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## A Nuyorican Looks Back: Reflections In Words and Images

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## A Nuyorican Looks Back: Reflections In Words and Images



**Bennie Pacheco Beretta**  
*McNair Scholar*

### ABSTRACT:

*A Nuyorican Looks Back is an artistic project that draws upon my experiences as a young Latina immigrant in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s and addresses the issues of memory, identity, ethnicity, gender, culture, community, and family. The piece, composed of original images, text, and performance, is presented via a multimedia project and was inspired by the work of author and photographer Wright Morris. Morris – most notably in The Inhabitants (1946) and The Home Place (1948) – introduced the idea of the photo-text; a hybrid artform of images and words that creates a fictionalized account of his personal memory and demonstrates how individuals can discover meaning in their lives through the creation and reception of art. With this project, I hope to inspire others to use artistic expression to reflect upon the challenges and successes of discovering both their own cultural uniqueness and our universal human desires.*



**Anthony Thompson, M.F.A.**  
*Faculty Mentor*

*Inspired by the Works of  
Wright Morris*



*“This recombining of the visual and the verbal, full of my own kind of unpeopled portraits, sought to salvage what I considered threatened, and to hold fast to what was vanishing.”*  
*Wright Morris*

From that first moment of awareness people have sought a piece of time's living substance, an arrested moment that would authenticate time's existence. Not the ruin of time, or the tombs of time, but the eternal present in time's every moment. From this spinning reel of time the camera snips a sampling of the living tissue, along with the distortions, the illusions, and the lies, a specimen of truth (Wright Morris, *Time Piece*, 139)

It was time to go back and make peace with my past and myself. My thoughts go back to a happier time in my life. We were poor but my parents made me see life through rose-colored glasses. I had no clue what was going on in the real world. It was just a matter of time before I would take the glasses off and see life as it really was. The harsh reality of surviving as a Puerto Rican in the 1950s and 1960s in New York City was the beginning of a long journey. I hoped my project would conjure up feelings and emotions that would awaken my understanding of the bumps and turns in my journey. For the past twenty

### 138th Street



- Sirens...the melodic sounds of the City...
- Hot and humid...the pavement is smoldering...
- The sounds of its people in the streets...

years, I have been having a conversation with myself through my writing. My doodling on paper may not have made sense to anyone else, but it has helped me on countless days and nights, particularly when I wanted to make choices that would hurt me as well as others close to me. In recent years, I began to look at life through a different lens.

Creating images has brought me to another level. As I look through my camera lens, I make unconscious decisions that become evident when I am in the darkroom. Often I am pleasantly surprised by the images that appear before me. There were many people during Wright Morris's time that did not agree with his technique. Roy Stryker who headed the Farm Security Administration (FSA) did not like the fact that there were no people in Morris's photographs. President Roosevelt created FSA in order to enlighten the American public of the plight of farmers during the depression. Mr. Stryker believed that in order to make a social statement we needed to show the plight of human suffering. Morris, on the other hand, believed that omitting the people from an image actually enhanced its hidden meaning. Stryker advised Wright Morris to include people, but Morris

refused to take his advice. Morris eventually had to give in because he made more money with writing than with phototext. Just like life, my project will continue to evolve. Just because my story is unique to my struggles, doesn't mean that others do not have stories of their own.

### Reflection: Abuelita

Closing my eyes to see clearer  
Hoping to take a look into my past  
Abuelita prays to the saints and  
offers bread and wine  
To grant her a wish. "If only my  
granddaughter will not see  
The color of my skin. If only my  
granddaughter will love me as I am."  
I couldn't understand. What is this?  
Not love my Abuelita? Because her  
skin was black  
As night. What were these stupid  
notions? Where did they come from?  
And why did my aunts and uncles  
stay clear of the burning sun? Was it  
that bad in America?

This is the land of opportunity. Where anything is possible. Or is it? I took a deeper breath and let my thoughts wander. Wander to the small Caribbean island called Puerto Rico, where the water was crystalline blue, and children's laughter resounded through the hills and the rain forest. Where the *coqui* sang their song serenading the babies to sleep. It was a magical place. My mother never wanted to leave the island, but she had to follow my father. He was sure he would find work and make lots of money. As soon as we left the island, my mother began to slowly slip away. She was homesick, and her cries to go back were never heard. My father got a job in a sheet metal factory, and after 25 years of service, he got a watch. My father had secrets of his own. Before marrying my mother, he fell in love with a free-spirited woman in our

hometown. I never knew what her name was, but I did know that my father loved her dearly – even more than my mother. I will never forget my mother saying how she found letters bound together with a ribbon, tucked neatly in a box under some suitcases. She knew who they were from. It broke my mother's heart, and still she couldn't go back to her island. She had to remain in our new American apartment.

My memories growing up in New York City are somewhat fragmented. I look at old photographs so that I do not forget my past. I do not want to forget the faces that have made me who I am. Sometimes I can smell a particular fragrance and it takes me back to a time and place where I felt loved. I was a cute little girl. Big brown eyes and lots of

### La Familia Pacheco



- We looked like a happy family, but behind those smiles there was too much pain...

curly brown hair. My mother would always tell me how I would never crack a smile. People in the town would say I was antisocial. Even at a young age I was stubborn, just like my Papa. My Papa was very handsome. He had an exotic look. Women all over town would swoon over my Papa. He was "Mr. Cool" from the small coffee town. He loved hats, and he knew just how to use them to further enhance his coolness. Even though my Papa was known for his coolness, he always melted when he was with his little curly

tops. I was the “mango of his eye.” I knew how to get my way then, but as I got older, that talent subsided. My mother was the opposite of my father. She was quiet and shy. Her whole life centered on my father and me. Along the way, she would suffer, and along the way she would look back and reflect on what her life had become. Unfortunately, my mother found it difficult to find happiness until her grandchildren were born. The grandchildren gave her the boost she needed. During the last years of her life, she would dote on her grandkids and give them the love that only a grandparent knew how to give.

**Reflection: Going Back**

I was soaking it all in. Sounds of intermingling melodic rhythms and the clattering of metal, horns blowing, sirens screeching. People going nowhere not looking to what’s ahead. I was one of them again. I stared but did not see. I listened but did not hear. Hearing all the sounds, trying to separate each note from one another. I closed my eyes and took it all in, and I breathed. Sitting at a bistro early in the morning in the heart of the East Village, I was looking out of the window and daydreaming of a time 35 years ago when I walked around

*I Close My Eyes and Remember*



- The journey through the dark tunnel will slowly emerge into the sunlight and help us to finally see the truth...

with my high school friends. It had not changed much. I remember walking and listening to the groups of the day: the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Temptations. I would wear bell-bottoms and an Afro. I was discovering, like everybody else, who I was and where I belonged. I had a crush on this guy named Ritchie. He was a cigarette-toting guy, long hair, army jacket, your typical hippie. My friends would say that I wanted to be white because of my taste in men and music. At home though, my mother was always playing all the hits on Radio WADO, a popular Hispanic radio station in New York. Even though I didn’t know it then, the words and music were being imbedded in my mind. I never hooked up with Ritchie perhaps because he had a thing for one of my best friends, who happened to look like Cher. *I guess I was the wrong color, and my hair was not straight enough. I hated myself in those days. I wanted so much to blend in. I felt betrayed by my parents to have given birth to a café latte child.* For the longest time, I questioned my existence. I wanted so much to have a gringo for a boyfriend. Many years later, I was ashamed of having these thoughts, especially since the one true person who loved me with heart and soul was my own Abuelita.

**Reflection: Knish**

My husband and I were walking down Battery Park when we came upon a hot dog stand. I immediately ran up to the cart and looked around feverishly. My husband wanted to know what was all the excitement. “Knish,” I told him. “They have knish.” My husband clearly thought I was crazy, but he humored me. You see, when I was growing up and going to school in Manhattan one of my favorite snacks was a knish. Knish is a Jewish pastry made of potatoes and spices. People would usually have the hot dog man slice the knish in half and spread some mustard. I always wanted

*It’s Never the Same*



my knish plain and warm. As usual, my husband just sighed and let me enjoy my knish. As I took the first bite, I suddenly became sad. My husband asked me what was the matter. I told him, “I had waited twenty years to sink my teeth into a New York knish, and now that I have, it doesn’t taste the same.” *The flavor was not what I had remembered it to be. I was disappointed and even though it didn’t taste the same, I still finished the knish. I thought to myself, “Why did the knish have to change.” I liked it the way it was before. In fact, I liked everything as it was before.*

**Reflection: Insecure**

I have always been insecure. Besides being insecure about my color, intelligence, and ethnicity, I was insecure about my body. When I was about 10 years old, I woke up with a bad pain in my belly. I went to the bathroom and discovered this brown stain on my underwear. I cried out to my mother, and my mother rushed to see what was going on. I told her I was dying, or perhaps I soiled my pants. Mother left the bathroom and returned with this rectangular shaped pad. She told me that I was now a young woman and that I would be experiencing this for most of my life. I began to cry because I didn’t

### Through the Looking Glass



Through the mirror...what do I see...  
Ageless wonder staring at me...  
Lines and lines of years gone by...  
Some of them good and some filled  
with lies...

want to be soiled. I didn't want the pain either. At that time, the pads did not stick to your underwear. You had to wear this silly belt, which I thought was confusing enough. On those special days of the month, I didn't want to go to school. I felt that everybody would know that I had the "you know". Of course, no one knew. How could they? Unless, of course, I didn't change often enough, and it would seep through my underwear and onto my skirt. That never did happen to me, thank goodness. After months of becoming a "young woman", I noticed I was getting plumper and growing in the chest area. By the time I was eleven years old, I was wearing a "B" cup. My body was always in transition. When I reached full puberty, I got unwanted attention from much older men. *Walking the streets, especially during the summer was very uncomfortable. The catcalls and innuendos thrown at me from all kinds of men. I felt so dirty and wanted the floor to open up and suck me into the pavement.* It was at that time I decided to become a nun. I wanted to be so much like the *Flying Nun*. Of course my aspirations of becoming a nun subsided as soon as I entered college. My mother was very relieved.

### Reflection: Grandfather

I never spoke of my grandfather. Perhaps because I did not want to remember him. My grandfather never married my grandmother, but they had nine children together. In fact, he never gave his name to any of his children until they were much older. He was of Spanish stock, and in those days it wasn't acceptable to marry someone of dark complexion and wiry hair. It still happens today, but it is not as obvious. Abuelita was not good enough to marry, but she was good enough to bear him children. Abuelita never complained. She was a saint to put up with him. I remember one particular day when I was staying at their house. My Abuelita was taking a nap, and my grandfather asked me to sit on his lap. I was a child and did not know any better. *The one thing I do remember is that I felt very uncomfortable and frightened. Too frightened to let anyone know. To this day, no one ever found out what happened in my grandmother's living room.*

Abuelita Querida



Grandfather



### Reflection: Herman Ridder Junior High School

I was in the school orchestra in Junior High School 98. I attempted to play the violin. Never made it to first violin, but I learned a little about music. My mother would always close my bedroom door when I would practice. She claimed I needed to concentrate. Perhaps it was



High in the Tower  
I plucked my strings  
Trying to squeeze a note from my violin.

better that way. Noise pollution was not an offense in those days. Our teacher was amazed with the sounds coming from our instruments. He was patient and guided us through three years of grueling rehearsals. Some of us actually sounded good. As for me, I was too busy checking out the boys in the band. Especially the ones that played the saxophones. I wonder what became of...? My favorite piece was Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Yes, our group did manage to pull it off. We sounded quite good actually. The music sounded urban and sexy and, of course, we were that age when our soaring hormones left us in a puzzled state.

### Reflection: Adios Abuelita

It was the middle of the night. My mother gently woke me up. She told me to get dressed because we were going to Abuelita's house. We took a cab to my grandmother's house. We came to the stoop of 1452 Wilkins Avenue and as we slowly walked up the stairs, I had a funny feeling. I knew something bad was going to happen. Abuelita had been ill for quite some time. *I still remember the day I first met my Abuelita. Abuelita was the great granddaughter of African slaves, and she was made to believe that she was not like everyone else because of her skin color. My parents left Puerto Rico and we were heading to Abuelita's house. There was much anticipation.*

### Fire Escape Blues



- I sit here on the fire escape...listening
- To the music...the beat making me move
- To and fro...Taking me to the land
- I once knew...I once loved...Yearning
- To go back...

*She wanted so much for her granddaughter to love her. It didn't help matters when she heard her granddaughter was antisocial and did not smile for anyone. When we arrived at my Abuelita's first apartment on Freeman Street, everyone was waiting in anticipation. As soon as we were introduced to my grandmother, I smiled and went into her waiting arms. It was quite amazing. But lucky for me, whenever I got into trouble, I would always hide behind Abuelita because I knew no harm would come to me. Now, as we came closer to Grandmother's bedroom, I could hear the sobbing of my aunts and uncles. I didn't go into her bedroom. My parents didn't want me to see her. I sat in her rocking chair and just rocked back and forth. As the bedroom door opened, I could see my father sobbing uncontrollably. All I could see was the bed and a small white sheet. Nothing moved except my father's shoulders. I couldn't cry. No tears would fall down my face. I didn't want to know the truth. I kept rocking back and forth hoping that my Abuelita would soon come out and hold me tight. She never did, and eventually I did cry. It was several months later in the middle of the night that I suddenly had this strange*

pain in my throat, and the only thing that would relieve this pain was my crying out, and then the tears began to flow. My Abuelita was gone now. Who was going to protect me?

### Reflection: Spring of 1997

As I look at the computer screen, I see my life flash before me. I'm 48 years old and where am I in my life? I've been with many men. Can't seem to get it together. What is wrong with me? Why do I go into the same pattern? I'm not bad looking, and yet, I can't hold on to anything. I want to finish something. I want to write and finish something. Something meaningful. . .something that my father would have been proud of. Yes, my father. My mother, whom I loved, never had any confidence in my abilities. I was always too fat, had no personality, and wasn't sociable. I grew up thinking I was a great big mess. On top of that, I was a young Hispanic woman trying to see where I fit in. I grew up watching TV and old movies. I wanted to be a part of the fantasyland where I would someday find my prince charming and ride off into the sunset

### Te Vas? Por Fin



- When I see you, tremble
- When I think of you, I tremble
- When I caress you, I tremble
- When I cry for you, I tremble
- When I feel the bruise, I tremble not...

and live happily ever after. I used to make believe I was the star of the day. I transformed myself into that person. I wanted to be beautiful in the eyes of modern America. I didn't want to be Hispanic. In junior high school when they voted for the prettiest, one of my friends got the honors, but some of my classmates felt I was prettier than the winner. Of course, I didn't believe them because, you see, they were black and how can they judge beauty. I wanted to be a fair-skinned beauty. How terribly wrong I was. Throughout my whole life I felt this insecurity. When I arrived at college, I still had self-doubts, and I figured the best way to win boyfriends was to give myself to them. Many times I got hurt, many tears were shed because I was not loved for me, but what I could give to their raging hormones. In the morning light, I was cast away and soon forgotten, until the next young man came along. To this day, I do not know who my daughter's father is. All I know was that he was black. The blacks thought I was beautiful, and I felt great. When I drank, I became a lush, and who wants a lush, no matter what color they may be. Drinking would wash away my pain and guilt. I was torn between being a good Catholic girl and the social misfit of the day. I didn't love myself. Many years went by and I still gave myself to a man to be loved. I gave myself altogether. My first long-term relationship was one of the most frightening experiences of my life. Shortly after my daughter was born, I met my first husband at a local community college, and I was swept away with his lines and his total attention to me. The courtship lasted two months before we decided to live together. My mom said that under no circumstances should my daughter live with that man. Deep down inside she had an instinct that this man was up to no good, and as it turned out. . .she was right. Like always, she was right. It took

two long years of physical and verbal abuse. No, I guess I didn't love me. If I did, I would have left a long time ago. I desperately needed attention, and he gave me that all right. It wasn't until that late afternoon in September of 1986, when I was on my way back from a therapy session, that I finally realized what I was doing to myself and to my family. I was traveling on the subway heading home; in the train across the platform, the police and paramedics were trying to revive a heart attack victim. By the looks on the faces of the policemen and the paramedics, it was clear the man would not make it, and it was clear that I wouldn't make it either if I remained in that relationship. That day I went home and phoned my mother to come and get my daughter and me. This time I would not go back.

That was the first day of my changing life. One more page had been turned.

I have more lessons to be learned but in the end, I think, my life will be that much richer because I took a road less traveled. This project has been a catharsis for me in that I was able to look at what has happened in the past and use these experiences in a creative way to turn difficult situations into hopeful ones. Recently, when I was presenting my project, someone asked me how long it took to put it all together. After a long pause, I replied, "my whole life." As soon as I said this, I knew I was coming to terms with myself and heading in the right direction. As in life, my project will be evolving and changing through the years, but it will be worth it.

*"Experience is not what happens to you;  
it's what you do with what happens to you."*  
Aldous Huxley

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