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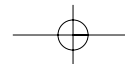
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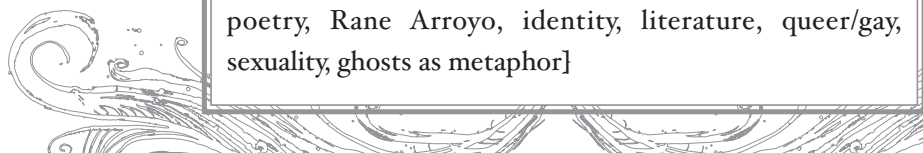
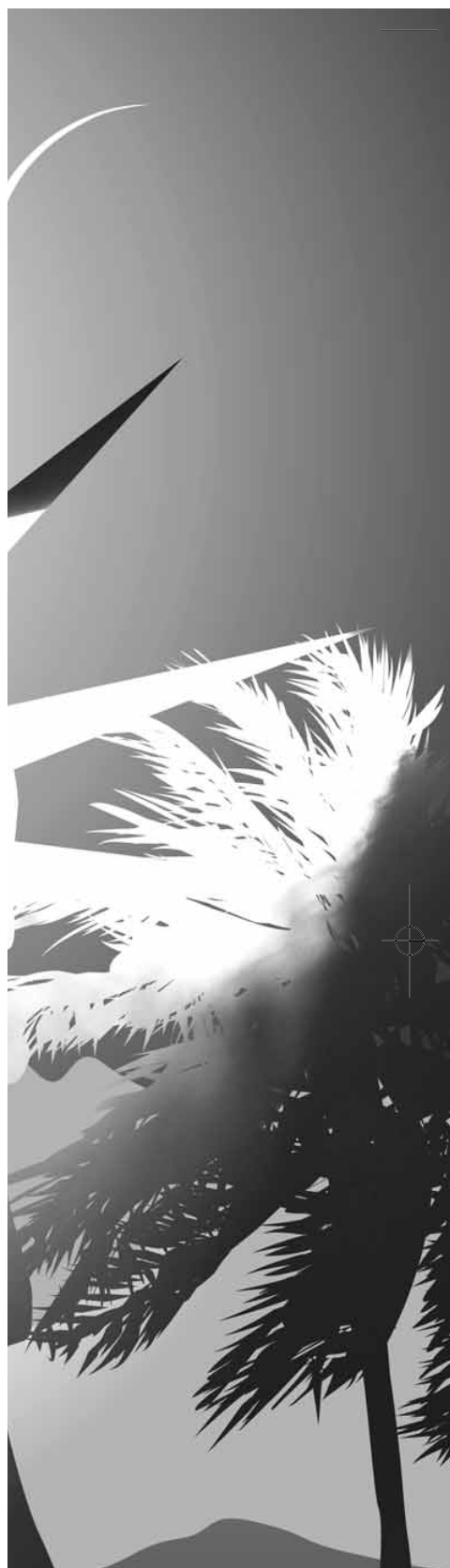
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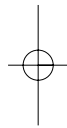
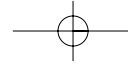
“Poetry always demands all my ghosts”: The haunted and haunting poetry of Rane Arroyo

BETSY A. SANDLIN

ABSTRACT

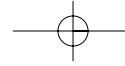
Ohio-based, Chicago-born, gay, Puerto Rican author Rane Arroyo writes poetry in which ghosts and ghostliness serve as metaphors for identities that are present but not always represented in dominant U.S. literary history. This essay argues that in Arroyo's mainly autobiographical poetry, ghosts, hauntings, and a broader concept of ghostliness are used to interrogate identifications that float between, around, and through socially constructed categories such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. While the relationship between the poetic voice and his specters varies and is shown to be quite complex, Arroyo's ghosts serve not only as constant inspiration for his poetry but also as vehicles for his meditations on identity. [Key words: poetry, Rane Arroyo, identity, literature, queer/gay, sexuality, ghosts as metaphor]





Anthologized in important collections of verse and the prize-winning author of several books of poetry and drama,¹ Rane Arroyo uses his writing to explore various intersecting axes of identification as a Latino, Puerto Rican / Chicago Rican, American gay author with one foot in the Midwest and one on the Island of his parents' fading memories. His mainly autobiographical poetic voice experiences identities that may be spectral or ghostly—unstable, shifting presences that are present but not always (re)presented in dominant society.

Derrida theorizes the spectral as that which “is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse of Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, that we think of hauntology” (51). Arroyo works within and through discourses of hauntology; poetry, and ghosts serve as identificatory metaphors in his personal, cultural, and metaliterary meditations. Arroyo's cadre of ghosts includes famous figures like William Carlos Williams, Reinaldo Arenas, Emily Dickinson, and Juan Ponce de León, as well as more personal specters. Ghosts and a broader concept of ghosts, both of which are omnipresent in Arroyo's poetry, serve as metaphors for identifications that spectrally float between, around, and through socially constructed categories such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. When metaphorical ghostliness can prove painful, confusing, or unsettling, spectrality—the state of being a specter/ghost—at times allows the poetic subject to analyze his situation, to make his own choices regarding identity, and to question social restriction and immobilization. Various inextricable areas of spectrality are explored in Arroyo's poetry: the invisibility of the working class; unclear notions of “home” or what Arroyo calls the state of “interior exile”³ as tied to his dual identification as Puerto Rican and “American,” as well as the political spectrality of Puerto Rico.



In “Write What You Know,” the metapoem that appears in the concluding section of *Home Movies of Narcissus*, a collection whose title alludes to its journey through time and collective memory and identity, Arroyo writes: “I know that in poetry work I’ve lied: / ‘I’m not autobiographical’” (69). The ironic “lie” that Arroyo acknowledges here is just one of the strategies of self-preservation and protection that the poet employs in “Write What You Know,” a piece that reads as a kind of poetic autobiography, an *ars poetica* and will serve as the springboard for my discussion of ghostly identifications in Arroyo’s poetry as a whole. The oxymoronic statement, “I’m not autobiographical,” establishes one of the dominant ideas at work in the identity politics found in Arroyo’s poetry which is, in reality, highly self-reflexive. That is, Arroyo’s concept of identity is derived as much from his interaction with the texts of others as it is the constraints of his own texts. It is the juncture where the two meet—his “self” in dialogue with literary icons, historical figures, other poets, and the like—that ghosts often play a part in the discovery and expression of “who I am” and “what I know.”

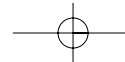
The *ars poetica* “Write What You Know” begins with a question: “But what do I know?” (68). The answer illustrates Arroyo’s first-hand “knowledge” as a poet whose personal history includes social injustice experienced due to class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. The first difference remembered in the poem revolves around his working-class upbringing. He writes: “I know Papi / worked in factories reigned by me / (a sick day = the righteous anger of / waltzing bosses in K-Mart suits)” (68). The images in the poem serve an important identificatory function: to symbolize the root of the poet and his transitory connection to Puerto Ricanness, which is felt as a reality of not belonging in the Anglo-dominated Midwest, since “I know that / my parents tried to color the suburbs / with their shy children” (68). Furthermore, the experience of classism is parallel to, and overlapping with, the experience of racism in the poet’s voice’s “knowledge” of life as a Latino in the United States: “I must write / about the time a museum guard yelled / at Papi: ‘The service entrance is over there’” (68).

As an adult, the poet continues to deal with ignorance regarding his cultural heritage: “Papi was silly, but he stopped dreaming / after citizen classes (but the Puerto Ricans are / Americans I must still tell my frowning / scholarship geniuses)” (68). He exposes not only the ignorance of American students but also that of his educated Anglo colleagues in academia:

... I know that some colleagues
treating me to one dinner were naïve in thinking
I knew the Mexican waiters who cursed them
every time they smiled under the parachutes of
fragile mustaches. We were and weren’t strangers. (69)

The experience of social injustice and misunderstanding is also present in the world of publishing, another “place” in which the poet often does not belong. “I write without permission and no one knows how / often I’m rejected, and I do publish, they smirk, / ‘Affirmative Action.’ . . .” (70).⁵

Yet it is not only his ethnicity that makes him an outsider in the literary

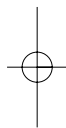


I know that I want to be known in my earned bed,
 that it's worth it to be kept out of anthologies
 because machos clone themselves without end.
 My crotch has a mind of its own; I'm a double exile. (70)

The double exile of being Puerto Rican and queer, he admits, has caused him to feel "Si, I know that none of this matters and yet / it hurts, it hurts. . . ." (70). He acknowledges that the multiple levels of discrimination have been experienced not merely as pain but also as erasure or invisibility. That is, living as a gay Puerto Rican poet of working-class origins in the Midwest is portrayed as a spectral existence, as illustrated by his reference to the Hardy Boys, books in which the poetic voice looked (unsuccessfully) for identification:

. . . I know that my beloved
 Hardy Boys may never recognize me
 from other migrant workers while solving
The Mystery of the Lost Muchacho.
 I'm waving to them: here I am, here I am.

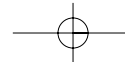
Hombres, how many more clues do you need? (70–1)



Once again, identity is configured not as an internal sense of self but rather as dependent upon interaction with external "others"; in this case, the subject seeks recognition and validation from the mainstream (represented by figures from United States popular culture).⁶ Such validation is dependent upon the poetic "I" being able to convince others (and, by extension, himself) that he is different from "other migrant workers," with whom he has chosen not to identify in this moment. In solving the "mystery of the lost muchacho," the ghosts and ghostliness are important metaphors in the search for visibility, remembrance, and permanence. Like the poetic voice who seeks recognition from the Hardy Boys, the "identity" of ghosts also depends upon their being identified and acknowledged, particularly by those who are not ghosts, to whom dominant society has given the authority to name, describe, and, in a sense, bring into existence.

The word "haunt" may be derived from the same root as the word "home," which is significant because Arroyo's autobiographical poetic voice is often haunted in its search for "home." Because the poet is like a ghost himself, his bicultural voice implies that he belongs nowhere in particular and instead floats between and among different locations, never truly settling in any. The lack of a stable "home" is the experience of being a Puerto Rican born in the US and feeling a tenuous connection to his Puerto Rican heritage.

In "Breathing Lessons" from *The Singing Shark*, it is a third-person protagonist described as "Yet another Puerto Rican / Buddhist" (90) who struggles with



Buddha teaches that most beaches
in Puerto Rico are illusions,

that the naked and the dead are
not obscene but opaque. He longs
for home. Longing is thinking so
he takes bigger breaths. In, in, in,

out. . . (31)

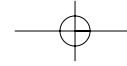
Such a longing for home proves even more difficult to satisfy when “home” (emphasized with italics in the original) is not clearly defined. At the end of “Breathing Lessons,” he “lunges into the Void. But he grows / afraid as he has so many / countless times when his airplanes / began their descents into San Juan” (83–6). Significantly, in the last two lines of the poem San Juan itself is described as a spectral site, personified as an “urban ghost that embraces / him until he is breathless” (32). Here, the Puerto Rican character is haunted by his very Puerto Ricanness, and Puerto Rico itself is an unclear and somewhat frightening presence about which he feels ambivalent. Puerto Rico serves as both a painful, physical presence and yet continual presence throughout Arroyo’s poetry.

Puerto Rico itself is a spectral entity that exists “between” various categories: neither a state nor a country; Caribbean but not always considered Latin American; its inhabitants US citizens but not quite “Americans” who are passengers of “the ship” that float between the Island and so-called Mainland. In a poem from the second section of *The Portable Famine* titled “Mortals: London Poems,” the poet ponders Puerto Rico’s spectrality after hearing Ricky Martin on the radio in England: “. . . Amigo, v / ambassadors from a country / that doesn’t exist. Will it ever?” (56).

In the search for home and self, the attempt to connect with his Puerto Rican / Latino past—that is, to understand his role as “Columbus’s Orphan”—is a central aspect of Arroyo’s poetry. In “Exterior America,” from *Columbus’s Orphan*, the poet declares: “I was taught to respect compasses, their role in shrinking the world’s maps. (I once had a wet dream of a *ménage à trois* with Christopher Columbus and the Statue of Liberty.)” (10). As a Puerto Rican who was born in Chicago and who always resided on the “Mainland,” the question of identity in terms of ethnicity and geography is a complex one for Arroyo.

Because of his ambivalent desire for (a) home, at times the poet stages his work inside Puerto Rico, as in “The Arrival” from *Pale Ramón*, which presumably describes the first trip to his parents’ Puerto Rico where “The [taxi] driver asked: tourist or visitor? Sí, / and then I shut up for I saw the imagined sea” (5). A sense of displacement marks many of Arroyo’s poems; however,

“As a Puerto Rican who was born in Chicago and has always lived on the ‘Mainland,’ the question of identity



multiplicity of places through which he travels but in which he never quits. Thus, while being haunted by a search for (a) home, Arroyo's first-person voice also haunts. His poetry meanders not only through time but also through space, chronicling visits to and residencies in Pittsburgh, Ohio, Chicago, Rico, New York, Amherst, Iceland, and Toronto, just to name a few of the geographical locations mentioned. Throughout his poetry, as he travels through memories, he also travels spatially in a dual mode of wandering—both physical and mental—that Julian Wolfreys labels as “t(r)opographic,” arguing that such restless haunting is the work of someone seeking to know himself. He acknowledges “the role of the exile or stranger searching for home, for touch of home, in the place that has always been home but which is nonetheless inescapably haunted” (122). Arroyo explains his wandering this way: “The more I travel, the more conscious I’ve become of the fact that I don’t fit easily anywhere. It is like being homesick for an imaginary place” (Nelson 1).

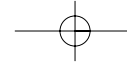
In this sense, the word “exile” appears repeatedly in Arroyo’s poetry, seeming to index the Spanish term *destierro*, literally meaning “without land.” In “The Rumba in Toronto” from *Columbus’s Orphan*, he writes:

I’m north of my own life,
on a useless porch in winter,
a Puerto Rican close to the North Pole.
I am Columbus’s orphan,
so often out of place. (23)



The repetition of the direction “north” and implied contrasts between the climate of his place of origin and his current location capture the feeling of not belonging, punctuated by the irony of the poems’ geographical specificities. In the self-imposed nickname of “Columbus’s Orphan,” which is also the title of the collection in which this poem appears, that most clearly illustrates his perceived marginality and perhaps an ambivalence and insecurity felt toward his heritage. Where does he belong? If he is “so often out of place,” what is his place in Toronto? Where can he call “home”? The poem “Happy Birthday Me” concludes: “. . . that all of us exiles finally unpack” (*Home Movies* 19). As previously illustrated in “Breathing Lessons,” what often haunts Arroyo’s poetic voice is this desire to have a place to call “home,” an emotional sense of belonging somewhere specific and tangible. But, as he repeatedly implies, this longing may never end: “will this place actually be mine?” (“Book Signings,” *The Portable Famine* 61).

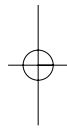
The notion of home and, thus, identity as unclear or constantly in flux also appears in a poem titled “Bad Disguises,” which uses the idea of Halloween costume as a metaphor for the performance of everyday life. He asks “Who shall I be this Halloween?” (*Home Movies* 19). When “Someone in a devil’s mask / demands a green card,” he responds: “It’s a joke, / but not for me. When is this home?” Thus, rather than lacking a literal “place” to call home, what is central to the identification of the poetic voice is the emotional state of what Arroyo calls



(314).⁸ In reference to this quote from Arenas, Arroyo assented, “There are many of us who write of ghosts because we ourselves are ghosts and are fluent in that profound language” (email). In part, then, Arroyo’s poetic voice desperately seeks interaction with other ghosts in an attempt to understand his spectrality.

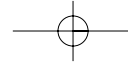
In the process of exploring his spectral Puerto Rican and, more broadly, Latin American heritage, many of the ghosts who appear in Arroyo’s pages are pop culture icons: Selena, Desi Arnaz, Speedy González, Che Guevara, the characters from *Wuthering Heights*, *Story*, and Zorro, among others. Most notably for the current discussion, though, is Juan Ponce de León, a major focus of Arroyo’s metapoetic and cultural hauntings is Juan Ponce de León. He is the subject of part three of the collection *Home Movies of Narcissus*, a series of poems titled “Hungry Ghost: The Ponce de León Poems” that includes twelve numerous and roughly chronologically ordered poems that trace Juan Ponce de León’s attempted haunting of the poet. In the first poem, it is the explorer himself who speaks, having returned from the dead: “Alive again, I’m wounded, my old island is now have skyscrapers instead of palm trees” (40). Despite the existence of social injustices, what troubles him in “My poor hysterical Hispanola” (40) is the twentieth century is what he considers his own unjust treatment in contemporary society. He laments:

. . .Anonymity is the worm
that eats body and soul long after
burial, a deep sleep in real space.
To be forgotten is a daily death. (40)



Ponce De León’s solution to the “problem” of anonymity is to find someone to write him back into history. That is, to bring him to life again through and in the poem. “I must find a poet to haunt, someone / to help me forever flee the footnote” (41).

The poems that follow this opening work reflect a long struggle between the specter and his potential poet, called “Arroyo.” After several rejections, the poet eventually attempts several different portraits of Ponce de León, but it is not the picture with which the *conquistador* is satisfied. The “Promised Poem,” for instance, transports us to the time of Ponce de León as he sails toward the “new world.” We voyeuristically observe him in unheroic poses and situations: sneezing, drinking wine, walking naked, getting a shave. We see the *conquistador* in moments of vulnerability and weakness, through the perspective of the servants: “They see his balding head, / comment that it’s shaped like / a bony fist and that roses in the worlds decay like / those in gardens left behind” (43). Clearly, this is not the portrait that the ghost of Juan Ponce de León had envisioned. In the fourth poem, “Juan Ponce de León, Protest the Age of the Lyric,” he calls the poet “a clumsy ventriloquist” who angrily retorts: “and that is what he publishes, / the bastard. I’ve killed for many years” (44). The solution is, of course, another attempt at the promised poem. The fifth is entitled “Promised Poem, Second Attempt: The Young Ponce de León.” In this poem, Ponce de León’s story more “fairly,” a series of voices are heard: Ponce’s father, his mother, a neighbor, a soldier, a nun, Columbus himself, and an unidentified



between my legs, poeta, / that was history, el futuro, *el futuro*" (47). This macabre posturing by Ponce de León illustrates his desire that the poet emphasize his metaphorical and literal phallus, or colonizer's power.

The poet, however, remains uncomfortable with the idea that his poetry could be used to heroicize the colonizer. In poem eight, the poet has a nightmare that confronts him to Puerto Rico's indigenous past, as a Taíno Indian "shows me his / wound" (48). In this poem, it is the anonymous and destroyed Taíno culture that asks the poet to tell their untold history instead, to supplant the over-mythicized history of the colonizer.

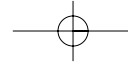
Then a hailstorm of heads of
Christianized slaves,
and each one cries out: Write
of us who are buried
without tombstones far from
our mourners. . . (49)

Is it the poet's responsibility to speak for the dead? As the poet ponders this question, weeping, it is yet again the ghost of the Spanish colonizer who gets the last word: "PONCE DE LEÓN INTERRUPTS: / We all speak sorrow, son. / It is the language of history" (49).

Finally, the poet decides to research the conquistador, and this act of seizing knowledge (through knowledge) rids him of Ponce de León's ghost: "Ponce's ghost is lost at last!" (50). Yet de León does not give up. In poem ten, called "I, Ponce de León Declare War on Poets," he humorously decides "I will now haunt a historian / fabulist. Arroyo, I kick you to the curb— / and take your hipped Ricky Martin from you" (52).⁹ Here, "Arroyo" comes to represent for the ghost of de León all that is lost of Puerto Rican heritage:

Puertorriqueños, you have forgotten
that Old Spain is your Mother who
demands blood, those liquid rubies.
We bribed the Gods we could, killed
the others. Poetry should praise scars. (52)

Poetry, the colonizer claims, should "praise scars," not correct them, heal them, condemn them, or seek someone to blame for them. With this pronouncement, the poet returns to the "I, Ponce de León, Say Good-bye to Puerto Rico Again" (poem 11). This is the last political poem of the series, in which the ghost assesses Puerto Rico's predicament in the twentieth century, particularly its continuing status as a colony, now called a territory of the United States: "You are my zip coded heir, poor puppet" (53). He continues to offer some advice for the island, instructing Puerto Rico to hold on to its own identity despite its increasing Americanization: "Don't hurt through heroin, hype, or



ghost and the haunted, as “The Poet Dreams of a City Crowded with Singing Statues” (poem 12), the poet calls out for the disappeared specter: “Where are the honest ghosts? / . . . / Statues keep predicting the wrong past. / Ponce? de León? Juan?” (55). It appears that history itself is spectral: unclear, uncertain, fleeting. At the end of his encounter with de León, the poet remains with unresolved conflict and identity. In the Ponce de León poems, Taíno, Spanish, and “American” narratives struggle for primacy, leaving the poet with more questions.

Just as the “Ponce de León Poems” are self-reflexive in that the figure of the poet appears and writes of his craft, and that craft is, in part, bound by and indebted to the ghosts that haunt him, there is a preponderance of metapoetic ghosts in his work. In “The Business of Words,” one of Arroyo’s many metapoems, he allows the reader a moment of voyeurism, as we watch the poet at work: “I sit in the dream pen in dream hand, / and wait for the dead to whisper” (*Pale Ramón* 14). Many of the ghosts who whisper to Arroyo’s often self-reflexive poetic voice are other poets. In “Obituary,” from *The Singing Shark*, Arroyo mourns the loss of a man with whom he identifies on several intersecting axes: sexuality, displacement, and poetry. The ghost in “Obituary” is once again Arenas, the openly gay Marielito who took his own life in 1990 while suffering from AIDS. A recurrent figure and acknowledged precursor in Arroyo’s life and work, Arenas is a spectral presence in “Obituary”—someone who is yet unknown, sensed yet not understood: “Here I am mourning a stranger, / I mourn you, Arenas, / yes, / I mourn you. / Who were you?” (55). He asks, “How can I be present with this impersonal stranger?” (55). Calling Arenas the “queer Shakespeare,” Arroyo continues by questioning his invocation of the Cuban author:

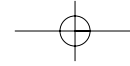
I have no right to even use your name in this poem.

I have no right to act like a loved one.

I have no right to wake up your spirit to ask it: “Spirit, tell me the secret history of mourning in the Americas.” (56)

The self-negation of the phrase “I have no right to” is once again ironic since the very repetition of the phrase mitigates the self-doubt indicated in the semantic meaning of the phrase. Yet, as in previous poems, the “I” calls upon an “other,” in this case Arenas, to bolster his own authorial sense of self through dialogic interaction, he asks the “spirit” to respond, to teach him about the world and, by extension, about himself.

Specifically, the poetic voice asks Reinaldo to reveal the “secret history of mourning,” that is, to help him remember and, thus, record the painful realities and injustices that those of Spanish-speaking America have suffered in a long history of violence.¹⁰ The “secret history” to which Arroyo alludes may also refer to the collective memory of those who have died of AIDS, a reality for which Arroyo serves as a familiar icon. Another poem that has a similar goal of remembering and making visible is “Three Latinos, One City” from *The Portable Famine*, in which the poetic voice speaks to three friends who have died in New York City: “Like me, my friends, my magnetic New York has / Always been about post-Eden death



haunting that will affect the living, waking them from the self-absorbed isolation in which they live" (189).

Yet the task of unsilencing AIDS and the process of private/public mourning produce a feeling of loneliness in the poetic voice of "Obituary." Feeling abandoned by his fellow exile, Arenas, he cries, "You have left me behind in this strange country" (56). In fact, despite the aim to "re - present *you* in this poem" (59–60, emphasis added), he admits that his poetry, including this particular work, is mainly focused on *self*-reflection, as examined previously in the study of the invocation of Narcissus:

I speak English like a record that's stuck on the word *me*:

the day I heard about your death I cried in the men's bathroom

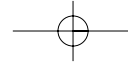
and I dried *my* eyes and nose with

paper too fragile for *my* words. (57)

Thus, even though the ghost of Arenas could be interpreted as a communal representative of the untold numbers of those who have died of AIDS, he is also a personal ghost for Arroyo's poetic voice, who feels a kinship, albeit a tenuous one, with him.

Arenas is not only a metaliterary ghost but also a queer one for Arroyo's poetic voice, who also deals openly with homosexuality in his poetry. While the term "queer" has been reappropriated most notably as a defiant alternative to the labeling structure of "heterosexual" and "homosexual," some proponents of queer theory argue that sexual desire should not be the only index of queerness. Michael DeGuzmán reminds us that "queer" serves not only as a transgressive adjective but a verb "meaning to question, to puzzle, to put in doubt" ("Turning Trick"). Michael Warner echoes this sentiment, insisting that ". . . 'queer' gets a critique by *defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual*" (xxvi, emphasis added). Ghosts, it would seem, are logical choices to conjure and, in a spectral sense, "embody" queerness. Referring again to Derrida's concept of hauntology, ghosts exist in what Julian Wolfreys calls "the between"—neither present nor absent, alive nor dead, residing neither fully in the present nor in the past. Like the term "queer," ghosts go through walls, passing through binarisms and resisting classification. A presence sensed but not discussed, known but unacknowledged or unaccepted, ghosts are also a fitting metaphor for queerness. In the words of Erica Johnson, "[g]hosts mediate cultural, historical, and psychological spaces that they alone can traverse" (111).

While Arenas may seem an obvious choice for a figure with whom Arroyo's Latino poetic voice seeks identification, the poem "In Amherst" from the collection *Pale Ramón*, begins with an intriguing question: "Why is a brown man like me interested in Emily / Dickinson, that white woman in a white dress in a / white town in a white town?" (33). Here, the issue of racial difference is underscored as one of the ways in which he should not be able to identify with another ghost, Emily Dickinson. After enumerating other perceived differences between them, the poetic voice



multiple identities in the performance of what he calls the “hybrid self” (1), “experience of identity is fractured and split” (31–2). Disidentification is the reappropriating, rather than rejecting, cultural resources that may not seem obviously applicable to a subject who finds few images that do pertain positively to him/her. This process is highlighted often in Arroyo’s work, which is filled with references to pop culture, including humorous deconstructions and reappropriations of stereotypes of *latinidad*, such as those mentioned previously. Disidentification is also at work in his love of and identification with Emily Dickinson, a figure connected to his poetic voice in terms of vocation and, one might argue, social marginalization, yet separated from him by gender, ethnicity, and epoque.

Another ghost with whom the metapoetic voice seeks to identify is William Carlos Williams, who shared Arroyo’s Puerto Rican/American duality, although he has been considered historically an “American” (rather than Latino) poet. In “The Carlos Poems,” from the book *The Singing Shark*, the poet speaks directly to Williams in an attempt to understand his precursor’s own spectral identity. His relationship with Williams, being what Derrida labels *revenant*, or that which returns, is an ambivalent one, falling in line with Kathleen Brogan’s assertion that “the figure of the ghost carries both positive and negative valences, often shifting from one to the other in a single work” (20). In the first visit, Arroyo’s poetic voice greets the ghost warmly: “Hello, William Carlos Williams, you come / calling” (61). Then the tone changes to one of recrimination as he questions his guest:

But William, how was I supposed to know

that your middle name Carlos meant *Carlos*,
like the name of some cousins? You, the most

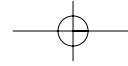
American of poets, according to critics...

....

You were half *puertorriqueño*?... (61)

Ghosts often serve in literature and mythology as guides to the past, but in Arroyo’s poem, they also serve as a vehicle for an inversion of the teacher/student relationship found in traditional haunted house narratives. In this way, Arroyo’s poem eventually illuminates lessons for the precursor, as it is the poetic voice who educates Williams. An illustration of his own hybrid identity, the poet teaches his ancestor words and phrases in Spanish while simultaneously reminding him in on what he has missed in American pop culture. In this way, popular culture, literature, and language blend together to form complex layers of identification. At this point, the poetic voice reproaches Williams, whom he now symbolically chooses to call “Carlos,” rather than the clearly English name “William”: “I choose silence for *la raza* (*Carlos*, / *that’s the people*), for any one of us. / You are one of us only by blood” (62).

The identification process continues to evolve as the poetic voice grows into the precursor. In the second visit, he and the ghost of Williams, whom he



white; were you?" (63). Despite this confrontational tone, as the movie ends and the lights in the theatre go up, the poetic voice seeks to find peace with the past, not in order to lay him to rest but to make him feel welcome for future visits.

Carlos, to quote Doris Day, *que será*
será. Ser is the verb *to be*. You were.

I hope to be. How to part from you? Ah,
mi casa es su casa which roughly

translates as *my poem is your poem*. (64–5)

The metapoetic voice clearly feels indebted to his precursor, despite his inability to reconcile Williams's spectral Puerto Ricanness and apparent "passing." Just as Derrida and others have pointed out the futurity inherent in ghosts and hauntings, as ghosts haunt not once but repeatedly, this poem also projects into the future for the poet. The various forms of the verb "ser," to be, express not a certain ontology but rather a connection to the poetic past that still points to an unknown future filled with further identificatory exploration.

When asked why there are so many ghosts in his writing, Arroyo responded, "A ghost can be an idea, a regret, a promise. It can be a visit in a dream or a memory repressed until it was safe to think aloud" (email). Positing poetry as a safe space to think aloud is one of Arroyo's metapoetic endeavours. As to why many of the ghosts in his poetry are spirits of dead *authors*, particularly those with whom his metapoetic voice seeks to identify, Arroyo asserts, like Derrida, that conjuring ghosts in poetry and reflexive writing is as much about the future as it is the past:

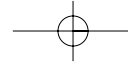
For many of us Latinos, gays, etc. we have had to search for literary predecessors and then had to admit we had to create things for ourselves without forgetting the past. Our strengths will someday be viewed as weaknesses because it may not be understood that we had nothing to begin with, not even straw to turn into gold . . . So be it. So I include the process as a way to talk to the future. (email)

Arroyo's vision of talking to the future implies that he, himself, will be a revenant who will also haunt—in a positive way—the multiple literary and cultural traditions through which he floats.

Arroyo writes because he is haunted, albeit in a productive sense. Put another way, he writes because he has to, not to exorcise himself of the ghosts that haunt him but to make certain that their presences are made present, not forgotten or silenced. This urgency is expressed in "Write What You Know":

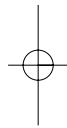
. . . I know that I cannot

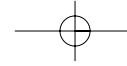
stop writing, that the immanent moment



This scaring of himself through self-reflexive and honest writing is frightening in a positive sense. Similarly, ghosts (his poetic I as specter as well as fellow specters) do not haunt Arroyo's poetry in a menacing way just as spectrality is not always a negative state. Rather, ghosts can serve as links to the past and as important pieces of the identificatory puzzle while spectrality can involve a slippage between social categories that may be both confusing and/or liberating. Ghosts have uncanny abilities and powers, like walking through walls, inhabiting different spaces without being forced to settle in any, reminding us of the past and making it impossible to forget, combating oblivion, and exacting revenge. Arroyo explains: "My poems may help keep these ghosts from a final, even more profound death: They must not be forgotten" (Nelson 2).

Just as Derrida pointed out the necessary futurity of the *revenant*, or that which returns again and again, Brogan has also discussed this persistent characteristic of ghosts: "they figure prominently wherever people must reconceive a fragmented, partially obliterated history, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future" (29). As Arroyo's poetry illustrates and as Derrida asserts, the task of the present is to "learn to live *with* ghosts." It is necessary to speak of *the ghost*, indeed *to the ghost* and *with it*" (xviii–xix). Despite his sometimes ambivalent relationships with infamous ghosts like Luce de León, Arroyo proclaims: "The 'I' in my work finds it vital to historicize and exorcise" (email). That is, the poetic "Arroyo" embraces ghosts and ghostlines as filters through which identificatory questions may be posed. As he discovers in *The Portable Famine*, ". . . What an education: / poetry always demands all my ghosts" ("Always" 42). In his poetry, Arroyo speaks with, to, and through ghosts in his attempts to understand and, perhaps, to claim his "place" in literary, cultural, and biographical history as queer, Puerto Rican, and Latino in the United States. These identifications that stubbornly haunt "the in-between."





NOTES

¹ *The Singing Shark* won the Carl Sandburg Poetry Prize in 1994, and his most recent book of poetry, *The Portable Famine*, was awarded the John Ciardi Prize. Four poems by Arroyo are included in the fifth edition of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, one of the major literature textbooks used in the United States.

² Arroyo writes: "I've always insisted that the Midwest is one of my four compass points in my identity as a poet and a human being; the other compass points are being Puerto Rican, gay, and a member of the working class" (Compass Rose 7).

³ Arroyo has used this phrase himself at least twice: once in our email interview and again in an interview with BkMk press about *The Portable Famine*.

⁴ Although not germane to my current argument, there are several poems in *The Portable Famine* that negotiate class identity with and through the figure of labor. For instance, in "The Burrito King of Toledo, Ohio," the educated poet attempts to justify what he does (write) as another form of labor: "I get to go home with / clean hands, but this worker's shadows / dirty many pages" (36).

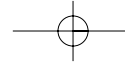
⁵ Elsewhere, Arroyo writes: ". . . it's always discouraging / to see winners listed in *Writers* / and to see so few faces of color / peering back in those black and white photos. Even now, we are herded into / special theme issues in magazines and / to press for representation despite the smallness / of their distribution. . ." ("Being: An Essay on Being a Midwest Writer" in "Compass Rose"). In this same poem, he also reveals that because of his dark skin and Midwestern English, even his ethnicity has been questioned: ". . . I am not the interview / questions: *You don't look. What? / You don't sound. What? You sound too much like us*" (79–82).

⁶ Although beyond the scope of the current essay, Arroyo's identity politics are reminiscent of elements of C.S. Pierce's theory of semiotics. For Pierce, as Robert Corrington asserts, "all aspects of the self are other-directed" (82). Arroyo's poetry is created not only by comparisons between himself and others but also by his interaction with those signs that reside particularly in the realms of popular culture, literature, and national history. As Corrington elaborates, in Piercian semiotics: "Insofar as the self attains what might be called 'self-knowledge,' it must do so through acts of communication that work their way through the series of external signs and their fields of meaning. These external signs are then internalized and self-consciousness is given a textual shape" (85).

⁷ According to Merriam-Webster, the verb "to haunt" derives "from Middle English *hentan*, from Anglo-French *hanter*, probably from Old Norse *heimta* to lead home, pull, from *heimr* home."

⁸ "In exile, one is nothing but a ghost, the shadow of someone who never achieves reality." Arroyo quoted this line from Arenas's memoir in our email interview.

⁹ As seen in an earlier reference to "Mortals: London Poems" from *The Portable Famine*, Ricky Martin is one of many recurring pop culture icons in Arroyo's poetry. Although a thorough discussion of his significance is beyond the current argument, Martin is not only a symbol of the Americanization of Puerto Rican culture, but also the symbol of the Latinization of "American" culture. In addition, as a reviewer of this essay for *Criticism* astutely pointed out, Martin is often connected to queerness as well; the significance of Martin in this sense may be understood as the machete expulsion of the effeminate



personal than collective as he searches for a “home.” In addition, Arroyo’s ghosts allude to specific biographical figures, as in the case of Reinaldo Arenas, in contrast to Pietri’s communal ghosts that represent the social injustices suffered by all those who reside in the Puerto Rican diaspora.

¹¹ In addition to Williams, Dickinson, and Arenas, there are many other meta-“ghosts” in Arroyo’s work, including Pablo Neruda (see “The Visitor” from *The Portable Hunger*), Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, William Blake, and others. See María De Guzmán, “The Already Brownd Skin of ‘American’ Modernism.”

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