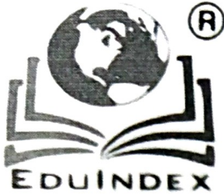

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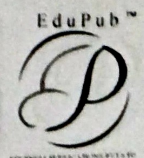

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Performing the Tranfrontera Contact Zone: David Hernández

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ABSTRACT :

David Hernandez (born in 1971) is an American poet and novelist. Most recently, he was awarded a 2011 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for Poetry. In a 1997 interview, David Hernández, Chicago-Rican poet and front man for the poetry-music group Street Sounds/*Sonidas de la Calle,* analyzes the role of the community artist in the creation of cross-cultural political and aesthetic coalitions.

Focusing specifically on the development of Chicago's Latino arts movement during the 1960s, he states:

Community arts is basically about the artists in the community who paint and reflect on their community. The thing about community arts is that they should go beyond their communities and tie up with other communities so it doesn't just become an ethnic thing, so we don't say, "Oh Uptown. . . yes, their arts over there are Vietnamese." There are a lot of different programs out there that are finally tying all these groups together. Chicago is very poly-cultural, whatever that means. That should be recognized. Not separating but combining all of these elements artistically, because it's the artists from every given community that, if their consciousnesses are raised enough, they should be able to do that, to influence their communities to see other communities.

KEYWORDS : Community, Political, Historical, Poem, Mexican

I. INTRODUCTION :

II. a 1997 interview, David Hernández, Chicago-Rican poet and front man for the poetry-music group Street Sounds/*Sonidas de la Calle,* analyzes the role of the community artist in the creation of cross-cultural political and aesthetic coalitions.

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Here Hernández describes what Paul Gilroy has called "the vital connection "between expressive culture--in this case, murals and poetry readings--and grassroots political movements. Referring to his experiences with Chicago's Mexican-American and Puerto Rican arts communities, Hernández insists on the role of these participatory art forms in the development of a shared Latino ethnic consciousness and the ensuing emergence of local grassroots political organizations. In Hernández's example, Mexican- American and Puerto Rican artists, poets, and audiences cross neighborhood boundaries and come together in public spaces such as the street, the community center, or the neighborhood playground in order to participate in the unveiling of a mural or a street poetry performance. As Hernández points out here, moreover, the cultural event/performance draws the audience into what Simon Frith has described as "the immediate experience of collective identity," an experience which for Hernández plays an important role in transforming the political sphere ("Music and Identity"). It is through the empathetic alliances formed between artists from these two

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communities, between the artists and audience members, and between audience member and audience member that individuals begin to imagine a provisional collective identity and construct viable political coalitions.

Ethnomusicologists and cultural studies scholars such as Simon Frith, Martin Stokes, and Mayra Santos Febres have written extensively on music's ability to transform public spaces and disrupt normal social processes. While Stokes locates this subversive quality in the way that sound fills physical space, both Frith and Santos privilege the participatory nature of the performance. In "Salsa as Translocation," for instance, Santos defines salsa music as subversive because it is an improvisational, participatory musical form, one that breaks down the boundaries between poet and audience, self and other. She writes, "Salsa is a participatory musical genre: it resists the binarisms of audience/artists, performers/consumers, founder/follower, subject/object. It privileges both continuity and rupture, order and hazard, sequence and simultaneity" Frith's essay, on the other hand, focuses on how a collective identity-in-process is constructed via the musical event. Looking at a variety of popular musics, he states that "[t]he experience of pop music is an experience of identity: in responding to a song, we are drawn, haphazardly, into emotional alliances with the performers and with the performers' other fans" ("Music and Identity"). According to Frith, moreover, these provisional emotional alliances suggest new imagined communities, what he refers to as "alternative modes of social interaction". In these essays, both Frith and Santos define the audience's response to the performance as a social movement of sorts. Through collective and corporeal activities such as listening, singing along with the performers, and dancing, the audience expresses what Frith calls "a real experience of what the ideal could be" and what Santos refers to as a sense of "peopleness" that is "larger than national and broader than ethnic".

This paper takes its cue from these recent discussions of identity, community formation, and musical performance and from Hernández's own writings on poetry, the public sphere, and social change. In the pages that follow, I introduce the reader to Hernández's thirty-year career as a community poet and performer. I also attempt to address the political work that Hernández's poetry does. I place his poems within a socio historical context that includes both his political activism and his role in the development of a Puerto Rican poetic tradition on the mainland. I then discuss three Street Sounds/*Sonidas de la Calle* performance poems: "Workers," "Roscoe Street," and "Chitown Brown." Focusing on the poems' soundscape and

the dialogic interaction between performer and audience, I theorize the live performance as a political act, one that exhorts its audience to attend to and be moved by what they hear. Before turing to my analysis of these live performances, I would like to spend a few pages addressing Hernández's poetry career.

II. CHICAGO'S UNOFFICIAL POET LAUREATE: DAVID HERNÁNDEZ AND THE CHICAGO POETRY SCENE

As Chicago poets Marc Smith and Carlos Cumpían have pointed out, David Hernández has been integral to the establishment of both a viable Latino political and arts scene and the renaissance of the local poetry scene.2 [Click for Appendix A: David Hernández Bibliography, Discography, and Videography 1971-2000] Hernández is a contemporary of Nuyorican poets such as Miguel Piñero, Pedro Pietri, and Sandra María Esteves. He was born in Cidra, Puerto Rico, on May 1, 1946 and arrived in Chicago with his family in 1955 at the height of Puerto Rican migration to the mainland. Like these early Nuyorican poets, he came of age as a poet during the social and political unrest of the late 1960s. And, like their poetry, his continues to be influenced by personal and familial experiences of migration and cultural displacement. Hernández addresses the intersection of the personal and the political in his poetry in the preface to his 1991 collection *Rooftop Piper,* when he writes:I grew up here.

I know the streets like the back of a passenger's head on the subway train. I have tasted the freshly-killed animal anger that periodically implodes upon seeing a street survivor sleeping in a hallway under a newspaper blanket headlining the upside of the economy. Maybe it's the memory of mami y papi struggling to pry their children loose from a one and a half room, immigrant apartment that makes me empathize with all the little great people forever reminding me where I came from. Therefore, it's my natural choice to write their story from the most intimate poem to a class-action song of universal celebration.

Like the Nuyorican poets, moreover, Hernández synthesizes English, Spanish, and street language and records the experiences of this bilingual, bicultural community. Poems such as "Me La Buscaré [I Will Find it Myself]," "New Town: A Tribute," "Immigrants," and "Tecata" use various combinations of English, Spanish, and Spanglish to document the collective history of Chicago's marginalized populations—immigrant families, the homeless, prostitutes, and drug addicts. In "Immigrants," for example, Hernández juxtaposes English

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and Spanish and contrasts the (im)dream for a better life with the eternal winter, concrete, and poverty that they find upon arrival in Chicago:

> They came to make money
> rest, laugh, and yawn with
> contented bellies
> and dream in half-truths.
> *Llegaron a piés, en barco,*
> *por trén y avión busando*
> *la luz de esperánza sombrada,*
> *encantádos con cuentos jámás realizádos.*
> *Llegaron a trabajár ha pesár*
> *de un invierno eterno, la apatía,*
> *la indiferéncia y la pobresa*
> *invadiendo una vida migrante,*
> *extranjera y orgullosa.*
> *Llegaron para enterrár*
> *los sueños en concreto*
> *y derramár lagrimas*
> *en cuentas desconocidas.*
>
> [They arrived on foot, by boat,
> by train and airplane looking for
> hope's sheltering light,
> enchanted by never-realized stories.
> They arrived to work weighed down
> by an eternal winter, the apathy,
> indifference, and poverty
> that invades a migrant life,
> foreign and proud.
> They arrived to bury
> their dreams in concrete
> and to spill tears
> in unknown stories.]
>
> They came in freshly cut green bunches
> that ripened in dark basements
> with linoleum floors, plastic covers
> figurines and worn-out photographs
> of youthful weddings.
> They worked overtime for half pay
> to put on layaway their son's
> wheelchair and silver braces.
> Becoming strangers to each other's faces,
> they fulfilled the myth of countless others.
> They departed.
> Paying extra-flight baggage
> for 30 years of arriving
> while dreams flew by

on clouds where sky
greets infinity
and horizons are no more.
Where sky greets infinity
and horizons are no more.
(*Rooftop Piper* 16/*Elvis Is Dead but at Least He's Not Gaining Any Weight* 15)

While the title of this poem suggests a larger, more universal theme, "Immigrants" speaks primarily to the experiences of Puerto Rican migrants who travel back and forth between the mainland and the island trying to get ahead economically. This poem portrays the disparity between the migrants' hope for a better life and the reality of their life as underpaid workers living in a Chicago tenement building. The poem's layout performs the back-and-forth that typifies the fluid migration patterns between the mainland and the island. It also contrasts the promise of the American Dream articulated in the first stanza with the poverty, economic exploitation, and disease described in stanzas two, four, and six. Throughout this poem, moreover, Hernández juxtaposes English and Spanish and uses the syntactically parallel structure of the first five stanzas to deconstruct the American Dream. The bilingual anaphora (They arrived/They came/Llegaron/ Llegaron/Llegaron/They came) that runs throughout these stanzas highlights the disparity between the immigrants' aspirations and the reality of their lives after their arrival in Chicago, as does the translinguistic pun of arriving-as-migration and arriving-as-assimilation.

III. CONCLUSION :

In more recent works, Hernández draws on his experiences with multiethnic political and aesthetic organizations such as *La Gente*, the grassroots political coalition that he co-founded with members of the Latin Eagles Organization, and *El Taller*, the crosscultural arts workshop that he co-founded with Gamaliel Ramirez, Dean Karabastos, Salima Rivera, and Cesar Quiñones. He places Puerto Rico's struggle for independence within the context of Civil Rights, the Black Power movement, and twentieth-century Latin American liberation struggles and expresses a multiethnic, multinational political consciousness. In poems such as "Martin and My Father" and "Elvis Is Dead but at Least He's Not Gaining Any Weight," the title poem from his most recent chapbook, Hernández addresses the similarities between the African-American and Puerto Rican communities in Chicago. The autobiographical "Elvis Is Dead but at Least He's Not Gaining Any Weight," for instance, traces the emergence of a new racial consciousness in the late 1960s by cataloguing the changing attitudes toward kinky hair

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among Chicago's Puerto Rican and African-American communities. Framed by Hernández's parodic reading of Elvis as pop icon, this poem compares Elvis's arrival on the rock 'n' roll scene with Operation-Bootstrap-era migrants' arrival on the mainland :

> Elvis arrived on the scene around 1955
> with straight, greasy hair and a loose
> pompadour that got all shook up whenever
> he rocked n' rolled. At the same time,
> we Puerto Rican arrived in Chicago except
> we weren't as big of a hit as Elvis was.
> My brother Sam and his best friend Manuel
> were miserable Spanglish teenagers who
> looked like Elvis from the neck down
> in their beltless blue jeans, white t-shirts
> and the rebel snarl so common in 50's teenagers.
> But unfortunately, their hair was too kinky
> and wiry so they settled for a forelock they
> trained to hang loose by clipping on a clothes pin
> before going to bed at night.
> Manuel and Sam hated George Perez and I
> because we were their little brothers
> and they had to take care of us outside.
> George Perez and I had recently reconciled again
> since the last time that my cousin Hector and I
> hung him from the tree in the backyard alley
> while playing Delone Ranger and it was George's
> turn to be the bad guy. But after the last
> spanking, we too wanted to be like Elvis
> since it was safer than playing Delone Ranger.
> It wasn't long before George Perez and I felt
> as miserable as our teenage brothers because
> our kinky hair refused to go straight.
> We tried clothes pins, do-rags, brylcream hair-tonic,
> lye, vinegar, Vaseline and nylon stocking
> overnight skull caps hoping to wake up with straight
> greasy hair just like Elvis had yet nothing really
> worked. So we grew up hating our hair because it
> was pasu hair, raisin hair, kinky hair, bad hair and as a result, we
> didn't like ourselves too much either.
> When the Beatles musically invaded America in the 60's,
> they had long straight dry hair and Elvis was no
> longer popular with the teenagers so he retreated
> to Las Vegas, got high on prescription drugs, shot up
> televisions and his snarl became a permanent
> fixture on his face.
> At the same time that Elvis faded away,
> Black People began marching for freedom, embraced
> their culture and gave pride to kinky, nappy hair

so that soon Afro hair-cuts became very fashionable.
Even white people wanted afros. They tried permanents,
jerry curls, sponge curls, Dippity-doo, curling irons,
hair pins, afro wigs but to no avail because they still
looked like Elvis from the hair-line down.
And something happened to Puerto Ricans like Manuel,
Sam, George, and me. We felt good about our hair.
We were proud of our kinky, raisin, pasu, bad hair
that refused to go straight. And after all those years
of shame we were a big hit with ourselves. We made it.
We had finally arrived.
So even though Elvis split the scene in an over-dose
of drugs, his rock and rolling love songs are now
part of fate. And all I can say is that Elvis is dead
but at least he's not gaining any weight. (*Elvis* 33-34)

Like "Immigrants," "Elvis Is Dead" is narrated from the point of view of an adult looking back on his childhood, and like "Immigrants," "Elvis" draws on personal experience (the poem includes references to Hernández's older brother Sam and Sam's friend Manuel Perez, both of whom appear in his poem "Workers" as well). This poem, however, focuses primarily on issues of identity and identification, particularly on the effects of popular culture images of physical attractiveness (white skin, straight hair) on the young men and boys in Chicago's Puerto Rican community. As I've suggested above, however, this poem is not only a testimonial to the privations faced by Operation- Bootstrap-era migrants. It also documents and celebrates the emergence of a shared political consciousness around the Black Power movement and the role that a shared aesthetics (in this case, hair styles) played in the development of this shared political consciousness. In language that resonates with Kobena Mercer's discussion of the politics of black hair styles, Hernández details the rise of a radical ethnic identity via the history of the popular hair styles of 1950s through the 1960s--from Elvis's loose pompadour, to The Beatles's "long, straight, dry hair," to the ascendancy of the Afro as signifier of the Black is Beautiful movement.

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