

# WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF A NUYORICAN ELEMENT: SANDRA MARIA ESTEVES

Louis Reyes Rivera

I was asked to participate in the program, "Hispanic Women Write," and therein to discuss the work of Sandra Maria Esteves. The focus of our discussion here then is the Puerto Rican writer in the United States, more specifically, the New York Puerto Rican writer. The given metaphor is Sandra Maria Esteves, but only as a metaphor, since she represents the culmination of a literary particular in process since 1898, the year Puerto Rico fell to English-speaking hands. I will not cite from her work, as she will be sharing that with you. Instead, I will attempt to outline the context out of which she grew into poet.

Credentially speaking, Sandra Maria Esteves is, among other reflections, the author of **Yerba Buena**, which book earned her a citation from Library Journal as the best of the small press offerings for 1980.

Since 1972 the bulk of our literature has been published by small press alternatives. Now, there are roughly about 100

large, conglomerate publishers in this country, which control all the major networks that get books into bookstores, libraries, and schools. But they don't publish our work. In addition, there are slightly more than 1,000 fairly stable publishers capable of competing to some degree with the 100 biggies - but they don't publish poetry period, much less our poetry. Consequently, some 7- 10,000 little outlets with limited audiences and even more limited promotional-distributional outlets, networks, and budgets, are the ones which publish our work in limited editions. Our potential readership, therefore, is hard pressed to find our work, much less to have it assigned by an instructor to read or write about it.

Esteves, by the way, is one of these small publishers whose entrees include Shamsul Alam's "**Hakim**," and her own bilingual downpour, **Tropical Rains**. She is, as well, the present chief administrator of the African Caribbean Poetry Theatre; the organizer-producer-director of numerous staged performances and literary events. These

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Pen and Ink drawing/Sandra Maria Esteves

include her Voices of the Belly poetry series (which featured over 100 different writers of Caribbean and African American descent over a period of three years), and that literary potpourri called, "Grito de Lares: Yesterday, Today, Always" (which actually offered for the first time more than a century of Puerto Rican literature with a balanced inclusion of what is separately referred to as nuyorican literature).

Notice that she is not just a writer - that many of us cannot be strictly about our vocation as writers because the social structure under which we are kept bars us no latitude. No natural inclusion in standard curricula or automatic patronage to encourage and subsidize our own cultural workers. We are faced with the need to produce and transform our own works into other mediums: from the written to the public performance to the printed page and the distributional mechanics we are able to muster. Otherwise, the work would die there, hidden in a closet full of boxes or stored away in an old suitcase.

Sandra Maria Esteves is also among those fortunate ones who happened along at a time when the gestation period of our literary-tribal rejection here gave birth to a vanguard movement that insisted as all newborns insist - we are here! We matter, too!

The roots of that movement can generally be traced to the initial result of European incursion into the Caribbean as base from which to subjugate

the rest of the Americas. It can be traced to the forced importation of Africans into these Antilles, these **slave-**breaking islands from which the Puerto Rican hails. But the stems of those roots are more immediately traceable to 1898, and through that process of historical attrition where eventually all of the Americas are dominated by the United States. For it is within the context of opposing forces, economic, political, cultural, military impositions that Puerto Ricans come to reside in New York. Once the land that comprises Puerto Rico is taken, the corresponding labor and culture of the people, which is the rest of their wealth (land, labor, culture), become subjected to another's will and when the people rise up and resist, as with the Nationalist Movement of the 30s, with its corresponding *criollismo* and *atayalista* literary-cultural movements, they must be crushed or conceded their sovereignty. And so the exploitation, manipulation, distortion of our will, our own imperatives, comprise the contradictions we inherit as present condition, our state of being.

Forced by external controls, we transplanted from island to mainland. The new Puerto Rican, the neorican, born and raised into adult back home, then exiled from that home, was confronted by a world of conditions in which we did not belong or were hardly welcomed. Read Jose Luis Gonzalez, **Bernardo** Vega, Clemente **Soto Vélez**, and especially Julia de Burgos, and check out their personal backgrounds and the impact of their work and you

see it: the conflict between that **puertorriqueidad**, which is what every nation is supposed to reflect and nurture, anyway, and that ruthless imposition of someone else's idiom, values, perspectives, social agenda attempting to destroy what is particular and unique. Even among today's latest arrivals the conflict is present - check out Ivan **Silén**, Iris Zavala, Luz Maria Urnpierre, Brenda Alejandro, Maria Mar, whose works adequately reflect the pull and push of a **gringo yankee** contradiction imposed upon people whose thought processes are conceptualized in another language. And they write in that insularly reared offshoot of Castile's version of Spanish; it follows here, then, they are permitted little room to explore their senses of worth in an English-setting. It is, additionally, however, in the very usage of that English idiom that we see the contradiction further manifested.

To wit: the very children of that phenomenon. Those who were either born here or transplanted while still babies, then raised here, are the ones to whom the tag 'nuyorican' is given. Among these are that literary vanguard through which Sandra Maria Esteves gives voice to her voice. The New York Puerto Rican gives rise to ourselves. Spanish and Spanglish at home, standard English in the schools, and Black English mingling with Spanglish in the streets, the social setting.

Among the first flowers signaling the rise of this vanguard was Piri Thomas' **Down These Mean Streets**. It

is the first book written with all four elements of language at work: Spanish, Spanglish, standard English, Black English or (to borrow a term from Piri's mentor, the African American novelist, John Oliver **Killens**) 'Afro-Americanese' interweaving what would become the pattern of linguistic approach to literature. Felipe **Luciano**, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Miguel Algarin, Pedro Pietri, Jose Angel Figueroa, Tato Laviera, Lorraine Sutton, Americo Casiano, Nicholasa Mohr, Ed Vega, Miguel **Piñero**, Shamsul **Alam**, Magdalena **Gómez**, Julio Marzan, Rico Vilez, Jesus 'Papoletto' **Meléndez**, Lucky Cienfuegos, Noel Rico, Roberto Marquez, Suzana Cabanas, Sandra Maria Esteves are among the key personnel comprising that vanguard - New York Puerto Ricans who dared write, to write in four interchangeable tongues, though each of them was told, taught, trained and often tricked into believing that they couldn't, hadn't **oughta** find their place in the body of world literature.

Puerto Ricans are not supposed to have the capacity to think, much less to write, even less to devote their entire lives to the creation of their own voice of expression in books, and even in the very language of their most obvious oppressors.

Notice, by the way, that the people mentioned are poets for the most part. Poetry that is largely unpublished has to find a more immediate outlet than other genres; it is more accessible to a live audience - we can write to be heard, to be felt, as much as to be read. The oral tradition is, in turn, key to poetry, to our poetry

certainly, to contemporary African American poetry, most vociferously; the musical sense of nuance is, again in turn, key to the oral tradition. With no real and equitable access to publishers, the poetry is taken to the streets, the theatre of the people, to be heard, felt, visualized in actual performance. That communal and dramatic nuance, that resonance of voice is vital to the communicational elements at work.

Notice, as well, that I mentioned fewer women. Part of stereotype reasoning would follow that if Puerto Ricans generally are not supposed to think and write and speak for themselves, especially in English, then obviously, you can't expect much more from the women among them.

Part of our human condition, however, bears certain psychological disruptions peculiar to the colonial condition. Among them is the factor of **genderic** intimidation. Given this society's use of token representation, many of our early members of the vanguard who broke through publisher's barriers tended to appear intimidated by the presence of others with talent. Given the chauvinism that we are all indoctrinated in, the rate of intimidation rises when it is a woman who shows her strength. Between both points far too much talent is crushed even before that strength is sown.

In relation to Sandra Maria Esteves, there are at least two personal metaphors that help to explain both Esteves and her work. The first has to do with

her childhood. She had been sent to a Catholic school, a convent, with teachers who would use a tennis racket across the palms and wrists of anyone who got caught speaking Spanish. But Esteves will tell you herself that at that young age she genuinely didn't know which of her words belonged to which language, so reared was she in forms of expressions that transgressed the given linguistic lines. Immediately she was afraid to speak at all.

Consequently, she developed an almost "defensive" interest in drawing and painting, forms of expression that are still heard though not actually vocalized. In her poetry, by the way, you can see the drawing of images in her choices of words. Compare, for example, the ironic twist in her poem, "Not Neither," with the short staccato drum jazz urban sounds in her poem, "Bedford Hills is a woman's prison," with the lyrical folds from Spanish to English in her poem, "A Julia Y a Mi." You see the colors and the lines, each in their respective musical settings.

The second has to do with her entry into poetry. Initially, of course, Esteves trained to be a graphic illustrator. But her social artistic contacts grew in numbers among poets, musicians, activists. As the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe in New York's Lower East Side (Loisaida) opened up the possibilities to her, she gradually began to translate line and color into word and sound. Many of the male poets involved encouraged her development, recognizing the need, of course, to allow for some token representation from the women. The irony, of course, given our earlier

reference to what I called **genderic** intimidation, is that she who was supposed to be but the good gesture recipient became one of the most recognized of all our contemporary poets, whose work has appeared in numerous magazines, and, in addition to her two previously mentioned

collections, in at least four very important anthologies: **The Next World; Womanrise; Ordinary Women;** and **Herejes y mitificadores.** She too dared to write, dared to care, and dared to grapple with herself (us) on paper and in English, and in Spanglish, and in print.