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Chapter 6: Listening to Afro-Latinidad: The Sonic Archive of *Olú Clemente*

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For many Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, Roberto Clemente was more than just a baseball star. Above all, he was a symbol of hope and humanitarianism, succeeding despite the overt racial discrimination he encountered as a Black Puerto Rican. Off the field, Clemente was renowned and beloved for his involvement in charity work in Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries. His final humanitarian act came about in 1972 on New Year's Eve when the plane chartered to deliver aid to earthquake victims in Nicaragua crashed into the ocean off the coast of Isla Verde, Puerto Rico. His sudden and tragic death brought about many tributes, but one that has remained unnoticed is the ritual musical drama *Olú Clemente: The Philosopher of Baseball*.¹ Renowned Nuyorican artists, Miguel Algarín and Tato Laviera, pay homage to Clemente's life and perseverance by dedicating the ritual musical drama, *Olú Clemente: The Philosopher of Baseball* to him. This significant yet presently under-discussed performance, which premiered for one night at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park on August 30, 1973, is among the first – if not the very first – U.S. Latino musical production produced by Joseph Papp,

¹ Miguel Algarín and J.A. Laviera, *Olú Clemente: The Philosopher of Baseball*. New York Public Library, Performing Arts-Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives, Joseph Papp New York Shakespeare Recording Collection, LT-10 10282, recorded August 30, 1973, sound tape reels.

the founder of The Public Theater.² This production engaged with Clemente's blackness and integrated many Afro-Caribbean elements, illustrating how Nuyoricans used theater, music, religion, and other performing practices to mark their Afro-Latino identity.³

For months, the script of *Olú Clemente* was the definitive archival document and the only entry point into the world of *Olú Clemente*. However, upon further research into Joseph Papp's papers at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, I found that a handful of black and white photos, a prompt book, past iterations of the script, and a sound recording of the performance were all available. These archival documentations enhance our understanding of the past. They provide insight on the visual, aural, and performance elements and assist in reconstructing this theatrical event—what do the songs, instrumentation, and overall performance of this musical sound and look like? Listening to the audio recording of *Olú Clemente* made it clear that the script, published in the journal *Revista Chicana-Riqueña* during the fall of 1979, six years after the original production of the musical, could only provide a limited version of the performance.⁴ After all, we must remember that a script is only a blueprint of what actually occurs on stage. As a theatre historian who specializes in Nuyorican theatre and performance, recovering the sonic archive provided more than another gateway to accessing the musical; it altered my understanding of this production. This sonic archive of *Olú Clemente* does

² It is important to note that there are several earlier iterations of *Olú Clemente*. In Joseph Papp New York Shakespeare Festival Collection (Box 2-16, folder 20) there is a program of *Piñones: A Puerto Rican Musical Book* by Tato Laviera. This seems to suggest that Laviera originally conceived the idea and then partnered with Miguel Algarín to shape the musical.

³ Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Juan Flores, *The Diaspora Strikes back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁴ *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, founded by Luis Dávila and Nicolás Kanellos in 1973, was one of the few journals in the country offering a forum for Latinos to publish their literary works and art. This literary journal evolved from the *Revista Chicana-Riquena* to *The Americas Review* in the mid-80s and gained acclaim by the *New York Times* and the *Small Press Review*, along with countless others. This successful literary magazine launched Arte Público Press in 1979. Tia Tenopia, 2011. "Latinopia Literature Arte Público Press," May 1. (<http://latinopia.com/latino-literature/latinopia-literature-arte-publico-press/>), accessed on May 4, 2013.

not merely capture the ways the Puerto Rican and Nuyorican community were deeply impacted by Roberto Clemente's death, but also how they utilized rich African-diasporic performance traditions and practices. Magnifying the unscripted sonic moments, such as the vibrant Nuyorican theater and music scene of the seventies, the joyous collective singing at the *parranda* (Christmas caroling Puerto Rican style), the improvisational moments, the dynamic audience response, and the constant drumming throughout the musical, illustrates the significant strategies of sound and music Nuyoricans implemented to express blackness and their Afro-diasporic identity. In carefully reading the sonic archive, I grapple with methodological questions of how historians read in a script and audio recording the Afro-Latino aural textures and contours of language, sound, and music in, while also recovering a part of theatre history that has yet to be heard and narrated.

The late 1960s marked the beginning of the Nuyorican movement, a period of New Awakening, where artists, educators, activists, intellectuals, students, and working class people cultivated a form of radicalism that sought to reform civil society. Artists, in particular, were at the forefront of this social movement partaking in anti-war protests, civil rights demonstrations, and local grass-roots initiatives to rehabilitate the inner city. Most importantly, they were now taking the reins in their own hands to gain community control over public resources dedicated to urban renewal and anti-poverty initiatives. *Olú Clemente* must be understood within the context of this period of radicalism and creative explosion that was occurring in communities of color. Nuyorican poets and theater makers such as Miguel Piñero, Miguel Algarín and Tato Laviera, among others, were cultivating a Nuyorican aesthetic. At the time, Algarín was a Professor of English at Rutgers University and was also running El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop with the support of Joseph Papp, who provided the group with a studio at 4 Astor

Place in New York City.⁵ The need for poets to share their work extended outside the workshop with informal gatherings in Algarín's apartment. Eventually, this group demanded a more formal space for poets to gather. Thus began Algarín and Piñero's quest to formally find a home for the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.⁶ A year after the Cafe opened its doors, Miguel Piñero's New York Drama Circle and Obie award winning play *Short Eyes* (1974) became the first Latino play to hit Broadway. Similarly, Laviera was deeply involved in the Lower East Side poetry, theater, and salsa scene.⁷ He had yet to publish his signature anthologies *La Carreta Took a U-Turn* (1979) and *AmeRícan* (1985). *Olú Clemente* was part of this movement wherein Nuyoricans engaged with the civil rights and black pride activism of the seventies.

Although an important part of the poetry and theater scene, Nuyorican performance is not perceived as part of the canonical American historical narrative. Though there is, as Flores states, "a glaring omission of Puerto Rican life in the United States from the historical record," turning to personal or institutional archives can help fill the void.⁸ *Olú Clemente* is part of a reel series that documents the premier of new original works created by artists of color and produced by Papp between 1973 and 1979. This sound archive, which lives in the New York Public Library for Performing Arts, includes the recording of Ramiro Ramirez's *Mondongo* (1976) and *Sancocho* (1979); *Evening at New Rican Village with Pedro Pietri* (1977-1978); *Revolutionary Ensemble in Concert* (1971-1972); *Mango Tango* by Jessica Hagedorn (1977-1978); *Poets from the Inside*, plays from Ed Bullins and Ntozake Shange, (1978-1979); and *White Sirens* by Lois

⁵ In the introduction of *Nuevo Pasos: Chicano and Puerto Rican Drama* (1979), Nicolás Kanellos and Jorge A. Huerta, refer to the group as the Nuyorican Writers' and Actors' Workshop (viii). On the other hand, Algarín in a *New York Newsday* interview conducted on December 5, 1990 and later in the "Afterword" of *Action: Nuyorican Poets Cafe Theater Festival* (1997), calls it El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop (132).

⁶ Miguel Algarín and Lois Griffith, *Action* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), xii.

⁷ Tato Laviera and Stephanie Alvarez, "Tato in His Own Words: A Collaborative Testimonio," in *The AmeRican Poet: Essays on the Work of Tato Laviera*, eds. Stephanie Alvarez and William Luis (New York: Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2014), 311.

⁸ Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, 52.

Griffith (1978-1979). These aforementioned artists of color are seminal figures of the seventies, bringing the politics of race and social justice into the realm of theatre. As such, these sound recordings, although almost completely unknown and unheard, are significant sites of cultural production that illustrate how African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos used sound and music to narrate a history of resistance and create a sense of belonging. This kind of close reading requires a historian to listen to the sounds; however if the audio recording is inaudible, we are further removed from grasping the significance of this theatrical event. More frankly stated, if sonic archives are not properly preserved, they run risk of being erased from history.

Ironically, *Olú Clemente* and all of the aforementioned productions produced by Papp are currently in the precarious predicament of disappearing. They were recorded on reel and the majority of them still remain in that format. When I requested the recording of *Olú Clemente*, I could not listen to it because the library only digitizes material upon request. The preservation specialist warned me that since time had aged the reels with splits and tears, he might not be able to retrieve the recording. The day's wait made me keenly aware that musical performances can instantly disappear from history. Fortunately, when I returned the next day, the preservation specialist did not encounter any problems, and I was able to listen to *Olú Clemente*.

Reading the Sonic References of Iconic Afro-Latin@ Figures

Structured in two acts, *Olú Clemente* begins at a ballpark diamond in Piñones, Puerto Rico with a New Year's Eve *parranda* where El Poeta (The Poet), who has returned home after living in New York City for thirty years learns about Clemente's tragic death. The setting of Piñones, a town in the coastal region of Puerto Rico and in close proximity to Loíza, immediately situates the play in a location that is principally known for its majority black

population and its strong African tradition.⁹ The festive tone of the parranda turns grim as the town receives the heart-wrenching news of Clemente's passing. Profoundly saddened by the news, we hear sounds of astonishment, outcries, and hollering by the townspeople. El Poeta, possessed by Elegúa, announces that Clemente's spirit named Olú has been given a position among the Seven African Powers.¹⁰ The magnitude of Clemente's ever presence is reflected in the second act, which is set in New York City, where the Nuyorican community worships Olú as an ancestral spiritual teacher and savior.¹¹ They pray for Olú to guide them through their present time of crisis—unemployment, drug addiction, post-traumatic stress syndrome, housing conditions, and lack of access to quality education.

Algarín and Laviera utilized Afro-Caribbean music as the underpinning of *Olú Clemente* to sonically signal a new pulse for the community to follow, one that amplifies the activism of the civil rights and black pride movement. In the opening stage directions, Algarín and Laviera pointedly orient the reader to hear the Afro-Latino literary and musical traditions of *Olú Clemente*. They specifically align their work with the likes of Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén and Puerto Rican poet Luis Palés Matos, who were known for celebrating blackness in their work and using rhetorical strategies that expressed Afro-Caribbean cultures.¹² Similar to the poetic tactics of Guillén and Palés Matos, Algarín and Laviera use repetitions, pauses, and recurrent rhythmic patterns in the script as way of producing an African musicality. In referencing Guillén

⁹ Luis A. Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Petra Rivera-Rideau, "'Cocolos Moderno': Salsa, Reggaetón, and Puerto Rico's Cultural Politics of Blackness," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2013): 5.

¹⁰ In the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean, seven of the many orishas were combined into a commonly seen image called "The Seven African Powers."

¹¹ In the script Algarín and Laviera define Olú as teacher and savior. Nicolás Kanellos and Jorge A. Huerta, *Nuevos Pasos: Chicano and Puerto Rican Drama* (Gary, Indiana: Revista Chicano-Riqueña, 1989), 152.

¹² Kanellos & Huerta, *Nuevos Pasos*, 151.

and Palos Matos's visual, textual, linguistic, and sonic strategies, Algarín and Laviera pay homage to their black heritage.

In addition to modeling a literary tradition, Algarín and Laviera utilize the basic format of Afro-Caribbean music, especially Puerto Rico's plena and Cuba's son.¹³ In the stage directions, they specifically call for instruments such as the panderetas, congos, bongos, timbales, and maracas to produce an African-based sound that would energize the theater. This strategy of using music in literature was one that Laviera often used in his poetry. His poem "the salsa of Bethesda fountain" (1979) works to document the power of rumbas in Central Park during the seventies. He writes: "the internal dance of salsa/is of course plena/ and permit me to say these words/ in afro-spanish:/ la bomba y la plena puro són/ de Puerto Rico que ismael es el/ rey y es el juez/ meaning the same as marvin gaye/ singing spiritual social songs/ to black awareness."¹⁴ His poem notes how these musical jams articulated Nuyoricans connections with Africa and African Americans and contested Central Park as site of Afro-Latino affirmation. Central Park functioned as a public multi-ethnic and multi-racial gathering space where Nuyoricans, African Americans, and other Afro-Latino drummers acoustically took center stage. In doing so, they were declaring their cultural pride at a time when they were negatively stereotyped and being displaced from the areas surrounding Central Park.¹⁵ The Central Park rumbas, as Berta Jottar argues, were at "the intersection where the energy of the civil rights movement synchronized with the formation of an Afro-Boricua identity."¹⁶ Notably, Algarín and Laviera's use of Afro-Caribbean music in *Olú Clemente*, which also took place at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park

¹³ Ibid., 151.

¹⁴ Tato Laviera, "The Salsa of Bethesda Fountain," in *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*, 67-68, (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1992).

¹⁵ Berta Jottar, "Central Park Rumba: Nuyorican Identity and the Return to African Roots," *CENTRO Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 23, no. 1 (2011): 13; Marisol Berríos-Miranda, "Salsa as an Expressive Liberation," *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 16, no.4 (2004): 161.

¹⁶ Jottar, "Central Park Rumba," 6.

(not too far from Bethesda Fountain), must be read as a continuum of the artistic expression spawned during the Civil Rights Movement. Algarín and Laviera's decision to perform *Olú Clemente* at Central Park's Delacorte Theatre, their acknowledgement of Afro-Caribbean literary models in the stage directions and script musical instrumentation demonstrate how they identified their community and their Afro-Latinidad, and at the same time defied assimilation to U.S cultural and political influence.

The sonic archive reveals the intimate relationship between the audience and the performers, their interplay, the integral collective practices and the improvisational elements that often embody Afro-diasporic productions. Algarín and Laviera establish a collective sensibility by setting the opening as a New Year parranda in Puerto Rico. The sense of community was even more audible when hearing a crying baby and young children in the audience. The entire cast sings for over ten minutes about La Virgen Maria, eating pasteles and chicharrón on December 24th, beautiful women, the power of rum, and the Afro-linkages of drumming. While the stage directions mention that the parranda proceeds the dialogue, it is unclear as to what the performers sing, how long this musical encounter lasts and to what extent it moves audience members. Parrandas usually occur unexpectedly throughout the entire Christmas season and that impromptu quality remains in the production. People sing along, clap, laugh, and shout out the names of performers, acknowledging and encouraging them to show their skills—"yes," "es verdad" (it is the truth), "Viva Puerto Rico" (long live Puerto Rico), "Canta Miguelito" (sing it Miguelito) and "Asi es Tato Tocalo" (Right on Tato, play it). Someone even calls out which house the group will carol to next: "vamos a la casa de Ismael Rivera (let's go to Ismael Rivera's house)." These encouraging shout outs suggest the possible special appearance of the authors, Miguel Algarín and Tato Laviera, as well as Ismael Rivera, to join the parranda. Known, for his

sharp chanting delivery of words, Algarín's participation on the stage would not be surprising. Similarly, Laviera's presence on stage would also make sense, as he was deeply involved in the Lower East Side art scene and in the salsa community.¹⁷ Rivera, an Afro-Puerto Rican icon, known as El Sonero Mayor, a master of plena and salsa, by that time had recorded and toured throughout the Caribbean with Rafael Cortijo y su Combo, the first all-black band to perform on television and in prestigious concert venues in Puerto Rico.¹⁸ It is important to note that neither the original program nor the script document Ismael Rivera's appearance. However, Patricia O'Hare's performance review, the only one in public record, mentions Rivera's appearance with Los Pleneros de Loiza in the review and the sound archive captures the audience's response when he appears on stage. Audiences applaud and cheer even louder when his booming, spontaneous, and rhythmically precise voice rides with the beats of the drums filling the theater with elation. Additionally, there are various correspondences that indicate that Algarín and Laviera were requesting his participation.¹⁹ These unscripted sonic moments--the raucous audience participation, improvisational impulse of the performer, and appearances of iconic figures amplify the play's connection to Afro-Latinidad. There are even statements about Celia Cruz and La Lupe, two legendary Afro-Cuban singers, also being possible participants.²⁰ Algarín and Laviera's desire to include these artists was a way of including critical Afro-Latino icons in a production about an Afro-Puerto Rican whose career spanned the entirety of the black freedom struggle from the Montgomery Bus Boycotts to Rosa Parks to the Black Panthers.

¹⁷ Tato Laviera and Stephanie Alvarez, "Tato in his own words: A collaborative *testimonio*," in *American Poet: Essays on the Work of Tato Laviera*, eds. Stephanie Alvarez and William Luis. New York: Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2014: 311.

¹⁸ Rivera-Rideau, "Cocolos Moderno", 6.

¹⁹ New York Shakespeare Festival Papers, Box 1-319 f. 10

²⁰ New York Shakespeare Festival Papers, Box 1-319 f. 9

Among the various impromptu sonic moments, there was also the appearance of Jorge Brandon (1909-1995), who was known as the declamador of the Lower East Side and the father of Nuyorican poetry. He mentored Algarín and Laviera, and influenced the style and delivery of many of the poets coming out of the Cafe. They, among countless other poets such as Algarín, Pedro Pietri, Bob Holman, and Martin Espada, have written poems about Brandon's declamatory style and how he taught many poets to declare poetry in the everyday life of the community.²¹ In a collaborative testimonio with Stephanie Alvarez, Laviera acknowledges how Brandon made him think about cadence, tonality, and the skill of capturing the ear. He recalls:

por él conocí las 100 mejores poesías que él había editado en el idioma español, y por él aprendí carisma, cadencia, y persecución de palabras. Aprendí la tonalidad de aprender y memorizar la prosa, porque la poesía was meant to be read and was meant to be heard.

[because of him I found out about the best 100 poems that he had created in the Spanish language and because of him I learned charisma, cadence, and the percussion of words. I learned the tonality of learning and memorizing prose, because poetry was meant to be read and was meant to be heard].²²

²¹ Miguel Algarín reflects on the impact that Brandon had on many poets in *Puerto Rican Voice: Interview with Writers* by Carmen Dolores Hernández (1997, 42). Similar to the ways Pedro Pietri, Sandra Maria Esteves, Bob Holman, and other Nuyorican poets describe Brandon, Algarín brings a sharper focus on the poignant yet ephemeral aspects of orality and performance. In addition to acknowledging him in interviews, he reveres Brandon's declamatory style in his poem "Christmas Eve: Nuyorican Cafe," *Mongo Affairs* (1978).

I sit weaving electrical impulses
With Willy One, Ruben and the talking
Coconut, el Señor Jorge Brandon, who
bears the flag of poetry on his tongue
and purest love on his heart giving it
away on the impulse of the moment,
generously to anybody ready to control
the ego and become a listener to a master
painter with words... (6).

²² Laviera and Alvarez, "Tato in his own words," 297,

Indeed, Brandon was a fixture in the neighborhood, regularly performing on the streets. Pedro Pietri, another contemporaneous Nuyorican poet, in an interview conducted shortly before his death, anointed Brandon as the Saint of the Nuyorican Poetry Movement.²³

In listening to the recording of *Olú Clemente*, when Brandon enters the stage the audience immediately responds clapping. We hear the audience exclaim: “Ayi esta el Coco que Habla” (there is the talking coconut), referring to Brandon’s performance technique of using a microphone attached to a small speaker placed inside a coconut shell. In a declamatory style he delivers a poem that pays homage to Roberto Clemente by describing his death and transformation into the spirit Olú. Brandon’s polyvocal incantation gradually becomes a possession of sorts, hysteria of words that are at times overwhelming to the ears. Since as a declamador, his poetry was based on the vocal performance, it cannot be easily found in bookstores or libraries, nor is it accessible in recording for the public domain. Similar to Ismael Rivera, Brandon’s name does not appear in the script, but can be tracked in the program and artist payment roll. Accessible to the general public are only two poems published in *Aloud*, a handful of audio-recorded performances at the Poets House in New York City, and José Parreño’s homemade video, *El coco que habla (The Talking Coconut, 1978)*, archived at The Center of Puerto Rican Studies. Notably, then, *Olú Clemente* offers a unique recording of Brandon.

The recording of *Olú Clemente* reveals the sonic contours of the performance and the nature of impromptu live artistic collaborations rooted in oral traditions, evidencing how Algarín and Laviera were creating the foundational fabric for a Nuyorican aesthetic that was already

²³ Raymond Beltrán, “There was Never No Tomorrow, Nuyorican Pedro Pietri in His Own Words,” *La Prensa San Diego*, February 6, 2004, accessed on October 3, 2014, <http://laprensa-sandiego.org/archieve/february06-04/pedro.htm>.

underway and in circulation within the community. *Olú Clemente* is one of the first productions that capture how the intimate relationship between music and poetry functions in the practice of a Nuyorican aesthetic. Positioned in this light, we can see how *Olú Clemente* lays the foundation leading to much later works like: *Slanguage* (2001), *Def Poetry Jam* (2002), *In the Heights* (2008), and *Ameriville* (2009).

Reading Sound on the Page: A Review of *Olú Clemente*

Performance reviews often allow readers to travel back in time and imagine what happens on stage. The only performance review of *Olú Clemente* in existence was written by Patricia O'Hare and published in the *New York Daily News* on August 31, 1973. The production, as she describes it, is "less a play than a highly stylized dramatic reading" and "as sparse as the stage it was performed on." As for the actors, "They seemed more to be reciting speeches than dialogue, and while some of the thoughts they spoke had validity, some of them were truly pompous, to say the least." The storyline was even more problematic as it was simply too "lugubrious and heavy-handed, something that Clemente himself never was." The music, however, was an element she valued. "But if the actual dramatization left something to be desired," she comments, "the musical accompaniment to it was excellent." Seduced by the rhythmic dynamism of Los Pleneros de Loisada and Ismael Rivera, O'Hare describes the music as "happy, infectious, engaging, and it was really delightful."

With the New York City salsa explosion in the seventies, there was a great deal of attention drawn to Latin music. Historically, the cultural productions of Latinos that circulated within the larger popular culture were minimized to focus on food, music, and dancing. In the review of the 1974 Broadway production of *Short Eyes*, also produced by Joseph Papp, Fiona

Mills discusses how a Latin musical scene was built into the production and though this scene played only a minor role in the play, reviewers noted it as the highlight of the night.²⁴ This speaks to the trend of Latinos and blacks gaining acclaim when they are musical subjects. O'Hare's review suggests that the musical element of *Olú Clemente* was the only positive and legible entry point into the performance. O'Hare enjoys the music. The persistent sounds of the drums and güiros heard throughout the entire recording of *Olú Clemente* gain power over the listening ear, evoking the impulse to joyously move one's entire body. Rather than seeing the music "as a cohesive cultural force" or "a tool of cultural survival, a carrier of national identity and unity against the opposing conditions"²⁵, O'Hare reframes the African-based musical elements to exoticize the performers as a stereotypical trope of both blackness and Latinidad.

Furthermore, when O'Hare described the play as "less a play than a stylized dramatic reading," she misses the link between the declamatory delivery of lines and signature practices of the Nuyorican poetry aesthetic. According to her, the performers are reciting speeches rather than having conversations and seem too "pompous." The sonic archive reminds listeners that orality played an integral role in the embodied cultural practices of the Nuyorican community of the seventies. *Olú Clemente* opened at the heels of when the Nuyorican Poetry Cafe was establishing a location and formalizing a style and aesthetics. Reminiscent to the Puerto Rican declamatory style, performers take on an authoritative stance and declare odes in an affirmative manner. They must claim a huge amount of sonic space, which for audiences who are not part of the Nuyorican community or are uninformed about the cultural specificity of this artistic genre can be read as showy and ostentatious. As Algarín discusses in different published essays, poetry

²⁴ Fiona Mill, "Seeing Ethnicity: The Impact of Race and Class on the Critical Reception of Miguel Piñero's *Short Eyes*," in *Captive Audience: Prison and Captivity in Contemporary Theater*, ed. by Thomas Fahy and Kimball King, 41-66 (New York: Routledge, 2003), 47.

²⁵ Félix Cortes, Angel Falcón, and Juan Flores, "The Cultural Expression of Puerto Ricans in New York: A Theoretical Perspective and Critical Review," *Latin American Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (1976): 126.

was always performed, with an eye (or better yet ear) on the vocal projection and intonation.²⁶

What audiences witness in *Olú Clemente* is the earliest development of a performance style, the emergence of an aesthetics associated with Nuyorican Poets Cafe.

Overall, O'Hare's review evidences a disconnect from the community, cultural, social, and political content, the major players signaled within the play, and the aesthetic and performing practices of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. O'Hare's review alone cannot provide the whole picture. Traditional archives privilege written documentation over other forms of archival sources, ultimately erasing specific histories and experiences. If not for the live sound recording of *Olú Clemente*, the delivery style invoked during the performance would be completely erased from this theatre history narrative. The dynamic audience response, declamatory delivery of lines, improvisational moments, and the constant drumming throughout the musical, for instance, are critical Afro-diasporic performance moments not legible/audible on the page but nevertheless crucial to the overall performance of *Olú Clemente*. The sonic archive recovers these invaluable Afro-diasporic practices of Nuyorican theater and performance history that engage with ideas of blackness.

Reading the Spiritual as Political in the Sonic Archive

The audio recording of *Olú Clemente* documents the rich Afro-diasporic performance traditions and practices utilized by Nuyorican poets, performers, and musicians. Notably, the acoustic texture is highly charged with spiritual relevance and social urgency. In the theater listing of the *New York Times*, *Variety*, and *The Daily News*, the playwrights immediately anchor the production with an Afro-Caribbean religious framework. They publicize *Olú Clemente* as “a

²⁶ Miguel Algarín, “Introduction: Nuyorican Language,” in *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings*, ed. by Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, (New York: William Morrow, 1975), 9.

ritual celebration of Roberto Clemente” or “a ritualistic eulogy to Roberto Clemente divided in two acts.” The phrasing “ritualistic eulogy” stems from an earlier version of the script. The original title of the musical was “Baquiné A Roberto: A Program in Three Parts.”²⁷ As Algarín & Laviera describe in the stage directions of the earlier version, the Baquiné is an old, disappearing, African partially religious and festive tradition that functions as a wake marking the death of an innocent child.²⁸ The relatives, friends, and neighbors of the deceased normally perform the baquinés and enact themselves, which is an element the authors build into the musical.²⁹ Similar to baquinés, *Olú Clemente* includes dancing, singing, and acting. Furthermore, the plot deals with Clemente’s death and incorporates the characterization of the Seven African Powers to demarcate his ascension to the spirit world. This archival information, which is part of earlier versions of the script and not in the published script, anchors the ritualistic eulogy within an African context and demonstrates how religion was an integral part of the performance practice.

With this Afro-Caribbean religious framework in mind, we can better understand the role of El Poeta, who serves as a narrator providing the audience with details of his present actions and surroundings, a documentarian capturing the moments of the past, and a preacher spreading the message of Nuyoricán resistance. As the narrator, El Poeta immediately establishes the time of date, the place, and the most recent occurrence and speaks in the present tense--“It is 12 o’clock, las doce, in a new year....Clemente died inside the waters of Piñones. He died when I touched land in Puerto Rico”³⁰ Other times he is a documentarian speaking about the same

²⁷ Information found in Joseph Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival Papers, T-Mss 1993-028, Box 1-319 f.9, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

²⁸ Baquinés are not written. They have always been improvised by the townspeople of our island. In 1965 the Institute of Culture of Puerto Rico organized experts and sponsored them in the production of a theatrical show. The show toured all over the island and was even brought to New York.

²⁹ Francisco López Cruz, *La música folklórica de Puerto Rico* (Sharon, Connecticut: Troutman Press, 1967) 164-165.

³⁰ Kanellos and Huerta, *Nuevos Pasos*, 152.

moment in the past tense—"I saw people in circles, they were praying...I knelt down, and I prayed. Coño, it had to be Clemente. I wish it were me. Damn it."³¹ Navigating between the past and the present allows El Poeta to directly connect with an audience who has recently lost an important cultural figure. The collapse of time serves as a pedagogical moment for El Poeta to model for the community how to use their mourning as a launching point for raising consciousness about the unjust social circumstance Puerto Ricans were experiencing in New York City, cultivating resistance and perseverance, and sparking inspiration. Before attaining these valuable tools of survival, El Poeta and the community must undergo a spiritual transformation.

When El Poeta arrives to Piñones the townspeople receives the news of Clemente's tragic death. In the recording the shrieks, laments, anguished cries of Clemente's passing and the urgent pleas for his body to be recovered overtake the listener with sadness and longing, something that cannot be captured on the page and is not documented in the script. Seeing the entire community in a state of mourning and prayer, El Poeta joins them. Among those praying are The Seven African Powers, chanting an evocation for Clemente's spirit, Olú. Moved by the evocation, El Poeta undergoes a spiritual possession:

I prayed hard and I screamed, and the people gathered round me, and they prayed to Clemente. Una oración [A prayer] by the sea, by the sea, Clemente, vente [come] inside of me, give me your beauty, help me transform. I want to sing my negroid verses. What is this? ¿Qué... me...vie...ne...por...den...tro... [What... is... co...ming in...side...of... me?] I feel something is coming out of me,

³¹ Ibid., 152.

shaking me, moving me, as swiftly as the waves. I feel a second voice coming out of me.³²

In scripting and staging this metaphysical experience the audience bears witness to El Poeta's transformation. In so doing, Algarín and Laviera radicalize the role of the poet as well as the role of the audience with social and spiritual activism. El Poeta represents the vibrant and prolific community of Puerto Rican poets living in New York City during the Nuyorican Movement, who used their work to expose the social injustices experienced by people of color and turned to spirituality to transcend social inequities. El Poeta is clear to note that the works of la poesía negroide, of which Palés Matos was a part of, facilitates his spiritual enlightenment. Thus, emphasizing how El Poeta, and by extension Nuyorican poetry, incorporated African dimensions of Puerto Rico's heritage, culture, and language.

By the end of the first scene the Orishas don El Poeta with the grand responsibility of using his poetry to spread the faith of Olú and to inspire the community with Clemente's work as an activist, resisting social inequalities. El Sonero and the entire chorus urge El Poeta to face his responsibilities, chanting:

QUE CANTE EL POETA, QUE NO TENGA MIEDO,
QUE CANTE EL POETA, QUE NO TENGA MIEDO.
ESTAS CON TU GENTE, NO TE VAMOS A ENGAÑAR
QUE CANTE, QUE CANTE, AQUI CON SU GENTE.

[LET THE POET SING, LET HIM NOT BE AFRAID.
LET THE POET SING, LET HIM NOT BE AFRAID.

³² Ibid., 152.

YOU ARE WITH YOUR PEOPLE, WE WILL NOT BETRAY YOU,
LET HIM SING, LET HIM SING, HERE WITH HIS PEOPLE].³³

Algarín and Laviera's use of all-uppercase letters stresses the message in the chant, which does not only implicate El Poeta, but also brings the audience into the picture, charging them with the responsibility of committing to El Poeta. The chant solidifies El Poeta's spiritual journey as one experienced by the collective, who is now connected to an African-based spiritual world and is responsible for sustaining this cultural link.

Notably, the scripting and staging of a spiritual possession are public acts illustrating the significant ways African-based spirituality intersected with Puerto Rican identity in New York City. When El Poeta experiences this spiritual manifestation, El Sonero, the chorus leader, becomes El Poeta's carnal vehicle for the spirit of Elegúa to speak and declares:

Mi nombre es Martín Elegúa.

Soy su guía, soy su cuerpo.

Estaba you encarcelado

Adentro del lenguaje del sajón.

Soy el espíritu del poeta,

Mi nombre es Martín Elegúa

Le enseñare su español.

My name is Martín Elegúa.

I am his guide, his body.

I was imprisoned

³³ Ibid., 158.

Inside the language of the Saxons.

I am the spirit of the poet,

My name is Martín Elegúa

I will teach him his Spanish.³⁴

In African-based religions throughout the Americas, Elegúa is one of the Seven African Powers known for mediating between humans and all the other Orishas, messenger gods.³⁵ As a god who has been trapped by the Anglo-Saxon language, Elegúa serves as El Poeta's guide teaching him how to speak his own kind of Spanish, sing his "negroid" verses, and "feel tradition in [his] veins."³⁶ Interestingly, while Elegúa and El Sonero clearly embrace an African ancestry, they also make sure to acknowledge the indigenous and Spanish European linkages of their Puerto Rican identity. In the songs "Nunca se me fue [It Never Left me]" El Sonero affirms the biological and eternal connection to three distinct cultures:

CORO: Lo que tengo nunca se me fue.

SONERO: Un Indio Madamo.

CORO: Lo que tengo nunca se me fue.

SONERO: Negros Africanos

CORO: Lo que tengo nunca se me fue.

SONERO: Español a mi lado.³⁷

Furthermore, in the final scene, the African Powers, including the newly anointed Olú, and the Indian spirit, walk to the various bases in the ballpark diamond until reaching home base.

³⁴ Ibid., 152.

³⁵ The spelling used in the script of Elegúa comes from Santería in Cuba.

³⁶ Kanellos and Huerta, *Nuevos Pasos*, 153.

³⁷ Ibid., 154.

Throughout the entire play Algarín and Laviera operate under this inclusive understanding of Nuyorican identity, preserving the African, Indigenous, and Spanish European lineages of Puerto Rican culture, while also expanding the boundaries of thinking about American identity for Puerto Ricans in New York.

If the first act is about the spiritual experience of El Poeta and the anointment of Olú as an eighth member of the African Powers all set in Piñones, the second and final act set in Maria Socorro's household uses a spiritual discourse to address the social disparities experienced by working-class Puerto Ricans living in New York City. Significantly, the recording of *Olú Clemente* connects with communities across disparate locations and cultures—Piñones, New York City and the African, indigenous, and Spanish European cultures and traditions that are part of Puerto Rico's history—generating translocal sonic threads between the island and the mainland.³⁸ Well aware of how Clemente was not only a role model for many Latinos, but also a cultural icon, Algarín and Laviera transform him into a spiritual guide. They use the theatrical stage as an opportunity to expressly cultivate spiritual strength for the Nuyorican community to overcome social and political strife. More than simply a biographical musical of Pittsburgh Pirates' greatest right fielder and first Latino baseball star, *Olú Clemente* is a spiritual cure for the social crisis of the radically increasing death rate of Nuyorican and Latino men caught in the cycle of poverty, drugs, and violence during the 1970s.³⁹

³⁸ Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 283; Augustín Laó-Montes, "Niuyol: Urban Regime, Social Movements, Ideologies of Latinidad," in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, eds. Arlene Dávila and Augustín Laó-Montes, (New York: Columbia University, 2001), 176.

³⁹ Latina theater scholar Tiffany Ana López uses the term a "double helix of violence: poverty and prison" to argue that poverty and prison propel the cycle of violence. In her book manuscript in progress, *The Alchemy of Blood: Violence, Trauma, and Critical Witnessing in U.S. Latino/a Cultural Production* (Duke University Press), citation with courtesy of the author.

As denoted by their family name “Socorro,” which means succor, aid or relief in Spanish, their prayers, songs, and invocations function as pleas for endurance, resistance, survival, and social change. Eight candles lit by the Socorro family illuminated the ocean, easing El Poeta’s migration from Piñones to New York City. The audience now observes Maria Socorro and her children praising Olú. Irma, one of Maria’s daughters, supplicates: “May all Puerto Ricans/praise the/[s]pirit of a hero-man/Clemente-man/Roberto-baseball-player man.”⁴⁰ Clemente is an icon of cultural healing touching the hearts and souls of the people. Miguel, one of Maria’s sons, prays for Olú’s guidance:

Let us give thanks
to Olú Clemente
for our daily knowledge:
Olú teach us to
Dance on high pitch
Fear, teach, us to fight
Sleep, to want more wakedness.
All will be done in
Heaven as it is in el barrio.⁴¹

Worshipping Olú and honoring Clemente’s legacy has become part of the everyday spiritual practice of the Socorro family. The revision of the biblical phrase “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” to “All will be done in Heaven as it is in el barrio” positions El Barrio as the spiritual sanctuary. Though there aren’t any photos of this scene in the archive, it is important to imagine the theatrical impact of having the same actors who played the role of the Seven African

⁴⁰ Kanellos and Huerta, *Nuevos Pasos*, 159.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

Powers now taking on the role of the Socorro family. Double-casting the African Powers as members of the Socorro family facilitates the transmission of an African-based spiritual tradition into the contemporary world and marks Roberto Clemente, arguably one of the most famous Afro-Latinos of the sixties and seventies, as the chosen embodiment of the spirit of Olú – transforming from man to spirit, from baseball star to religious and political figure.

Interestingly, women play a central role in the spiritual practices of the Socorro family. In the recording the women in the family, the mother and daughters, are most frequently heard:

MARIA SOCORRO: We, I, you, us

we cannot help

the standing System of Justice

keep its course in declaring

us criminals,

beasts of loathing,

we cannot raise

the flag of contempt

against ourselves.

RUTH MARIA: My children are not

CRIMINALS

Mis hijos no son

CRIMINALES

IRMA ANTONIA: Mi esposo no es [my husband is not]

un pillo [a thief]

my husband is not a thief,

do not accuse me,
I am not the mother
Of criminals.

VERA CRISTINA: I am the mother
of beautiful
children born of a
beautiful Puerto Rican union.⁴²

The shrilling cries of women supplicating Olú give the men in their community guidance, courage, and perseverance so they can overcome their social hardship. Their emotionally charged supplication becomes a public statement of oppressive realities faced by their community. As such, the women righteously declare that they want to push away the oppression experienced by their men: “Pa’ trás con el que me humilla al esposo. [Ward off he that humiliates the husband]. Pa’trás con el que me humilla al hijo [Ward off he that humiliates the son].⁴³ All the while you can hear claps of affirmation and enthusiastic cheers of “yes, yes” and “Viva Puerto Rico” [Long live Puerto Rico] from the audience. We learn from the women how difficult it is for the family to maintain their culture when they are stuck in factories having to pay bills; about the aching bodies of men and women enduring the long working hours in factories; about young men dying from overdosing from heroine, cocaine, or other drugs; about young men returning from the Vietnam War and how their return is coupled with mental illnesses and drug addiction; about the denigrating perception of all Nuyoricans as criminals, illiterates, and addicts.⁴⁴ While this information is in the script, in the recording the women’s

⁴² Ibid., 161.

⁴³ Ibid., 165.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 163-166.

supplication has so much sonic power it positions them as the supportive pillars of the entire community.

In remembering and paying homage to Clemente's life, various characters continuously yearn to recover his body. In the recording, for instance, when Clemente's spirit transforms to the eighth African Power, the townspeople lament his passing and imagine Clemente's physical experience at the moment of contact:

Can you imagine the burning pain? Ay, dios mio como ardio el cuerpo. The affliction of a brother. Clemente era un tipo duro. Ese cuerpo negro e iluminoso. Algun dia celebraremos lo que ese cuerpo negro verdaderamente significa. El cuerpo de Clemente se transforma de la sangre al mar. Roberto caused the revolution in the Caribbean. Roberto joined el meneo del Caribe.⁴⁵

[Can you imagine the burning pain? Oh, my god did his body burn. The affliction of a brother. Clemente was a tough guy. That black illuminating body. One day we will celebrate what the black body really means. Clemente's body transforms from blood to ocean. Roberto caused the revolution in the Caribbean. Roberto joined the swaying of the Caribbean sea.]

The agonizing yearning for restoring Clemente is only audible and not documented on the page. Listening to the townspeople speak of the burning sensation of Clemente's body makes the physical impact of the plane crash more viscerally palpable. The repetition of Clemente's black body inserts the African component into Caribbean culture and history. Reminiscent of Luis

⁴⁵ Algarín and Laviera, *Olú Clemente: The Philosopher of Baseball*. New York Public Library, Performing Arts-Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives, Joseph Papp New York Shakespeare Recording Collection, LT-10 10282, recorded August 30, 1973, sound tape reels.

Palés Matos' work *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* (1937) and his Afro-Antillean vision that blackness is central to connecting Puerto Rico to other places in the Caribbean sea, Clemente's black body takes on a central presence. His black body becomes one with the Atlantic Ocean, never to be found, but always to be remembered. And the ocean, as Derek Walcott conveys in his poem, "The Sea is History," becomes the bearer of the body and history of those that leave their legacy in the waters.⁴⁶

Clemente's racialized body is even more visible when the Socorro family discusses the ways America reads his blackness:

MARIA SOCORRO: America made him into a smooth bronze thrill for its people. He wasn't black, but that's America's holdback. It deceives itself.

RUTH MARIA: America lies to itself: Clemente was black, not bronze. You hear that? He was not a new skin color. Black, not bronze! [audience clapping, cheering].

VERA CRISTINA: Roberto was proud to be a Puerto Rican man close to his people [audience clapping, cheering].

.....

JESUS ABRAHAM: Roberto emerged as a brilliant symbol in the sun, a leader, a model for our struggling youth.

...

MIGUEL: The cancerous problem is that America saw him as bronze; it was easier to see you as exotic Roberto!

⁴⁶ Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History," in *Collected Poems: 1948-1984*, 364-367 (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1984).

TITO: While America saw him as bronze, colored man batting balls, no matter what the curve. He was a lump of muscular earth that hit any ball.⁴⁷

The Socorro family reveals the ways America reads Clemente's blackness as bronze. Since Puerto Ricans did not fit the white or black categories of identification, Americans perceived them as a racialized Other.⁴⁸ In identifying Clemente as bronze rather than black, Algarín and Laviera demonstrate how America attempted to dilute the reality of Jim Crow that he, and many other Afro-Latinos, encountered. Clemente was drafted by the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1954 just seven years after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball. As a black Latino, Clemente encountered many of the same obstacles and prejudices as the first African-American ball players. His salary was considerably lower than that of his white teammates, and segregation laws meant that while Clemente's white teammates stayed in hotels that didn't admit blacks, he was frequently forced to find his own lodging, and eat meals on the bus.⁴⁹ Although distinct, Puerto Ricans and African Americans share a history of racialization, marginalization, and class exclusion.⁵⁰ Given Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States, Puerto Ricans are more akin to African Americans than to immigrants from Latin America.⁵¹ Many of the forms of racial discrimination discussed in the play would appeal to many Nuyoricans who might relate to them. At the same time, the play's critique of the representation of Clemente as "bronze" stresses the importance of recognizing Clemente's Afro-

⁴⁷ Kanellos and Huerta, *Nuevos Pasos*, 169.

⁴⁸ Ramón Grosfoguel and Chloe Georás, "The Racialization of Latino Caribbean Immigrants in the New York Metropolitan Area," *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 8, no.1 & 2 (1996): 195.

⁴⁹ David Maraniss, *Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

⁵⁰ Petra Rivera-Rideau, "From Carolina to Loíza: Race, Place and Puerto Rican Racial Democracy," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* (2013): 2, accessed October 20, 2014. doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2013.842476; Flores, *The Diaspora Strikes back*, 46; Raquel Z Rivera, *New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 21; Grosfoguel and Georás, "The Racialization of Latino Caribbean Migrants in the New York Metropolitan Area," *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 8, no. 2, 190-201.

⁵¹ Rivera, *New York Ricans*, 26.

Latino identity through a reclamation and celebration of his blackness that directly countered pervasive anti-black racism.⁵² Algarín and Laviera position Clemente as not merely a baseball star, but as a civil rights activist encouraging black pride and overcoming racism and segregation.

Conclusion

When theater educators teach musicals like *West Side Story* and *In the Heights*, the majority of students immediately access the Broadway recordings. They experience Broadway musicals first through the act of listening and not primarily through reading the script because audio recordings convey how the play was presented. Similarly, the audio recording of *Olú Clemente* is an important archival tool, especially since this was the closest and only source for reconstructing this theatrical event and imagining what bodies are doing on stage. Magnifying the sonic presence and power in the script and archive offers a more expansive reading of *Olú Clemente* and enhances our understanding of the ways Nuyoricans engage with blackness through sound, music, and performance. Upon listening to *Olú Clemente*, it was clear that the audio recording documented a part of theatre history that has yet to be narrated. The sonic archive of *Olú Clemente* illustrates how sound and music are generative modes for understanding how Nuyoricans expressed and created a connective fiber linking Afro-diasporic music and religious traditions with their own understandings of Afro-Latinidad in New York City. Listening to the sonic archive of *Olú Clemente*, I tune my ears to the sonic imprints of Nuyoric theater, imagining how the audience embodied the music, how it inspired them to persevere, and

⁵² It is worth noting that this anti-black racism was also prevalent within Latino communities.

how its musical rhythms pulsate into the present, weaving this theatrical event into the fabric of public history.

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