CHAPTER 6

Wake Work in Post-Maria Puerto Rico and Beyond

JOHN RIBÓ

In the summer of 2019, Puerto Ricans protested en masse, forcing then-governor Ricardo Roselló to resign. The massive mobilization and unprecedented ouster were the culmination of a series of events including the US government's imposition of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) in 2016, the mishandling of the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, and a string of political scandals that reached their apex in 2019 when Puerto Rico's Centro de Periodismo Investigativo published 889 pages of group chat transcripts between Roselló, members of his administration, and private contractors. Colloquially called Telegramgate or RickyLeaks, the release of the transcripts, which included racist, misogynistic, and homophobic slurs and crude commentary mocking the dead of Hurricane Maria, sparked the social unrest that eventually unseated Roselló.

While each of these events leading up to and including Roselló's resignation merit analysis and would be appropriate subjects for an edited volume on disaster in the circum-Caribbean, this chapter focuses on the role of the dead in Puerto Rican cultural practices of protest. More specifically, through close readings of Pedro Pietri's poem "Puerto Rican Obituary" (1971), Hurray for the Riff Raff's song "Pa'lante" (2017), and video footage of Puerto Rican protesters occupying Grand Central Station in New York City to dance the electric slide during the 2019 protests, I analyze how Puerto Rican activists, writers, and artists invoke the dead to empower the living to resist injustices rooted in US colonial rule. I read these engagements with the dead as manifestations of what scholar and cultural critic Christina Sharpe calls wake work—a term that describes a range

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of strategies for defending the dead. Puerto Rican wake work has deep roots in performance. Like the Puerto Rican protesters dancing the electric slide, Pedro Pietri's classic poem "Puerto Rican Obituary" and Hurray for the Riff Raff's more recent song "Pa'lante" originated in public performance, and the live element of their poetry and music has made their art particularly useful for educating, organizing, and bringing together broad publics. Moreover, the intertextual relationship connecting "Puerto Rican Obituary" and "Pa'lante" also replicates the dynamic of wake work. Through intentional engagement with Pietri's poem, Hurray for the Riff Raff's Bronx-born Puerto Rican singer-songwriter Alynda Segarra invokes the struggles of previous generations as inspiration for continued resistance to injustice today. Finally, drawing on the scholarship of Yarimar Bonilla and Beatriz Llenín-Figueroa, I situate these examples of Puerto Rican wake work within the larger context of the circum-Caribbean and draw connections to similar practices in Franco-Cuban musical duo Ibeyi's song and video "Deathless" (2017).

This chapter's exploration of the ways Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Caribbean activists, writers, and artists defend the dead offers a diachronic approach to disaster that shifts the focus of analysis from a specific disaster to what Bonilla (2020: 1) calls "the coloniality of disaster." Bonilla coins this phrase to underline the long-term processes, practices, and conditions of racio-colonial capitalism that have unevenly cultivated vulnerability to disaster and other systemic violence among particular populations—specifically among people of the circum-Caribbean and its diasporas. Although societies across the globe memorialize the dead, such practices take on special significance and added urgency as empowering forms of resistance for marginalized communities and colonized peoples in regions rendered especially vulnerable to the disastrous violence—slow, quick, and symbolic—of racio-colonial capitalism. Moreover, wake work in the circum-Caribbean is often rooted in syncretic cosmologies and spiritual practices such as Vodou and Santería that colonial powers have demonized and attempted to eradicate for centuries. In this particular context wake work then becomes not only a means to defend the dead and to resist the negative material and psychic effects of coloniality but also a strategy for maintaining, reclaiming, and renewing sacred forms of memorialization and relationality that connect Caribbean peoples to their ancestors. These connections to one's ancestors prove essential in the aftermath of disasters such as Hurricane Maria, in the midst of political crises such as the #RickyRenuncia protests of 2019, and in the long afterlives of colonization and slavery that make poetry such as Pietri's as relevant today as when he first performed it.

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Post-Maria Wake Work

In her incisive meditation on Black culture in the long afterlife of slavery, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe (2016: 10) asks, "What does it mean to defend the dead?" Sharpe stages this question among intimate accounts of the deaths of members of her family to illustrate how "racism, the engine that drives the ship of state's national and imperial projects . . . cuts through all our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake of its purposeful flow" (3). Sharpe's turn to the autobiographical undisciplines her study, validates lived experiences, and illustrates the various ways that racism kills Black people—from the slow violence of hostile policies and bureaucratic negligence, to state-sanctioned murder by police, to the symbolic oblivion of erasure.

In response to these different modes of violence, wake work takes different forms as "a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives," an analytic to "imagine otherwise from what we know now in the wake of slavery," and a method to "attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death" (17–18). Despite the funereal contexts that make the defense of the dead necessary, Sharpe describes wake work in positive terms as resistance, imagination, and care narrated from the first-person plural of community and rooted in the insistent presence, creativity, and perseverance of Black life.

The question of defending the dead through collective forms of resistance, imagination, and care lay at the heart of the 2019 Puerto Rican protests. After Hurricane Maria hit the island on 20 September 2017, Puerto Ricans performed wake work on multiple fronts with social media playing a key role. When a May 2018 Harvard study in collaboration with Puerto Rican researchers revealed that Hurricane Maria caused 4,645 Puerto Rican deaths—a number that far surpassed the US government's original estimate of sixty-four (Hernandez and McGinley 2018)—Puerto Ricans took to social media using the hashtag #4645 to share the untold stories of their dead and to protest the lack of US governmental aid after the storm. When, on 13 July 2019, El Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (Center for Investigative Journalism) published the scandalous private chats between Roselló and his inner circle of bureaucrats and lobbyists, Puerto Ricans on the island and in diaspora used the hashtag #RickyRenuncia to organize and document the protests calling for the governor's resignation (Valentín Ortiz and Minet 2019).

The defense of the dead was particularly salient in the Puerto Rican public's reaction to Telegramgate. Among the many crass comments included in the leaked transcripts was a record of Christian Sobrino Vega

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joking about feeding the cadavers of victims of Hurricane Maria to the crows (Associated Press 2019). Sobrino Vega was chief executive officer and president of the Puerto Rico Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority (AAFAF, from its Spanish name) and the governor's ex officio representative to the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) established under PROMESA. In other words, Sobrino Vega served as the representative of the Puerto Rican people in bureaucratic structures imposed on the island by the US. Instead of using this platform to speak for Puerto Ricans, he ridiculed and disrespected their dead. Sobrino Vega resigned the day the transcripts leaked.

These events in the aftermath of PROMESA and Hurricane Maria provide powerful examples of the many possible manifestations of wake work. The research that revealed the actual number of Puerto Rican deaths caused by Hurricane Maria, the social media campaign to memorialize the dead, the investigative journalism that uncovered the leaked chats of Puerto Rican elites desecrating the memory of the dead, and the protests that eventually ousted Roselló all constitute strategies for defending the dead. These events also exemplify the capacious creativity of Puerto Rican and circum-Caribbean wake work. Despite the dire circumstances, the protests demonstrated the rich creative possibilities of wake work manifesting through joyful collective celebrations expressed creatively in unexpected forms of protests including horseback riding, acrobatics, scuba diving, boating, yoga, and more (Henríquez 2019).

One creative form of protest-cum-celebration that became common across multiple sites was the electric slide, a four-wall line dance with variants consisting of as many as twenty-four and as few as sixteen steps. The electric slide featured in videos from protests in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Washington, DC; and New York City. Though some on social media dismissed it as frivolous or passé, the dance constituted a powerful manifestation of wake work that drew together multiple forms of protest, synced protesters through movement, made their presence and will known, and helped ease, if only temporarily, the traumatic effects of the disaster and its aftermath (Roy 2020).

As the protests unfolded, one particular video of protesters dancing the electric slide resonated on social media. On 22 July 2019, Puerto Rican poet Ricardo Alberto Maldonado posted to Twitter a thirty-three-second clip of protesters filling New York City's Grand Central Station.[1] Throughout the video, the Puerto Rican flag dominates, adorning the bodies of protesters and waving from poles. Alongside the original red, white, and sky blue *monoestrellada,* flies the black and white Puerto Rican flag that signaled the call to anticolonial resistance after PROMESA and to mourn the dead after Hurricane Maria (Newman 2018).[2] As the protesters dance

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the electric slide, individuals embellish turns and dips with personalized flourishes—a raised fist here, a shoulder shimmy there. The dancers also double as percussionists beating drums, scraping guiros, and banging pots. The crowd repeats the dance and chants in unison following the beat, the steps, and the lead of an amplified voice heard from off-screen shouting, "¡Yo soy boricua, pa' que tú lo sepas!" The refrain, popularized in the titular chorus to Puerto Rican rapper Taíno's 1995 song, declares, "I am Puerto Rican, let it be known!" After several rounds, the chorus shifts to "¡Ricky renuncia y llévate la junta!" demanding that Roselló resign and take the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board with him. The first chant exclaims in words the Puerto Rican presence on display in the mass of protesters and their ubiquitous flags, both colorful and somber. The second chant asserts that despite the festive atmosphere the crowd has gathered to demand concrete change in the governance of Puerto Rico.

This short clip of Puerto Rican protesters dancing the electric slide and chanting together in unison provides just one example of how the 2019 protests performed wake work by interweaving activism, cultural expression, and celebration to defend the dead. Through dancing, chanting, and the display of Puerto Rican flags, old and new, the protesters inhabited the public space of Grand Central Station to make their community visible and their voices heard. Their collective action defended the dead of Hurricane Maria, demanded a better future for Puerto Rico, and provided a glimmer of how solidarity and creativity could make that future possible. Finally, while the protest raised consciousness of the physical, social, and symbolic death that plagues Puerto Rico and its diaspora, the collective joy of the protest also insisted Puerto Rican life from death.

Wake Work in Puerto Rican Cultural Production of Protest

Though the 2019 protests represent an exceptional moment in the history of the island, these manifestations of wake work blending activism, creativity, and celebration form part of a longer tradition of Puerto Rican cultural production of protest. This tradition cultivates an active, symbiotic, cyclical relationship in which the dead empower the living to defend the dead; this interdependent and dynamic relationship of the living and the dead alloys cultural production and political protest, suffusing popular culture with historical import and communal purpose. Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" exemplifies this tradition of Puerto Rican wake work, blending activism and performance. As scholar William Luis explains, "Nuyorican poetry developed in the decade of the sixties, concurrently with the civil rights movement, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, and other organi-

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zations promoting black and Puerto Rican pride" (Luis 1997: 46). Pietri, a member of the Young Lords, performed "Puerto Rican Obituary" at party meetings—most famously at the People's Church, the name the Young Lords gave to the First Spanish United Methodist Church in East Harlem after they occupied it in 1969. The poem first appeared in print in the Young Lords' newpaper, *Palante*, and then in the 1971 book *Palante: The Young Lords Party.* Many scholars today consider "Puerto Rican Obituary" the quintessential example of the aesthetic of this historic moment; poet and scholar Urayoán Noel, for example, calls it "the Puerto Rican Movement's emblematic poem" (Noel 2014: 17).

"Puerto Rican Obituary" interweaves the narratives of five fictional Puerto Ricans who fail to achieve the American dream despite their back-breaking efforts. The poem's opening stanza sets the stage for their stories through the impersonal and monotonous repetition of labor and death.

> They worked
> They worked
> They worked
> and they died
> They died broke
> They died owing.[3]

Yet as the poem's chorus reveals the protagonists' names, it becomes clear that the implications of their deaths far exceed the linear, the literal, and the individual.

> Juan
> Miguel
> Milagros
> Olga
> Manuel
> All died yesterday today
> and will die again tomorrow.

The surreal temporality of these repeating deaths blurs the boundaries between past, present, and future, indicating that this is not a realist portrayal of the literal deaths of discrete individuals. Rather, "Puerto Rican Obituary" riffs on these figures as iterations on a common, collective experience of social death that all but forecloses the possibility of achieving the American dream. Like dancing protesters individually improvising over the same cycle of repeating steps, Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel each undertake their own particular Sisyphean march towards the same morbid fate.

Through these five figures, Pietri portrays as a foregone conclusion the social death of Puerto Ricans seeking to assimilate into the capitalist

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society that colonized their homeland—"They were born dead / and they died dead." This social death manifests as various forms of economic exploitation including unfair wages ("They worked / ten days a week / and were only paid for five"), inescapable debt ("passing their bill collectors / on to the next of kin"), endemic malnutrition ("hating the grocery stores / that sold them make-believe steak / and bullet-proof rice and beans"), and institutionalized discrimination ("*is* against the company policy / to promote SPICS SPICS SPICS").

Yet rather than portray these characters solely as innocent victims, "Puerto Rican Obituary" explores their self-destructive and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to assimilate in order to achieve the American dream. Perhaps the most concise example of the poem's critique of this drive to assimilate comes in its description of the impulse to purchase a home in a white neighborhood:

> Dreaming about queens
> Clean-cut lily-white neighborhood
> Puerto Ricanless scene
> Thirty-thousand-dollar home
> The first spics on the block
> Proud to belong to a community
> of gringos who want them lynched.

Pietri's portrayal of this fantasy of suburban home ownership stands in as a synecdoche for migration from the island to the mainland and emphasizes many of the negative aspects that the poem attributes to assimilation and the American dream: materialism; the abandonment of language, cultural identity, and community; and the acceptance of a subordinate, marginal role in a violently racist social order. Through these descriptions of the economic plight of Puerto Ricans, and through examples like the passage above and others pitting Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel against one another in petty, materialistic rivalries, Pietri attends to the material and psychological toll of social death on Puerto Ricans and paints these five figures as profoundly unhappy, jealous, unfulfilled, and disconnected.

"Puerto Rican Obituary" thus presents a bleak depiction of Puerto Ricans' life chances in the US and a sharp critique of assimilationist strategies for upward social mobility. Yet the poem nevertheless insists Puerto Rican life from death by lacing its critiques with humor and offering its protagonists and audience a hopeful path towards liberation through pride, love, and community. Though also evident on the page, Pietri's humor significantly shaped the reception of his live performances of the poem. The short film *El Pueblo Se Levanta* (The People Are Rising, 1971), for

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example, includes footage of Pietri performing "Puerto Rican Obituary" inside the People's Church. When he enunciates "make-believe steak / and bullet-proof rice and beans" the audience breaks into knowing laughter. Pietri's playful, oneiric language describing hunger transforms a common, difficult experience into a point of connection and solidarity among the audience. Through live performance featuring humorous depictions of painful lived experiences of his community, Pietri cultivated the self-reflection, camaraderie, and solidarity for which his poetry advocates and created a space where "you do not need a dictionary / to communicate with your people."

Pietri's poem clearly left its mark on Puerto Rican singer, songwriter, musician, and activist Alynda Segarra, who fronts the New Orleans–based Americana band Hurray for the Riff Raff. Their 2017 song "Pa'lante" announces itself as an homage to the Young Lords and Pietri through its iconic title and climactic sample of Pietri performing "Puerto Rican Obituary" in the People's Church. The song's lyrics reiterate the core themes and retrace the emotional arc of "Puerto Rican Obituary." For example, the opening verse of "Pa'lante" echoes the emphasis on labor in the first stanza of "Puerto Rican Obituary."

> Oh I just wanna go to work
> And get back home, and be something
> I just wanna fall in line
> And do my time, and be something
> Well I just wanna prove my worth
> On the planet Earth, and be something
> I just wanna fall in love
> Not fuck it up, and feel something.[4]

Despite clear similarities, "Pa'lante" makes significant alterations to translate the themes of Pietri's poem into a contemporary pop anthem. It shifts the narrative from third person plural to first person singular, providing an account of the narrator's emotions and motivations and thus facilitating the audience's identification with them. The song also exchanges Pietri's litany of unattainable signifiers of the American dream for the more nebulous epistrophe "be something."

The second verse of "Pa'lante" echoes Pietri's critique of aspiring to assimilation and of capitalist notions of success as a colonial subject of US empire.

> Colonized and hypnotized, be something
> Sterilized, dehumanized, be something
> Well take your pay
> And stay out the way, be something

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Ah do your best
But fuck the rest, be something.

The first two lines contrast "be something" with an oblique but devastating gloss of Puerto Rico's colonial history, including eugenicist US policies encouraging sterilization. This bleak context shifts the meaning of "be something" from the narrator's internalized desire for a successful and meaningful life in the first verse to a sinister and externally imposed command in the second. In the final four lines of this verse, the imperative to "be something" becomes a dehumanizing bludgeon driving home a zero-sum-game mentality that accepts injustice and abandons community to seek personal gain.

In contrast to "Puerto Rican Obituary," references to death in "Pa'lante" are minimal but nevertheless key. As the song builds to its climax, the narrator hints at suicidal ideation—"Lately I'm not too afraid to die / I wanna leave it all behind / I think about it sometimes." This seemingly casual admission sets the stage for the revelatory sample of Pietri performing "Puerto Rican Obituary."

Dead Puerto Ricans
Who never knew they were Puerto Ricans
Who never took a coffee break
from the ten commandments
to KILL KILL KILL
the landlords of their cracked skulls
and communicate with their latino souls[5]

Juan
Miguel
Milagros
Olga
Manuel
From the nervous breakdown streets
where the mice live like millionaires
and the people do not live at all.

The recording of Pietri reciting these words plays a key role in the sonic and thematic composition of the song. With the insertion of the sample, the voice of an ancestor returns to the song's soundscape to illuminate the narrator's encounter with social death as part of a larger collective Puerto Rican experience and to chart a path towards liberation. The opening lines of the first stanza—"Dead Puerto Ricans / Who never knew they were Puerto Ricans"—equate the ruptured transmission of cultural heritage with social death. As antidote to this social death, Pietri prescribes

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that Puerto Ricans "KILL KILL KILL / the landlords of their cracked skulls," a violent metaphor mobilizing fantastic imagery of internalized capitalist slumlords, mental anguish, and death to colorfully depict the difficult process of decolonizing one's mind.

This sample of Pietri performing "Puerto Rican Obituary" unlocks the song's incandescent conclusion, which charts an affective geography of diasporic belonging through a dedicatory list of locations, ancestors, and elders:

> From el barrio to Arecibo, ¡Pa'lante!
> From Marble Hill to the ghost of Emmett Till, ¡Pa'lante!
> To Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Manuel, ¡Pa'lante!
> To all who came before, we say, ¡Pa'lante!
> To my mother and my father, I say, ¡Pa'lante!

The coda replaces the three syllables of the epistrophe "be something" with those of "Pa'lante," sung over the same notes, in a new, higher key. The substitution effectively rejects the equation of human worth with labor and material wealth, replacing it with "Pa'lante," an expression of solidarity and perseverance used in the face of adversity to encourage oneself and others to push forward, onward, together. While this affective map highlights key Nuyorican signifiers such as "el barrio," and four of the five figures from "Puerto Rican Obituary," it also outlines an inclusive coalition of solidarity among all marginalized people, saying "¡Pa'lante" to "all who had to hide," "all who lost their pride," and "all who had to survive."[6] Notably this intersectional coalition of solidarity extends Puerto Rican wake work's defense of the dead to include Emmet Till, the lynching victim whose 1955 open-casket funeral produced shocking photographic images credited with galvanizing the civil rights movement. The affective map of Segarra's wake work follows the example of the Young Lords and Pietri, who recognized Puerto Ricans as part of the African diaspora and built strong coalitions with Black activists.

Circum-Caribbean Wake Work

In 2018, Puerto Rican filmmaker Kristian Mercado Figueroa wrote and directed the music video for "Pa'lante," dedicating it to his "grandfather Felipe Figueroa Rosa, who died in the aftermath of the hurricane but will not be forgotten. And to all the Puerto Ricans struggling after Maria. Pa'lante Siempre."[7] The video sets the song against the story of one fictional family's difficulties in the aftermath of the hurricane as the father returns to

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them in Puerto Rico from New York City. Mercado Figueroa depicts labor conditions and economic hardships similar to those found in "Puerto Rican Obituary" and the lyrics of "Pa'lante." Yet before the song begins and after it ends, the video frames the narrative with sights and sounds from the ruins of Hurricane Maria. The footage is not the sensationalized, apocalyptic imagery of cable news or Hollywood blockbusters. The ruins, as Mercado Figueroa captures them in a series of haunting images, are quiet, exist on a human scale, and are shot through with signs of survivors attempting to make do: a small pile of wood gathered from a collapsed home, a roofless house partially covered in blue tarps, a utility worker and his truck parked near a pole with downed lines, interiors and exteriors of roofless homes in which people seemingly still live, and a tattered Puerto Rican flag wrapped around a pole, flapping in the wind.

These real images of the hurricane's aftermath document what happens when colonization, social death, and catastrophe combine. The results, as Mercado Figueroa reminded a stunned audience when accepting the Best Music Video Award for "Pa'lante" at the 2019 SXSW Film Festival, are neither abstract nor theoretical: "We lost 5,000 people. On fucking American soil. 5,000 DEAD PUERTO RICANS. Where is the response? WHERE IS IT?" (Jackson 2019). "Puerto Rican Obituary" and "Pa'lante" describe long-term, systemic patterns of slow violence that set the stage for disaster by rendering specific communities vulnerable to catastrophic events. These patterns predominate across the circum-Caribbean, in diasporic Caribbean communities and among marginalized populations at large in what Puerto Rican anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla (2020: 2) calls an "archipelago of racialized neglect." This archipelago connects communities whose life chances are fundamentally diminished by the coloniality of disaster, or "how catastrophic events like hurricanes, earthquakes, but also other forms political and economic crisis deepen the fault lines of long-existing racial and colonial histories" (2020: 1). Wake work proliferates across this archipelago of racialized neglect because death disproportionately accumulates across this archipelago. This accumulation of death—symbolic, social, and clinical—makes wake work necessary.

In the summer of 2020, a year after Roselló's resignation, the electric slide also became a staple of Black Lives Matter protests in the US. The use of the electric slide as wake work by both Black and Puerto Rican activists is not, however, surprising given the rich collaborative history of Black and Puerto Rican activism, the fact that many Puerto Rican activists are also Black, and the origins of the dance. Dance critic Sanjoy Roy (2020) explains:

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> The dance has a long pedigree, with black roots and widespread branches. The step sequence was first devised by Broadway dancer Ric Silver in 1976 to an upbeat reggae song by Bunny Wailer, Electric Boogie, a hit in Jamaica that went on to become a more mainstream US success for his compatriot Marcia Griffiths, in 1982 and 1989. . . .
>
> In the 1990s, the sequence was styled for American line-dancing and became a genre staple. It got another big boost through the 1999 black romcom The Best Man, here danced to Cameo's 1986 hit single Candy. It has become massively popular at parties and weddings, and is often called the Candy Dance.

The prominence of the electric slide in both the Ricky Renuncia protests of 2019 and the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 suggests that in response to the violence of racialized neglect, the archipelago develops transnational, transcultural forms of wake work to attend to its dead, resist violence, and insist life from death.

Similarly to the broadly inclusive affective map of diasporic belonging that Segarra charts in the conclusion of "Pa'lante," Puerto Rican scholar Beatriz Llenín Figueroa (2019) theorizes a regional network of solidarity rooted in

> a Caribbean-wide history of maronage, resistance, and endurance that travels and unites us, as Brathwaite famously declared, submarinely. We honor the submarine corals made from the bodies of our enslaved, our migrants, our poor, our women, our queers, our dispossessed, our freedom-seekers. In and through them, we, Antilleans, islanders, Caribbean peoples, stand united. The maroons are deathless. We are deathless.

Llenín Figueroa identifies the marginalized dead—those who historically have defied hierarchies of race, class, and gender, those who often remain unrepresented in the historical archive, and those whom Roselló, Sobrino Vega, and company ridiculed in their leaked chats—as foundational figures of this circum-Caribbean tradition of wake work. Further still, Llenín Figueroa claims deathlessness for all Caribbean peoples, living and dead, and thus effectively defines the Caribbean community not only across time and space but beyond the boundaries of mortality.

Llenín Figueroa borrows this concept of deathlessness from the lyrics of Ibeyi's song "Deathless" (2017). French-Cuban musicians Lisa-Kaindé Díaz and Naomi Díaz of Ibeyi—twin sisters and daughters of celebrated Cuban percussionist Anga Díaz—composed "Deathless" in response to an incident of racial profiling Lisa-Kaindé experienced in the Paris Metro at age sixteen (Younes 2017). Yet despite the song's bleak topical origins, Lisa-Kaindé explains the song's title and chorus—"Whatever happens, whatever happened, we are deathless!" (Ibeyi 2016)—as a profound, joyful, and

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defiant optimism rooted in their Yoruban faith: "To be 'Deathless' means that there's no end. . . . It means there's no end to love, there's no end to joy, there's no end to music" (Edes 2017). Ibeyi's video for "Deathless" figuratively stages this deathlessness through the repeated, cyclical emergence of the twins from the red garments of one another's prostrate bodies. In the video, Lisa-Kaindé and Naomi Díaz provide an embodied performance and visual representation of the empowering, symbiotic, cyclical relationship between the living and the dead cultivated through wake work. While the protests Puerto Ricans undertook in the aftermath of PROMESA, Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and Telegramgate provide powerful examples of wake work in action, they also form part of a longer tradition of Puerto Rican cultural production of protest that invokes the dead to empower the living. In turn, this Puerto Rican tradition connects to broader circum-Caribbean networks of resistance in which the dead empower the living to defend the dead, insisting life from death through care, resistance, and joy.

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Notes

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1. Ricardo Alberto Maldonado (@bookswimming), "Grand Central en NYC," Twitter post, 22 July 2019, https://twitter.com/bookswimming/status/1153448850872553473?s=20.
2. See also La Puerta, "Carta abierta: un llamado a la solidaridad," Facebook post, 7 July 2016, https://www.facebook.com/notes/la-puerta/carta-abierta-un-llamado-a-la-solidaridad/1756205121315928/.
3. All quotes of this poem are from Pedro Pietri, "Puerto Rican Obituary," in *Pedro Pietri: Selected Poetry* (2015). Copyright © 2015 by The Estate of Pedro Pietri. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC, on behalf of City Lights Books.
4. Track 11 on Hurray for the Riff Raff's 2017 album *The Navigator*, ATO Records.
5. Though the published text reads "latino souls," Pietri says "latin souls" in the sampled audio recording.

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6. Though "el barrio" literally means the neighborhood, in the Nuyorican context it has historically denoted East Harlem, also often referred to as Spanish Harlem.
7. Hurray for the Riff Raff, "Pa'lante," YouTube video, 8:34, 21 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LilVDjLaZSE.

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