

# In Review: *Puerto Rican Obituary* by Pedro Pietri

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Spring 2020

## Ex-iles and (Trans)national Identities

*Puerto Rican Obituary* is a good example of how creative writing tools can be deployed for social and political commentary while maintaining theoretical ‘rigor’ that academe continues to ask for. Pedro Pietri weaves a perspective commensurate with Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Orlando Patterson’s *Social Death*, and Giorgio Agamben’s *Bare Life* - to describe the realities of Puerto Ricans on the U.S ‘mainland’ in the context of racial capitalist expansionism.

*They worked*  
*They were always on time*  
*.... ten days a week*  
*And they were only paid five*  
*.... Jaun*  
*Miguel*  
*Milagros*  
*Manual*  
*All died yesterday today*  
*And will die again tomorrow*  
*.... Practicing a religion without a roof*  
*The old testament*  
*The new testament*  
*According to the gospel*  
*Of the internal revenue*

These lines and their essence appear several times in this piece and are meant to bring into sharp focus how the dispossession of Puerto Ricans operates within the same framework of racial slavery that required various mechanisms of othering. While Puerto Rico has been annexed to the U.S, the non-white racialized bodies of its citizens could not be fully assimilated into white culture. Thus, labor-intensive work fell on these bodies which were more violable, less valuable and bearing disproportionate levels of death. By pointing out that Puerto Ricans were working ten days a week, Peeitri highlights the harshness of those realities - servitude, low labor standards, absence of union representation, no sense of leisure, the inability to afford a trip back home.

The machine that keeps Puerto Ricans in this servitude is inescapable. The machine that keeps Puerto Ricans in this servitude is fuelled by the hope that never dies, the “dreaming about america” (118), The view that success (the american dream) through labor was a sign of God’s favor. This dreaming, this hope though it can be seen as an attempt to find ways to make life liveable is ironically, to invoke Weber the ‘iron cage’. Pietri is showing how belief systems and ideas had serious implications for social organization that kept Puerto Ricans as “assistant, assistant, assistant to the assistant assistant” (123).

Gesturing to militarization, Pietri paints a damning and paradoxical picture of how racial liberalism and multiculturalism were celebrated at the same time a race war was being fought; racial capitalism as both a cause and effect of war and how Puerto Ricans attempted to assimilate into U.S citizenry via reinforcement that their bodies were ones the state could let die. He writes:

*They knew  
They were born to weep  
And keep the morticians employed  
As long as they pledge allegiance  
To the flag that wants them destroyed*

*They saw their names listed  
In the telephone directory of destruction  
They were train to turn  
The other cheek by newspapers  
That misspelled mispronounced  
And misunderstood their names  
And celebrated when death came  
And stole their final laundry ticket  
....They were born dead  
And they died dead*

Moving from how Puerto Rican bodies that are socially dead are key to capitalism Pietri makes a turn to show how their physical death is also productive for capital expansion by “keep[ing] the morticians employed”.

Centering interracial strife and consumption as critical axes of (neo)liberal capitalism, he writes:

*Miguel  
Died hating Milagros because Milagros had a color television set  
And he could not afford one yet  
Milagros  
Died hating Olga because Olga  
Made five dollars more on the same job*

And then later

*And now they are together  
in the main lobby of the void  
Addicted to silence  
Off-limits to the wind  
Confine to worm supremacy  
In long island cemetery  
This is the groovy hereafter  
The protestant collection box  
Was talking so loud and proud about*

It is the penetration of the western values that have created and fostered the notion among Puerto Ricans that to be a valid subject you must access social mobility and join the ranks of the

hyper-consumer. Pietri theorizes that the strain that results from racialization forces interracial violence - a move for empowerment but through dystopian means.

How might one work against this racial capitalist system? For Pietri, part of that answer is in a rejection of western modernity and deliberate moves to understand their role in keeping the wheels of the machine turning. Pietri Asks Puerto Ricans to return to the art of their dialogue, to turn the TV off, and trust their own ideas of what it means to truly live in the world by a return to their ancestral roots and to never forget the struggles of their people. Pietri's piece is one of recovery and centering of silent and silenced voices not dissimilar from other pieces from, for example, Montejo, M. Nourbese Philip, Hartman, Bennet, Baez, and others. The bilingualism in the piece can be read as the authors' refusal to "neglect the art of their dialogue" and to produce knowledge that is clearly in the service of his own people- Puerto Ricans.