

“Echa Pa’Lante”: For Some of Us, Death is Never Too Far Away
(Excerpt from *Essays, Notes, and Chronicles at the Edges of Empire*)¹

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June 2016: In the span of three weeks, death and I looked into each other’s eyes: My mother was murdered, 49 people died in Orlando’s LGBTQ club Pulse on Latin Night, and my partner-in-life faced two life-threatening diseases. In our intimate encounters, death showed me what I already suspected: that she is so close to me, to us, LGBTQ Latinxs. I ask myself: How do we live in spite of her, the specter of death waiting for us at the club, in our house, on the streets? How do we live with her so close by?

Her Death

Hace tres meses mami murió en la sala de nuestra casa, our childhood home in Puerto Rico, “de disparos de balas,” said her death certificate. It is still so surreal. That phrase, disparos de bala, haunts me. I know she is gone. I just cannot believe why or how.

It was a Friday evening, exactly eight days before a shooter killed 49 people in the LGBTQ club Pulse in Orlando, Florida; half of the victims were Puerto Rican. My mom could have never imagined that, for me, hers would be the first tragic loss in a series of violent deaths over the next weeks. That her death would lead me to a deep, painful and insightful journey into the meaning of life for myself as an Afro-Latina lesbian, a Puerto Rican migrant in the US. No, my mom, would have never imagined that.

That night, on June 3rd, 2016, she was enjoying a quiet evening in our home, in the same small rural town where four generations of my family have lived and died for at least 100 years. But 40 bullets changed everything. Changed our world. She is gone.

On the Road: Queer Latinxs in a Post-Orlando World

During the weeks following my mom’s death, as expected, I cried, I could not sleep; I had a hard time eating. But I also became increasingly puzzled and angered by other people’s responses to her death. I could not understand why friends, family, and colleagues were so completely freaked out about how my mother died.

I complained angrily: *What is the fuss? This is not anybody’s business. You do not see anybody else on campus broadcasting their mother’s death on list-serves.*

¹ This is a manuscript-in-progress. Thanks to Nadia Ellis, Ana-Maurine Lara and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on this excerpt.

The shooting in Orlando fed my anger and grief.²

On our way home from my mom's funeral services, my partner-in-life and I looked at airport television screens not believing what we were seeing. On the evening of June 12th, 2016, Omar Mateen shot more than one hundred people and killed forty-nine at club Pulse in Orlando on "Latin Night." Running from one plane to the next, we watched as the death count increased by the minute. As we sat waiting to board, we navigated a broad range of responses. I was in shock; my partner checked if her people in Florida were ok (one had been killed). I eventually gathered the courage to check the Facebook check-ins that let people know who was safe and who had been hurt. We drank three gin and tonics. I anesthetized myself as best as I could to contain the overwhelming grief that overtook me. If I thought I could not add grief to grief, I was wrong. Grief can be limitless. Infinite. Overtaking one's senses completely.

That endless grief kept me ranting: *But don't you see my mom's death is not out of the ordinary. We just lost 49 people in Orlando. We keep losing people in the streets every day. Death is always around the corner for us, queer people of color. It is always there.*

This rant continued for another week when I found myself sitting next to a hospital bed. By then, my partner and I were in Arizona. Five days after the Orlando shooting, fourteen days after my mom's death, we had embarked on a short road trip meant to be a healing/writing retreat. But we had brought the dengue and the Zika viruses from Puerto Rico with us.³ Como dice mi papá, "a veces llueve sobre mojado." My beloved was the twenty-first case of Zika virus infection documented in the U.S. mainland by the Center for Disease Control; and the seventh in Arizona. She was also infected with the dengue virus for a second time, which increased her chances to develop a potentially deadly hemorrhagic dengue fever.

And that is how we ended in a hospital in Arizona. My partner was hospitalized when a rash all over her body, along with high fevers and other life threatening symptoms, refused to subside for days.

In her feverish wisdom, she asked me a question that left me quiet for a few days: *You do see that this is not just another death, right? You see that, right? That it makes sense for friends and colleagues to be traumatized, scared, freaked out of their minds. How could all this seem normal to you? Like any other death?*

I stopped ranting.

Sitting in that hospital and driving through mostly isolated roads thru Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, Utah, Idaho, and Oregon on our way back home helped me understand why my mother's death seemed ordinary to me, a regular fact of life. It reminded me of the fact that

² Mateen's motive remains unclear. Authorities claimed that it was an act of domestic terrorism; Mateen had allegedly pledged loyalty to the Islamic State on a phone call to authorities. Others stated that he was gay and had been in romantic relationships with Latino men. Mateen's parents released a public apology for the shooting immediately and refuted the idea that their Muslim religious practices explained the shooting; they later said that their son was heterosexual in response to other emerging media narratives.

³ Dengue is a virus commonly found in Puerto Rico and the rest of the Caribbean. It is transmitted by the mosquito *Aedes aegypti*. Flu-like symptoms are common in people infected with the virus. It can also produce hemorrhagic dengue fever, which potentially entails internal bleeding, a shock-like state and death in infected individuals. The Zika virus is also transmitted by the same mosquito. Since 2015, there have been significant Zika virus outbreaks in Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. It can cause long-term neurological syndromes and congenital anomalies. It was first identified in Uganda in 1947. Its recent outbreaks in the American continent are currently under close examination by the World Health Organization. By June 2016, it remained a mostly unknown virus for U.S. physicians, except for specialists on tropical diseases.

death, including violent death, has never been a distant possibility in my life. Death and violence have always been so close . . .

Coming from a place with unexplainably high rates of cancer, almost losing a friend during our childhood. His boyish bald head remains etched in my memory. What was the cause? Toxic water and air? The Coca-Cola plant next door? We do not know.

Losing a childhood friend to gun violence at 19. We used to walk together every Wednesday to catechism. Was it a hate crime? Was he gay? Did he flirt with a drug dealer's girlfriend? What is the truth? What is the story that covers the truth? We do not know.

Losing an uncle struggling with mental illness. He was murdered, possibly by a neighbor, possibly by a distant relative. Some say he would throw rocks unto people's roofs. Maybe he provoked someone without realizing the danger. Maybe he was in the wrong place, at the wrong time. We will never know.

For some of us, these are not exceptional moments in familial and communal histories. So, when one's mother is murdered, it is shocking and yet not too shocking.

In a similar way, the deaths of our queer siblings in Orlando are horrifying, painful, traumatic, but not exceptional. Because unlike what the Islamophobic media, or the police, or Homeland Security state, we know that this is not just a random hate crime on gay people or a terrorist attack on LGBTQ Latinxs. We know that our peoples have been dying for a long time. We know that the value of our lives is questioned every day in fundamentalist Christian and Catholic Churches, in the schools that punish LGBTQ youth for being themselves, in the families that erase their queer relatives from their history, in attempts to pluck Latinx histories and languages from school curriculums, in efforts to deny Puerto Ricans' Afro-indigenous heritages and caribeñidad, in the violence Brown and Black bodies, LGBTQ Latinxs, and migrants face from police who suspect us of vagrancy, delinquency, drug dealing, robbery, violence for being on the street sharing with one another, for trying to make a living, for driving a car they cannot imagine is ours, for being in the world proudly as we are and not as we are expected to be: whitened, assimilated, middle-class, gender conforming Americans willing to forget where we came from and who we truly are.

It should not be surprising then that a violent death may seem an ordinary possibility for myself and others. Travelling with my gender non-conforming Dominican partner through mostly isolated roads of the Southwest and the Pacific Northwest, death is the unspoken possibility potentially lurking around every corner; in an encounter with police or Border Patrol officials, with white supremacists, with homophobic God-fearing people; in a gas station, in a hospital, in a bathroom stop, in the only open rest area for 100 miles.

Orlando Is Everywhere

On this roadtrip, I begin to see Orlando everywhere. I see the death of those queer siblings every time my fear creeps up.

I see it while driving through Arizona praying that the police will not stop me suspecting that I am undocumented. I may live in my own flesh just a little bit what SB 1070 is all about.⁴ I wear a baseball cap. Try to put on my most American looking face, one that hides my fear. Prayer is all I have when in the middle of the night we encounter a Border Patrol stop and, for once, they believe I am a U.S. citizen. I carry my passport everywhere. But I also know that anything can happen to us here in the middle of the desert. And no one would ever know.

I see it while registering my partner in the ER in a Tucson County hospital. I am scared. My partner has been ill for three days and she is getting worse. As I stand in line, I realize I have to make a choice. Do I lie and pretend to be her sister? Will they let me enter her room if I say that I am her life partner? Should I say she is my wife? I am freaking out and there is only one person ahead of me. They are quick. I have no time to consult with my partner. I go with my gut. I say the truth. She is my partner. And I pray to the heavens that they will let me be with her, that they will not keep me waiting for days to hear from her, unable to advocate for her, wondering if she is alive or dead.

I see Orlando while driving from Texas through New Mexico as the news of the deaths of two Black men reach us in small motel breakfast rooms. Philando Castille in Minnesota and Alton Sterling in Louisiana died on July 5th and 6th at the hands of police officers. Silence all around us. Silence.

I see it waking up in a New Mexico motel to the news of a shooter in Dallas. During a July 7th protest against police violence towards communities of color, Micah Xavier Johnson began shooting at the police. At the motel, while eating eggs and waffles, everyone is deadly quiet. We are all tense, everyone unsure about who is next to us and what kind of a response would they have if anyone utters a word right now. To explain himself, Johnson expressed pain for all the recently documented deaths of black people at the hands of police. His own death became a political statement as well when the police deployed anti-terrorism tactics for the first time on U.S. soil to kill him. There was no judge, nor jury for him. Due process was deemed optional.

And, as we drive thru Burns, Oregon, we are reminded that some people do not have to fear the label “terrorist.” Due process is possible for them. When a group of white ranchers began an armed occupation of Native land on January 2016, 26 days passed before any arrests were done. No Homeland Security protocols were activated to engage them. The media did not even consider using the label “terrorists.” They were able to face a judge and jury of their peers. Some people do enjoy these constitutional protections supposedly to be guaranteed to all.

After Burns, we drive as fast as possible, without stopping. We are done. We need to get home.

Orlando accompanied me all the way on our road trip as a reminder of our proximity to death and our fierce struggle for life, as LGBTQ Latinxs. As I mourned for my mom, I mourned

⁴ SB 1070 is a law that allows Arizona police officers to stop and interrogate drivers who they believe may be undocumented even if the driver is following state traffic regulations and laws.

all those who could have been me as well in one of those days when the club calls my body to heal itself from how others try to discipline its appearance, performance, desires. In the club, life is its most present form, that immediate moment on the dance floor moving to the rhythms of cumbia, bachata, merengue, salsa, reggaeton, is what matters. That is one form of queer survival many of us know well.

My mom, in a way, had the queer sensibility of Latinx night at the gay club. She believed that affirming one's self-worth and enjoying the quotidian beauty of the present moment allows us to confront any hardship. When life hit me hard and she saw me a bit disheveled, she would say: *"No dejes que la gente te vea así. No hay que andar to'a tira'. Mira, ponte un chin de listic, así. Ponte esta camisa de colores. Ok. Ahora. Ahora sí, sal. Vamos, echa p'alante, que la vida no es fácil y uno no se puede dejar caer.* As a nurse, she also knew that illness and death do not respect age or status. That is why she taught me at 16 to keep a bag ready for an unexpected trip to the ER: *Ahí tú pones tres pijamas nuevas y tres panties nuevos. Algo de maquillaje. Uno puede estar enfermo pero no acaba'o."*

For her, acknowledging that death walks next to us, really close at times, does not mean that we must feel pessimistic or defeated; it meant one had to be prepared to face it (and continue looking fine along the way). That always cracked me up. But I get it now. In a way, it means that we accept a fact of life: one can pass away anytime, any day, but we must continue echando pa'lante caring for ourselves as much as possible. It is a gift for all of us that mami's last Facebook posting was of a beautiful amapola in her garden. She was going through a really hard time. Even then, everyday she took time with a cafecito in her hand to appreciate the herbs and plants she and my dad had planted. Until her last day, she believed one needs to appreciate the beautiful simple things at times unseen in our everyday lives.

For me, it is in those acts of everyday enjoyment that I, as a queer Afro-Latina, a Puerto Rican woman, find life livable in spite of so much loss, so many statistics against us, and so much violence. We can see our LGBTQ Latinx's proximity to death as an experience that moves us to be who we are, live as we want, find beauty as we can now, not later; because we know that this moment may be the last one and it better be a good one.

An Invocation!

I sit with my cafecito this morning. I sit and watch the beginning of the day.

I pray for us still here, LGBTQ Latinxs, queer of color people, for our safety and strength.

I honor the memories of those who are no longer with us.

And I ask for my mother's blessing. Bendición. I hope she can trust that we will carry on finding beauty and joy in the world even as we mourn her.

I honor those we have lost to genocide and slavery and conquest. I invoke their histories of resistance to sustain me, to teach me.

I honor those we lost in Orlando, and all those we have lost for so long.

And I pray that we do not forget them.

May we remember to care of ourselves and each other; to live in the present with as much joy and love as possible.

And may we cherish those moments when people surprise us, when they see us as human.

Those nurses and doctors in Tucson surprised me. I was suspicious of them as they let me be with my partner, as they listened to our stories of travels through Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia to find a diagnosis, as they sought to understand the Zika and dengue

virus in her body. That hospital triggered a historical trauma of eugenics, the Holocaust, of experimentations on women of color. I was tense for most of our time there, not quite trusting all their tests, meds and questions. But, for once, I was wrong. Their polite and warm care ended up having a much-needed cooling effect on my heart. Sometimes, in those places, where death may seem to be really close by, we find people willing to embrace life, embrace us and our humanity.

I close my prayer grateful for those moments when our humanity and the sacred value of our lives are seen, acknowledged. This is where my hope for a better present and future for us all lies.

Ashé