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When Being is Not a Burden:

Naomi Ayala and the Re-Embodying Poetics of Neo-Riqueña Discourse

By: *Roberta Barki*

I am simply governed by my heart,
by the overriding thought – who rules me is me...I, a flower of the people
-Julia de Burgos

Western society has a long tradition of mapping meaning – in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, and class status – on to bodies. Yet, from the Enlightenment period to the present, the inscriptions that gender racialize bodies have been of grave significance for instituting colonial regimes. Genderized racialism functions as a tacit aspect of this intellectual movement, which depends on a complex negotiation of racializing bodies with a simultaneous genderization that determines the meaning of the race and gender of the individual and group body. These two components of identity happen interdependently. As part of colonial institutions, the impact of this process can be recognized in shifting designation of what “womanhood” meant and who was included, and the effeminization of particular groups of “men” in their roles as subjugated positionality under colonial domination. The methods through which oppressed bodies become known and controlled reflect larger structures of power, such as those depicted by Immanuel Kant in “On the Different Races of Man.” As Michele Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, “the classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body – to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces” (136). However, questions necessarily emerge, pertinent in a new millennium when the official de-colonization of over half the world has occurred, regarding how these dominated bodies find freedom in spite of the systematic attempts to subjugate and dominate their mental and corporeal beings for

centuries.

The terms “de-colonization” and “postcolonial” emerge as particularly problematic, when configured as eras in global history, especially for those nations and peoples caught within the grasp of neo-Imperialism. For Puerto Ricans, designated colonial citizens of the United States as part of their colonial status, the realities of colonialism and neo-colonialism remain ready-present aspects of their daily-lives and identities. Within this unique subject position, first created by the *Downes v. Bidwell* case of 1901, the label “foreign in a domestic sense” has remained a major legacy of their identity formation. While the granting of US citizenship under the Jones Act of 1917 appears to recognize Puerto Ricans as US subjects, this subject position is greatly altered by various legislative components such as the limited extension of the XIV Amendment to the Island as an “unincorporated territory,” the limited nature of their constitution, the inability to have voting representatives in the US Congress, the denial of Islanders to vote in national elections, and most recently the revocation of Puerto Rican birth certificates by July 2010 and replacement with US certified certificates[i].

Specifically, as Laura Briggs notes in *Reproducing Empire*, “[f]or feminists, nationalists, the U.S. military, the federal government, philanthropists, and academic scientists and social scientists, it has been important to ‘know’ Puerto Rican women’s bodies, and to rescue, condemn, or defend working-class women. This fact has been important to the U.S. imperial project on the island” (15). The female body functions as a tool for power assertion and maintenance within this colonial relationship. The mapping of U.S. power on to Puertorriqueñas, and their reproductive abilities, demonstrates a form of social control exerted through a particularly gendered racism. The female body is positioned as a site of entrance for American colonial discourse.

Representations of mind/body fracturing reflect how the internalization of U.S. colonial rhetoric has forced Puertorriqueñas to develop coping mechanisms detrimental to their psyches. Briggs notes that the disciplining of Puerto Rican women's bodies through medical testing for birth control and sterilization enacts a violence specifically designed for their gender. Howard Fields describes in *Setting the Stage for Pain: Allegorical Tales from Neuroscience* that pain is a culturally trained response that grows from the concept of pain representing a physical punishment (55). Puerto Rican female reproductive organs transform into the site of their trauma, rendering a mental dissociation from corporeal reality necessary. However, it is in this instance of fracturing that the body and mind become all the more vulnerable to subjugation and available for exploitation.

U.S. based Puertorriqueña poet Naomi Ayala demonstrates in her poem, "Perfection," that acknowledgment of the body's demonization within colonial oppression is a subversive act that deconstructs the disciplining rhetoric working upon the corporeal *and* mental. In *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Mohanty writes that "authorization of experience is...a crucial form of empowerment" (202). The silencing of various individuals and entire groups serves to enhance structures of domination, enabling some to speak for and about others while some remain unable to guard how they are represented. Ayala's act of addressing these power dynamics and infrastructures in her poem illuminates a potential path for individual reclamation of the body through the use of theory in the flesh as described by Gloria Anzaldúa and Charríe Moraga in *This Bridge Called My Back*.

Further, Ayala's "Crickets" enhances this recognition of multiple voices and shows the need to unite against systems of oppression and create new forms of organic epistemologies and empowerment. French feminist Hélène Cixous writes "we plant flags in blood,/ Nonetheless

there are turns, whirlwinds forming a series of curves in our lives, and we who have a tongue give ourselves names that remain to what does not remain” (70). Markers of meaning are not enough in and of themselves; there is more detail, more description that cannot fit neatly into predefined categories of organizing titles. Instincts toward cultural nationalism also re-emerge as contradictory to emancipator consciousness by reifying the very discourse that has been constructed to subjugate. The poet’s job emerges as giving voice to and from the position of the silenced. I intend to argue that examination of Naomi Ayala’s “Perfection” and “Crickets” illuminates the value of poetry to expose the physical and psychological travesties wrought by Empire while also formulating a renacimiento beyond its boundaries and constrictions.

Ontological Bodies: Ayala and Corporeal Meaning in Mind/Body Fractures

In “Perfection,” Ayala constructs a discourse between her mind and body through which she identifies the systems of control working to dominate her. Her first line, beginning with “I bring back your drum and forgive you, body” indicates a mental action that is intertwining with a physical one (*l.* 1). Ayala, in beginning the poem with “I,” produces an image of the self that also distinguishes the mind for the body. That the poet is writing from “I’s” perception transforms the conversation into a demonstration of a coming to consciousness and her own power over her mind and perception. The uncategorized nature of “I,” being given neither a nationality nor a gender, enacts a moment similar to Walt Whitman’s opening in “Song of Myself” in which he states “I celebrate myself” and later writes “I sound my barbaric yop” (*ll.* 1, 1330). However, Ayala’s poem does not begin with a celebration; it begins with an attempt at healing. Yet, each poet *does* emphasize “I” as a noun undistinguished by the imposition of national, racial, gender, or ethnic classification. Jane Flax notes in *Disputed Subjects* that “differences can be simultaneously colonized” (91). Neither poet provides an immediate marker of distinction to

exploit and depict as categorical differentiation. Although these two poems are written more than a century apart and from completely different socio-political structures, they nevertheless open with the potential for a transcendence of labels and titles and the powers vested in the authority to produce these inscriptions.

Ayala's method of introducing elements of a Puerto Rican culture and heritage in her opening line of "Perfection" similarly resists cultural nationalist labeling. She writes "I bring back your drum," with drum here potentially indicating the instrument used in bomba music, an aspect of Puerto Rican culture that has existed since the bringing of slavery in the late fifteenth/early-sixteenth centuries. Juan Flores notes in *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, while describing a Puerto Rican community gathering in New York City, that "[i]t was these African-based forms of Puerto Rican popular music that got everyone moving, clapping and shouting in chorus" (67). This community has a visceral response to the sound being created. Importantly, the drum is also used in traditional playing to create a dialogue between a dancer's body and the sound of the instrument itself. Madeleine Richeport-Haley shows in her documentary about bomba music, *Puerto Rican Bomba: In Search of Our Roots*, that the musician, the drum, and the body making movement in response to the drum are perceived as having an intimate connection; there is a spiritual communication. This music, having roots in Puerto Rico's history of slavery, is an element of the colonial legacy. Ayala's body thereby takes on the signified meaning of the drum as an aspect of oppression's history. However, her depiction demonstrates that buried within this history is a subversive aspect of cultural survival that is neither oppressed nor subjugated, but an entity unique unto itself.

The poet's portrayal of this element of Puerto Rican culture and history maintains an integrity that hinders the drum from entering into exclusionary cultural nationalist rhetoric. José

Ramón Sánchez writes in *Boricua Power* that “Puerto Rican nationalist strategies are... compelled by complex acts of distancing from other minorities as well as from white America” (161). However, Ayala’s invocation of meaning through the term “drum” does not inherently exclude other Caribbean cultures or communities, or even other non-Caribbean cultures and communities. Further, this invocation similarly avoids emphasis on a Taíno identity and/or a blanquemento that evacuate the presence of African heritage as noted by Jorge Duany in *Taíno Revival*. Instead, the poet opens an entryway into understanding Puerto Rican culture as having various elements that have been historically created but can, nevertheless, find commonalities with other groups outside the Island’s boundaries. Ayala’s introduction of “drum” acts as a symbolic entreaty to both Puerto Ricans, and non-Puerto Ricans, to view history and culture outside the constrictions of a nationalist discourse.

The relationship Ayala depicts between her mind and body demonstrates how her mental and corporeal experiences have been lived and interpreted. Ayala states that “I...forgive you, body” as though they are two separate and distinct entities (*l. 1*). The word “forgive” indicates a sense of betrayal by her body, perhaps exposing the reason why the body and mind have been separated. Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain* that, in regards to the act of torture for confession, the individual being tortured “began to experience the body that will end his life, the body that can be killed, and which when killed will carry away the conditions that allow him to exist” (31). The body is positioned as the object that subjects the mind to cruelty and violence. The distancing between the mind and body posits that they are necessarily separated under extreme moments of duress for purposes of survival. Ayala’s assertion of forgiving her physical self thus translates into a recognition that she has had to witness her body as separate from her sentient self in order to survive an, as yet unnamed, atrocity. This line also introduces the

concept of theory in the flesh, as a critical analysis of the body's experience of the site upon which power is asserted and through which the lived experiences of individuals attest to these dynamics but can also resist it.

The poet's conception of her corporeal self alludes to how she has been taught to see her body as a demonized source of pain. Still within the first stanza, Ayala tells her body that she forgives it "for cursing yourself" in the moment "when you were accused/ of endangering my salvation" (*ll.* 2-4). The body is detailed as having enacted a betrayal in the instance when it was designated as negative by outside forces. Yet, the question remains as to why the body should be determined as something that detracts from salvation, and what exactly the mind is in need of being saved from. Scarry notes that "[t]orture systematically prevents the prisoner from being the agent of anything and simultaneously pretends that he is the agent of some things...body as an active agent, an actual cause of his pain" (47). The body acts as a physical barrier, one that stops the psyche or soul from reaching goodness, and this is something that it does to itself. Flax writes that "[l]anguage partially constructs our personhood including the structure, categories, and content of thought. The dependence of thought on language means that it and the mind itself are partially socially and historically (pre-)constituted" (49). If the body has been designated, through language, as a negative imposition on the mind and the thing that causes the mind to suffer, then the mind will express the experience of the body as the thing that hurts it. The image of the unified sentient being breaks down through the rhetorical reconstituting of the body as responsible for not protecting and saving the mind.

Ayala further demonstrates the various persuasive constructions that define the body as a willing participant in its oppression and subordination. The poet describes how her body "knelt to search for sin" and that it did so while "brewing shame like a back-home tea/ out of woman

song” (*ll.* 5-7). The body is depicted as directly searching out those things that will further hurt the mind and hinder it from attaining salvation. The physical experience indicated by the word “kneeling” also defines an action that reduces the body in stature and brings it closer to the ground, below those who are standing to full height. Mohanty states that “Blacks and Latinos in the United States, Asians and West Indians in Britain, and North Africans in France, all share similarly oppressive conditions and the status of second-class citizens” (67). The described prostration functions to metaphorically depict the hierarchical structure in which certain individuals and groups are rendered lower than others, such as would be evident in height classification. As such, the body is established as an instrument that verifies the hierarchy amongst those who kneel and those who do not.

The physical inhabitation of the body within a larger culture is also shown to be part of how the body is used as a tool to harm the psyche. The term “back-home tea” illuminates the presence of culture and heritage that act upon, within, and through the body. The tea, rather than being distinguished as a particular flavor, scent, or any other sensory meaning, is merely a place with a history that is rooted in that locale. Mohanty notes that “a place on the map (New York City) is, afterall, also a locatable place in history” (111). The culture that the tea originates from gains a spatial ontology that’s exact detail remains mystified. Further, tea is a drink that is imbibed and nourishes the body. Mohanty writes that “history and memory are woven through numerous genres: fictional texts, oral history, and poetry, as well as testimonial narratives – not just what counts as scholarly or academic (real?) historiography” (79-90). However, that the body is “brewing shame” in a manner similar to the “back-home tea” demonstrates that it is taking the lessons of how to make things that enter the body and rendering them painful for the mind. The memory and history of the body are ones in which the body has transformed into an

aggressor and violator of the mind.

The direct positioning of the female body as an aspect of that cultural pain that causes the body to betray the mind is further depicted within this stanza. The body is “brewing shame” out of a “woman song,” demonstrating that that pain is located in the fact of being female. Flax writes that “[g]ender is an effect of complex, historically variable sets of social relations in and through which heterogeneous persons are socially organized as members of one and only one of an exclusionary and (so far) unequal pair – man and woman” (97). A woman song, a sound that comes of the experience of being a woman, recalls the opening line’s inclusion of a “drum” that also produces sound. The attention given in this first reference to gendered bodies recalls its prominence in U.S. colonial rhetoric in regards to Puerto Rico as noted by Briggs:

The relentlessly fertile Puerto Rican mother provided an interpretive key for (post)colonial poverty, communism, and the role of the United States in the Third World. For liberals, she was victimized by her endless children, and they longed to rescue her from her own ignorance and ‘macho’ Puerto Rican men who proved their virility through her suffering maternity; for conservatives, she was a ‘demon mother’ whose dangerous fecundity could only be halted by strong measures – sterilization, high doses of hormones, perhaps a contraceptive agent in the water. (110)

Women’s history in Puerto Rico since the U.S. take over in 1898 is one of continual domination specifically directed at female reproductive organs and reproduction. The song and the sound of the drum unite through Ayala’s invocation of the same sensory perception. The poet demonstrates that the socio-cultural history of the drum’s presence in Puerto Rico and the socio-political existence of gender represent the body’s disciplining and therefore must be

acknowledged elements of the forgiveness being enacted.

Subversive Reclamation: Ayala and Re-Embodying of Self

The poet, also within this forgiving, indicts the socially prescribed methods of disciplining the body that have resulted in her negative perception of it. She tells her body “I release you of sin,/ the laws used to yoke you” (*ll.* 8-9). Although the act of releasing could pertain to a mental lifting of the sanctions she has placed on her body as her betrayer, there is also a physicality involved in this action, tantamount to removing chains. However, sin, a concept and manner of understanding actions but not a physical space or tangible object itself, must perceptually be removed from the body; the metaphor emerges through which the body has been imprisoned into shame. As Briggs notes, “the question of the relationship of colonialism and capitalism to Puerto Rican poverty....deflected onto working-class women’s bodies. Once more, working-class women’s problematic reproduction became the ground on which U.S. intervention was justified” (121). U.S. control of Puerto Rico was defined as a necessary method to contain female sexuality. However, as Flax states, “the categories we use to conceptualize ourselves are themselves our constructions” (119). The mind is acknowledged as a participant in disciplining the body. The term “laws” thereby indicates a social institution, made up of the will and desires of governing individuals and groups, that has constituted the narrator’s negative view of her body.

The reflection of a legal approach to dominating the body also illustrates an awareness of how the culture and society are responsible for her anguish. Howard Fields notes

[t]he brain provides the interface of biology and culture. Although the brain is a bodily organ, it has the unique property that its operation is completely symbolic. Patterns of neural activity are representational. Some patterns produce sensations; others produce

language and memory...Although these activity patterns symbolize very different things, the representations themselves are all ontologically identical. (37)

The brain is trained to give specific responses; it interprets sensation and translates it into a meaning for the mind to interpret. Ayala's description demonstrates that there is an insidious violation that has reached into the depths of her perception. She must therefore grapple with this realization even as she is attempting to break down the restrictions that have been created to hinder her from fully embodying her physical self.

Ayala's continued divulgence of other methods through which her body and mind have been subjugated enhances her metaphorical reclamation of herself as a sentient being. The poet tells her body "I release you from the colonialist's hymns" (10). I's perceived autonomous action of freeing the body produces an image of savior. However, Ayala's introduction of colonialism also intimates the mind's participation in the act of colonizing. Jeffrey Richards writes in *Imperialism and Music* that "[h]ymns and hymn-singing were a distinctly nineteenth-century experience" (368). The U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico, occurring in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, is thereby definable by its historical epoch and era. Further, as Richards contends, "music and pageantry were used to dramatize the idea of Empire" and that there is thus a "potent musical link between the colonies and motherland" (26, 33). The mouth opens and sound come out, yet the mind must first imbibe the words that will then be transmitted into verbal motion. The mind is thereby shown to be participating in furthering the colonialist maintenance of the body. Yet, within this acknowledgement is an emerging awareness that removes the body's culpability for its subjugation.

The role of religion buried within the term "hymn" also indicates an attempted spiritual domination of the colonized. Mohanty states that "colonial relations of rule form the backdrop

for feminist critiques at both levels, and it is the notion of practice of ruling that may allow for an understanding of the contradictory sex, race, class, and caste positioning of Third World women in relation to the state, and thus may suggest ways of formulating historically the location of Third World feminist struggles” (64). Ayala, a colonized Puertorriqueña, is subject to the various methods that the dominating factions choose for purposes of controlling and altering her self-perceptions. Religion, the moral and spiritual code through which many people envision themselves and the world, thereby becomes a constraint upon how she knows herself. What Ayala describes through her poetry goes beyond a simple indictment of the powers that have subverted her claim to self-ownership and a movement into what Gloria Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands: La Frontera* as “facultad”: “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (60). The simplicity of Ayala’s phrase “colonialists’ hymns” is actually one of extreme complexity, containing multiple layers of meaning and insight. The narrator demonstrates a unique formation that exposes, interprets, and theorizes the underlying factors of her social status.

Ayala’s acknowledgement of how she participates in her own subjugation thereby creates a rupture within power dynamics. Ramon Sanchez’s claim that “mixed racial identity weakens the level of solidarity as well as their relationship with white America,” indicating Franz Fanon’s claim in *Black Skins White Masks* that “[t]here is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white” (154, xiv). However, Ayala’s statement refutes blanquemento while simultaneously taking responsibility for her own psychological propensities toward disciplining her body. There emerges a moment of acceptance in which she understands that “to have a body is, finally, to permit oneself to be described” (Scarry 216). Yet there is also a deeply buried awareness that the labels that will be given to her do not necessarily have to be her demarcations.

Within Ayala's representation of *facultad* she establishes the guilt of colonization as not her own but of those who are actually responsible for its imposition in her life. She describes "Sunday mornings/ when songbirds were put off" (ll. 12-13). The body and mind are made to listen to songs at a specified day and time designed to further the oppressor's power instead of the freedom of sound given by birds in nature or the drum at the beginning of the poem. Flax notes that "[m]odern Western societies have a distinctive mode of legitimation...this mode incorporates and is grounded in a particular set of beliefs. In our culture we must produce the truth...Legitimate power requires grounding in and justification by a set of rational rules" (41). The colonized body's forced weekly attendance in church translates into a ceremonial practice that normalizes practices for governing time and physical space. Further, the songs that legitimate colonial rule also enable the continued domination of the physical and mental capacities; these are methods of indoctrination that justify their patterns through the very act of enacting them.

Ayala's recognition of how the body has been used as a tool alters its meaning from willing participant to that of victim. She tells the body that "you lost/ the earth beneath your feet" (ll. 14-15). As well as the physical relocation of the body into a Church that has a floor, rather than the natural ground, the body also loses its grounding in a conceptual system that denies the legitimacy of any experience not authorized by the oppressive system itself. As such, the body escapes through the mind and becomes reliant upon it to avoid understanding its pain. In this moment Ayala acknowledges that "we are all operating on the terrain of power and not truth or objectivity" (Flax 12). The rhetoric of law and religion emerge as instruments of oppression rather than representations of reality. Similarly, the positioning of ethnic and gendered bodies into fixed knowable categories also becomes an arbitrary system based on fallacy. A new

ontological perspective can emerge.

Ayala is thereby able to reenter a dialogue with her body regarding the disciplining of her gender and its use to control her self-perceptions. She tells it “I forgive you the aches and fires/ of your first moons” (*ll.* 16-17). Rather than describing the experience of her menstrual cycle in terms of sound, she re-describes it as physical experience rooted in pain that is, nevertheless, her own. Scarry asserts that “if a thorn cuts the skin of the woman’s finger, she feels not the thorn but her body hurting her” (166). However, Ayala describes her pain as something that is physical and metaphorical, and ultimately what she experiences. The alliterations of “f” with “forgive,” “fires,” and “first” demonstrates that they must all be linked together; she is forgiving the physical experience that she had gone through during puberty and transforms the meanings that she had associated with them into something new. Her gender transforms from a negativity into a natural aspect of living that has an integral right to be recognized without connotations of sin and shame.

Ayala’s final stanza demonstrates the exact moment where the body and mind were separated and transforms how it can be recalled in order to change its meaning for the future. She writes that

you tried to wash them off like rape
with the same hands
you used to imitate the flight of birds,
to speak a poem. (*ll.* 18-21)

Ayala depicts the manner in which women are trained to perceive their femininity as a violation. Earlier references to sin and the demonized body take on new meanings as Ayala exposes the multiple facets of “woman” as a category as it is constructed and condemned in her society.

Briggs notes that the “United States, far from belonging to this international colonial community only through its response to a series of accidents (paradigmatically, the explosion of the battleship *Maine*), was certainly part of a colonizing system, a membership evident in its adoption of British and other colonial norms for the organization of prostitution” (45). Emphasis on woman as a sexual creature translates into an understanding of her body as an available site of interest and domination by those able to recognize it as such.

Yet Ayala’s depiction of the disjunction of the body trying to create beauty at the same time as perceiving itself as inherently negative further identifies her own *facultad*. As Anzaldúa notes, “[*facultad*] is anything that causes a break in one’s defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one’s habitual grounding, causes depth to open up” (61). Her ability to write, to give voice to those aspects of her mind and body considered dangerous and necessarily controlled by colonialist rhetoric identifies a resistance that speaks of its own violations even as they are painful. Cixous notes that “writing is the movement to return to where we haven’t been ‘in person’ but only in wounded flesh” (74). The right of the individual to speak – despite being female and a colonial subject – becomes prominent. Ayala’s poem promotes a platform and realm where the healing necessary for the conception of liberation for the mind and body, such as described in Plato’s *Republic*, can occur.

Respecting Difference: The Power of a Healed Psyche in Ayala’s “Crickets”

Ayala’s “Crickets” continues her representation of healing while simultaneously promoting a liberatory consciousness from the basis of her own *facultad*. The poet states that “I don’t know where crickets go/ when the frost comes” (*ll.* 1-2). Once again, Ayala begins with the “I” as indicative of the significance of herself and her conscious awareness. Syntactically, she positions herself as significant because of the placement of “I” as the first word of the poem, yet

the “don’t” which follows disables a grandiose image of self that would produce a hierarchy of importance. Further, the content of the first line, and her emphasis on natural insects rather than man-made conceptions, recalls such writings as transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden Pond*. Yet Ayala is situating her experience, not in the isolated woods of Concord, Massachusetts, but in an unnamed physical location that does not require designation on a map to be real. Ayala subverts the power of cartography as a method of ordering the world and its contents.

Ayala continues her questioning of the crickets’ migratory pattern by considering the meaning and significance of home for survival of the individual and the community. She asks “[d]o they burrow? Make tiny homes/ between bricks and concrete cracks?” (ll. 5-6). The crickets are endowed with the desire to maintain security, but in a particularly urban setting. The crickets, rather than living in fields or the countryside, are connected with man-made structures such as would be witnessed in a city space. Arlene Dávila records in *Barrio Dreams* one individual’s statement that “[f]or us, El Barrio means *la lucha*, that everyday struggle of living, of our culture and roots” (70). Although El Barrio is historically a Puerto Rican community in East Harlem, changes in the last decades have found new communities inhabiting this space, including Mexican Americans and peoples from other Latinate countries. Barbara Love notes in “Developing a Liberatory Consciousness” that “liberatory consciousness enables humans to live their lives in oppressive systems and institutions with awareness and intentionality, rather than on the basis of the socialization to which they have been subjected” (470). Ayala demonstrates her consciousness of other individual’s oppression. The inhabitants of a city can, therefore, metaphorically be reconstituted, through the crickets, as merely trying to live.

Ayala’s respect for the crickets, as evinced in the beginning of the poem, maintains as she

acknowledges her subject position in regards to their integral right to privacy. She writes that, in relation to where they go during the frost, “I don’t want to know/ It’s better like this” (ll. 7-8). She hinders a full investigation into the lives of these individuals. What remains is a distance that recognizes how the crickets embody information that she does not, and should not, know.

Michelle Wallace states in *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* that for African Americans living in the United states, the “ideal would be to mix visibility with invisibility...in just the right balance. Too much visibility of the wrong kind, and at the wrong time, can not only be dangerous to your health but also to the general well being of blacks as a class” (424). Within debates surrounding representations of African Americans in U.S. media, the manner in which members of this group are both consistently brought into public conscious while simultaneously evacuated of their humanity has been of prime importance. What remains is the mere outline that is then filled in by the imaginative demands of a public trained to perceive African Americans within a particular way and with specific meanings. Thus, if Ayala were to know everything about the crickets and where they go during the frost, she would have the power over that information. She would also control how this information is disseminated, evacuating the crickets of the right to privacy or self-authority.

Instead, Ayala’s respect enables her to focus on the multiple methods of allegiance that are possible through recognizing the integral life within the crickets and how they impact her psyche and identity. She notes that “[t]heir song quiets me/ when I’m alone near the dark” (ll. 9-10). Different from the colonialist’s hymn of “Perfection,” the crickets’ song nourishes her soul. There is a bottom up effect, rather than a top down. Notably, Ayala writes that she is *near* the dark and not in it, demonstrating an awareness of space and how the physical act of hearing, combined with the impact this has on her mental perceptions, is also located in a physical terrain

that is mapped out with meaning in terms of color and light. She evinces the significance of the “material uses of ‘culture,’ and with the claims to space established and contested on its bases” (Dávila 9). The songs created by the crickets are unique to their existence. Similarly, the sounds of a community construct a transcendence of physical barriers.

Alaya is therefore able to come to terms with aspects of her own soul that are otherwise obfuscated by dominant discourses. She writes of “when I sit too long/ for things I can’t bear to name” (*ll.* 12-13). The syntax of these lines, in its awkwardness, reflects a difficulty in transmitting into words the ineffable experiences of pain as they exist. Scarry notes that “[i]ntense pain is also language-destroying; as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject” (35). As the body and emotion break down, so too does the syntax. However, these lines also evince an active determination to maintain the grammatical incorrectness as an integral aspect of its expression. As Minh-ha notes, “[c]lear expression, often equated with *correct* expression, has long been the criterion set forth in treatises on *rhetoric*, whose aim was to order discourse so as to *persuade*” (16). As the structure of Ayala’s sentence also suggests, to be in pain is to cause a psychological rupture that must be addressed even as the physical trauma is understood. She gives voice to her reality as a person in pain and, as such, suffering. However, the fact that she is able to acknowledge it, and her clear difficulty in doing so, provides a depth to her experiences as lived events that simple statistics and fact would not be able to convey.

Divided We Fall: Ayala and the Power of Collective Body Politic

The poet is thereby able to formulate a method through which the deconstruction of differences as artificially barriers can transform into moments of empowerment. She states “I

think I want to be a cricket when I die-/singing among thousands” (ll. 14-15). A coalition emerges through which her voice is merged with others into one, larger sound. The unification of her voice and existence into a larger community indicates Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s argument in *Woman Native Other* that “[i]nspired by his people, the poet has to play the difficult role of being simultaneously the torch lighting the way for his fellowmen and their loyal interpreter” (13). Notably, Ayala does not indicate wanting to be submerged into the group or to disappear into it. Cixous acknowledges that “I cannot live with a single body cut off from the rest” (75). Solitude is separation from life. The sound Ayala describes transforms into subversion. The poet, rather than submitting to the isolation of a category, seeks a re-birth into a sound created by the multitudes, as described in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*.

Ayala’s desire also functions to illuminate the intricacies of liberatory consciousness. Flax writes that “[f]reedom is the ability to determine self-consciously the course of one’s life in conjunction with other similarly autonomous selves” (15). As such, the act of dying and re-entering life as a cricket metaphorically becomes a *renacimiento*. False categories used to segregate peoples, dating back to Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant who stated that Africans’ skin “make all Negroes stink” can therefore be shed (46). Ayala, instead of reifying classifications of race, gender, or ethnicity, expresses a desire to experience her body and its potential as sentient being in collusion with others. Cixous writes there is the possibility for the “fall of walls, the bursting of doors, the dissolution of the skin’s wall, the dissipation of bars, this is what the loving – beloved brings us – my flesh plus the world’s flesh, the world as flesh, a body finally on scale with our soul” (75). As Ayala’s disruption of power illustrates, the reality of power is only a manifestation of the mind and, therefore, can be imagined out of being.

The strength gained from creating a unified front can lead to an emancipator practice

through which individuals enact their agency and further demonstrate their own autonomy. Ayala concludes the poem with the statement “I want to go where it is I go,/ and come back singing, always, somehow” (*ll.* 18-19). The authority she asserts through the first word of line eighteen is enhanced by the desire implied by her ready acceptance of the fact that she has dreams and needs that she willingly acknowledges. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights point 10.1 asserts that “[e]veryone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.” The poet’s desire to move and sing, to express herself without restriction is the enactment of a privilege acknowledge more than fifty years prior to the publication of this poem. In this instance, Ayala indicates Mae Ngai’s constant quotation of Justice Warren’s statement that “the basic right of humans is the right to have rights” (10). In Ayala’s awareness of the fact that she has the right to have desires, she acknowledges her own humanity as it is demonstrated in her desire to form alliances with others.

Similarly, her desire to always sing indicates her awareness of the need to be heard and acknowledged for the sound she creates. Flax notes that “writers can be located along a spectrum from those who believe there is a (yet unrecognized) emancipatory potential within the project(s) of modernity to those who claim that it is morally bankrupt or hopelessly contaminated by its disciplinary imperatives” (75). However, Ayala does not appear to be working within the constraints implied by the term “modernity.” Nowhere does she indict or laud “modernity” as having any particular elements that hurt or help her. Instead, the soul of the individual and the body they inhabit are of the utmost significance and, therefore, the only element worth examining. Instead of reliance on empirical information, the experience of the individual is the only thing we should be doing. Ayala suggests an episteme shift to imagine a way out of the

colonial domination of the multitude's mind.

Borderless: Neo-Riqueña Discourse

Examination of Naomi Ayala's "Perfection" and "Crickets" illuminates the artistic methods available to address and circumnavigate the ideological constructs that have been utilized to discipline the psyches and bodies of the oppressed. Rather than falling into the practice of labeling and naming, Ayala transfuses the essence of various cultures into her poetry without recasting categories that separate and segregate. Ayala indicates the empowering moment of transcendence of cultural nationalism and the benefits of creating alliances among the subjugated masses, while ensuring to not evacuate the difference that exist, to understand differences as just that and not deficiencies, recreates the ability to acknowledge individuals as integrally unique and deserving of respect in those differences.

As such, individuals are shown to have the power to create new ways of knowing and understanding the self. However, these new forms of knowledge must maintain an awareness of how the mind has previously been disciplined and how culture has been deployed to disintegrate the individual into automatons that were as controllable as they were violatable. Edén Torres writes in *Chicana Without Apology* that "Chicana authors seem to understand that acknowledging the loss, the disgrace, and the pain in our lives – and learning to trust – is a major step toward eradicating the kind of vulnerability that grows out of dysfunction" (39). Ayala constructs a new image of the Puerto Rican that is no longer colonized but is free to assert self-authority and control. In this, alliances are built across time and space without the necessity of acknowledging the barriers that otherwise control. As such, Ayala constitutes a pathway out of dichotomies and categories of living, reconstitutes methods of interpreting reality, and creates a method of re-embodying the body.

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[i] For more details regarding Puerto Rico's political status, please see Duffy Burnett, Christina and Burke Marshall, eds. *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001. Please also see McCune, Marianne. "Puerto Rican Birth Certificates Will Be Null And Void." *NPR* March 18, 2010.