholu Parkway S. to Webster Avenue. My head up and down and writing and in and out of the world.

A neighbor playing classical music behind a window curtain.

Gated windows and no entry either way.

Two men bump into each other.

“You feeling better?”

“Yea, you?”

Right, onto Webster Avenue, walking opposite the 52nd NYPD Precinct.

General Electric signs in windows, washing machines, stoves.

I cross the street at Bedford Park and head toward the Botanical Garden, eastward.

It's hot in my jacket.

I can never describe all of what I see. Juan García Madero in *The Savage Detectives*:
“*Luego me puse a pensar en el abismo que separa al poeta del lector y cuando me quise dar cuenta ya estaba profundamente deprimido.*”⁷²

⁷² Roberto Bolaño, *Los detectives salvajes* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2000), 88.

A flat bike spray-painted white and chained at the entrance.

I walk adjacent to Fordham University, toward Fordham Road, on Southern Boulevard, looking for a good baconeggandcheese.

Fordham Prep students playing on a football field (collars, ties). Fordham Prep students standing beside the road (and me, passing by) waiting to get picked up. 2:12 PM.

“In Memory of Joe Allen” dedication on another field.

Cedric Robinson, H.L.T Quan, under my arms.

Evid A. Haupt Conservatory looming tall to my left. The Gardens.

Fall leaves, dead and faintly falling.

My eyes are tired.

My dad calls: “You okay?” “Yea, I’m walking to Fordham.” “Ok.” He’s sick.

It’s not COVID.

1 U.S. flag on the East entrance to Fordham University, reflected in parked car windows against the blue sky.

Fordham University students taking batting practice. I stop to watch through bushes, my eyes level at their feet. I peep.

I walk into the East entrance for a peek. I turn around, when I see a sign, required ID. I keep walking the common path.

Bx? (it passed quick) asleep to my left #5274 with a driver on their break. +1 U.S. flag on its side.

Bx? (it passed quick) #5980 comes behind #5274 with a ConEdison ad on its side, and +1 U.S. flag.

A parked cheese bus, a yellow drained by time.

A 8+ rowing shell and Vespoli oars behind the fence separating university from street on my right. A different world. On the other side of the fence, the street side, my side, right in front, are bouquets of dead flowers taped to a tree, with a photo of a ser querido in a soccer uniform, dead. I snap a wide picture, like a voyeur, and also whisper “rest.”

The Bronx Zoo and a McDonald’s in the distance, but I turn onto Crotona Ave.

Sitting against the fence on the corner, one of the corners of Fordham University, facing the intersection. My heart rate is a bit up. I take sips from my Hulk thermos.

Sencha.

A Mobil and sirens, a *WEEEEWOOOOO* up ahead.

Right onto East Fordham Road.

Another *WEEEEWOOOOO* up ahead.

I chuckle thinking to myself, *have you ever even seen Barstool Fordham’s Instagram?*

A big pharmacy building with products and products in glass windows and walls. 625 E Fordham Road.

A left at Hughes Ave, following it southbound through a bit of mayhem, a driver attempting a u-turn.

A right at E 189th St., darkened by buildings, shade.

My dad calls again: “Where are you?”

“Fordham. To eat.”

“Oh you didn’t take the car?”

“No, I wanted to walk.”

“Ohh, okay, papi.”

Onto Arthur Ave. Simon’s Deli. 2479 Arthur Ave. A homey deli.

I order my BEC. And I sit directly underneath a little shelf altar with la virgen, baby Jesus, crosses, fake flowers. Sintiéndome como todo Rímac, en la ciudad de Lima, como la Avenida San Cristóbal, no muy lejos de la Plaza de Armas, el Palacio de Gobierno del Perú. No muy lejos, tampoco, de la Feria de Libros de Amazonas, which I’ve never been to. Faraway places.

It’s just me.

A bar, Mugz’s, outside the window directly to my right, and Clinton Hall. And a Gulf gas station up ahead.

Mi amigo the cashier brings me my BEC and says *enjoy* and I say *gracias, amigo*, and he asks: “what are you, a writer?” seeing me write, not knowing what I’ve been writing for the past hour straight. I laugh. “Sí,” I say, “sí.” We laugh, and he goes back to the counter.

I start to get a little bit anxious. Or I start to feel it.

2:52 PM.

A good BEC.

Elementary, middle, high schoolers getting out and walking. A blonde Fordham student debates coming in and they do. This is their order: a spinach wrap with egg whites, mushrooms, avocado, hot sauce, and a Sprite.

A Latina mother and her kid come in. Neck pillows and big bags, looking like they’ve been traveling. These are assumptions.

I breathe through my belly.

Gotta run home. 3:12 PM. Gotta go north.

Wish I had more time.

I walk up Fordham Road uphill in a blaze, sweating against the effort,

*Walkin' with my back against the sun
I been runnin' all my life,
that's way before my life begun...⁷³*

past the new Target and the new Krispy Kreme and the new Taco Bell, a new White Castle letter sign poem that you can see from a distance: ORDER A CRAVE CASE / TODAY / STAY SAFE; on the uphill; past the new Target; past the JD Sports that used to be a Joyce Leslie that used to be a FALLAS, where my mom worked, that used to be a CONWAY, where my mom started, with boxes and shelving and cash registers, back when B's work just wasn't enough. Past marine recruits; naturally, the recruitment center, y los demás. Legal proceedings happening. Evictions happening. Protests happening. People dying. And on the Bx2 on the Grand Concourse, speeding past Edgar Allan Poe's cottage, ghosts, getting lost still in crowds, past where Virginia Clemm Eliza Poe died; past a Bx10, a Bx22, a Bx9, neon bodegas, P.S. 246; past the spirit of Fordham Restaurant; a person in a poncho picking up trash; past dentistry and shivering vendors, cuchifritos, jerk chicken, curry goat, nuts, tamales, catching my maldito breath.

I don't pay. A sign above me reads: "Up to \$100 fine for fare evasion"

How much must I be thinking about?

⁷³ Denzel Curry, "Walkin." *Melt My Eyez See Your Future.* <https://denzelcurrymusic.bandcamp.com/track/walkin-1>.

I get off on ____, walk past 2_2nd, to 2_3rd, making a right, making it home. My dad buzzes me in.

“I gotta go.”

We grab things of mine and bring them down to my car and say bye, and I put it in drive and go.

3:37 PM.

I'm gonna be late to class, and I drive with that anxiety.

JOURNAL ENTRY 12/12/22 – The Bronx, NY

The building around my corner gets taller.

VI.

*"I can't build no new nothing
 No new life
 No new nothing for me
 I've gotten all of my bricks aligned
 But mortar's escaping me"*

– L'Rain, "Two Face"⁷⁴

Fail, and wonder what's left for you. If it's not books, it's other things, other very different things... other roads to success, and redemption.

When goodness escapes you, that goodness thrown onto you by everyone you love and hate... when you try (*and I see you trying, mi amor*) but goodness escapes you, just out of reach, *mocking*... when you do everything you can and yet fall short of it, a few GPA points, say, a letter grade, something that, in the end, doesn't really matter, but means *everything* right now, it's your whole life, right now... when you do everything, *everything*, and receive nothing in return, chastised, reprimanded, doubted, told you should be working **HARDER**, doing **BETTER**, just **TRY**, as if you haven't already been trying... Watch. Watch as they come, as if they were ever elsewhere and not always around, watching you and waiting. Watch the hallways fill with them, in uniform, watch them come into your classrooms, watch them set up right outside of your building, watch them call you (like B), send you letters, love letters... looking for *you*, the ones who seem to fall short, the ones that try, perhaps harder than most, to please and to be loved. Watch them come to our places and into our lives. Always in our lives. Always in our countries. Watch them come for the ones that strive, for goodness, and for love. That love that always seems to slip right out of one's grasp...

⁷⁴ L'Rain, "Two Face." *Fatigue*. <https://lrain.bandcamp.com/track/two-face>.

and you deserve love, my love. You deserve it.

Watch them find you, and pull you in with promises.

and you deserve to feel loved, my dear.

Watch them come into your homes and your minds and your choice.

Watch them tell you they care about you.

As if they could ever love you the way you ought to be loved.

A lot of my friends, growing up, ended up being recruited at some point. “Ended up” is perhaps, I hope, not their fate, as if their life trajectories were complete, but it’s the only language that makes sense for me to use right now. Many of them were insecure about their grades at school and felt like they weren’t doing well. See yourself on paper, reflected back to you relentlessly. Naturally, and understandably so, they felt that if they couldn’t get school “right,” they were going to be ill-prepared for the world, would have nothing to bring into it; with grades lower than acceptable for passing by the city and the state, I had a lot of friends fail, get left behind, and they were convinced that it was all their fault. Many had already been on the verge of this “failing” multiple times in their schooling but had just made it above the threshold to be permitted entry into the next grade. However, this was never a story of redemption but of an upward climb, and there was a general sense of apathy, at that point, toward the whole fucking thing, which didn’t make failing any harder.

Friends from Jerome Ave., my old stomping grounds. “Lost,” last I heard. “Perdidos.”

¿Qué de ___?

No sé. No hemos hablado en mucho tiempo.

Ay, qué pena. Se perdieron.

Lose touch with some friends you really loved, the ones who get “lost”; *both* of you losing each other. Your lives straying in different directions. Consequence and circumstance. I’m not really sure why that happens.

I remember them coming, though. Coming for you. Acting innocent. We would go as a class to college fairs hosted by other colleges, or they would come straight to our high school and set up a table in our cafeteria and in our halls, tabling for a while. In uniform, stoic, smiling. Flyers on the tables. Knick-knacks, like a stress ball or a pen. Tabling right next to colleges, right beside all of the other options for young people in the Bronx. Folders, forms, and a Sergeant standing firm. Fail, and feel like you have nothing left, like you are failing your family, the immigrant parents that came all the way from ___ because they saw a future and *you* were in it; their future is *you*.

Watch... as they challenge you to some push-ups... do 20 and you get a free t-shirt, something silly and pointless and there are clothes and I need another shirt... and do some push-ups, crowd around the table and count each push-up as the Sergeant stands and smiles... and everyone is having a good time because push-ups are happening... now *everyone* is lining up now trying to watch or compete and win a free t-shirt that says ARMY, USMC on it... push-ups from some of my friends who don’t know what happens after everyone graduates, after they barely pass or leave... and I know some friends who tried really hard to impress the recruiters, and I was never totally sure if they were doing so just to impress everyone, to feel the praise and applause, or if there were different stakes other than the t-shirt. Push-ups in front of the recruitment table. Stickers, magnets, posters, shirts, folders, bracelets, cards, water bottles, flyers,

telling you that if you really wanted to, and I know you want to, you could think about it, give me a call, sit on it but believe me, we can help you

*BE ALL YOU CAN BE.*⁷⁵

Things like that that all say the same thing, that suggest to you, the *failing* one struggling against what everyone else wants from you, that there is an alternative way to be loved and respected. Give your heart. There are so many benefits. Fight for your country. As if the country was ever yours...

we can beat you as we pay you and love you
we can hate you as we pay you and love you and deport you⁷⁶

Or we'll send you off, *we'll sign you up ourselves for being such a "malcriad@" that doesn't learn, has no respect whatsoever*, and you're not just failing school but you're failing *everything*, decency, and you need to be corrected, beaten into shape. In either case, *go*, and come back better than ever before. All dressed up as you are, stone-faced as you are... we're so proud of you, now. Sign up, ready to give yourself over for your country, ready to pay off the debt you inherited at birth and much earlier with your life. Right alongside your mates, all in the same uniforms having killed off so many of the ones that came right before you, standing over the Grand Concourse, the bodies buried by Empire.

⁷⁵ "Find Your Career in the U.S. Army," goarmy.com, <http://aem.usarec.army.mil:4502/goarmy.html>.

⁷⁶ Borzutzky, 14.

I know a lot of old friends who achieved goodness through the armed forces. Signing up for all the reasons they might have, be they the benefits, or the education, or the looks they would receive in their uniforms, back home.

But the recruits come, because they *know*.

Fuck that... Can you let me love you? Before it's too late?

Watch, as your brother V goes... trying, too.

Trying to pay off B's debt. And your own.



77

⁷⁷ “United States Armed Forces Recruiting Center, Bronx, New York. | Flickr,” <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jag9889/5458149853/>. Intersection of E. Fordham Road and the Grand Concourse.

JOURNAL ENTRY 6/23/22 – College of Mount St. Vincent, Riverdale, NY

Mount St. Vincent bathroom. Hayes Auditorium. Thursday.

I planned to get here at 4:30 pm; I'm just getting here, at 5:24 pm, pero it's just starting.

A nice drive and I'm right where I was 5 years ago. My high school is holding a graduation for its 2022 graduates. I ran straight to the bathroom. Mr. Carter checked me in, and didn't give any sense of recognizing me until he saw my name.

"...Ortiz-Valdiviazo!"

"I didn't think you'd remember me."

"Of course I did. You're the 5!"⁷⁸

It was after I got checked in that I ran to the bathroom, then pissed, and heard the national anthem muffle in the other room. I ran out, into the auditorium right before it started. All of it was exactly the same. It hadn't changed, save faces and suits and dresses. I saw all the faces and dresses standing up and listening, looking toward the stage, as four or five nasally adolescent voices started to sing, and I made no hesitation at sitting down.

I see Ms. Leonard!

Ms. Lindsay!

Mr. Tucker.

Mrs. Gonzalez!

Mrs. Rodriguez! Her last year, she says, giving a speech. Her last seniors.

Mr. T!

⁷⁸ In 2018, I got the elusive score of "5" on the AP Literature Exam.

I watched and listened to Mrs. Rodriguez give a lovely farewell speech and charge.

Urging them to simply *live*. And nothing more. Qué poesía.

Ms. Angie!

And

Umar.

Announced as the salutatorian, by Mr. Roberts. Umar wields a 100.62 GPA, with emphasis. Point six two. The crowd claps and cheers. He seems like a kind young man. They say things about him. He helps his peers. “A remarkable young man.” A full ride to Notre Dame. Computer Science. Everyone claps and cheers, and I hear some *oohs* after “Computer Science.”

I write, and I’m unable to participate in the clapping.

His deep voice provides some more silent *oohs*. Como si fuera hombre, de repente.

He speaks. He says many things, things I can’t catch and slip me, but then he addresses his classmates, asking them to turn to each other and congratulate themselves for “surviving.”

“Surviving.” I wonder what he means by that. *What*.

He calls it, school, jokingly, “prison,” nothing new and nothing you don’t hear from students in New York City. And I know the metaphor. And I know it does and doesn’t hold up.

I should really read Sherry Ortner’s *New Jersey Dreaming*.

Kaplan (my principal) comes to the podium, after a loving video of the seniors – laughing, joking, playing – projects onto the screen for us all to see,

She comes from a family of educators, Kaplan says, and she went into education only after trying many other things out. “Going into education was the best decision of my life,” she says, choking up.

Mr. Wright! He introduces the valedictorian.

Richard.

“Many might say Richard is the perfect student,” Mr. Wright begins, “and I wouldn’t say that... what did you get on the SAT, like a 1570?” He jokes.

Cheers and *oohs*. From those who know what that means.

AP Scholar, NHS, Valedictorian.

Worked part-time. Like many of the first-generation high school students in the room.

“But it’s much more than that... he’s nice, thoughtful...” Important distinctions, I think. Though I lament what might end up sticking with us here.

A full ride to Northwestern. Studying Mathematics and Engineering.

Mr. Wright continues as Richard is seated in the sea of students in their caps in gowns, the sea of some 115. I imagine everyone, his friends, his enemies, the ones that are *envious*, looking at him, and him sitting and warm (the blood is rushing to his cheeks) and yet confident. He waits, and in the meantime more is said.

“I will simply say that I am 99.9% confident that Richard will be truly remarkable, and *beyond* truly remarkable.”

At the conclusion of Richard's introduction as Valedictorian, and in moments throughout, the crowd of family members and friends roar with applause.

I can't catch up with the applause.

Richard is Black.

His speech. I catch this: "...as the great Spanish explorer and teacher, *Dora*, once said: '*we did it, we did it, lo hicimos, we did it.*'" Laughs. I laugh, too. He's funny. These kids are funny.

I wonder what COVID did to, or for, these kids.

A lot of people around me are on their phones, their social media apps. Posting, taking pictures, and just scrolling through, as if in any other place.

This is a fragile, liminal space, made up of bodies not yet "grown" but lauded, with their future selves in sight. The sea of students up against the stage; in the crowd of us coming to see them on their big day, there are younger siblings and strangers watching, perhaps indifferent, perhaps in awe, and everyone is at a different point of their understanding of the scene. What's happening feels something like timeless and anachronistic, students cycling in every year for the same commencement and procession. Every year this is the most important point in their lives. They deserve to feel important. This is a formative moment. And yet, the formative moment holds the criterion through which they may continue to perceive themselves moving forward. That criterion is unforgiving. In this moment, they are not yet totally consumed, maybe. Not yet.

I fear for the computer science and STEM students.

I'm reminded that the Marble Hill High School for International Studies logo is a globe of flags, with the U.S. at the north pole.

Ms. Portanova!

They walk. Ms. Gonzalez calls the students one by one.

Names I won't remember, but their joy is *important*.

Mr. Tucker (my vice principal) takes an airpod out of a boy's ear, as he walks up on stage for his fake diploma. He takes it right out. Then they shake hands.

Graduates stand. Turn tassels. A speech from Ms. Kaplan:

“Class of 2022, please stand.

Repeat after me.

With gratitude to my school,

WITH GRATITUDE TO MY SCHOOL

With pride in my city,

WITH PRIDE IN MY CITY

And with devotion to my country

AND WITH DEVOTION TO MY COUNTRY

I pledge: As a graduate

I PLEDGE: AS A GRADUATE

To cherish traditions of Marble Hill

TO CHERISH TRADITIONS OF MARBLE HILL

As a citizen

AS A CITIZEN

To work both alone and with others

TO WORK BOTH ALONE AND WITH OTHERS

To improve my city

TO IMPROVE MY CITY

And as an American

AND AS AN AMERICAN

To obey my country's laws

TO OBEY MY COUNTRY'S LAWS

And to support and defend its constitution.

AND TO SUPPORT AND DEFEND ITS CONSTITUTION.

By the power vested in me, by

New York State and the New York City Department of Education,

I declare you graduates of the Marble Hill High School for International Studies.

Move your tassels from the Right to the Left side... Congratulations, Graduates!"

It's the last thing she says to them.

Marble Hill High School for International Studies.

this I will not obscure

though I want to.

I can't.

...

Outside, in the conglomerate of photos and joy, I ask Ms. Kaplan if she could send me a copy of the speech. She pauses and looks at me. She says that she's wanted to change it for a while, "because not all our kids are citizens." But it was the same. We look at everything. Students are taking pictures with their families. Students are asking for pictures with their favorite teachers. Not all the students are here. Remember, not everyone graduates. We look, and the future is here and in sight; we look, and though we see everybody on the field from the top of the steps, the future hasn't yet arrived.

She asks, then, in a brief moment of catching up, just me and her among the noise.

"So what are you going to leave with?"

She means my degree.

"*Anthropology and Literature*," I say.

Though, I don't mean the degrees.

I mean my Anthropology, and my Literature.

Then I asked her for it, again, her speech, and it was the same one *I* repeated years ago in this same spot, and I told her that I thought it was "really interesting," and then she laughed and looked at me, and said, "*anthropology*," and it was as if she was saying that my anthropology brain, or the whole thing, was funny, like it was a funny word to say aloud, like there was something in the way it sounded, or what it meant, though it no doubt meant something for her that was very different from what it needs to mean for me. She laughed. And when she laughed, I

laughed too. I felt a little sorry for laughing at myself. Still, I laughed. It was kind of funny. I knew she would forget, or decide not to send it to me. Maybe my question was a bit threatening. It wasn't personal, no, nothing is. It was something about the speech, the moment it was deployed, the performance of it all, the whole day, the whole beautiful, special day, that appeared to carry an immense amount of force, and meaning. I thought about reading it, reading it to myself. I thought about time out of joint, what seemed to be Kaplan's words being repeated again and again completely unaware that they didn't have to be said anymore, that they were, in fact, *beyond* Kaplan, and that they could just give it up, already. I thought about the words, the stances conveyed by their everyday iterations, and this annual revival. I thought about going deep into them, studying them, turning them over, feeling them and their stakes on my life, *again*, remembering and *re*-remembering, about getting so deep in them that it would start to get real heavy in there.

We say goodbye, and I walk back to my car, seeing some of my former classmates, here to support their younger siblings. I walk past them, ducking, almost. Feeling something bubble.

I watch Miss. Fisher and Mr. T drive away. And I'm in my car listening to radio static, the waves of my gut and heart, anxiety, and a falling sensation, and I think I'm about to cry.

JOURNAL ENTRY 1/3/23 – The Bronx, NY

The building around my corner gets taller.

JOURNAL ENTRY 1/4/23 – The Bronx, NY

X had a dream, last night.

She wakes me up, gently, just to say hello. *Mijo. Ya, levántate.*

I wake up slowly, and come into the world. My mom sits on the edge of the couch as I wake. It takes me a little bit. She looks at me sweetly, resting her hand on my side. Looking at me. How big I've gotten. *Ay, mi niño...* she says. *Dónde se fue mi niño.*

I'm going to graduate soon, sometime soon, and there are things up in the air about that. Where will I go? What will I do? Who will I be? In my sleep I dream, dream of committing to being the poet I think I need, another body trying to see the world and read of all the silenced histories Michel Rolph-Trouillot knew began "with bodies and artifacts: living brains, fossils, texts, buildings"⁷⁹ of the city, the Bronx.... Not yet certain about my history and my place in it, and still longing for the Bronx, not understanding it at all beyond what was given to me, desde la nada... still grieving memories, still looking around for answers, I start to think of you. I'm still dreaming... I'm already awake.

I am going to graduate soon. This is my mom's last year of receiving support from the government because her kids are in college. What's going to happen to us after? What about our money?

"Vamos a ver," she says. And she looks at a photo of Papito. "¿Verdad, Cefe?"

X dreamt about him last night, she tells me, the past coming into the present.

⁷⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995), 29.

He had knocked on the door. His chest was exposed, in the hallway, wearing one of his button-up shirts. At our Bronx building from Perú, in the middle of the frigid Fall. He was holding a bag of clothes, she says. X tells me that she thought he was selling them to the neighbors. It looked like there was nothing else he would have been doing. Bony, shivering. She touched his face with the palms of her hands and softly kissed his mejilla, his cheek, not saying anything. He was so cold. He was freezing. X's father in the doorway.

“Entra,” she said.

And he came in. In his other hand was another bag, a bag of Chinese takeout from downstairs that had likely, certainly, gotten cold. She looked him up and down, a mixture of disbelief and pity, and concern. She thought he came up, inexplicably, to heat it up. It was all a surprise, and yet as dreams go it was all simply happening, slowly.

“Cefe.” She watched him, skinny and cold. Ceferino reminds her and my Mamita of an older version of myself. She looks at me, recalling her dream.

Mi chino. Cuánto apareces al Ceferino. Igualito, son.

She looked at his bag, the bag of clothes, and then looked at him.

“¿Y cómo te fue?”

And then she woke up.

She didn't want to wake up. She really didn't want to.

Maybe in the next dream he'll tell you, I said, and she laughed.

“Como un capítulo dos.”

What long chapters. Oh, how often my Papito comes back to life.

JOURNAL ENTRY 1/27/23 – The Bronx, NY

Tyre Nichols. Protest in Manhattan.

8:20 PM.

Thinking of going but scared, alone.

Said, “I’ll run to the store for water.”

“Ten cuidado, no corras,” says X. “¿Sabes la canción?

Un hombre negro corriendo es ratero, un hombre blanco es atlético.

Canción de hace muuuchos años.”

“No me gusta la canción,” I respond. “I don’t like it.”

VII. “A Parable of Non-Recalcitrance”

Walk with me? Let’s try out some thinking.

Fordham. Past Little Italy on Arthur Avenue and E 187th. The Bronx on a sunny, cloudy, rainy, clear, great, smoggy day. Let’s try out some thinking on all days.

Thanks for walking with me. I admit, sometimes I struggle with this thinking. Sometimes I doubt myself about it, but I think the fact that I do is important. Because I really do think it’s all worth thinking about. When I’m calm and it’s quiet (more or less), and I find time to think (mostly *it finds me*), I’m very confident. I believe in it. And it’s true, I swear. I feel connected to generations. And I remember that people dead and alive have been thinking about these things, too, for a long time, dead and buried, under apartment buildings and fossilized or scattered through the air, in dirt and trees, in molecules, dropped from helicopters into the ocean, released into the ocean. The dead, still thinking about things.

South from Fordham University, past Little Italy: St. Barnabas Hospital. __ years ago I was born here. I’m __ years old. I’ve been looking around for __ years, but only recently have I really felt like I’m *looking*. It’s a strange, sterile place. I think it takes a lot to just STOP and look around. I look at the Hospital; hay tantos fénix como ataúdes adentro.

Over here. Coming down from Arthur Ave make a right on E 184th, wrap around the building, then down 3rd Ave. Make a right on E 183rd. Lost? That’s okay. Just find the Emergency Room on E 183rd. Again: Make a right.

Do you see it? Chiky's Grocery. Una bodega como cualquier otra. It used to be called something else, I don't remember. Our backs are to the Emergency Room, facing Chiky's a block away – stop. Do you see it? The short walk from here to there?

This is spectral ground. We stand on specters of the living and the dead.

Remember with me: do you remember? ...Sorry, that's vague, Dios, that's far too broad. Forgive me if I reminded you of someone else, something you don't want to think about.

I'm thinking about the Summer of 2018.

June 20th. Lesandro "Junior" Guzman-Feliz (does that ring a bell?) leaves his apartment, a block away from here, to give a friend some cash. His mamá calls him an hour after he leaves and tells him to come home (she is falling asleep on the couch), that it's getting late. Y dijo que iba regresar, pero he walks, instead, to Adams Place, to meet someone else. On the way, a group of four cars drives slowly toward him, then next to him, and prowl. Darkness calls something out to him. Alarmed, Junior runs back home. The cars – some gang members – chase him.

Some get out, preferring to be on foot. They all chase him to a lonely little corner, to *here*, what is now Chiky's. They think they have the right guy. Junior runs inside and hops the counter to the cashier's side, begging. All of this is on tape. It was everywhere, the evidence everyone wanted – do you remember? Some of the pursuers enter the bodega to get him, others wait outside with knives. They force their way to him, reach him, beat him, drag him (he grabs at air) out of the store and back into darkness. Someone hacks him with a machete. Someone else stabs him everywhere. A few others punch and kick, and stab, too. Repeatedly. (*Tanta puñalada de gracia te dieron, mijo.*) This lasts forever, a few seconds. After a few more, Junior is on his feet. He rips himself desperately from their hands and pulls himself into the store, but someone

holds him back. And he lets Junior go, but not before slicing into his neck. Then, they disappear into a derelict Bronx night.

Stumbling into the bodega Junior slacks atop the counter, and he flutters between states of consciousness. Life and death is on his face. Everyone inside is scared; I imagine they all dissociate almost immediately, if they hadn't been already, one Modesto Cruz and three other shoppers, from what the videos show. He is sent away. They could not be heroes that night.

Outside, again, he searches the night and yells something to a third-story(?) apartment, whose residents watch the late scene from above. And right in front of Chiky's he puts his hands on his knees, dripping, and he looks so tired. One video says he calls out for 911. Another video says he calls out for water. Then it's like he has an idea. Suddenly, he makes a slow dash to the St. Barnabas Hospital Emergency Room a mere block away...

Towards us...

Oh, he's slowing down...

Do you see him?

A stars and stripes shirt. He's walking towards us, and he's slowing down. A shirt stained, soaked. His eyes probably fluttering through it all. Streetlight neon in his gaze, an empty evening street. Red in his holey, *holy*, body.... Holy shit.... Qué puñalada de gracia.

This is spectral ground, I tell you.

He doesn't make it to the Emergency Room, only to the security booth. He is drained: tired and bloody. Two police officers stand by and watch. Watch. I'm sure they weren't ready for

this. Some friends see him there, perhaps by coincidence, who knows, it's really terrible timing, it's like it was supposed to happen, and it shouldn't have, and they *scream*. Strewn on the concrete, ¿quién sabe por cuánto tiempo?, or how long it *must've* felt like. He's brought inside, who knows after how long, but he's dead in 20 minutes. Leandra arrives and there's already caution tape. A fatal stab wound to the neck. Another victim of his community's violence.

He walked slow on this ground. He played. We walk too fast on it. Rushed and anxious. Like B. Like X. Makes sense. Hay cosas pa' hacer. Pero here we are. It's a very important place. And yet a corner like any other, como el tuyo, la mía.

...Sorry for the sore memories. Pero let's think about that. About all of it.

No, not *all* of it. How could we?

As much as we can.

To think about Junior, *how, where, why* he died, what happened *after*, what happens *now*, *how* we think about him (without realizing it), is not *just* to think about Junior. At the same time, we think about you, me, and los demás. We think about the Bronx, too, maybe.

I start to formalize the events of that night, and what happened as a result. Una cosa pasa enseguida por otra, y otra, como los días. I drain this singular tragedy of its grief, its fear, in an attempt at honoring it. But we must analyze.

In the days following his death, the story was everywhere. #JusticeForJunior trended on social media. Thousands reposted it, and thousands attended his wake, funeral, and memorial service, remembering (even if they had never met him) "the 15-year old the entire city fondly

[*and suddenly*] knows as ‘Junior.’”⁸⁰ The blood, the boy, the killers, and the community’s mourning were on replay.

In the days following his death, they found and arrested his killers; his killers were tracked down and swiftly arrested, a group of Dominican gang members, and they perp-walked out of the 48th Precinct (the one by Claremont Park) to cries of “¡ASESINO!”, and “¡CABRÓN!”⁸¹

In the days that followed, artists Chris Pyrate and George Fernandez began to paint murals nearby.

In the days that followed... some others in the city likely died, too.

In the weeks that followed, he circulated non-stop on the news and social media. On the Bruckner Expressway was a billboard of his face for drivers to see.

In the months that followed, people continued to gather at the corner. The bodega was closed, and kept closed; the owner Cruz was attacked for not having helped Junior that night. People lit candles on the corner, and placed photographs, signs, and bouquets of flowers.

In the months that followed, he was honored at a Yankees game.⁸² His favorite team.

In the months that followed, I was keenly aware of the need to get home safely. The ambiguous threat that was always lurking outside in the streets was made supremely visible, and I projected it everywhere, onto every colored body I saw. I walked and felt both trepidation and something between disdain and pity, walking past groups smelling of weed and made

⁸⁰ News 12 Staff, “Friends, Family Honor the Life of Lesandro Guzman-Feliz,” News 12 - The Bronx, <https://bronx.news12.com/friends-family-honor-the-life-of-lesandro-guzman-feliz-38521919>.

⁸¹ “Justice for Junior: Arrest Made in Vicious Murder of Teen in Bronx Bodega, NYPD Reports,” ABC7 New York, <https://abc7ny.com/justice-for-junior-bronx-teen-killed-in-the/3647783/>.

⁸² Ray Negron, “Yankees Honor Bronx Teen ‘Junior,’” Newsmax, July 30, 2018, <https://www.newsmax.com/raynegron/yankees-junior-lesandro-guzman-feliz/2018/07/30/id/874554/>.

“unpredictable,” and I was as vigilant as ever. I walked past them and their music, and I had already decided who they were. You had to be somebody. Now, it was supremely clear what it meant to be a “nobody.” Gatekeepers. It’s like I couldn’t trust anybody, not even the night.

In the years that followed... a lot has happened (*¿qué carajo* does that mean?).

They renamed the street after Junior. More people died.

We’re back...let’s come back. We’re looking at a mural. *The* mural. Do you see it? What was once ??? is now called Chiky’s – the former bodega owner has since been traumatized, and is at some unknown place, in an unknown state of being. We’re not supposed to care. Next to it is the mural. You’ve likely seen it before, it’s George’s: a blue sky and clouds painted on the red brick building, with Junior’s face front and center. He looks at you, looking at him. His earring glistens. His face is forever young. He transcends time. He wears a halo. It’s as if he’s in heaven. “LOVE IS THE ANSWER” is written next to him. Born in 2002. Killed in 2018.



83

⁸³ Nicole Brown and Lauren Cook, “Who Killed ‘Junior’? Lesandro Guzman-Feliz Murder Suspects Face Justice | AmNewYork,” June 14, 2019, <https://www.amny.com/news/justice-for-junior-killers-1-29676267/>.

“Another victim of his community’s violents.” “Violents.” A double entendre for the correlation of the act, *violence*, with the actors, the *violents*. That was, more or less, the consensus surrounding Junior’s death. If you remember the boy dying, saw him on the news, and carry his story with you, then you must also have seen the culprits.

I think about them a lot.

That’s not to say I thought about Junior any less. Are you kidding me? How could I not? They jammed it into the throats of every brown and black kid in the Bronx 18 and younger. Junior was special. That’s what everyone said.

Thousands showed up to pay their respects to a boy they either knew personally or had decided they knew, seeing him in the faces of their lives, mourning him and of all the things he represented. In life, he was an NYPD explorer, part of a program providing kids from young, diverse communities like Belmont with an introduction to careers in law enforcement and criminal justice through “the importance of higher education, self-discipline, and respect for diversity and human dignity.”⁸⁴ Junior’s lifelong aspirations to be a detective embodied these values. This was coupled with his character, as he was his mother’s baby boy, a “good kid,” young and “full of life,” a young man whose youth and innocence was evident in his kindness and his love of the Yankees and video games. He possessed a remarkable charisma according to those who knew him, and he embodied a hope for the future. The future was bright with Junior on its way, he had “so much going for him.”⁸⁵ He was on his way, one more good young Bronxite “making it,” and he had all of the attributes one would want to have in their own child. Junior was remarkable in all the ways the Bronx wanted him to be, and he was exactly what it

⁸⁴ “Explorers - NYPD,” <https://www.nyc.gov/site/nypd/services/law-enforcement/youth-programs/explorers.page>.

⁸⁵ “Justice for Junior: 6 Suspects to Be Extradited from New Jersey in Murder of Innocent Teen; 8th Arrest in Bronx - ABC7 New York,” <https://abc7ny.com/justice-for-junior-bronx-teen-killed-in-the/3655264/>.

would want for its other children; he was what then Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. would call “everything we want our children to aspire to.”⁸⁶

And I, in my heart and fear, agreed with them, *agrees* that he was, indeed, special. I’d like to believe that he and every other Bronxite are. Junior was “good,” though, and his goodness was something to live up to. The media coverage emphasized, non-stop, Junior’s brief and summarizable life in his passing. In reality, however, it was a goodness that felt almost impossible to achieve except only in death.

Whereas in life Junior was remarkable in every way, in *death* he had become much more. District Attorney Darcel Clark would state at a press conference that Junior “came to symbolize *all* of the young people who had lost their lives to brutal gang violence,”⁸⁷ and he was elevated into the “model” of those both dead and alive in communities like his own in Belmont, his body a vehicle for outcry against the “heinous, reprehensible gang violence”⁸⁸ of the volatile streets that were, simply, evil. The facts of his life – his charisma, his youth, his innocence, and his future cut short – were on repeat.

His killers, on the other hand, a group of Dominican boys and men of the Trinitario gang, were also on repeat, but only as foils to Junior’s parable of goodness and lost futurity. Whereas Junior was the ultimate “good” of the Bronx, a characterization made up of how he was understood by others, his age as a “kid,” practically untouched and pure, and his aspirations to be a member of the NYPD – the ultimate force for good and respectability, akin to the Armed Forces, despite their racializing histories of imperial violence and whiteness –, his killers were

⁸⁶ “Justice for Junior: All 5 Defendants Found Guilty of Murdering Bronx Teenager,” ABC7 New York, <https://abc7ny.com/justice-for-junior-killed-bronx-bodega-lesandro-junior-guzman-feliz/5346768/>.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:45-1:53. Italics mine.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the ultimate “bad.” Rounded up (it felt like a manhunt, and every day there was news about headway made in the search for the men who killed him, no doubt quickened by the attention of all of it), Junior’s killers were demonized, labeled as, despite being from the same community and being Brown and Dominican like Junior, criminals and “animals,” having “savagely” murdered Junior beyond the belief of the public and yet confirming a certain Bronx cultural consensus that there was indeed danger “on the streets,” made up of certain colored bodies.

Claire Jean Kim, in her 2015 book *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age*, writes about the 2007 case of star quarterback Michael Vick, who had lost it all when he was caught running a secret dog fighting ring. As graphic details of his ring, Bad Newz Kennels, was publicized, a media storm ensued fiercely condemning Vick for the cruel conditions in which his dogs had both lived and died. What Kim points out, however, about the media coverage and narrative of Vick’s animal abuse is that the story was not one concerned with a single man’s animal cruelty, but was one centered on a *black* man’s animal cruelty. The Vick saga was not simply one about reprimanding a man’s violence but rather a racialized saga that pushed a culturally legible story about animal-human relations that called upon and invoked the placement of blackness alongside animality. Since the story’s beginning, Vick was placed in relation to the animals he abused. His dogs were recuperated, rescued, after the bust of Bad Newz Kennels, and elevated into the national spotlight: praised, protected, and saved from the vicious, savage black man and adopted into white families. Michael Vick, on the other hand, was condemned for his heinous acts and was said to be *the real animal*, a characterization that hurled him back to a false colonial and slavery-era argument on black people’s biological inferiority to their white counterparts, embodying a *typeness* more animal than human. Vick’s superstardom in

the NFL, charged also by the story of triumph that was his upbringing – chasing the dream of sports, a “making it” out story from the Ridley Circle Homes in Newport News, Virginia –, slipped through his fingers as a result of his own decisions.

The Vick saga was crafted as a *parable of Black recalcitrance about doing the right thing and succeeding*, and inasmuch as this parable drew upon the constraining, deforming tropes with which we think and do race – specifically, tropes about Black masculinity, criminality, brutality, and animality – we could not help but read the story this way. The parable presented Michael Vick as choosing between good and evil, sports and gang life, the NFL and the ghetto, human and beast, and reaping the consequences of that choice. Vick made the right choice at first but then *slipped back*, losing the American Dream because of his own recalcitrance.⁸⁹

Michael Vick had made it. Having achieved the “American Dream” that was NFL superstardom and the salary that came with it, Vick had *failed* – himself, his family, and the youth that looked up to him. Having already reached “goodness,” and yet always in a position of slippage as a result of his blackness in the United States, Vick had, according to the media storm and public input, *deliberately chosen* badness and evil; while his treatment of his dogs was indeed cruel, that treatment was conflated with a choice for gang life, the ghetto, beastliness, and rather than having simply “fallen from” the grace he had worked so hard to achieve he had actually *slipped back* into his racialized typeness: a typeness that was, chillingly, always-already lurking over him, and waiting. No matter how successful he was already, and no matter the obstacles he had had to overcome on the way to superstardom, it was not enough for Vick in the end. He had chosen that which, in a way, had *always* been a possibility for him, as a precarious colored body. He fell, and at the same time he seemed to have fulfilled a cruel racial prophecy.

⁸⁹ Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 255.

Reading the Vick case in the Bronx, a case of animalizing language concomitant with histories of race in Europe and the United States, Vick had slipped back *into* what families of the nation and the Bronx had feared was always ever-present in the streets.

It's in that sense that I think about them a lot... I think about those killers a lot.

A lot.

The demonization of Junior's killers, who were Brown and Black and Dominican, as "animal" for their brutal murder of the 15-year-old boy with the bright future reveals the ways in which people in the Bronx read "good" and "bad," and the historical implications of those characterizations. "Animals," they were called. The kids out in front of my building, with their music blaring and their fold-out chairs, were "animals," "*animales*" to many of my family members and friends' families; they were nuisances, pestly, and yet they were perceived as gatekeepers who held my very life as a Bronx youth in the power of their hands. One's gait, informed by a general sense of ambiguous precarity in the Bronx, reveals much. The story of Junior's death, in the media and its aftermath in the community and communities like his, like *mine*, shares similarities with the Vick saga, as both put on full display conceptions of "goodness" and "badness" with racial histories that hurl across time and space and (continue to) map themselves onto bodies and identities. While the Vick story centers on Blackness, the fierce animalizing rhetoric in both cases aim to accomplish something of the same uncomfortable thing: the identification of an ever-present "typeness" only waiting to be realized and reified.

Despite being from the same community and being Brown and Dominican like the boy they had killed, thinking he was another person, Junior's killers contrasted Junior in every possible way. Whereas he was good and had chosen *correctly*, everything about him commendable and promising in his brief life, the men that killed Junior had chosen wrongly. They had had a choice that night, notwithstanding the social and cultural circumstances that might lead to gang violence in the Bronx, and they had chosen to kill a boy, a young child, in something like the ultimate crime against immigrant lives that aspire for ideas of the future, and do so through their children. Like Vick, they had chosen wrongly, however their "fall" was not a fall from grace, but rather deeper into an animality and beastliness *that they had already slipped into*, and had already had decided for them. One mother in the area, commenting on the Trinitario gang, remarked that "Decency and humanity isn't in their DNA, only killing."⁹⁰ Another resident, Kenneth Kelly, said that "they did him like an animal"⁹¹ that night, not specifying whether it was Junior who was being killed "like an animal" – like livestock – or if it was the killers that were behaving like predatory animals, on the hunt, or, perhaps, both. Junior's brother, Manny Ortiz, had called them "rats" and not "men," analogizing them to a pestliness that had also accompanied their naturalized violence.

They seemed resistant to change. Bronx local Sasha Merci, appearing on MTV's series *True Life Crime*, identified their mentality as "a hood mentality [that] is fucking trash,"⁹² suggesting that they were not only deciding to stay within a certain racial typeness but were also

⁹⁰ Emily Crane, "Men Accused of Murdering Bronx Teen Are Perp Walked in New York," June 27, 2018, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5894219/Men-accused-murdering-Bronx-teen-perp-walked-New-York.html>

⁹¹ "7 of 8 Suspects Appear in Court in Brutal Murder of Innocent Bronx Teen, Lesandro Guzman-Feliz - ABC7 Chicago," <https://abc7chicago.com/justice-for-junior-bronx-teen-killed-in-the/3662135/>.

⁹² *True Life Crime - Gang Target or Mistaken Identity?* | MTV, 2020, <https://www.mtv.com/episodes/5elnk6/true-life-crime-gang-target-or-mistaken-identity-season-1-ep-2>, 4:15-4:44.

deciding *against improvement*, or a “better” mentality that they, simultaneously, would likely have been denied entry into, for their fixedness into their savagery reflected an inability to rehabilitate back into society, let alone “goodness.” The 5 killers, as well as the 10 additional gang members charged in the case, had their individuality as Dominican gang members and their animality as murderers morphed into a fixed, single neighborhood entity that could be easily identified and resisted. Judge Robert Neary called them “savages and cowards” for their failures to renounce gang life, while the residents of Belmont and the larger New York City area had already known and felt this in their everyday lives. It was only until Junior was killed that these “savages and cowards” could be given specific names and faces, at least for a period of time, and chastised aggressively.

Junior’s rise into immortality only augmented his killers’ plummet into the depths of vilification. Unlike Michael Vick or his own killers, who had chosen their own falls from grace, Junior had been *struck down* from it, the grace and “goodness” that was placed onto him in life; once he had died, Junior had swiftly been brought back into that grace again. While his kindness and youthful energy had tugged at the hearts of many in the wake of his death, it was primarily his aspirations for the future, to be a detective in the NYPD, and his position in the Explorers program – almost, and not-yet a cop – that had cemented his life and death as a narrative of *success* and a parable of *non-recalcitrance* in an otherwise volatile Bronx neighborhood. In this sense, cop and killer are placed opposite each other despite their shared Dominican identity, and the cop, in the end, always wins the battle with its own haunted history. The violence that had taken him from the Bronx and his family was an identifiably *colored* one that ignored the historical social and cultural factors that might have provoked it, and Junior’s aspirations were

also ignored of their historical and cultural explanations. His desire to be a member of the NYPD placed him in proximity to a supreme “goodness” that was only possible through membership in institutions of whiteness and policing, aimed at “protecting” against the very violence he had experienced and could easily identify. And that violence enacted against him could only ever be colored.

Junior’s humanity, emphasized at and into death and his afterlife, was, as a result of the case’s coverage and the cultural imagination reified by it, made resistant to the typeness that was otherwise always a possibility for colored youth like himself. His “spirit,” a characteristic that was emphasized in the coverage, transcended both life and death only *after* his murder, and was combined with his social and professional aspirations to create the ultimate Bronxite: a law-abiding, civilized, “model” member of communities in precarious neighborhoods that refuses to succumb to the vices of “animality” as portrayed by their uncivilized and recalcitrant counterparts.

There’s “good” and “bad,” as there is “real” and fake.” Coverage lasted months, as did sentencing. At the trial in the fall of 2019, one of the killers yelled out “Trinitarios to the death,” to which Judge Neary responded “you threw your life away.” To another one of the killers, who had previously called himself “a real Dominican,” he said “You are not a real Dominican... real Dominicans” work hard, seek an education, and obey the law, in a non-recalcitrance equivalent to Junior’s.⁹³ Neary’s identification of “real” and “fake” demonstrates a number of other things, among them a tension between “real” and “fake” members of the community. Junior, no doubt a “real” member of the community *and U.S. society in general*, is, despite already exalted and

⁹³ “Judge Has Last Word in First ‘Junior’ Trial and Readies for Round Two | PIX11,” <https://pix11.com/justice-for-junior/judge-has-last-word-in-first-junior-trial-and-readies-for-round-two/>.

immortalized, pitted against the “fake” Dominicans that took his life. Dominicanidad and belonging in the community, not simply topographically or demographically, but as *members*, are contested and redefined along the lines of “goodness” and “badness,” recalcitrance and non-recalcitrance. Neary’s “real” Dominican, a law-abiding individual, who is yet perhaps neither a resident nor a citizen, faces off against their “fake” counterpart as both fight one another in a quotidian battle over humanity, membership, and “goodness,” engaging in what Bénédicte Boisseron suggests as a perennial “equation where [they] have to battle in order to not be last.”⁹⁴ Regardless of their proximity as neighbors and as racialized bodies, “real” and “fake,” “good” and “bad” are forced to recognize each other and fight.

And the “real” ones, or rather the ones who identified and wanted to resist the “fake” community members, saw the “fake” and “bad” members of Belmont as resistant to change and as fatally violent. What is important to note about the Junior saga is that the Trinitario gang members were acknowledged as presences in the area, albeit loathed. In a sense, they were never *not* members of the physical, topographical community but instead ethically (and judicially) exiled from the spiritual, emotional one. There is danger on the streets, and one identifies it in those that live in the same area. *Tate juicioso*. Close the curtains. A threat to precarious humanity that must always be avoided. The awareness of danger, typeness, afoot and always a possibility for Bronx youth reveals that Junior very well could have been anybody, and the men that killed him could have been, too. After receiving their sentences, all at least 23 years to life, all of the men that killed Junior found themselves farther from both the community and “goodness” than they could ever imagine; as a result of their failures and the firestorm, their slippage back into

⁹⁴ Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (Columbia University Press, 2018), xv.

typeness and to the inevitable violence of the Bronx and its streets, they would end up on Rikers Island, “a world apart” from the New York City skyline, the rascacielos that were representative of “possibility and hope.”⁹⁵ Forever recalcitrant menaces to a parable of success, the Trinitario members were exiled outside of society entirely. It was an attempt at securing the future, by eliminating those that might threaten it.

Imagine, how sad it is to live somewhere and be told you don't belong...

To tell one Dominican boy that you love him, to tell another that he is an *animal*.

What strange ideas of love.

We loved Junior, didn't we? How much of that was real, or, rather, *ours*, and how much of it was from somewhere strange and far-off in space and time? How much does our hatred for his killers become more than just simply hating what they did, but hating *them*, black and brown boys living with us, growing up with us, looking at them through old, *white* eyes?

Years passed, and the coverage, naturally, dwindled. Here and there, however, Junior would pop back up into the news cycle. Anniversaries came and, naturally, people visited again. His Explorer friends were always there, now there for him. On June 21st, 2021, one memorial was held for him. Junior was promoted to Deputy Chief. There were explorers there, all of them Black and Brown. One of them passed out. It was a hot day. She was wheeled away. “Keep her in our prayers,” said then-Commissioner Dermot Shea.

It was hot, and it was a lot of people. I stood and watched the processions, and everyone smiled and it was nice to see all these people smiling, even under the implications. At a certain

⁹⁵ ABCNews. “Most Violent Jail Inmates | A Hidden America: Inside Rikers Island PART 1/2.” *YouTube*, 21 May 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAqf0sDkez0, 0:25-0:34.

point in the ceremony, Junior's mother said some words. I watched a man walk by us all, singing humorously to himself

I'm just trying to get back hoooooome...

as Leandra was presented with a statue of a police officer protecting a child, presented to her by one Kevin O'Brian. She, years later, held fast to the conviction that the men who killed her son were animals, true enemies, and that they deserved what they had gotten. "We have better things to do," she said, looking out at the sea of awkward, stoic Explorers. "I inspire you to take a better life. I know how sad he was when he was running from those killers," she said, and I believed her. I imagined how sad it must have been to be put in that position, on a night like any other. I was sad that it had come to that, and I wasn't sure why. I wasn't sure where to look for answers.

"He is happy where he is right now," she would say, looking up at the sky. She had done the same two years earlier, at least to my memory, on February 27th, 2019, when the intersection was renamed "Lesandro Junior Guzman-Feliz Way" by the city. That event was heartfelt, a pain and joy, faintly falling snow. Junior was, then, again remembered for his humanity, his non-recalcitrance, his dreams, his goodness, and his blood, and he was honored for it. 15th congressional district representative Ritchie Torres said that he "was a life taken too soon, but one that will be long remembered and memorialized forever here on Bathgate and 183rd."⁹⁶ His unwavering *spirit*, Torres said, was captured in the made infamous words "justice for Junior" that had "emerged as a national rallying cry against gang violence."⁹⁷ Leandra had said, then, that

⁹⁶ "Justice for Junior: Bronx Street Renamed after Slain Teen Lesandro 'Junior' Guzman-Feliz." *YouTube*, 27 Feb. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VD7ytpv4P-Q, 0:50-1:00.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:14-1:24.

Junior was in heaven, happy, jumping, like he had in life, looking down on the occasion and perhaps saying “Mommy, don’t worry, I’m alive, I’m alive, I’m waiting for you here.”⁹⁸ On the 2021 anniversary, she had done the same, looking at him. “He is happy where he is right now.” Spiritually, ethically, Junior had made it to heaven, and everyone knew it, and it was made clear on Fernandez’s mural. Leandra ended the anniversary with another call, though in Spanish: “usted puede hacer *mejor* que ser malicia.”

And I looked at the Explorers, and thought that it was no wonder they were cheered for and elevated by the community into a non-recalcitrance like Junior’s, “commit[ting], as human being... to protect the life of our people,”⁹⁹ and only able to do so in uniform, in striving. I wondered if they would care about history, if they really thought that this was the only way. I wondered if they could give up goodness, and grieve, and grieve their friend and themselves.

And while everyone could, and would, remember Junior on such commemorations, the past still managed, as it always does, to catch up to the present.

On September 16th, 2022, “masterminds” of Junior’s murder were sentenced to 25 years to life,¹⁰⁰ and Leandra was asked for her reaction. She held onto what she had already known was true. “Those who choose gang life need to know that this is where it ends. State prison for the rest of your life,”¹⁰¹ she said. For Leandra, the men who killed her baby boy invoked a rage in her that she would carry with her daily, and could never forget or forgive.

It’s a justice to keep those criminals in jail forever, because we have a lot of kids already [frustrated], so scared, if one of those criminals comes back to the streets what’s gonna

⁹⁸ Ibid., 1:45-1:52.

⁹⁹ Crane. Words spoken at the service held at Mt. Carmel Church the day of Junior’s funeral.

¹⁰⁰ “Masterminds of ‘Junior’ Guzman-Feliz Murder Sentenced to Prison,” <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/public-safety/2022/09/17/masterminds-of--junior--guzman-feliz-murder-sentenced-to-prison>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

happen? The father is gonna be nervous with his children coming outside, knowing that those types of criminals are gonna be (*the camera zooms in on her*) out on the street killing people. So, what are we gonna do with that kinds of person come back to be free? So they deserve to be locked forever. This is justice, justice.¹⁰²

“Criminals” are forever dangerous and deadly. Notwithstanding their reasons. Junior’s death was a cruel one; Junior did not deserve to die. Similarly, however, I wonder if Junior deserved to have the weight of the world put on his shoulders. I wondered how we had all gotten here. Leandra Feliz had lost her baby boy, and time was, as of that awful night, forever out of joint. One of the interviewers asks her if it’s felt like it’s been four years, already.

“Does it feel like it’s been four years?”

“For me, I’m in the same week. Time does not happen. I’m in the same days. It’s the same for me.”¹⁰³

For Leandra, time does not remedy the grief or her in-process mourning. As a matter of fact, time does not even happen. Past, present, and future blend into each other as a result of the death of her 15-year-old son; histories of immigration, possibility, and futurity are canceled, as a mother in the Bronx mourns. Junior was the future, *her* future, and the future had been killed off. In turn, perhaps her own history of immigration to the United States, in search of that future, had felt like it’d been nullified, too. The present was neither what it might have been hoped for, as of however many years ago in Leandra’s life as a Dominican woman, nor at all anything about the future now that the vehicle of it, her son, was immortal and ageless in heaven. Leandra, stuck in time, clutching close to her the narrative and “goodness” of her son’s early death, appears to be haunted by the ghost of Junior, by both his bright future cut short and by the absence of the baby

¹⁰² *Junior Guzman-Feliz’s Mother Reacts to Guilty Verdict*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WruGCloYKBU>.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

boy she loved so much and seen so much good in. Her refusal “to give up the ghost,” her “failed mourning,”¹⁰⁴ as per Mark Fisher, of Junior, a mourning stuck outside of time and yet still in the moving, changing, palimpsestic Bronx, might reveal something of how destructively the forces of constructed “goodness,” “badness,” “animality,” “community,” and “love” crashed into one another on that night, and even before, as kinetic energies lingered in the air of the precarious Bronx. Leandra, stuck in no particular time and yet still “in the same week” and “the same days,” appears to be stuck in the past, *re*-living it in the present and haunted by it, mourning a future with her son that had never arrived. It’s in this sense that, for Leandra, and perhaps for many of the Bronx that mourn the deaths of their loved ones, to similar or myriad violences, unpinnable violences, violences with complex explanations... that the past bleeds into the present and *becomes* the present. Suddenly, there is only the past, and suddenly there is no present.

And yet, Junior’s smiling in death from a trusted afterlife, his speaking to his mother that “I’m alive, I’m alive, I’m waiting for you here,” exemplifies the other portion of Fisher’s synthesis on “haunting,” that it is “about refusing to give up the ghost *or* – and this can sometimes amount to the same thing – the refusal of the ghost to give up on us.”¹⁰⁵ Though Junior is “alive,” happy and well, he continues to wait for the future, too. Junior, spoken for, *speaks*, and it is not rage that he communicates but a reminder that the future might still be coming, “better” days, even if we may be forever experiencing the specters of the past. Waiting for Leandra, waiting to reunite with her; Junior waits. The ghost does not spit rhetoric, nor do they hold fast the narratives that they were thrown into. Believing in the future, still, in spite of violence, the ghost also appears to believe, in their haunting and waiting, that the past is not yet

¹⁰⁴ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Zero Books, 2014), 22.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

finished, that there may be things in need of reconsideration and correcting. Leandra refuses to give up the ghost, and the ghost of Junior refuses to give up on her... and it is *her* that he is not giving up on.

... And I wonder what he might want for her.

Junior's murder was, is, a cultural haunting. The ghost of his body, so close to life (the future, the emergency room) lingers in the Bronx, and it is not the only one. However, what Junior's parable, a parable of non-recalcitrance and law-abiding citizenry, of colored "goodness," of obedience and civility in the face of racialized "others" like himself, reveals from us who experienced and carry the story is that there is a certain racialized anxiety wrapped up in a lot of things... the search and hope for the future, embodied by Bronx youth like Junior, suggests a concomitance with racialized generation *desire* – immigrant aspirations of assimilation within the Global North, the U.S., and its illusive promise, even after its unfulfillment, even with this constant longing-in-progress. Close the curtain. *No salgas*. The fear of an external, racialized "other" both *of* and exiled *from* the affective and topographical community is a fear of death, and takes the form of a chilling colorism. Language is used against each other, hides under the tongue. Makes itself comfortable. At the same time, however, this fear is *also* a fear for, a *desire for*, life, or rather for ideas of life: a "good" life, in which futurity is prioritized over the present and the past, and whose stakes are placed on the shoulders of Bronx youth that will either actualize them, or fall short. Identifying death on the streets emblemizes recalcitrant youth – often "violent" men and women –, creating a type that is already historically informed against which the anxious Bronxite aspires to work against, even if it means they perform against

themselves and racialize themselves, *ourselves*, in the process, in the striving for assimilation, for the always out-of-grasp “better” future they, *we*, had always dreamed of.

... Junior... is not the only ghost who refuses to give up on us...

... hold onto the ghost a little longer...

Y

*¿Quién me encontrará
a mí,
en la noche,
en
el Bronx, a mis 22 años?*

JOURNAL ENTRY 2/5/23 – Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

*Para mi madre
mi padre
y “PALABRAS URGENTES”¹⁰⁶*

Y a los 6 años en 1970
X anda por las calles de Lima inconsciente
de lo que pienso de su Ciudad de los Reyes
la Ciudad Jardín
la Perla del Pacífico
Lima, la horrible.

Rímac,
desde mi mirada poética e
inmaduro hacía
el tercer mundo (*DIQUE*)
hacía américa latin con tantas ganas
de
venganza.

Tremendamente inconsciente, X,
de poetas y poetas y poetas
(con **MINÚSCULAS**)
paseando e ideando entre las yerbas de
presidentes
las plazas de las universidades
al lado de los innumerables fantasmas
de los poetas
izquierdistas del año

2023

si es que llega

¹⁰⁶ “Palabras urgentes” is the manifesto of the Peruvian poetry movement “Hora Zero,” written by Juan Ramírez Ruiz and Jorge Pimentel in Lima, 1970.

JOURNAL ENTRY 2/15/22 – Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

Texts with my friend, Immanuel. We shifted, just temporarily – or rather not temporarily but we’re just texting this time – from letters. In his most recent letter, he said that we were likely brothers in a past life, and Incans, and that I was his “INCAN BROTHER”.

I’m out and about, trying to spread love and clutching a bottle, a little warm off coquito, jumping between offices. Luis sends me a poem that I was bound to love at first verse.

*I’ve lived everyday
With fear in my pocket
And love in my eyes.*

Drunken love for my make-believe “Incan brother”; brother, still. After four more verses, sent between several 4:00 PM shots, he asks me for my interpretation. I give it to him.

“Beautiful. I love it. Better than my interpretation.”

I’m tipsy, feeling warm and lovely.

“But do you see rage? Or vengeance?”

I didn’t want to. I wasn’t sure that that was still for me.

“But rage, my friend, is healthy. Perhaps a little vengeance in your life would cleanse the wounds you hold.”

I didn’t want to be rageful. I was drunk. Happy. I knew at what I was angry, what I wanted things to be like. Right now, part of that was getting drunk with people I cared about, wanted to care about.

JOURNAL ENTRY 3/23/23 – Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

“Ese interview,” my mom had said to me sometime last year, back when she was studying for her naturalization exam, the one thing she needed to allow her to request that Mamita come here, with us, since she was all alone. “Ese interview te quita el sueño, hasta el hambre.”

My dad just had his exam today... and he passed. I didn't even know he had it; B doesn't like to make big deals out of things. He did it... and I called him, excited, congratulating him in the best way I could, my sweet, stubborn father. I wanted to look him in the eyes through the phone and pierce them. I wanted him to break a little. To just give it up. To let it out.

I imagined nothing changing, at least right away, because we'd all go back to doing our own things, making our salaries and missing each other dearly. And I imagined B letting some things out on the phone and letting himself stop being the man of the house, letting himself be held, because wasn't this one of the things that we had all, for generations, been waiting for? My father, a citizen. I imagined him saying it aloud, admitting to himself and to the rest of us, despite his hardheadedness, what my mom X had told me he wanted. The city is sad, and it's too much. My dad walks quick, and he trips, sometimes. B is dealing with heart palpitations, and X told me that he was worried that he was having memory problems, forgetting things, and I feel a little tug in my chest, towards him. I imagined him saying it, even though he didn't actually. I imagined him getting it, and I decided that I would do it, soon, I would give it to him once everything was all over.

I just want to see the countryside, again, to be in the quiet.

JOURNAL ENTRY 1/8/23 – The Bronx, NY

We walk around, to just get out.

“Cuando trabajaba en Conway me enojaba los fines de semana, no poder tomar un desayuno con mis hijos y tu papá...”

I reply. “Bueno, hoy sí tomamos una avenita.”

And we walk, her arm wrapped around mine.

JOURNAL ENTRY 3/1/23 – Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

Just trying to slow down.

A zine. “What’s life about? Work is the landlord’s response.”

JOURNAL ENTRY 12/25/22 – Soundview, The Bronx, NY

I get back from CCNY where 1 student works and can't finish her readings for class. Thinking about Queens, where 1 more newly arrived migrant kills himself. Another future was cancelled today.

So what if I'm young? I'll never get used to all of this.

And we're sitting at my grandpa's house, me and Daniel and Maria and V and Alejandra's boyfriend and Alejandra and Julia and Francisco and Cristina and Sarita and M and Patricia and David and Ronald and Stephan and Ernesto and X and B and Karla and Bernardo and Diego and Lucia and Chavo and Pancha and Anastacio, who is the oldest of us all today, at 102, sitting in the living room as I listen to conversations and float, finishing a translation into English of the same José Rosas Ribeyro poem. About to sing happy birthday, thankfully one more time, about to cut into a tres leches cake in the Soundview section of the Bronx.

JOURNAL ENTRY 2/10/23 – The Bronx, NY

And I don't quite know where I was on the day, on August 5th 2019, though I must have been gearing up for college in a few days. Toni Morrison died at Montefiore, *diablo*, right next to me. Four years later, I see the ghost of the beloved Morrison, somewhere in my writing. All of a sudden.

And continue to be migrant protests downtown, occupying the Watson Hotel, refusing to leave. The migrants arriving from all places in Latin America, migrants let down again by the city of New York.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Gwynne Hogan, "Standoff Outside Midtown Hotel, Where Migrants Refuse to Go to 'Inhumane' 1,000-Bed Shelter in Brooklyn," Gothamist, January 30, 2023, <https://gothamist.com/news/standoff-outside-midtown-hotel-where-migrants-refuse-to-go-to-inhumane-1000-bed-shelter-in-brooklyn>.

JOURNAL ENTRY 3/26/23 – Tivoli, NY

*Éste es 1 día insólito
vibrante cotidiano anónimo
terricola a más no poder como solemos decir los días de fiesta
o durante los cateos cada vez más frecuentes de las casas
el miedo te ilumina el estómago & te lo quema*

*NO HAY ANGUSTIA AHISTÓRICA
AQUÍ VIVIR ES CONTENER EL ALIENTO
& DESNUDARSE*



*Desde luego que no eres el único
frente al que el paraguas oxidado de la vida
no quiere desplegar sus alas
no eres el único al que el mundo le parece
– en 1 momento pesimista –
1 ghetto sin puentes ni caminos*

*& a veces también tú cojeas & te oscureces
te rascas la nariz & la costra del recuerdo
la Existencia toma el cuerpo de 1 policía
que te pasea su macana último modelo a todo lo largo de la cara
& tú todavía preguntas: ¿Qué onda mi lobo feroz?
¿Qué tal de salud la represión?
mientras tiemblan las matas de mariguana
sembradas como zanahorias en el subsuelo de tu mente
& tu corazón es 1 vecindad populosa
con las coladeras & el techo derrumbándose
por el puro miedo
por el puro miedo*



...1 cuerpo se alfabetiza junto a otro cuerpo
& así se funda la Universidad de la Ternura

*cuando aprendes a decir No
con toda la energía de 1 karateca cinta negra
o a decir Sí / con la certeza
de que pronto las estrellas tendrán 1 color
que hasta pasado 1 buen rato entenderemos*



¿& qué blancura añadiréis a esta blancura
*qué aliento / qué ardor?*¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Mario Santiago Papasquiari, *Consejos de 1 discípulo de Marx a 1 fanático de Heidegger* (ediciones norteadas, 2018).

JOURNAL ENTRY 4/1/23 – The Bronx, NY

The building around my corner is now very big.

The skeleton of another is now under construction. Already, its many sprawling parts have created the foundation of the entire building, and it is already enough to shield our building from the sun, from the other side.

VIII.

And I come back from a class, an evening class, the other night, just a class in faraway Brooklyn, a reading of Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It's very late. I brought a dear friend of mine. I bubbled with excitement, and wondered what next. What next?

V: "How was the class? Long? Boring? How was it?"

"No, it wasn't boring. It was a good class."

And I am tired, *my dear*, and there is much to do. I'm behind on a few things, I'm scrambling. There's a lot of it I love, and I'm looking for all of it here, in the Bronx. Wondering if you'll come with me, next time, too. I think about the places we can go, a short walk in the park, awkward as it might be, so long as maybe we can try. Maybe we'll go to Washington Square Park, which is a bit odd of a place, I know, but there are some lovely things going on there. The city gets the cops to close the park at night because a lot of the kids our age have been going there and setting up, a lot of lovely mutual aid stuff, people taking care of people. Or maybe we'll go to Sunset Park in Brooklyn, to the Plaza, Plaza Tonatiuh, where everyone's setting up shop and selling food and playing, and there are some classes going on there, too... I know they're classes... maybe we can just give them a whirl. They got kicked out, a few weeks ago, in early April, once things started to get warm. Something about not having payments. People got hurt. They'll be back, though the Plaza will be back. I know it. I think about the protests there, the protests that are happening everywhere we can't see, all the people on Instagram posting all the things I would have never thought I would be craving to see and tell all my friends about. I see that 38 migrants died in a fire the other day, in the U.S.-Mexico border

detention center.¹⁰⁹ I see protests in Perú, Dina Boluarte matándonos. Things to go to, necessary things, and ways to reach out to you.

And I start to think about, thinking about that, thinking about you, about the young poets of the Bronx. I start to think about everyone, *you*, poet, *you*. I start to think about Josue Caceres, Nicco Díaz, the folks at Bx Writers; poems I would write Alejandro; the collective poem I'd love to write with you. How *is* the young poetry of the Bronx, kids from 17 to 25? Do they write? Fuck me, of course they do. But what are they writing about? I think about the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Library of Study, all the zine libraries and book clubs in the city, all the neighbors to meet. And I start to think about her, about a young Stephanie Pacheco, the Bronx Poet Laureate and exalted and yet graceful, careful, I heard it in her voice. La poeta jóven, Stephanie Pacheco, walking through the Bronx, looking. I bet she's read it, *This Bridge Called My Back*, a young woman poet of the Bronx reading, reaching out to you. She was so careful. So precise with her language. I think about the passage.

We were born into colored homes. We grew up with the inherent contradictions in the color spectrum right inside those homes... We are all family. From those families we were on the other hand encouraged to leave, to climb up white. And with the other hand, the reins were held tight on us, our parents understanding the danger that burdened our homes.

We learned to live with these contradictions. This is the root of our radicalism.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Jose Luis Gonzalez, "Mexico Border Fire: At Least 38 Die during Protest at Juarez Migrant Center," *Reuters*, March 29, 2023, sec. Americas, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/least-ten-dead-after-fire-migrant-facility-mexicos-ciudad-juarez-sources-2023-03-28/>.

¹¹⁰ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), 5.

And I start to think about coming home. About what things are going to look like.

Because things, things are going to have to change...

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