DREAMS AND REALITIES IN THE WORKS OF AMERICAN POETS OF LATINO-CARIBBEAN ORIGIN

SUEÑOS Y REALIDADES EN LAS OBRAS DE POETAS ESTADOUNIDENSES DE ORIGEN LATINO-CARIBEÑO

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ABSTRACT

Poetic representations of dreams offer a compelling lens through which authors of Latino-Caribbean ancestry based in the USA explore migration, identity and historical trauma, revealing how individuals navigate belonging and diasporic life. This paper has two aims: on the one hand, it examines nightmares of loss and erasure caused by (neo)colonial trauma, ethno-racial oppression, displacement and exile; on the other hand, it explores fantasies of strength and survival emerging from cultural hybridity, identity reconfiguration and artistic creativity. The analysis highlights the role of dreams in poetically bridging past and present, homeland and new land, helplessness and hope, resistance and reconstruction. By illuminating the tensions between these binaries, it addresses the psychological toll of diasporic and postcolonial transformations, underscoring the importance of dreaming as a site of radical literary imagination and aesthetic expression relevant to the betterment of daily life.

KEYWORDS: American poetry; Latino-Caribbean identity; migration; American dream

RESUMEN

Las representaciones poéticas de los sueños nos ofrecen una perspectiva sugerente a través de la cual los autores de ascendencia latino-caribeña radicados en Estados Unidos exploran la migración, la identidad y el trauma histórico, revelando cómo los individuos navegan la pertenencia y la vida diaspórica. Este trabajo se plantea alrededor de dos ejes: por un lado, examina las pesadillas de pérdida y borrado provocadas por el trauma (neo)colonial, la opresión etnorracial, el desplazamiento y el exilio; por otro, explora las fantasías de fortaleza y supervivencia que surgen de la hibridez cultural, la reconfiguración identitaria y la creatividad artística. El análisis destaca el papel de los sueños como puentes poéticos entre pasado y presente, tierra natal y nueva tierra, impotencia y esperanza, resistencia y reconstrucción. Al iluminar las tensiones entre estos binomios, se aborda el coste psicológico de las transformaciones diaspóricas y poscoloniales, subrayando la importancia del ensueño como espacio de imaginación literaria radical y de expresión estética relevante para la mejora de la vida cotidiana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía estadounidense; identidad latino-caribeña; migración, sueño americano

1. INTRODUCTION

The contrast between dreams and realities is essential for understanding how poets of Latino-Caribbean origin based in the USA grapple with the promises and disappointments of being from elsewhere. Aspirations often reflect fantasies of freedom, belonging and socio-economic advancement, while nightmares serve as stark reminders of ongoing struggles with alienation, ethno-racial injustice and historical turmoil. Especially in their debut collections, these poets use dreams to confront both personal and collective anxieties, often in multicultural contexts. Fantasies of liberation, whether from colonial histories or systemic oppression, are juxtaposed with the terrifying weight of actual violence, loss and displacement.

The Caribbean is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the world: Afro-Caribbean populations; communities of Asian ancestry; European-descended groups; indigenous peoples; and mixed populations with blended ancestries. The *genius loci* expresses itself in multiple idioms, fostering linguistic creativity throughout history. Consequently, the

poetic landscape is multilingual as it has drawn its energy from many languages with rich traditions. The Caribbean literary canon is transnational, translingual and transcultural, part of the larger colonial and postcolonial literature, and essentially diasporic, in the historical sense that local ancestors, except the natives, came from elsewhere. It is marked by hybridity and it is archipelagic rather than confined within frontiers. In this context, what are some of the consequences of moving from the Caribbean to the USA on language and the sense of belonging?

The main argument of this paper is that poetic imagination – based on dreams, fantasies, nightmares – serves as a framework for resistance and reconstruction, illuminating its role in cultural viability and aesthetic expression. In the case of Latino-Caribbean poets, it is not a sickly, excessive or useless imagination, but one that is integrative, collaborative, truthful and spiritual, one based on a long experience of a specific coexistence among various ethnicities under conditions of scarcity and cultural loss. As French-Caribbean poet and cultural essayist Édouard Glissant (1990) wrote, this has created an increased consciousness of relationships, a *poetics of relations*, as he called it. Considering the strength of Caribbean poetry across the decades, it is regrettable that the editors of the three-volume *Caribbean Literature in Transition* (2020) do not refer to Latino-Caribbean poetry in the USA, even though the books engage with Hispanic literature to some extent. This article seeks to address and contribute to such scholarship.

In *La isla que se repite* (1989), one of Antonio Benítez-Rojo's most influential works, the Cuban writer questions whether Caribbean literature can be defined as a unified tradition given its linguistic fragmentation. While acknowledging divisions, he argues that beneath local literatures lies a shared "meta-archipelago" (Benítez-Rojo, 1996: 24) of repeating cultural patterns that transcend geography and history. Such interconnectedness blends various influences, resisting fixed borders. To give an example, the author invokes Martin Luther King Jr., whose dream, rooted in African heritage and improvisatory humanism, embodies both North American and Caribbean sensibilities. His vision of freedom and performance symbolizes the space where Caribbean and American cultures intersect, much like jazz, representing a fluid, transnational identity. This divided perception between an imagined Europe and the real Caribbean, which is a constant in the work of many writers from the region, has traveled to the USA and has become something else.

In the "Foreword" to the anthology *Hispanic American Literature* by Nikolas Kanellos, Ishmael Reed (1995) writes about abandoning textbooks early in his teaching career and

developing his own reader, because the existing textbooks did not take into consideration minorities' backgrounds and sensibilities. The book and the series to which it belongs are described as "an effort to provide the material that will awaken the country from its own 'fantasy heritage' of a monocultural and monolithic past" (Reed, 1995: 4). The anthology, which includes autobiography, fiction, poetry and drama by authors born between the 1920s and 1960s who contributed steadily to the Hispanic American literary canon, responds to this need for diversity evoked by Reed.

The number of anthologies by poets of Latino backgrounds – whether these identities are foregrounded or more subtly evident – has steadily increased over the last decades, indicating both the recognition of shared cultural experiences and a conscious effort to preserve and celebrate the complexity of these collective identities within the literary culture of the USA. One of the first such publications is *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975), which contains three sections: "Outlaw Poetry", "Evolution Poetry" and "Dusmic Poetry". One of the editors, Miguel Algarín invented the term "dusmic poetry" to define "the process of transforming aggression being directed at you by another person (or, more generally, society) into your strength" (Algarín and Piñero, 1975: 129). In the "Afterword", he concluded that "Nuyorican poetry is the talk of the ongoing. It is the event of the moment" (Algarín and Piñero, 1975: 182). The collection conveys the urgency of communicating poetically on issues that politicians and journalists of the time overlooked or ignored. Two decades later, in the "Introduction" to the anthology *Paper Dance: 55 Latino Poets* (1995), the editors mention that one of its central themes is "the 'Americanization' process, the struggle to define, redefine and attain the American dream" (Hernández Cruz, Quintana and Suarez, 1995: xii).

The current analysis explores how the poetic tradition of the USA has adopted the work of the poets of Latino-Caribbean origin or ancestry, taking into consideration representations of dreaming across several generations: Pedro Pietri (1944-2004), Miguel Piñero (1946-1988), Sandra María Esteves (b. 1948), Victor Hernández Cruz (b. 1949), Tato Laviera (1950-2013), Judith Ortiz Cofer (1952-2016), Martín Espada (b. 1957), Shara McCallum (1972), Willie Perdomo (1967), Rafael Campo (b. 1964), Aracelis Girmay (b. 1977) and Elizabeth Acevedo (b. 1988). The first five on this list were part of the Nuyorican movement emerging in the late 1960s in East Harlem amid Puerto Rican migration to New York, a literary wave which gave voice to experiences of displacement, racism, poverty and identity negotiation. Blending English and Spanish, poets transformed lived struggles into powerful art. Over decades, through

venues like the Nuyorican Poets Café, the movement fostered performance poetry, community empowerment and cultural pride, leaving a lasting impact on the American poetry scene. The other poets are not considered part of the original Nuyorican movement, though some share thematic or cultural connections as evidenced below.

Published mainly in English, all the volumes in this corpus nonetheless deploy Spanish as a powerful cultural marker that affirms Latino/a/x identity within an English-dominant literary space understood as processual and hybrid, self-claimed and contested, gender-inclusive and performative, rather than essential, homogeneous or externally imposed. The strategic, intermittent use of Spanish resists linguistic hierarchy and critiques pressures toward assimilation, while also allowing poets to convey emotional nuances – such as intimacy, humor, anger or mourning – that English alone cannot fully capture. It further operates as a mode of communal address, calling upon family, neighborhood and ancestral audiences often excluded from the implied Anglophone readership. At the same time, its presence sustains memory and continuity across borders, preserving migratory histories and intergenerational bonds. Although it is not the dominant medium, Spanish signals a deliberate, hybrid practice that negotiates belonging, resistance and cultural survival.

A central contemporary question is how the experience of the American dream has been reshaped by Latino-Caribbean poets. In an article from 2000, Gordon Rohlehr discusses the federal ambition of regional unity in the Caribbean, focusing on economic necessity, the struggle to remain alive and the insular conflicts. His analysis shows how poetry reflects this link over the decades from the 1930s to the 1990s, highlighting the struggles and the solidarity of the different actors in the region. He concludes that: "Dreamers of the dream of Caribbean unity are not deterred from their dreaming merely because of the grimness of social and economic reality that surrounds them" (Rohlehr, 2000: 304). His conclusion implies that the federal aspiration for regional unity – marked by creolization, nationalism and the pursuit of independence – partly overlaps with the American dream, defined by migration and the desire to belong to something larger and different. As the following poems exemplify, the tension between the Caribbean realities and the inherited European and African imagination has fueled the energy behind both the Caribbean dream and the American dream.

In their study of the Latino/a literary canon, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez (2007) open their periodization with a chapter on Pedro Pietri's poetry. They examine two key poems – "Puerto Rican Obituary" (1973) and "El Spanglish National Anthem" (1993) – to trace a shift from a didactic and anticolonial stance framed in tragedy to a comic and postcolonial

reimagining of the tension between dreams and realities. In the first poem, the American dream results in death for individual subjects, victims of materialism, commodification and the absence of community. By contrast, the second poem presents a collective subject more comfortable with the commodification of cultural products and grounded in a strong, established community. This suggests the hypothesis that a pessimistic literary wave was subsequently followed by a more optimistic one, as what initially appeared impossible gradually came to be perceived as attainable.

There is a paradoxical idea in Pedro Pietri's "Love Poem for My People", included in his debut collection *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973), which reads: "do not dream / if you want your dreams / to come true" (78). The lines warn that the border between aspiration and dread is fragile and not all of them deserve life, but they also criticize idealism, urging pragmatic engagement with reality instead of fruitless delusion. The next two sections explore works that follow these paths, echoing Dalleo and Machado Sáez's perspective while also demonstrating that the two trajectories developed in parallel.

2. NIGHTMARES OF LOSS AND ERASURE

Latino-Caribbean poetry often reconfigures the American dream as a recurring nightmare, spotlighting the gap between aspiration and lived reality. Initially shaped by male voices, these poetic visions exposed systemic exploitation, racialized oppression and the futility of consumerist promises, with fantasies rendered as grotesque or surreal. More recent works, increasingly articulated through female perspectives, extend this critique by linking shattered aspirations to gendered vulnerability, violence and resilience. Across these shifting voices, illusions rarely signal transcendence; instead, they dramatize estrangement, displacement and loss, while opening aesthetic spaces where trauma is reframed as cultural memory, critique and the possibility of collective viability.

The opening poem in *Snaps* (1968) by Victor Hernández Cruz, "Half a Page from Square Business" (3), describes a man in difficulty on a "cold Tuesday", when imagination cannot transcend the gloomy atmosphere caused by a dead daughter and a wife assaulted. On the contrary, "all your horror dreams come true / at the same time" means that it is amplified and confiscated by despair. The uneven line lengths from single words to longer phrases create a disjointed, stream-of-consciousness feel, while the punctuation and irregular spacing enhance the fragmented, chaotic tone. The narrator claims the darkness of misery as beautiful, hinting

at a twisting acceptance for aesthetic purposes, yet transforming reality into art carries a cost: "my true nature is gentle / & the stare of a mad eye".

The first poem in *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973) by Pedro Pietri, which provides the title for the book, exposes the tension between harsh existence and imagined possibilities. Performed first in 1969, it depicts the lives of five Puerto Ricans, who labor endlessly, obey rules and sacrifice without gaining prosperity or dignity. Their daily grind leads only to exhaustion and death, with little to show but debts and disappointment:

> All died yesterday today
> and will die again tomorrow
> passing their bill collector
> on to the next of kin. (1-2)

This cycle of poverty and debt tied to inevitable mortality underscores the weight of systemic exploitation and racism, where their names become interchangeable symbols of the working poor. Against this bleakness, another current runs through the poem: visions of wealth, respectability and escape. Winning the lottery, owning a suburban home or buying jewelry appear as tantalizing hopes that briefly interrupt their oppression. Yet these images are hollow television fantasies and consumerist ideals that mock rather than sustain them. The poem insists that these aspirations do not liberate but instead keep individuals speechless and trapped in cycles of waiting and wanting "as lavaplatos porters messenger boys / factory workers maids stock clerks" (8), reinforcing alienation, as "now they are together / in the main lobby of the void" (9). Critics Dalleo and Machado Sáez (2007) emphasize how the poet decries their "blind adherence to materialism" (19) and "their lack of imagination and political consciousness" (20). Pietri also gestures toward a third possibility – a reclamation of pride, solidarity and cultural identity. In its closing vision of an ideal community where Spanish is spoken freely and "Que Pasa Power" (11) thrives, the poem offers a counter-world, in which belonging, love and dignity become possible, transforming suffering into a collective source of strength. However, the sense of community for the five Puerto Ricans can occur only in the "groovy hereafter" (9), where they do not fight each other and where "there are no dial soap commercials" (11) – a place beyond real life.

From the same generation, poet and playwright Miguel Piñero was a self-proclaimed outsider, embracing marginalization, rejecting any hypocrisy and shaping a persona rooted in honesty beyond conventional norms. In his poetry, he urged his community to contemplate the

conditions of its oppression, while also delving into his own inner world, exploring love, hope and disillusionment. "La Bodega Sold Dreams", which is the opening piece in his collected works, *Outlaw* (1975), addresses the dwarfed American dream of becoming somebody in the new country:

> poets' dreams
> endin' in a factoría as one
> in a million
> unseen
>
> buyin' bodega-sold dreams (3)

The capitalist machine overwhelms the immigrant, ensnaring the modern Don Quixote in deception. In "A Lower East Side Poem", the poet identifies himself with "the Philosopher of the Criminal Mind / a dweller of prison time / a cancer of Rockefeller's ghettocide" and wants to spend his afterlife in the same place, asking "please when I die … / don't take me far away" (5). The nightmarish everyday struggle of the Puerto Ricans in the USA is captured in stylistically rich poems like "Mango Dreams" as well, where the comforting tropical fruit is set in contrast with "the fiberglass laughter of the hungry" (61) and the "poison market place / of business" (62).

Inspired by the three-act play *La Carreta* (1953) by René Marqués, which explored the migration of Puerto Ricans to New York, Tato Laviera's debut collection *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* (1979) acts, according to editor Nicolás Kanellos, as "a fourth act to the play" (iii) and proposes a new approach. Commenting on Laviera's collection, critic Juan Flores (1993) asked cogent questions about the identity of the Puerto Ricans in the USA, warning that their cultural productions did not go beyond the artistic circles and did not reach the sociologists and urban anthropologists: "Are Puerto Ricans becoming Americanized? […] Which of the most essential features of Puerto Rico cultural life are being integrated? Which are being obliterated by pervasive colonial influences?" (157). The first section of Laviera's collection, entitled "Metropolis Dream", begins with "para ti, mundo bravo", a poem that is both a dedication to those who dared to migrate – "a wandering nomad / to taste the breadcrumbs / of survival" (3) – and an affirmation of the poetic self as someone cultivated capable of transcending the condition of being a poor outsider. The U-turn in the title announces a radically different view on belonging, one that is not nostalgic like in Marqués's play, but addresses the numerous

nightmares immigrants had to deal with in the metropolis: extreme poverty, cold weather, bad health, inadequate education, injustice, social isolation, suffering among others.

The aesthetic technique is hybrid, humorous and therapeutic, mixing English and Spanish and revealing personal and cultural loss as, for example, in "my graduation speech": "i think in spanish / i write in english", "tengo las venas aculturadas", "tonto in both languages" (7). As Flores (1993) put it: "In this volume, poetry itself poses the issue of acculturation in reference to language" (159) and "the very term *bilingualism* has itself been used as a convenient cover for the long-term imposition of English in Puerto Rico" (160). The overall tone of Laviera's poem is affirmative, combative and insightful, with a jam-session feel: "fighting became a constant / manifestation of my mind and my body announcing the claim that / all of us are creative cocos" (20). The "coco", a folkloric Iberian bogeyman figure, also present in the Caribbean, stands for acknowledging the anxieties of migration and assimilation.

Sandra María Esteves's "Autobiography of a Nuyorican" (13-14), from *Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo* (1990), reimagines the American dream from the perspective of a woman of color born into struggle and resistance. The poem begins with the speaker's difficult birth, "half blue, feet first" (13), signaling both vulnerability and defiance. Unlike the mainstream ambition of prosperity and ease, her existence is marked by marginalization: "The world did not want another brown, / another slant-eyed-olive-indian-black-child" (13). From a woman's point of view, the dream is not handed down; it must be fought for, breath by breath. The invocation of the Virgin by her mother highlights how women's faith and resilience preserve life in hostile environments. Yet the speaker transforms exclusion into empowerment, embracing her destiny as "another rock-the-boat poet, / another voice opened wide" (13) and shaping a desire which is about staying alive and a woman's power to claim voice and visibility against systemic erasure. The ending presents confrontational ideation as formative, showing how conflict can shape identity from birth:

> The meaning of war defined her. Gasping and innocent,
> before she knew her mother,
> before she discovered herself, barely alive,
> gathering weapons into her being with each breath that filled her,
> growing stronger,
> determined
> to beat all the odds. (14)

Warlike phantasms become metaphors for resilience, each breath forging innovative strength to redefine selfhood and the capacity to rise above adversities.

In contrast to Nuyorican poets, who frequently interwove English and Spanish to foreground linguistic difference as a socio-cultural creative strategy, other poets – whether from Puerto Rico or other Spanish-speaking contexts – opted to address linguistic difference primarily in English, framing this choice as a means of negotiating entry into and recognition within the literary field of the USA. For example, in "Camino Real", the opening poem from Rafael Campo's debut collection, *The Other Man Was Me: A Voyage to the New World* (1994), the author expresses his conflicting, ambivalent attitude toward Spanish, marked by both estrangement and longing. The three sections, titled "Learning the Language", "Familia" and "The Other Man Was Me", contain poems where Spanish is present as cultural reference: various places (countries, cities, cafes), food names, etc. For him, the language is both inheritance and burden: "The Spanish that I never knew at all, / My heritage and punishment" (13). The speaker acknowledges this fracture suggesting that Spanish functions less as a fluent medium than as a haunting reminder of displacement, cultural memory and the possibility of transformation into verse.

In "I Dream I'm Him" (59) from the same collection, the poet subtly casts doubt on the myth of success by presenting it through the lens of exile, superstition and fractured identity. The speaker, a Cuban American, recalls a prophecy tied to sacrifice and muteness – "your eldest son shall never speak / your native tongue" – which indicates the silencing of heritage in pursuit of assimilation. The dream of prosperity is inverted: instead of abundance, he returns to "Cuba's poor, / untillable soil" where even the ground rejects cultivation. The surreal images of "a door / Beneath my feet that vomits lambs in herds" evoke both sacrifice and futility, mocking the promise of plenty. Campo, an established gay physician of Cuban and Italian background, illustrates how, for immigrants, the pursuit of happiness may be less about achievement and more about existence amid systemic obliteration.

This is the main theme in *Terms of Survival* (1987) by academic Judith Ortiz Cofer, who presents the American dream through the lens of exile and longing, emphasizing the tension between displacement and the possibilities of home. For example, the speaker in "Exile" reflects on what she left behind, revealing how migration complicates the pursuit of prosperity and fulfillment. Memories of childhood pleasures – "pink and yellow and white Sunday dresses, dreaming of husbands, houses, and orchards" (50) – call to mind the traditional expectations of family, stability, and leisure, yet these dreams are now inaccessible. The contrast between the

lively past and the desolate present – "nothing remains of that world […] inhabiting the dead cities like the shadows of Hiroshima" (50) – underlines the fragility of illusions disrupted by political, social or geographic forces.

In the same volume, "Lost Relatives" expresses dispersal, separation and the search for connection, in the context of a fragmented diaspora, where family and heritage are scattered – "we've lost track of one another" (54) – implying that unity, rootedness and continuity are interrupted. The pursuit of identity and belonging becomes mediated through modern channels – classifieds, personals, obituaries – showing how immigrants and descendants attempt to reconstruct familial and cultural ties.

Estrangement is frequently transmitted through posthuman tropes. For example, in "My Cockroach Lover" (48) from *Imagine the Angels of Bread* (1996), lawyer and professor Martín Espada uses dream descriptions to bring to light the absurd underside of the rags-to-riches ideal, particularly for the impoverished and marginalized. In a setting overrun by roaches, night becomes a space where boundaries between human and animal blur. Insects compared to "an Indianapolis 500 of roaches", the famous annual American automobile race, vividly convey frantic, unstoppable speed and swarming chaos, their kitchen invasion likened to cars circling a track – relentless, overwhelming and disturbingly organized. The phrase "Republican National Convention of roaches" satirizes power and decay, equating infestation with corrupt elites, highlighting spectacle, excess and control in poverty's neglect through surreal, theatrical imagery. Both cultural references accentuate the surreal, almost theatrical infestation. The speaker conjures up a roach's "kind antennae" and whispered love, unsettling the divide between repulsion and tenderness and communicating a Kafkaesque intimacy, where insecthood embodies alienation. The roach's anthropomorphic behavior ironically exposes the human desire for attachment amid dehumanizing conditions. The night amplifies this vulnerability, transforming infestation into eerie companionship and parodying the vision of abundance through a lens of grotesque tenderness.

Reality sometimes becomes itself a bad dream. For instance, in "Dreaming, I Was Only Dreaming" from *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* (1996), Willie Perdomo blurs the line between aspirations and daily life to expose how the promise of prosperity mutates into a nightmare for racialized individuals. The poem begins in blank verse, signaling the everyday microaggressions that link personal trauma to the ongoing process of national identity formation in the USA:

My history professor
has a bad habit
of looking at me
when
discussing slavery (60)

As it shifts into surreal prose, the speaker's dreamscapes become increasingly chaotic and violent, indicating both historical and present-day oppression. The fragmented shape – alternating between poetry and dreamlike narrative – mirrors the fragmented self, caught between freedom and persecution. The poem's disjointed scenes – "the waitress threw a pot of boiling coffee on my face" or "Even the bullets were black" (61)—underline the brutality masked by patriotic celebration. The final lines evoke a Kafkaesque universe again, where the protagonist is unjustly accused and faces an arbitrary judge in surreal circumstances. The difference is that in Perdomo's work the man is black: "Blood dripped down my cheeks from a cut I had on my forehead. The policeman swam out of the blood pool and called my name. He wiped his red neck and smiled with his yellow teeth. Then he said, 'Get up, boy. This ain't no dream. It's time to see the judge'" (62). The end reveals that the American dream may become a violent performance where justice is illusion and freedom is conditional.

Latino-Caribbean poetry is often evidence of the collective dramatic past in poetic form. The last poem in Shara McCallum's debut collection, *The Water Between Us* (1999), "What the Oracle Said", presents dreaming as an unsettling prophecy, filtered through exile and myth. The oracle's voice foretells dislocation as a vision of migration marked by alienation, an approach that rewrites the story of *The Little Mermaid* by H. C. Andersen: departing the Caribbean for the USA is like emerging from the underworld sea into the world of living. Material success is reduced to surfaces – "dresses of gold; skins of silver, copper, and bronze" – that never erase the deeper scars of history, symbolized by "sulphur and salt" (85). The dream, instead of freedom, becomes a fate of rootlessness and violence, echoing the turbulent history of Jamaica in the 1980s, which prompted the poet's family to emigrate. In rejecting belonging, even the sea denies return, implying that exile from homeland and estrangement in the USA yield only endless longing. As scholar Derrilyn E. Morrison (2015) states, "the collection charts the evolution of self-identity as the poetpersona regathers fragments of memory from personal, family and communal, or national history" (43). By choosing an oracle, the poetpersona as an exiled voice wearing a fractured memory-mask exposes the pursuit of happiness as a haunting

cycle of desire and loss, where achievement can never satisfy the ache for origin, essence and love.

The tension between dreams and reality is at times intense. The poet seeks to observe it with detachment, as suggested by the quotations from Darwin's *Origin of Species* that preface the poems in Aracelis Girmay's *Kingdom Animalia* (2011). For example, the opening poem about a brother, which also lends its title to the collection, states: "I want to sleep. I do not want to sleep. See, / one day, not today, not now, we will be gone / from this earth where we know the gladiolas" (15). The lines convey the tension between mortality and impermanence, underlining human longing, the inevitability of departure and the fleeting nature of familiar, cherished spaces and experiences.

With a similar attitude and tonality, "The Dream", from the same collection, portrays dreaming as a liminal space where memory and actuality blur. The unconscious resurrects the dead mother, merging grief with surreal scenes of childhood, light and bereavement. It exposes longing, as the speaker calls to the mother who "would never hear me" (50), highlighting the impossibility of reversing death. Reality intrudes through the brother's denial – "she did not die, he thought" (50) – contrasting with the speaker's painful certainty. Taking shape as a layered, shifting narrative, the dream thus becomes both a refuge and a reminder: it allows temporary presence but ultimately affirms absence.

For the newer generations born and raised in the USA, the Caribbean dream no longer haunts or restrains them; they are more firmly anchored in the present and respond swiftly to injustices. For example, the poem "First Job", from *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* (2016) by Elizabeth Acevedo, presents the myth of success not as opportunity, but as vulnerability within exploitative labor. In contrast with Pedro Pietri's voiceless characters from "Puerto Rican Obituary", this poem is written in the first-person singular. The young female protagonist, working in a bakery, begins with the ordinary rituals of working-class life – sweeping, washing, checking the register – but the intrusion of male violence shatters the promise of safety or dignity. Her co-worker's laughter at her fear points out to the normalization of such threats. The image of the self as "a small roach / always waiting for a broom to fall" (10) captures the precariousness of female existence, where survival replaces aspiration and idealism masks fear and resilience in hostile spaces.

These samples demonstrate how the American dream, rather than a unifying hope, has unfolded as a generational cycle of broken promises, a series of shared nightmares. Early male voices exposed displacement through images of economic exploitation, systemic racism and

the hollow lure of consumerist ideals. Subsequent generations, especially women poets, shifted the focus toward the embodied experience of marginalization, where gender, class and race intersect in narratives of vulnerability and resilience. Taken together, these articulations remind us that the collapse of illusion is not merely individual but collective, inscribed across histories of exile, cultural fracture and an incessant search for belonging.

3. FANTASIES OF STRENGTH AND SURVIVAL

The American dream, long associated with opportunity and prosperity, has been rewritten by Latino-Caribbean poets as a space of endurance, creativity and empowerment. Rather than viewing it solely through material success, their work communicates resilience, cultural continuity and imaginative transformation. As the selection below illustrates, poetry becomes a vital medium through which immigrant experiences transmit both struggle and affirmation. By balancing hardship with visions of belonging, these poets affirm that, despite its fractures, the ideal of a better life still offers possibilities for dignity, solidarity and flourishing.

As Pedro Pietri's "Love Poem for My People" from *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973) warns through the lines "do not dream / if you want your dreams / to come true" (78), success depends on balancing expectations with possibilities; and not all dreamers are destined to failure. Several poems in Pietri's debut collection channel fantasies of empowerment, often tinged with vengeance. One such example, "To Whoever It May Concern", confronts a recently deceased figure – an anonymous yet selfish oppressor, most likely an employer or authority figure:

> you who trained us to mop yr floor
> will be cremated today
> we will not cry when this happens
> we love you better this way (79)

The contrast between "you" and "we" foregrounds class struggle, where anger is reconfigured as love once freedom is attained. The impersonal title draws attention to the corporate indifference toward workers, operating as a boomerang effect: if the system does not care for them, they reciprocate with detachment. In this context, the workers' response is not grief but liberation, interpreting the exploiter's downfall as both deserved and symbolically restorative. Aimed at an immigrant community, the four quatrains function collectively to mobilize

solidarity and transform trauma into art and cultural memory, shedding light on how poetic language reclaims power by converting suffering into resistance. From the same collection, the short poem "Tata" expresses cultural resistance at the individual level. It stresses the limits of cultural assimilation, exposing how existence does not require full linguistic integration into dominant culture:

> Mi abuela
> has been
> in this dept store
> called america
> for the past twenty-five years
> She is eighty-five years old
> and does not speak
> a word of english
>
> That is intelligence (105)

The grandmother's refusal – or inability – to learn English becomes a subtle act of resistance, affirming dignity in preserving identity. The capitalization of "Mi" and "She" emphasizes her role in the community, while the lowercase "america" and "english" and the abbreviation "dept store" diminish institutional authority, critiquing cultural assimilation, hierarchical power and capitalist commodification. This irony underscores a key power dynamic: true intelligence resides not in conformity, but in sustaining autonomy amid pressures to integrate.

Years pass and problems persist. In the poem titled "latero story" (12-13) from *Mainstream Ethics* (1988) by Tato Laviera, the ideal of prosperity is represented through the lens of a can collector, who navigates on the margins of society. The speaker, a "twentieth-century welfare recipient" (12), engages in collecting discarded aluminium cans – a task framed as a stepping stone toward entrepreneurial success. This pursuit reflects a satirical take on upward mobility, highlighting the gruelling and unsanitary labour involved: "several times a day i touch evil rituals / slit throats of chickens / tongues of poisoned rats" (12). Despite the harsh realities, the speaker ironically imagines becoming "a latero executive / with corporate conglomerate intents" (13). His wish indicates the reality of flourishing companies:

i am thinking of publishing
my own guide to latero collecting
and founding a latero's union to offer
medical dental benefits (12-13)

However, the poetic mirror is broken as the "i" is always in lowercase, which accentuates the dissonance between ideals and the marginalized individuals' arduous efforts to advance. The projections of endurance and triumph emerge through dark humor, hyperbole and repetition, portraying the speaker's transformation from marginalized welfare recipient to entrepreneurial can picker. Vivid, grotesque imagery of filth and danger spotlights resilience, while the ironic, first-person narration, enjambment and cumulative listing dramatize resourcefulness, ambition and original self-empowerment.

Can dreams ever truly materialize, sincerely rather than sarcastically? Affirmative answers can be found in Latino-Caribbean women's poetry. For example, "Springfield", from *Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo* (1990) by Sandra María Esteves, presents the pursuit of happiness through the eyes of a young girl navigating both privilege and cultural difference. Her experiences reveal opportunity intertwined with social inequality. While exposed briefly to luxury – "Her six-year-old godchild's first summer out got to ride the limo" – she also learns the realities of her identity and outsider status: "they never saw one like her before, / indian-haired-mulata-Puerto-Rican-girl" (15-16). Her curiosity, resourcefulness and love of learning exemplify self-empowerment: she claims knowledge from library books "hunting pictures to explain mysterious words" (16), even without full comprehension, embodying a personal, intellectual version of success. Simultaneously, she negotiates the risks of naivety and cultural missteps, as when mint-picking nearly harms her godmother. The poem conceives the ethos of achievement as exploration and education – an imaginative, self-directed journey within a landscape marked by privilege, difference and discovery.

What happens when somebody begins to feel at home in the USA, yet remains nostalgic for their homeland? "Snaps of Immigration" from *Red Beans* (1991) by Victor Hernández Cruz is constructed as a series of flashbacks, intertwining memory and displacement, weaving together the pull of an ancestral homeland with the strangeness of a new environment. The poem opens with sensual recollections – "I remember the fragrance of / the Caribbean", "I dream with suitcases / full of illegal fruits" (13) – images that capture what has been carried across borders. These contrast with the alien landscapes encountered: tenements, supermarkets and cement-dominated streets where even the sky feels artificial. Amidst these stark conditions,

however, echoes of the homeland persist: "the cucurucu of the roosters" (13) breaking through layers of urban infrastructure, the careful letters sent back, filled with tenderness and resourcefulness. Cruz sheds light on how cultural identity subsists beneath imposed assimilation. Language remains a battleground, where meaninglessness and deception occur: "At first English was nothing / but sound" (14). Through this interplay, the poem captures both the loss of origins and the need for perseverance.

A similar balanced attitude can be found in Judith Ortiz Cofer's work. Unlike other Latino-Caribbean poets who regret the loss of Spanish, Ortiz Cofer uses it to welcome readers into the language. In *Terms of Survival* (1987), over a third of the poems have Spanish titles, in the first section entitled "Palabras", and a glossary is provided at the end of the collection; the other section is entitled "Common Ground". The two sections illustrate a linguistic negotiation between the preservation of the Spanish heritage and the adaptation to the English cultural environment, pointing out the tension between cultural retention and integration. Poems such as "Quinceañera", "Loca", "La Bruja" and "Mamacita" explore aspects of women's lives, while "La Envidia", "La Fe", "La Maldad" and "La Libertad" engage with societal values and moral constructs. Several years later, the poem "A Latin Deli, an Ars Poetica" from *The Latin Deli* (1993), presents El Norte as the locus of prosperity – through the lens of migration, highlighting both aspiration and disillusionment. The deli becomes a microcosm of cultural memory and survival, where the "Patroness of Exiles" (3) mediates between longing and reality. Latino immigrants come seeking both material and emotional fulfillment: "all wanting the comfort / of spoken Spanish, to gaze upon the family portrait / of her plain wide face" (3). The poem reminds us that the narrative of possibility may be less about material wealth and more about connection, cultural continuity and small acts of care: slicing "*jamón y queso*", listening to lists read "like poetry" and supplying goods from "closed ports" that "now exist only in their hearts" (4). The fantasy of El Norte is enacted in intimate, everyday gestures that sustain both individual and collective identity.

In "Advice for the New World", a poem from *The Other Man Was Me: A Voyage to the New World* (1994), Rafael Campo presents the American dream as both a hope and a burden. The speaker, a father giving advice to his son, recalls the painful rupture of exile – "dictatorships resembled oceans, sweeping waves of fists" and "the poverty was like a ship that plunged" (52) – which forced him to leave Cuba for the USA. In exchange for the promise of freedom, he lost "family's wealth, the ruby of my health, the golden statue of my love" (52). The immigrant's hope is portrayed not as simple wealth, but as the inner strength needed to live on. What remains

is a legacy to his son: resilience, imagination and the responsibility to "learn the art of moving islands" and to "make kneel the precipice" (52), a metaphor for carrying history, memory and identity across borders. The dream here lies in the power to transform displacement into continuity and loss into endurance, forging belonging in a fractured world, as reflected in the author's assertion: "What distinguishes American poetry in my mind's imagination is its inclusiveness, its rich layering of voices and its incessant reworking of traditions" (Campo, 2015: 290).

Several poems from *The Water Between Us* (1999) by Shara McCallum gloss on the figure of the Little Mermaid. In the poem "The Daughter, Left" (73), reveries become a space where the poet's imagination reclaims and reconfigures the mother-daughter bond. The mother appears "unmasked and shimmering", an ethereal presence freed from the marks of time. Her actions – "gliding / a comb through unmatted hair" – evoke tenderness and restoration, suggesting a longing for intimacy and care. Yet, she continues "floating beyond my reach", symbolizing emotional and physical distance. Her message – "go down to the sea / and fish for your true face" – guides the poet toward self-discovery through memory and loss. The dream thus transforms grief into a generative, imaginative journey shaped by maternal influence, in which the daughter is prompted to search for her own sense of identity.

The interactions among Latino-Caribbean female subjects illuminate multiple dimensions of their private lives. For example, "Bed-making in a Foreign Country" (52) from *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish* (2005) by Judith Ortiz Cofer presents social advancement through labor, displacement and the tension between desire and survival. The chambermaid's quiet diligence sustains life in a foreign land, often invisible yet essential. The speaker admires her "love-sleepy" presence and imagines trading places, but the maid's independence and resilience prevail. The bed symbolizes stability and continuity: "leaves the sheets taut enough for me / to use as blank pages", yet her choices reveal the limits and personal costs of mobility. The warning that leaving a bed unmade could "cause a sleepless night" emphasizes the fragile balance between ambition, responsibility and existence. From another angle, "Notes for My Daughter Studying Math", included in the same collection, shows that the American dream becomes cultural inheritance, knowledge and growth. The speaker urges her daughter to connect with heritage: "when you step outside and breathe deeply, you inhale the history of our race in each molecule" (28), pointing out that self-realization depends on intellectual curiosity and cultural awareness rather than material wealth and calling attention to empowerment through education and contact with a broader cultural legacy.

As it occurs in other diasporic contexts, Latino-Caribbean poets explore family bonds through deeply intimate portrayals. In "My Father As a Guitar" (22) from *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen* (2000), Martín Espada examines sleeping visions as spaces where emotional truth surfaces shaped by the pressures and failures of the American ideal. The poet's father, unable to stop working – "*The landlord won't let me*" – embodies the immigrant forced to gamble with health for staying alive. Fantasies here are not escapes but revelations. When the father dreams of his mother's death – "heart hammering / like the fist of a man at the door / with an eviction notice" – the imagery fuses individual loss with systemic anxiety. The poet's imagination transforms the father into "a guitar, / with a hole in his chest / where the music throbs", hinting at both vulnerability and resilience, both hardships and the capacity of music to restore dignity and attachment.

Community building manifests not only through family ties and social interactions, but also by fostering a sense of belonging to a broader ethno-racial group. In "Elegy in Gold" from *Kingdom Animalia* (2011), Aracelis Girmay invokes "the African dream", layering it over the American dream through a reference to a relevant site of memory:

> This is the country
> of the gone-away: Harlem,
>
> you wear the missing
> like a golden chain. (75)

The poem intertwines displacement, heritage and resilience as precious luminous remnants of both dreams carried across oceans. Another mode of community building is through a shared interest in literature as "Ars Poetica", the last poem in the collection, intimates:

> May the poems be
> the little snail's trail.
>
> Everywhere I go,
> every inch: quiet record
>
> of the foot's silver prayer.
> I lived once.

Thank you.
It was here. (111)

The poem conveys belonging as a quiet, personal trace of existence. Through the metaphor of the snail's trail, Girmay implies that being present – even in small, subtle ways – marks the world, leaving evidence of life, memory and gratitude, affirming that one has lived and mattered in a particular place.

Several of the poems discussed so far demonstrate how the animal world serves as inspiration for transcending and challenging conventional urban ways of life. A powerful poem that draws on fauna to address migration is "For the Poet Who Told Me Rats Aren't Noble Enough Creatures for a Poem" by Elizabeth Acevedo, included in *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* (2016). It reframes the American dream through the figure of the rat, an urban survivor despised and overlooked, yet profoundly symbolic of resilience: "even when they sent exterminators, set flame to garbage, half dead, and on fire, you pushed on" (29). By celebrating its ability to endure exterminators, flames, hunger and violence, Acevedo challenges conventional ideals of beauty, nobility and worth. The rat mirrors the lives of marginalized communities, especially Dominican and other Caribbean immigrants in USA cities, who, like the "mammal bottom-feeder, always fucking famished" (30), survive on crumbs but refuse to be erased. The vision of progress here is not polished success, but the gritty triumph of existence itself, the refusal to be domesticated, lab-trained or commodified. For Acevedo, to write the rat into verse is to claim space for lives and aspirations considered unworthy by mainstream narratives, transforming stigma into affirmation and defiance.

The poems considered in this section illustrate how aspirations take shape through resilience and communal affirmation. They depict everyday labor, cultural memory and education not merely as obligations but as opportunities for self-definition and empowerment. Humor, irony and creativity reframe marginalization into resourcefulness, while close family ties and intergenerational dialogue provide continuity across displacement. The pursuit of knowledge, the preservation of language and small acts of care embody possibilities for dignity and belonging. In these representations, the promise of opportunity emerges as a reimagined space where persistence, cultural pride and collective identity offer genuine fulfillment.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Latino-Caribbean poetry from Victor Hernández Cruz to Elizabeth Acevedo shows that nightmares and visions of possibility are not merely opposing forces but interdependent modes of expression. Nightmares strip away illusions of integration, upward mobility and consumerist promise, exposing displacement, systemic violence and alienation. At the same time, ingenious projections of alternative futures recover dignity, cultural continuity and resilience. Reality thus appears not as a fixed condition but as a threshold where despair and hope constantly collide, producing a poetics of tension that dramatizes the precarious border between survival and aspiration.

Beginning in the late 1960s, these works, spanning half a century, also demonstrate a strong generational and collective trajectory. Earlier voices articulate the disillusionment with labor exploitation and the futility of material promises, while later ones reshape dreams into strategies of endurance and empowerment. Though nightmares often emerge through intimate and bodily experiences, they resonate with wider communal struggles. Likewise, projections exceed the individual by envisioning solidarity, language preservation and cultural memory. Belonging is thereby reframed as a shared process rather than an isolated achievement, making authenticity itself a collaborative construction and not only a personal negotiation of identity.

Finally, the innovative dimension of this poetry resists the simplistic charge of escapism. Instead, it works as a transformative tool, reconfiguring loss into resistance and remaking oppressive myths into self-authored possibilities. Such visions construct counter-realities that question capitalist hierarchies and assimilationist pressures, while offering alternative forms of recognition and continuity. The result is an open-ended vision: reality remains fractured and fluid, yet continually reinvented through poetry. In this interplay between nightmares and imaginative reconstructions, Latino-Caribbean poetry demonstrates its most enduring achievement: the capacity to turn suffering into resilience and disillusionment into cultural strength, without ever closing off the contradiction at the heart of diasporic experience.

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