

Nacimiento y renacimientos de Tato Laviera

The Birth and Rebirths of Tato Laviera

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Resumen: Este ensayo estudia lo que considero la estética de Tato Laviera. Me enfoco en ciertos tropos recurrentes presentes en sus poemas y libros de poesía. La estética de Laviera contempla al poeta y a la voz poética como un profeta y visionario, pero también como testigo e historiador de su comunidad. El poeta / la voz poética es consciente de su responsabilidad de documentar las diversas voces de su pueblo, las cuales han sido silenciadas por la sociedad que insiste en la asimilación. Al tiempo que delibero sobre las experiencias de sus personajes también doy cuenta de aspectos de la vida de Tato. Exploro la relación entre el poeta y su persona poética para centrarme en las caídas y resurgimientos recurrentes del poeta y cómo éstos se manifiestan en las etapas finales de su vida, culminando con su muerte. Leo esos momentos íntimos y personales conjuntamente con su poema magistral, "Jesús Papote", el cual creo refleja la vida del poeta. Me planteo cómo el significado de Jesús, de "Jesús Papote", de alguna manera extraña está presente en el nombre de pila del poeta, Jesús Abraham (Tato) Laviera, y cómo esta identidad lingüística me permite seguir una interpretación religiosa del poeta y su creación. En mi comparación de los últimos momentos de la vida de Tato con los experimentados por la voz poética de Jesús Papote, me pregunto cómo el poema esboza la existencia del autor. Los ciclos recurrentes de "vida" y "muerte" de Tato se anuncian muchas décadas antes en el poema como ciclos de muerte y renacimiento. Hacia el final, Tato se convierte en su personaje y su personaje se convierte en Tato, ya que ambos son uno y el mismo.

Keywords: Latino Literature; Nuyorican Poetry; Tato Laviera; Jesus; rebirth

Abstract: This essay studies what I consider to be the Tato Laviera Aesthetics. I focus on certain recurring tropes present in his poems and collections of poetry. The Laviera Aesthetics contemplates the poet and the poetic voice as a prophet and visionary, but also as witness and historian of his community. The poet/poetic voice is conscious of his responsibility, to document the many voices of his people, which have been silenced by society that insists on assimilation. While deliberating on the experiences of his characters, I also recount aspects of Tato's life. I explore the relationship between the poet and his poetic persona to focus on the poet's recurring fall and resurgence and how they are manifested in the final stages of his life, culminating within his death. I read those inmate and personal moments alongside his master poem, "Jesús Papote,"



which I believe mirrors the poet's life. I envisage how the significance of Jesús, of "Jesús Papote," in some strange way is present in the poet's given name, Jesús Abraham (Tato) Laviera, and how this linguistic identity allows me pursue a religious interpretation of the poet and his creation. In my comparison of the final moments of Tato's life to those experienced by the poetic voice of Jesús Papote, I ponder how the poem outlines Tato's existence. Tato's recurrent cycles of "life" and "death" are announced many decades before in the poem as cycles of death and rebirth. In the End, Tato becomes his character and his character becomes Tato, for they are one and the same.

Palabras clave: Literatura latina de los EE.UU.; Poesía nuyorriqueña; Tato Laviera; Jesus; resurrección.

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Para Ruth, hermana, madre y guía espiritual
Para Juan Flores, hermano, que en paz descanse

I

Tato Laviera is one of the most important New York poets in recent memory. His work is a testament to his national and international reputation. In a career that spans more than thirty years, Laviera published five major books of poetry: *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* (1979); *Enclave* (1981), Winner of American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation; *AmeRícan* (1985), whose title poem is the most published and anthologized ever written by a Puerto Rican poet in the United States; *Mainstream Ethics* (1989); and *Mixturao* (2008). Laviera wrote and produced twelve plays and published four: *The Spark* (2006), *Bandera a Bandera* (2007), *'77 PR Chicago Riot* (2008), and an act of *Kings of Cans* (2012). He also writes a draft of a novel, *El Barrio*. Selections of his poems, plays, and novel have appeared in the *Afro-Hispanic Review*.

Laviera's literary career has not been a smooth and progressive transition from one publication to the other. Though every publication has been an overwhelming success, each stage has also been fraught with difficult moments. For some time now, Laviera was legally blind; he suffered from diabetes and underwent dialysis. Instead of accepting defeat, each fall have given the



necessary strength to overcome the challenges before him, as he rose to a higher and even stronger personal and literary plane.

Laviera is the prophet of his people, and his poetic destiny was already outlined in his classic *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*. In this first collection, Laviera rewrites René Marqués canonical play, *La carreta*, about the different stages of the Puerto Rican migration, first from the countryside to San Juan, then from San Juan to New York City, and after a series of tragic events in the metropolis, from New York back to Puerto Rico.¹ Laviera's *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* suggests that the destiny of Puerto Ricans living in the United States is based not on a return to the paradisiacal island many have forgotten the reasons for leaving, but on remaining in the harsh and punitive New York City environment. This is a position other writers continue to underscore in their poems, from Miguel Piñero's "A Lower East Side Poem" to Mariposa's "Boricua Butterfly."

La Carreta Made a U-Turn contains the key to understanding all of Laviera's works, and it contains the seeds of what I call the Laviera Aesthetics. The opening poem "para ti, mundo bravo" serves as an introduction to Laviera's poetic world. In the first stanza the speaker shouts out to the world, announcing the presence of his poetic voice and desire to connect with his community, to speak to them about events that have become familiar to all of them. Here, the poetic voice defines his task as an observer, an ethnographer, or a historian documenting all things that take place within the immediate environment. The stanza reads as follows:

in the final analysis
i am nothing but a historian
who took your actions
and jotted them on paper (1979: 13)

The first four lines of this first collection describe the poet's *métier*, what he sees and writes can be considered as Laviera's "ars poetica." However, it is interesting to note that the beginning of the poem starts with the ending, the

¹ See Marqués *La carreta*.



“final analysis,” a reference to a final outcome or when truth is known. But here I want to focus on the word “final” and finality as the outcome of a process, even though in the Laviera Aesthetics it is placed at the beginning. Therefore, the final also reverts back to its binary opposite, the beginning, and the poem highlights the concepts of beginnings and endings, for a beginning is a start of a process and the ending is the conclusion of that initial activity. But endings are also beginnings insofar as we, writers and critics alike, give meaning to the past not as initial event that provided a first and limited impression of what will unfold before us, but as a conclusion of a process that gains insight from a contemporary and more recent perspective, which is later imposed on and attributed to that past. Beginnings and endings are inextricably intertwined. The concept of “in the final analysis” will always be present in the Laviera Aesthetics, as the poet moves to explain from a privileged or informed position what he observes about the past.

In this first poem, “para ti, mundo bravo,” Laviera presents his calling as an observer, capturing what he sees emerging from his community: the suffering of his people, who at times wonder aimlessly without direction, struggling to survive in an hostile and unwelcoming environment. However, this mishap is what gives life to the poet and the poetic voice, and provides him with strength, purpose, and inspiration. Knowledge of the arduous daily life of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos surviving in an unfriendly and unfamiliar environment is enough to madden any sensible human being. Nevertheless, I want to concentrate on the candid and disarming tone of these early poems. If a hostile encounter were to take place between the poetic voice and his adversary, whoever that persona may be, the speaker would not meet violence with violence but with a book by Dostoievsky. This response is not to show that he is more knowledgeable or educated than his opponent, but to convey that books and the act of reading represent knowledge and growth, which “in the final analysis,” a line that is repeated three times, including the start and end of the poem, is what makes the initial two antagonists richer, change the dynamics, and even produce a feeling of compassion between them.



The second poem, “even then he knew,” attributes to the subject of the poem, Papote, a wisdom the poetic voice does not know he possesses. While “papote sat on the stoop”—a line that is repeated four times—other types of activities and conditions in the neighborhood are taking place, some of which have become a fixture of ghetto life: the social club playing music, a burned car, garbage in the streets, among others. However, the time and place are clear: It is one hot summer Sunday, not only because there is a reference to “Sunday garbage,” but also because of the line that refers to the Pentecostal Church choir. Papote is also a fixture in his community, and the speaker tells the reader that Papote is uneducated, misinformed, and malnourished, and seems to be somewhat paralyzed; but he makes a decision, which is not to go anywhere. The unspecified “he” in the title of the poem refers to Papote who knew enough to be decisive, but also to the poetic voice who commands a certain insight to write a poem. I will say more about Papote later.

The use of language will always be a dominant characteristic of the Laviera Aesthetics. His “graduation speech” already foretells his concerns about expressing himself in different languages: Spanish, English, and Spanglish. For he is a product of the three:

i think in spanish
i write in english
.....
english or spanish
spanish or english
spanglish
now, dig this:

hablo lo ingles matao
hablo lo español matao
no sé leer ninguno bien

so it is, spanglish to matao
what i digo
¡ay, virgen, yo no sé hablar! (1979: 17)



Laviera's closing line of desperation, that he does not know how to speak, is unfounded, since he expresses himself eloquently in the poem. He communicates the frustration many of us feel when searching for the proper word while speaking any language. But there are other recurring themes in this first collection that will be carried on to the other books. Laviera's poems about Spanish themes in English are written for a predominantly English-speaking population that tends to romanticize the island and island culture. Such is the case of "savoring, from piñones to loíza," about Puerto Rican food and music. The poems that are written in Spanish are directed to a Spanish-speaking population in the Barrio or New York, but also in Puerto Rico. With his Spanish poems, Laviera wants to be on the same playing field as island poets; especially those who are willing to address issues important to Puerto Rican culture. Since there are not many island poets ready to discuss such delicate matters, Laviera becomes one of a handful of Puerto Rican poets eager to highlight issues others prefer to ignore. He tackles the myth of racial harmony many Puerto Ricans, both home and abroad, continue to perpetuate. Race, for Laviera, represents fertile ground; he documents and deconstructs this aspect of Puerto Rican culture.

In "el moreno puertorriqueño (a three-way warning poem)" Laviera expresses a concern that he will revisit in subsequent poems, the topic of racism in Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican culture. In the above-mentioned poem, the poetic voice questions the central idea of racial equality. When watching television soap operas, the black characters are white actors with makeovers, none of whom he can identify with, and they seem to be making fun of him. The speaker even wonders if he lives in the past and is still an enslaved. The poem is also a tribute to Luis Palés Matos, who in the 1920s pioneered the Negrismo movement, which focused on stylized African images and rhythms.² Though it is not difficult to criticize Palés Matos superficial understanding of the contributions Africans made to Caribbean culture, his peers ostracized him for tainting with black images Puerto Rican literature and culture. But Laviera

² See: *Tun tun de pasa y grifería*.



refers specifically to Palés Matos “ñam ñam,” a poem about cannibalism and the oral fixation of Africans, stuck in a primitive or infantile stage. Laviera pays tribute to the master poet and also distances himself from him to claims: “ñam ñam yo no soy / de la masucamba,” which he repeats twice at the end of the poem. Though “masucamba” can be interpreted in many different ways, it is also considered to be a dance. The speaker negates any association with it, and becomes independent from the master poet but also from certain aspects of Puerto Rican society and culture.

While Laviera is a Nuyorican poet, a term coined by Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero,³ he recognizes that Nuyoricans or New Yorkers regardless of race do not live in isolation, for the city is known to be the home of many racial and ethnic groups. Laviera’s poetry is concerned about other members of his community, Afro-Latinx and African Americans in particular. The black is present in poems such as “canción para un parrandero,” “felipe Luciano i miss you in africa,” and “the africa in pedro morejón,” among others.

Laviera feels an affinity with Puerto Ricans of all races, both on the island and mainland; however, he is also aware that blacks occupy the lowest part of the social and racial strata of US society. In fact, the racial tension has brought Afro-Latinx to seek refuge in the African American community; and African Americans have welcomed them. Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, Felipe Luciano, and Laviera himself are testaments to the cooperation between Afro-Puerto Ricans and African Americans. This perception is implicit in Laviera’s recognition that race matters in the United States, allowing him to revisit similar concerns affecting Afro-Puerto Ricans back on the island. Later, Laviera tackles the problem of racism on the island with other poems like “Tesis de Negreza,” based on Bobby Capo’s well-known “Negro bembón.” The poet reproduces the song, but he also offers a counter narrative, one that discloses pride in his blackness. Laviera’s communion with blacks brings him closer to the African American community to which he also belongs.

³ Algarín and Piñero, eds. *Nuyorican Poetry*.



Religion is an important component of the Laviera Aesthetics. In this first collection it appears with insistence in “excommunication gossip,” and even tangentially in “orchard beach y la virgin del carmen.” Religion is expressed as part of Puerto Rico’s Catholic or Christian denominations. However, it is also an essential belief system Africans brought with them to the Americas during the period of slavery, and continues in the present with all followers, regardless of race. In “santa bárbara,” who is syncretized with Changó in Regla de Ocha, the poetic voice attends a spiritual festivity, in which blacks and Indians come back to life through spiritual possessions. The poetic voice, who is skeptic, is unwillingly possessed and becomes a believer. The poem highlights these important cultural and religious components of Puerto Rican and Latino life both at home and abroad, but it also marks the poetic voice and poet’s spiritual initiation. For it is Laviera’s spirituality that guides him through the maze of confusion, and he seeks clarity where others continue to find perplexity.

Laviera has the capability to move into a larger frame of reference that can encompass Spanish or Spanish-American writers and themes and their influence on his work. He illustrates this idea by writing a poem about the Nobel Laureate, Pablo Neruda, who was known for his political and social activism. Neruda had a profound understanding of the common man, which in his work takes center stage in “The Heights of Macchu Picchu”.⁴ In this epic poem, the poetic voice is immersed in the confusion of contemporary society, until he finds the physical structure of the Inca Empire. After marveling in its wonder, he focuses his attention on those who built it and have disappeared from history. Like the Nobel Laureate, in “the last song of Neruda,” the Nuyorican poet is concerned about the suffering of man within his immediate environment. With his poem, Laviera provides an identity to those who have become beggars of the Bowery and sleep in “warehouses”:

inside this assembly i shall declare
that my poetry bled from prostatic
cancer, and in exposing society’s cancer

4 “Las alturas de Macchu Picchu,” *Canto general*.



i found the illumination of my thoughts,
pero aun, the fallen are the purest of all (1979: 30)

In “the last song of Neruda” Laviera shows his concern for those common people who have become marginal and dispensable in society. However, as in the case of Neruda, they have served as a source of inspiration for his poems.

Neruda also wrote love and sensuous poems, many of them dedicated to his wife Matilde.⁵ “a sensitive bolero in transformation” is a sexual and sensual poem that focuses on the senos or breasts in a manner that recalls the hands that caresses the body in Neruda’s “La infinita” (“The Infinite One”), which will take a lifetime to explore. Neruda’s obsession with the breasts is also incorporated into Laviera’s poem:

seno suave

seno
my longing is the

breasts caliente
creates all the moods all the
feelings of my colors
my third and fourth eyes
meñique
anular
del corazón
índice
pulgarcito
fingers of a hand
treat my breasts as sculptures
choreographing the mental and
spiritual ballet that would
make his lips and then his
body define me in my barest
nudity to make the contact
of harvesting flowless energy
in space (1979: 39)

Like the master poet, Laviera is also obsessed with the breasts, a word he repeats ten times in Spanish (seno) and seven times in English.

As I have demonstrated above, an important component of the Laviera Aesthetics is to write love poems. However, there is another fundamental element that is present in “a sensitive bolero in transformation”; the poem

⁵ For his love poems see, for example, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* and *Los versos del capitán*.



proposes a different perspective, that of the woman, for it poeticizes the woman's body from the woman's point of view. As early as "a message to our unwed women," Laviera experiments with different voices; in this other poem a "you" of a judgmental community is transformed into a poetic "I," who has been given a voice to speak of her true feelings:

I am now a true woman
my child will not be called
illegitimate
this act was done with love
with passion
my feelings cannot be planned
I will not let their innocence
affect me
I will have him, coño,
because I want him
because I feel his breast
of life consoling
my hurt, sharing my grief,
if anybody does
not accept it
que se vayan pal ... me entienden
pal ... lo oyen
pal ... me escuchan. (1979: 37)

Here, Laviera uncovers the poetic "I" of a strong woman, who defies the societal norm and speaks about social and cultural concerns. She challenges the cultural norm by making her position public.

Some years later Sandra María Esteves crafted her much publicized "My Name is María Christina," about a Puerto Rican woman who represents the mother of a new wave of warriors.⁶ But in "a message to our unwed women" Laviera already spoke about a poetic persona who gives birth to La Raza, that is, to a new cultural identity.

Laviera provides a voice to women but also to inanimate objects. This idea to have others speaks coincides with the task entrusted to testimonial literature, to give voice to those who have been denied a voice. In the Laviera

⁶ For an analysis of this and other poems, see my *Dance Between Two Cultures*.



Aesthetics it includes the Statue of Liberty: “lady liberty,” the first poem in *Mainstream Ethics*, refers to one of the great symbols of US society, and it is arguably one of the best poems about the statue that sits atop Liberty Island. Laviera’s composition is in dialogue with Frédéric Bartholdi, the architect of the statue, but also Emma Lazarus, whose poem the “New Colossus” is inscribed in the base of Lady Liberty. Laviera’s poem was written to commemorate the centenary celebration of the Statue of Liberty, an event that received much publicity throughout the country and in New York in particular. With this in mind, the first stanza captures the ambiance of the celebration, as tall ships dot the harbor’s water, the television cameras focus on the event, and awac airplanes fly above. But the statue and its symbol have been eroded with time, and Lady Liberty even needs a transplant in order to survive, and bring her back to life. Indeed, Lady Liberty is alive and voices her discontent with the changing times that have denied liberty to all members of American society.

if you touch me, touch ALL of my people
who need attention and societal repair,
give the tired and the poor
the same attention, AMERICA,
touch us ALL with liberty,
touch us ALL with liberty. (1988: 9)

We should note that in the above stanza the word “touch” is repeated four times, the word “all” three times, the word “liberty” two times, and the word “America” one time. In its most basic form, America needs to touch many times or to touch all its people, as the next to the last stanza indicates:

so touch me,
and in touching me
touch all our people,
do not single me out,
touch all our people,
touch all our people,
all our people
 our people
 people (1988: 10)



The act of touching the breasts in “a sensitive bolero in transformation” is converted in “lady liberty” to touching her children or her people. Laviera provides a voice to the statue, and she worries about what her symbol means during the time of celebration. The poet’s concern for those who have been marginalized was already present in “the last song of Neruda.”

Music is another element present in the Laviera Aesthetics. Laviera’s poems contain music, but they are also about music; music is sonorous, and music is also a cultural expression. Music is what immigrants and exile carry with them when traveling abroad and setting roots in a different society and culture. It is the newcomer’s connection to the past, and it establishes a link between the home and adopted country. “el sonero mayor” mixes the harsh life Ismael Rivera experienced with the music of his famous songs. In “the salsa of Bethesda fountain,” salsa is linked to Africa and Afro-Caribbean sounds, which for the speaker have been transformed into Puerto Rican bomba and plena, embodied in the African in all of us. The African presence is visible in “the Africa in pedro morejón,” as represented by the guaguancó, the merengue, the guaracha, and the mambo. Other poems that convey sounds and the music of instruments, in particular the conga, are “the new rumbón,” “tumbao (for eddie conde)”, and “summer congas (pregnancy and abortion).”

Music is part of the oral tradition, especially when referencing the Puerto Rican declamadores, for there is a poem entitled “declamación,” about Jorge Brandon; and there is another one “la música jíbara,” about décimas and music. As part of the mainland oral tradition, music is already audible with soapbox preachers, politicians, or hustlers, whose words are meant to entice or enchant the listener. The repetition of a refrain or a slogan is what the public remembers best. In poetry it is used as a vehicle to emphasize certain images or sounds, and Laviera does so by underscoring certain melodic words. This is clearly evident in the poem “tito madera smith,” of *Enclave*.

Enclave continues to chronicle the life of the ghetto with poems such as “tito madera smith,” a fast- and smooth-talking character, the quintessential hustler, who can transform himself in an instant to obtain his intended goal. The



repetition of “he claims” (mentioned four times) and “do you know him” (repeated three times), culminates in the birth of his identity, which repeats the words “you can call him” ten times, emphasizing the musicality mentioned above:

you can call him tito,
or you can call him madera,
or you can call him smitty,
or you can call him mr. t.,
or you can call him nuyorican,
or you can call him black,
or you can call him latino,
or you can call him mr. smith ,
his sharp eyes of awareness,
greeting us in aristocratic harmony:
“you can call me many things, but
you gotta call me something. (1981: 26)

Certainly, Tito Madera Smith is a mixture of Spanish and English surnames, for he is tito, madera, smitty, mr. t., nuyorican, black, latino, and mr. smith. But above all, he is the speaker himself, as his “I” makes it clear at the end. As we read the poem, there are telling signs of the speaker’s identity: He claims to translate Palés Matos, knows where Langston Hughes lived, is familiar with Santería, is black and prieto and from Santurce, and is very interested in las mamitas.

While it is not my intention to trace all the themes that are present in *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*, and study how they are transposed on to subsequent collections that define the Laviera Aesthetics, I do want to underscore some salient characteristics that are further developed in *Enclave*, and in some of Laviera’s more recent writings. For example, “declamación,” of *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*, in which Jorge Brandon appears prominently, closes Laviera’s first collection. However, it is not accidental that Laviera begins *Enclave* with “jorge brandon,” and this poem and character links both collections. In this second poem about the iconic figure, Brandon is present. However, he is only mentioned in the title; the poem does not refer to Brandon, but to poetry itself.



In the first stanza, the speaker makes the following proclamation: “poetry is an outcry, love, affection, / a sentiment, a feeling, an attitude, / a song.” “jorge brandon,” if you wish, is another component of Laviera’s ars poetica, a meditation on poetry, of how the speaker conceives of this form of expression, which for him is unambiguously instinctual, “it is internal gut expressing intimate / thoughts upon a moment’s experience.” The process engages all your senses: “the smell of sand,” “the mountain,” “the recital,” “to taste bitter memory,” and “to feel.” Above all, it is composed of an “attitude,” an “experience,” and “the soul.”

There are other characters that are part of the ghetto landscape, like “juana bochisme,” who knows everyone’s business; “unemployment line,” which describes the humiliating experience of having to struggle to receive what is his; and “bolita folktale,” which chronicles five and one half hours of a numbers game in which don Julio played his number’s dream, only to find out that he played Brooklyn and not Manhattan where the number won; and “serious dude,” about a man who falls in love with a woman but does not care if she desires him or is committed to being with someone else. But if she wants to be with the poetic voice, he expects her other man to step aside.

Laviera’s poetic personas have become a fixture in the New York City tapestry: Tito Madera Smith, Jesús Papote, Lady Liberty, all speak to particular aspects of the metropolitan city that has become Laviera’s home. But there is an emphasis in another aspect of the Laviera Aesthetics, in poems written mainly, but not exclusively, in Spanish. In *Enclave*, these include “juana bochisme,” “abandoned building,” “maría ciudad,” “compañera,” “alicia alonso,” “suni paz,” “vaya carnal,” “juana boria,” and “homenaje a don luis palés matos.” The latter is a continuation of “el moreno puertorriqueño (a three-way warning poem)” of his first collection. In this other poem the speaker identifies Palés Matos as black: “pracutú-piriquín-prucú-tembandeando / el secreto máximo: que luis palés matos / también era grifo africano guillao de castellano.” Repeated twice, the poem ends with the three lines mentioned above. Undeniably, Palés Matos was responsible for making blacks visible to



Puerto Ricans, and he did so by imitating what he conceived to be the influence of African music in Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands, as he conveys in “Danza negra,” which features the famous refrain: “Calabó y bamboo / bambú y calabó.” From this perspective, Laviera underscores the topic of race in Puerto Rico. For him, Palés Matos was not white, but rather he was a black who passed for white, a well-kept secret Laviera reveals in his poem.

II

Enclave is remarkable because it confirms Laviera’s reputation as a first-rate poet, and marks the direction his poetry will take. His second book also features one of the most significant poems in Laviera’s work, one that ranks among the best poems written by any poet regardless of origin, ethnicity, or race. “jesus papote” is a composite of different early characters and contains important elements of the Laviera Aesthetics we have come to know. Jesús Papote, and in particular the nickname Papote, can be traced to the second poem, “even then he knew,” of *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*, which introduces Papote to the reader. Papote, as outlined above, becomes another entity of the ghetto environment. He suffers from malnourishment and lacks a formal education, and while there is movement around him, “he decides to go nowhere.” However, Papote also points to another character, “tito madera smith,” who is the antithesis of Papote; or with time Papote can be transformed into a Tito Madera Smith. Contrary to Papote, Tito Madera Smith is poetry in motion; his mouth is faster than his feet. But, as is to be expected, in the end characters like Papote and Tito Madera Smith do not fare well and have a limited future. We do know that in the decades of the sixties and seventies, Puerto Rican and Latinx young men and women were victims of drug addiction and crime that plagued the ghetto, which claimed the lives and livelihood of many members of the Latinx community.

Laviera’s “jesús papote” responds to characters like Papote and Madera Smith insofar as their lives must come to an end in order to start anew and be



reborn, in the words of Sandra María Esteves, into to a new race of warriors. While it is not my intention to recapitulate what I have written elsewhere about this remarkable poem,⁷ I do want to focus on a few ideas that speak to the topic at hand. Those familiar with the poem know that Jesús Papote is a fetus with Christ-like qualities, as his given name suggests. In fact, he is the reincarnation of Christ, in the humblest of places, the Latinx ghetto. However, in this second coming, the image of the Christ figure has been inverted or more correctly, it has been placed in a contemporary context, where Christ continues to be an outcast. In the original Biblical version, the Virgin Mary gave birth to a child that was not the son of Joseph, mother and husband were refused shelter, and the mother gave birth in a manger. In Laviera's version of the Christ story, Jesús Papote's mother is indeed an outcast: she is a prostitute with a strong drug addiction, does not know the father of her child, lives in an inhospitable environment, and the cold winter weather is foreign to the mild island climate she had come to know earlier. The opening stanza sets the background for the epic:

... brethren woman strung out deep
cornered jungle streets eyes closed body
crouched face tucked pregnant belly, sali-
vating umbilical cord peddling multi-
cut heroine sub-ghetto fortress chanting
early winder 25 degree cold-frío shivering
lacked attention lacked warmth born-to-be
embryo asphyxiated 25 dollars powers pene-
trating vein venas veins venas pouring
rivers pouring up mountains muscles brain's
tributaries. (1981: 12)

Jesús Papote is more than an individual; he is the embodiment of generations of Puerto Ricans and Latinos of mixed racial and cultural, backgrounds born, raised, and residing in New York City. In the first stanza, the birth is accentuated by "He was born," which is repeated eight times (not all of the phrases are reproduced in the following stanza):

⁷ See: *Dance Between Two Cultures*.



.....
he was born son grand son great grand son
he was born generations america puerto rico
he was born europe africa 7 generations before
he was born latest legacy family tree inheritor
he was born he was born 20th century
urban story greatest told abandonment
concrete land new york city story of stories (1981: 13)

What follows is Jesús Papote's nine-month gestation journey, in which the fetus attempts to speak, guide, and give strength and inspiration to his mother. In this process he struggles to survive and keep his mother alive. While the poem is not a treatise on when life begins, the poetic voice's "I" is born at the moment of conception:

My name is jesús papote i live nine months gut soul
i was addicted i was beaten i was kicked i was punched
i slept in empty cellars broken stairways i was infected
i was injected spermed with many relations
i ran from police jails i was high every day of life (1981: 14)

The poem outlines a nine-month journey, recounting the months of gestation to birth. The refrain "My name is jesús papote" frames the stages of the mother's pregnancy, and the challenges associated with each month: "My name is jesús papote born holy saturday, easter / sunday march mother parading 3rd avenues' ...," "My name is jesús papote may month flowers she dis- / covered me making her green throwing up she wanted / abortion she took pill after pill ...," "My name is jesús papote june cold turkey center cold / turkey her system must contain itself...," "My name is jesús papote 4th of July celebration / plane ride across to puerto rico mountain house... / leo-mildness-august night tidal waves moving bells...," "My name is jesús papote september pregnant body new / york spells trouble once-again-racing-fast struggles...," "My name is jesús papote she october tried training / program cellar jobs she vowed not to use it again...." "My name is jesús papote november all souls day / grandma knocked on door oh no the prayers fell," "My name is jesús papote december christmas new / york



city my inner cycle 9 months completed....” It is important to note that throughout the gestation period Papote’s mother returns twice to Puerto Rico. First, she and the fetus are present on Easter Sunday; second, they travel in time for the 4th of July celebration, an event that was developed more fully in “Lady Liberty.” As I have indicated, the return trip to the island had already been outlined by Marqués’s *La carreta*, which in Laviera’s poem is accompanied by a vision of the idyllic island: “nights kissing early morning mango blossoms new sun / octapusing rays orange rainbows the ox-cart was your / solution your final triumph how beautiful you look.” As with the playwright’s characters, in the poem the mother and fetus return to the island, and in the poem not once but twice. While every month has its own section, these two trips are special, for they are the only events that combine two months, in the first March and April, and in the second July and August, and they indicate an extended stay. The first trip is characterized by embarrassment and discord, and these and other factors force the mother to return to New York and attend to her drug addiction. The second visit is more harmonious, and the fetus encourages the mother to stay in Puerto Rico: “mamita don’t go back give birth in island nativeness / tropical greetings nurturing don’t go back don’t / go back.” As we know from Laviera’s first collection of poems, *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*, and regardless of how the fetus feels, Laviera’s carreta makes a u-turn, for the island no longer offers solutions to the Puerto Rican diaspora.

It would be too simple or simplistic for these Puerto Rican characters to return to “island nativeness,” to bask in the sun and eat native foods, as highlighted in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “Idea of Islands”.⁸ This other returned journey is not realistic and responds more to a romantic and idealized vision of Puerto Rico, which was never part of the immigrants’ reality before they left the island. René Marqués’s *Cuentos puertorriqueños de hoy* narrates the harsh and even deadly conditions Puerto Ricans endured after Operation Bootstrap was put into effect. The attempt to industrialize the island forced many of them to abandon what could be appropriately considered an inferno. Regardless, there

⁸ This highly regarded poem is also available in my *Looking Out, Looking In: Anthology of Latino Poetry*.



is no redemption without experiencing a fall, and for this reason Puerto Ricans must make a physical and symbolic u-turn and remain in New York City's inhospitable environment. The poetic voice must fall in order to be resurrected.

The resurrection is not just a physical act or a mere tragedy, but in Laviera's poem it takes place as part of the writing process, as suggested by my study of the line "in the final analysis" of "para ti, mundo bravo." Though we know that the act of writing follows the conversion, in which the writer looks back to see the origin of the journey and considers the present and future to understand where he is and where he will be going, Laviera's writing exhibits its own transformation and change. In the fourth stanza Jesús Papote's "I" emerges, and the speaker is aware that his birth is on Christmas day, thus allowing the reader to draw the analogy between Jesús Papote and Jesus Christ. However, at this stage in the poem he defines himself differently from the way he does after he undergoes the process of describing (through Laviera's writing) the nine-month journey. At the outset of the poem, Jesús Papote identifies himself as follows:

My name is jesús papote i am born in oppression
my death a deeper martyrdom unknown to pain to
solitude to soledad to soledad's seven skins to
darkness to darkness' mystery to mystery's spirit.

The lines mentioned above indicate that he is no longer in the womb and is "born in oppression." They refer to a martyrdom associated with words like pain, solitude, and darkness. But later, there is a change. After describing the nine-month pregnancy period, at the moment of the birthing act, the poetic voice arrives at a different understanding of his life. The process unfolds subsequent to recounting the cycle of death and resurrection associated with the months of November and December. In November the grandmother's prayers are not answered, and the mother continues with her addiction. It is in November that death is present, as the phrase "death la muerte" is repeated ten times, and "death" twelve times. However, in December the poem shifts, from death to life, promising hope as expressed in the phrase "save him jesus,"



repeated four times. What follows in the next stanza, number seventeen, is Papote's actual participation in his own birth process, as he instructs his mother on what to do, he has become a midwife, in the process of producing his own life:

Mami Mami push push i'm coming out celestial barkings
Mami Mami push i don't want to die she slept
Mami Mami push i want to live she slept cough
Mami Mami i have the ability to love cough cough
Mami Mami fight with me again she slept he slept
Mami Mami i'm coming out out out push push push push
Mami Mami can you feel me can you hear me push push
push push empuja empuja cough cough push puh push
empuja empuja Mami cough cough push push i am fighting
I am fighting push push nature nature i have a will
to live to denounce you nature i am fighting by myself
your sweeping breasts your widowing backbone
yearnings your howling cemetery steps your
death-cold inhuman palms Mami Mami wake up
this is my birthday little mornings king
david sang cough cough cough push push
why do I have to eulogize myself
nobody is listening i am invisible
why tell me why do i have to be
the one the one to acclaim that (1981: 19)

If the stanza outlining the month of November is noteworthy because it insists on death, the one that follows, for the month of December, is full of life, conveyed by the word "push," repeated twenty-five times in Spanish and English. This Jesús Papote fights for his and his mother's life. He is a survivor and becomes a warrior before he is born; he has a will to fight and live in order to emerge from the womb and lead a productive life. The fight does not start at the moment of birth, but at the moment of conception and certainly while developing in the womb. However, as I mentioned above, the poem is born after the moment of birth, but the Jesús Papote who speaks at the end of the poem is different from the Jesús Papote who identifies himself as "born in oppression," and who experiences a death "unknown to pain," "to solitude to soledad to soledad's seven skins to / darkness to darkness' mystery to mystery's spirits."



This dark vision in which solitude is repeated three times, and darkness and mystery two times, corresponds to the events associated with the month of November more than with the jubilant birth that takes place in the month of December. If the poem were to be reorganized chronologically, Papote's negative vision of his existence would clash with his desire to live before and after the birthing process.

The Jesús Papote, the one who emerges after recounting the gestation period, is not surrounded by solitude or darkness but by a community of worshipers and caring people, expressed by the plural pronoun, in both Spanish and English, "We, nosotros," repeated sixteen times. The "We, nosotros" is not limited to the Hispanic or Latino communities but also comprises a cross-section of ethnic, racial, and national groups, which include "multi-ethnic black-brown-red in affirmations," "ghetto brothers black americans, indians / italians, irish, jewish, polish, ukranians / russians, german food and music lovers," and "mathematicians," among others. These are the same multiethnic and racial communities Laviera pays "Ethnic Tributes" to in his third collection, *AmeRícan*.

Unlike the Jesús Papote who identifies himself with destruction at the outset of the poem, this other one is an integral part of the "We, nosotros" community of fellowship, who asks "permission," a word repeated six times, to articulate a noun in the language of origin, Spanish, which represents a Puerto Rican concept with universal meaning. The word in question negates accusation and expresses family, pride, reverence, and love, and brings blessing upon him and others, and this takes place when the poetic voice articulates the word *Bendición*.

With the pronunciation of *Bendición*, the only word written in upper case letters in the poem, Papote's mother awakens and comes to life; she experiences a rebirth and is transformed into a woman of action, ready to take charge of her own destiny. She breaks the umbilical cord, rises (physically and spiritually), and participates in the celebration of the (re) birth and arrival of her messiah Jesús (Jesus). It is befitting that the mother, who represents origin



and traditions, displays Jesús Papote to the people, in a final paragraph full of images found in the liturgy: “jesús papote human legacy god the son at the right / hand holy spirit candles flowers incense wine water.” It is indeed a time for celebration because Jesus has returned; and in so doing, he has been embodied as an outcast, an outcast of the outcast, a double outcast, that is, a Puerto Rican, an outcast of Puerto Ricans in the island and an outcast of mainstream citizens in the United States. In “jesús papote” birth and rebirth take place separately and simultaneously. The birth of Jesús Papote is initiated at the time of conception and his rebirth happens when he is born. However, Jesús Papote is a rebirth of Jesus, and this is also accompanied by the rebirth of the mother; from this perspective both are born of the same body, and the mother by giving birth also experiences a rebirth.

III

There is a relationship between the author and his work, between autobiography and writing, as I have suggested at the outset of this study and highlighted in the poem “tito madera smith.” The connection was made in an early interview I conducted with Laviera. When describing his childhood in Santurce, Puerto Rico, Laviera spoke about the musical era of Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera, whose rhythms in one form or another find their way into Laviera’s poems. This is particularly the case with “Negro Bombón” of *Mixturao*, in which the poet celebrates Cortijo and Ismael, but also challenges the meaning of the song they help to popularize.

In the interview Laviera makes a more direct connection between art and life when referring to the first poem that gave birth to his poetic talents, “Even Then He Knew,” which—as mentioned above—appears as the second poem of *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*. Laviera recalls the moment of the poem’s inception:

The first poem I wrote was “Even Then He Knew,” of *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*. An incredible thing happened. I was sick and there was a building they were fixing across the street from where I was living, on 7th Street. I was very ill that day. And this kid, I called him Papote, was sitting on the steps of the building at 1 o’clock when I



came out; he was sitting there at 3 o'clock when I came out again. I looked out the window at 5 o'clock and he was there; él estaba descalzo. I looked at him and then me cogió pena. I said: "Mira, espera allí." I went to get him a sandwich and a soda. I came down the stairs and when I went out he was gone. He was there for five hours. So I went down and sat on the stairs and wrote my poem about that kid.... It was right there that "papote sat on the stoops ... and he decided to go no where." I showed my friend the poem and three hours later, por el amor de Dios, this guy, Sánchez was his name, came back and showed me a painting. It was destiny. I didn't want to meet him again because of my good luck. At 11:00 p.m. I had a painting and a poem about that kid. That was the calling. It was a concrete calling and there it emerged. This happened in July, 1966. (Luis 1992: 1024)

So, Laviera's epiphany that led to his initiation or birth into poetry came from a concrete situation, that of a young man he met while the future poet was recovering from an illness. He named his newfound friend "Papote," and when he went to join Papote, it was a coming together or the birth of Jesús (Laviera) and Papote.

There is another answer contained in the interview that is pertinent to this introduction to Laviera's work and the Laviera Aesthetics I share with the reader. This one also has to do with another moment of inception or beginning, when Laviera first arrived in New York in 1960. He recounts the experience in the following manner:

Yes, my coming to the United States was precipitated by my sister being eight months pregnant and my father not knowing about it. My mother wanted my sister to give birth in New York City, away from my father's anger. And when I left my house, I didn't know I was coming to the United States. I was on the plane and I had vivid images, which I included in the poem called "Negrito" in AmeRícan. Once on the plane, I thought the U.S. was all white, and I was scared I'd be the only Black person going there. I was totally terrified when the plane was landing. And in my poem called "Negrito," I say:

El negrito
vino a nueva york
vio milagros
en sus ojos



su tía le pidió
un abrazo y le dijo,
“no te juntes con
los prietos, negrito.”

My uncle used to work in the airport, so my family came to meet me by the plane. When I came down from the plane, I saw these Black people, and I felt good. But my tía política grabbed my hand and said: “No te juntes con los prietos, negrito.” It was the first thing that I was told, and here I’m thinking that there weren’t going to be any Black people around. I responded: “Pero Titi.” and she said: “No te juntes con los moyetos, negrito.” “Pero Titi.” “Si los cocolos te molestan, corre y si te agarran, baila.” My family proceeded to take me to the Williamsburg area, which is all Black, and so my whole image changed; I didn’t know what was going on. First I thought everyone was all white and then my tía me dice eso and proceeded to take me to an all Black area. I was totally shocked. Plus, I didn’t know I was coming here and after six years my life was totally transformed. (Luis 1992: 1023-24)

Laviera’s arrival in the United States marks a double birth (or rebirth), one associated with his life in the new country, and the other one with the beginning of his consciousness about race matters. Let us not forget that Laviera tells that this is a process that begins with his arrival and concludes six years later with his total transformation, but it is recounted from the present time of the interview.

Anyone familiar with Laviera’s poetry understands the importance of race, whether it is present in the home or adopted country, whether it refers to Afro-Latinx, African Americans, Africans on the continent of Africa, or the strong presence of African religion and culture in Hispanic and Latino societies. Laviera’s response shows that before he arrived in the United States, the poet in the making was aware of race and racial conditions in his home country, where he knew or was told he was black, and on the mainland where he believed that there were no or few blacks in the United States. Race and race matters will always be a touchstone for the Laviera Aesthetics. But for the moment I am interested in uncovering the initial moment of poetic creativity in Laviera’s work, his birth as a writer, if you wish, but also as a way of



understanding his rebirths. For if we follow closely “jesús papote,” birth and rebirth can represent two different stages in a person’s life, and they can also take place in the same time and space.

IV

In February of 2010 I received a distressing message left on my home answering machine. A familiar voice, in a painful and subdued tone, pleaded for help. I immediately answered the call to investigate the nature of the message. Tato, barely audible, informed me that he had been removed from his apartment and was homeless. It was not clear what had happened, nor was I able to decipher the sequence of events. In a subsequent conversation he directed me to a recently published article David González wrote for the New York Times (of February 12), which provided clarity and coherence to what Tato attempted to communicate to me in a fragmented manner.⁹ While I was aware that Tato suffered from diabetes, blindness, and underwent dialysis, González explained that in December Tato was rushed to the emergency room, where he was diagnosed with water in the brain and required emergency surgery to install a shunt to drain the fluid. This, however, left him with partial paralysis in his left leg. Laviera had checked into a nursing home for physical therapy, but abandoned it for fear of becoming another empty body. Looking for help, he was able to secure the assistance of Lorraine Montenegro, the director of United Bronx Parents, who came to his rescue.

In conversations with colleague Stephanie Alvarez (University of Texas-Pan American), we began to mobilize the academic community to raise money and assist Tato find affordable and respectable housing. Emails began to circulate with electrifying speed, and money started to surface from foundations and individuals. Everyone felt a sense of urgency, and this was a worthy task that could not fail. More often than not we recognize the person after he expires, and it became imperative that we change this awful custom of “celebrating” our artists after they are gone. We should learn to appreciate the

⁹ González, David. (2010a). “Poet Spans Two Worlds, but Has a Home in Neither”.



writer who is still with us. With the help of his community, Tato was able to recover.

On April 27, New York University student groups, in collaboration with community organizations, hosted a spectacular and filled-to-capacity tribute to Tato Laviera. Miguel Algarín opened the event, and Juan Flores emceed it. Notable Latino singers, artists, musicians, and poets contributed to the event. Nuyorican poets included Américo Casiano, Louis Reyes, Myrna Nieves, María Aponte, Sandra María Esteves, María Teresa Fernández (Mariposa), Nancy Mercado, José Ángel Figueroa, Jesús Papoleto Meléndez, Frank Pérez, Raúl Krios, Sery Colón and literary critics like Flores, Stephanie Alvarez, Edwin Meléndez, and yours truly. As a tribute to Tato, Alvarez, Flores, and I coauthored a parody of Laviera's "tito madera smith," which we retitled: "Tato Madera Smith:"

he can sound like a viejita bochinchera in el barrio in one poem
and like a fetus in the womb begging for his mother to stay in puerto rico in
another
do you know him?

he can rap to a fly mamacita out of one side of his mouth
and drink una tasita de café Bustelo out of the other
do you know him?

he can swim with alligators in the río bravo y grande by day
and be maestro guru at the edimburgo poets café by night
do you know him?

he was homeless seeking shelter in the Bronx one day,
and is resurrected to be here with us today
do you know him?

well we sure do!

you can call him tato
you can call him laviera
you can call him smitty
you can call him nuyorican,
you can call him black,
you can call him latino,
you can call him many things, but



you gotta know he's always with us!

we love you tato. (2010: 7-8)

Tato, who sat on stage next to a statue of Santa Bárbara (Changó) on one side and Algarín on the other, was clearly moved by the celebration. He even felt inspired and mustered the strength to cancel the intermission and recite one of his own poems. He chose to perform, in his typical Nuyorican style, "Nideaquinideallá," from his most recent collection, *Mixturao*. The event was a resounding success, and we were given the rare opportunity to applaud the talents of one of the best living poets of our time.

The East Harlem community found Tato a studio apartment in Taino Towers. The information was widely disseminated by a second New York Times article that provided additional information about Tato's living conditions. González's May 2010 article confirmed that Tato lives in a studio apartment in Taino Towers, located on East 122 Street, in East Harlem or El Barrio, and that his sister, Ruth Sánchez, and his daughter, Ella, helped decorate it.¹⁰ Though he is blind, Tato navigates his way through the city and the social service agencies to secure the necessary assistance he receives. Many have stepped forward to help Tato: Ibrahim González, of WBAI radio; Gloria Quinones, activist lawyer in East Harlem; and City Councilwoman Melissa Mark-Viverito; and María Cruz, manager of Taino Towers. These people are also mentioned in the article.

There is another event that I want to share with the reader. In March 2012 I was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and when I called Tato to discuss with him whether I should attend the Guggenheim reception at the New York Foundation, he insisted that I go, and the very same day of the event, May 9, coincided with his birthday. So, he asked me to secure tickets for him and his assistant, and he further insisted that during my visit I stay with him in Taino Towers. As it happened, we attended the Guggenheim reception, and as to be expected, Tato became a center of the event, and he and then president, Edward Hirsch, established a warm conversation as if Tato were a long-lost

¹⁰ González (2010b) "A Homecoming in a New Home"



friend and another fellow. After the event, our group went out to dinner, and after, returned to his apartment to celebrate his birthday with his sister Ruth, his nieces, and many of his key supporters. There was music and, as it was to be expected, Tato recited some of his poems.

That same weekend, on May 11, I attended Música Nueva 5: Big Band Poetry Jam & Beyond, featuring Arturo O’Farrill and the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra, with recitals by New York poets like Sandra María Esteves, Caridad “La Bruja” De La Luz, and Laviera with musical arrangements. Tato recited “Guarachera del Mundo,” a poem about the life of Ceclia Cruz, which poeticized her early history, her marriage, her singing style, and her universal message. Adam Kromelow arranged Tato’s music. This event confirmed that Tato was indeed back, for Tato had undergone another rebirth.

The visit was marked by Ruth’s request that an eye be painted on the ceiling of Tato’s apartment, directly above the living room chair where he sits. This was a vision transmitted to her by her father that she wanted to fulfill. So, we enlisted the help of a friend, Elizabeth, to paint the eye, which she did in her own artistic rendition. The large eye that watches over Tato is painted with a white cornea; there is a blue-green iris, and a black pupil that reflects the island of Puerto Rico, painted in white. The top of the brown eyelid droops slightly over the cornea and is more pronounced than the bottom part. The brown and green eyelashes of a right eye flow across an absent face on the ceiling and to the center wall in different lengths, the longest ones caressing ever so slightly the pictures and awards that cover the wall. The end of the eyelashes curve at tips into palm trees leaves. There is also water, in the form of tears emanating from the corner of the eye and eyelid, dripping in a downward motion. An insignia accompanying the eye that eternally watches over Tato reads as follows: “Like Water And Wind / Movement Beyond Restriction,” a phrase that captures the essence of Tato Laviera and his poetry. Both Tato and Ruth were touched by this rendition.

V



After envisioning this remembrance, a series of critical events have taken place in Tato's life that continue to speak to the title of this essay, "The Life and Rebirths of Tato Laviera." A little more than two years after receiving that dreadful telephone call from Tato in December 2010, I received another one while traveling in China in late January 2013, not from Tato but from his sister Ruth. I thought I had disabled the roaming feature of my cell phone and I was surprised to see a call come in from Tato's cell number. I answered the call and heard a high distressing and frantic voice that belonged to Ruth, who explained to me that Tato was in the hospital. Ruth was unperturbed when I mentioned that she was calling Chengdu, China. As we talked, she proceeded to describe a series of events that began while Tato was receiving a scheduled dialysis treatment a week or so before. During the procedure, a staff member of the hospital observed that Tato was running a high fever. A doctor wanted to keep him in the emergency clinic for observation, but Tato refused to stay. Instead, he returned to his apartment in Taino Towers. When Ruth stopped by the apartment to visit him, Tato appeared to be sleeping, and she decided not to disturb him. The following day, she returned to his room and found Tato in the same position; he appeared to be unresponsive. Unable to wake him up, she called the ambulance and rushed him to the hospital. The doctors were not able to identify Tato's ailment or decease.

I stayed in touch with Ruth as often as I could while traveling first in the northwestern province of Xingjian and later in the southeastern province of Guangdong. After my return to the States on February 18th, Ruth and I talked on the phone almost every day, and at times as many as ten or more times in a single day, to help chart Tato's ailment and recovery. We were fighting against time because Tato's condition was deteriorating rapidly. Shortly after my return, Tato experienced two cardiac arrests and was on life support, and his body would not tolerate a third one. We knew that the doctors were exploring all the options in the material world, but Ruth and I were not satisfied with their response, so we journeyed into the spiritual realm, searching for answers in ancient knowledge, whose origins can be traced to African religions. This



should not come as a surprise to readers of Tato's poetry. Consider, for example, poems like "santa bárbara," about the spiritual possession of the poetic voice. Also, Tato's Afro-Latinx rhythms can be traced to the rumba and to the religious music used to communicate with the Orishas, mainly but not exclusively of Yoruba traditions. On more than one occasion, in his interviews Tato has stated that he is spiritual and has spiritual protections. And during the Tribute at New York University's Kimmel Center to Honor Tato Laviera's recovery, or what I have called his rebirth, the statue of Santa Bárbara was present on stage and oversaw the homage that memorable Tuesday, April 27. Tato is devoutly Catholic, as I have painstakingly described in my reading of "jesús papote," but he is also familiar with African religions in the New World. Ruth and I needed to explore all the means available to keep Tato with us.

In one early March conversation, Ruth said to me, "Prepare yourself to come to New York at a moment's notice;" it was apparent that Tato's health had worsened. During this period, we were even discussing a celebration, rather than a funeral, with music, speakers, and readings. We even considered burial locations in the Bronx, where Celia Cruz and all the great musicians were resting, and a more preferable location in Manhattan, overlooking the Hudson River.

I traveled to New York, from March 20 to 24, to be with Tato and help Ruth. Upon my arrival, I took a taxi from LaGuardia airport directly to Mt. Sinai Hospital. Ruth and I met at the entrance of the hospital, and we both rode the elevator to the ninth floor. I found Tato resting on his back, and daytime medical workers were present to attend to an infected trachea. It so happened that they believed that the tracheotomy was being attended to properly, but Ruth, who became Tato's Guardian Angel, had noticed otherwise, and she called for a specialist to examine him. Ruth was right, there was an infection, and she asked me to digitally record the doctor cleaning the incision. Though doctors are experts in their field, Ruth positioned herself as a vocal member of the team that oversaw Tato's health, and she lobbied effectively for her brother's care. A physician and long-time friend of the family guided Ruth through the labyrinth

of medical procedures and decisions. Ruth also organized a group of friends and family to keep Tato company throughout his stay in the hospital. Ruth did not want to leave her brother alone, mainly due to his blindness and inability to talk.

Most of my time in New York was spent visiting Tato and helping Ruth. I soon recognized that Tato had many friends from different walks of life, something that is visible in his poetry with the array of characters marching through his poems. I was familiar with a small group I had met in previous trips, but as soon as the word spread that Tato was ill, everyone wanted to visit him. I became very close to Tato's family and helpers, and especially to his daughter Ella and Juan Flores, who were always by his side. Tato is indeed a very special and spiritual person, and even in his weakened state, I learned from him. While spending time with him, I searched inward in ways I had not done before to communicate with Tato. One afternoon, when we were alone, I placed my forehead next to his, then after a few minutes I pulled back and whispered to him: "You don't have to thank me, we do it because we all love you." Tato suddenly opened his eyes and greeted me with a big smile unlike any other I had seen before, as if to say: "You understood what I said to you." And I did! Needless to say, the experience reduced me to tears. As someone who was raised in the Lower East Side and does not cry, the days I spent with Tato and Ruth were marked by many tearful moments. Tato did communicate with us with the help of a mentalist or medium, who in a previous visit saw his aura outside of his body, but this time she found him more centered in himself. We learned that Tato was appreciative of our efforts and that we were doing what we were expected to do. He was at peace but did not want us to be sad, because our unhappiness also affected him. Tato made it clear that Ruth was "la luz y la protagonista" (the light and the protagonist) of his care and salvation. Ruth had accepted the challenge as if her own salvation depended on it. She is a remarkable person, and she will do anything in her power to save her brother. Like Tato, she also became my spiritual inspiration. The final evening before my



departure, Juan, Ruth, Nancy, and I celebrated with champagne the life of Jesús Abraham Tato Laviera.

The more I thought about Tato's condition, the more I felt the need to incorporate this most recent stage of his life into my essay. I began to think about how "jesus papote" and the fast approaching Easter weekend and Resurrection Sunday would shed light on his work and physical condition. After all, "jesús papote" alludes to Easter and Christmas, and it pertains to the births of the poetic voice. There were two clear interpretations of Tato Laviera as persona of his own poem of life. The first one follows closely the death and resurrection of Christ. Tato's illness would claim his tired body, and he would resurrect in the next world. Tato's "disease" began to consume his body. I do not mean to suggest that Tato is an embodiment of Christ, but his condition shows that many, if not all of us, in one way or another mirror Christ's life. This is particularly the case as we experience physical and spiritual deaths and resurrections. I would go further and state that there are some special people whose lives are much closer to what Christ embodied. After all, Tato Laviera's given name is Jesús Abraham Laviera and his poetic persona, "jesus papote," is a Christ-like figure. In this reading, I waited to see if Tato "resurrected" on, before, or after Easter Sunday, especially since in his poem Easter Saturday represented the time of conception. This is perfectly understandable to me since the poem attempts to parody a popular notion of the birth of Christ. If Christ was born on December 25th, which coincides with the secular Winter Solstice, then the time of conception was initiated sometime in late March, around Easter weekend.

The second interpretation also takes into account the concept of death and resurrection. Tato is in a comatose state, but from this condition he will be resurrected in *El reino de este mundo* (The Kingdom of This World), to use the title of Alejo Carpentier's novel about enslaved who, with the help of their African religion, successfully rebelled against their masters in Saint Domingue. This resurrection is closer to the life of Lazarus, whom Christ revived from the dead. In the case of Tato, in some respects Tato had died physically: while



receiving dialysis, he suffered two heart attacks and a defibrillator was employed to bring him back to life. Tato was in a coma-like stage, even though he had minimal body movements and made facial expressions. So, I waited to see what would happen as Easter came and went, and the farther we got from Easter, the more I was convinced, regardless of what anyone said, that Tato would remain with us and resurrect in this world. I believed that Tato's life already had been played out in "jesús papote," and the poem contained an outcome related to his present physical and spiritual condition. But I asked myself, what type of close reading should I do of the poem in light of the events that were transpiring? The doctors were far from being optimistic, and one even suggested that Ruth consider Hospice Care, which clearly meant the physical end to Tato's life. As far I know, no one has ever left a Hospice Center alive. Shortly after my visit, Tato had to be rushed to surgery.

While I was tempted to read the poem through the eyes of the doctors and Tato's present condition, a close reading of the poem clearly indicated the physical birth or rebirth of the poetic voice. According to the poem, the fetus Jesús Papote is alive in the womb of a mother who is addicted to drugs; she represents a type of death, but her son is strong, he has a strong voice and his determination keeps her alive. Equally important, he is born or reborn on Christmas Day. And the poem outlines many births, including that of the mother, and the many births of Jesús Papote, and by extension Jesús Laviera. Therefore, believing in this interpretation of the poem, in the present we are witnessing a rebirth or a resurrection of our Jesús Tato Laviera. During this other birth or rebirth, Tato will emerge with a different voice, a more spiritual one, in the company of many of his friends, and we will observe the unfolding of a miracle. When he finally comes back, he will not ask for the blessing of his grandmother or mother, but from his sister Ruth, who has been transformed into Tato's mother, for she was instrumental in raising him in New York. Tato is already surrounded by his friends, as he has received substantial support from his community. We anxiously await his return.



Indeed, Tato Laviera's life imitates poetry or poetry sets the foundation for life to take its course, for both poetry and life are inextricably intertwined. Just like his characters who find a voice to speak about their own conditions, Tato experienced downfalls and resurrections, or as I indicate with the title of this essay, birth or rebirths. Laviera is Jesús Papote, the poetic voice who encountered death at the outset of the poem and in the month of November, and the one who is reborn, when he receives the blessing of his community, and he in turn gives life and meaning to his existence. He does so through his writings and as a friend and a spiritual consultant. After his tragic downfall, the Latino community united to help Laviera, and he was reborn and during this other birth its members gathered around him and he asked for their Bendición.

For Laviera is a savior, and he has become a savior of his own people. Laviera is Jesús Laviera, Jesús Papote, and, like his character, a symbol of Jesucristo. I want to read "jesús papote" as an autobiographical poem, not one written about his past, but about the paths his life will take in the present and future. The poet talks about a birth that he describes as a fall, dominated by the elements associated more with death than birth, and a birth that is also a rebirth, a second coming, not so much the one proclaimed by orthodox religions, but by the individual, the one that speaks to the Jesús Papote we all carry within. The tragedy in Laviera's life has allowed me to revisit his masterpiece poem and see how the present helps to read the past and understand how that initial event has unfolded in the present, for past and present are intimately linked.

I will make one final observation about the use of pronouns in the poem. For the sake of clarity, I would like to recapitulate some previously mentioned ideas. Though Laviera refers to the speaker's "I" in its various manifestations, the poem also addresses him in the third person "he" and his mother as "she." However, these pronouns are later displaced by the plural "we, nosotros" rendered in Spanish and English, repeated sixteen times. Then, the speaker requests permission to utter the sacred word, for in Christian orthodoxy the "word was made flesh," and the poetic voice asks for his Bendición. It is after



this benediction that we experience a transformation in the poem. The final stanza starts with the pronoun “she,” which refers to Papote’s mother, but this “she” is not the same “she” or mother prior to the blessing. The mother has also undergone her own death and salvation, or birth and rebirth. In this other incarnation, external forces, such as drugs and the violence of others, but also the violence she directed toward her own body, no longer control her. It is as if she had shed the shackles of slavery—the shackles that have chained her soul, her will, and spirit. After her transformation, she becomes an active and productive member of society. The poem ends with the following stanza:

she woke up she saw she startled she warmed she
protected she cried she broke the umbilical cord
she got up to follow the bells the bells the bells
cats dogs vagabonds all followed the tinkle tinkle
of the bells christmas bells nativity flowing bells
faith hope and charity bells 1980 jesus christ and
jesús papote midnight ecstasy of bells church steps
door opens organ stops up the aisle she exclaimed
hand holy spirit candles flowers incense wine water
and finally the people grandmother she offered jesús
papote to the people miracle cherubims flautists
dancing and singing rejoice rejoice eternity smiles
oh night divine oh night divine she knelt she smiled
jesús papote’s presence in the dignity of our lives. (1981: 21)

What the poem offers is a rewriting of the fall and resurrection or the birth and rebirth of Christ. As we know, in this other version, Jesus is Jesús Papote, and the Israelites are now Puerto Ricans. But we also have a rewriting of the trinity, not only in terms of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but also when referring to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. In this other rewriting, Joseph, the male figure is missing and is substituted by the grandmother. That is, there are two women, now two powerful women at that, and the Christ child, which make up a new trinity. The mother has awakened, she has liberated herself from her past, and the grandmother, a strong maternal figure, has remained supportive and constant throughout the birthing process. The mother presents Papote to the public. It is significant that the mother presents the child to the public, because



the pronoun “she” is repeated in this last stanza twelve times. The number twelve closes a cycle and suggests the beginning of a new one.

VI

On Friday, November 1, 2013, precisely at 8:06 Central Time, Ruth, afflicted by the news she would share with me, called to tell me that Tato passed away. Tato died approximately nine months after he became ill and around 9:00 PM Eastern Time, and was buried on the 9th of November. In passing, Tato has shed the shackles of the material world and has resurrected into the spiritual one.

On November 6 I flew to New York to help Ruth with the final touches of the church service and burial arrangements. In reality, everything had been decided, and I was there to support Ruth. The celebration of Tato’s life, as he wanted it to be, was a joyous and festive occasion. The Friday service was held at St. Peter’s Church on 54th Street and Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, known as the Jazz Church to many musicians who have departed, and Father Fabián (of Argentine descent) presided over the service, which included communion. The event, which lasted approximately four hours, featured the testimonies from family and friends, who spoke eloquently about their relationships with Tato. Musicians, who accompanied Tato’s recitals, played two musical compositions from Tato’s *King of Cans*, and many poet friends read Tato’s poems. The highlight of the service took place towards the closing moments. Claudio Fortuna and his group unexpectedly appeared at the back of the church drumming and singing an African based rendition of the “Ave María.” The sounds and voices captivated everyone as the members of the group made their way down the aisle and surrounded Tato’s casket. While Ruth had mentioned to me that she had hired a group to perform the “Ave María,” I was expecting something more solemn, but I realized that she had something else in mind; she brought African music and culture into the Catholic world. It was simply spectacular. The event was reminiscent of carnival or of the Cuban “Día de Reyes” (Three Kings Day) festivity as Pierre Toussaint Frédéric Miahle captured in one of his drawings (ca. 1855). Everyone, including the priest, broke out into



a dance step to the beat of the African drums, and we all participated in a communal despedida to Jesús Tato Laviera.

The burial procession began at the Ortiz Funeral Home on 103rd Avenue the following day. A few of us, who desired to do so, were able to see Tato one final time. He wore his iconic Panama hat; he looked tranquil and rested peacefully. Those in attendance made our way to Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, known as the final resting ground to many Hispanic and Latinos from New York. Upon departure we drove by Tato's Taino Towers apartment, parked in front, and honk the horns in a final farewell. We also thanked the workers for taking care of Tato while he lived there.

As it should be, Tato is "buried" in a Communal Mausoleum, on the top level or shelf, the highest point possible and near a window. Ruth did not want him near the ground level but next to the tall ceiling, to facilitate his continual upward movement. Family and friends gathered before the casket was raised to give one final testimony before placing him in his final resting place. Just as it was evident in "jesús papote," in this other "birth" or "rebirth" Ruth presented Tato to his community. In life the community was always by his side, at his bedside at Mt. Sinai Hospital, at the service in St. Peter's Church, and at the burial in Woodlawn Cemetery. Tato has permanently been with his community and his community has always been with him. Tato has every reason to rest in peace. I (we) now ask for his Bendición, "BEN...DI...CI...ON."

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