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## Travel, Carnival, and Consumption: The Postcolonial Hybrid Nation in *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*

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### Abstract

Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (1976) criticizes the conservative project of the colonized nation by rescuing marginal voices and by uncovering taboo concerns in order to redefine the Puerto Rican ethos. By utilizing the related notions of carnival, travel, and consumption, the novel offers a renewed project for a postcolonial nation that embraces hybridity, globalization, and the crudeness of carnival as creative values of transgression.

### Keywords

Carnival, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, hybridity, nation, Puerto Rico, travel.

According to its translator Gregory Rabassa, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (*Macho Camacho's Beat*), by Luis Rafael Sánchez, "is probably the most 'Puerto Rican' novel ever written in that not only the story, but the language itself is so tied to the culture." The narrative would first crystallize the meaning of the nation as resulting from a linguistic-cultural complex, and then it would go on to claim the given features of *the* Puerto Rican soul, at least one engendered after the U.S. takeover of the island in 1898 and up until the publication of the novel in 1976. The word "beat" in his English translation, Rabassa adds, "does a fair job of rendering *guaracha*" because of its double meaning as "musical connotation" and "itinerary," which makes the narrative "peripatetic as it traces a route through San Juan and environs" (11). The result is a complex set of cultural, linguistic, and musical components unfolding into an urban geography and revealing a polyphonic, hybrid, carnivalized, insular nation (Acosta Cruz 122-23; Gozo 127-28; Perivolaris *Puerto Rican* 116-22; Rotker 25-26; Solotorevsky 41-45).

### Travel and Insularity

The novelist/traveler whose gaze(s) and voice(s) we as readers follow becomes a cultural translator the moment s/he begins to negotiate between differing cultural values,

especially as the produced text replicates source and target cultures in a context of postcolonial globalization. In fact travel, like translation, means displacement, motion from one space to another, where movement escapes geographic boundaries and involves changes in time and hierarchy: “A journey occurs simultaneously in space, time and in the social hierarchy” (Lévi-Strauss 85). This means that the novelist-as-translator, like the traveler, figuratively experiences every impression of the voyage in all three axes: in time, in space, and in social scale. And as the novelist’s gaze pushes forward, source and target cultures merge—the case for any writer standing astride different cultures and languages. By incorporating both cultures, literary output produces a new one that combines, pell-mell, postcolonial global capitalism and consumerism as well as vernacular, historical, and mythical-religious expressions.

Hybridity is the multiple incorporation of cultures, idiolects, dialects, code-switching, levels of speech, and voices that are elicited in highly fluid contact zones. For Bakhtin, hybridity involves “the mixing of two languages within the boundaries of a single utterance,” which is a “deliberate” “artistic device” (358). These “languages” may be understood literally or as different levels of the same language. A current definition of hybridity, like Homi Bhabha’s, states that “[a]ll forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity” (qtd. in Bahri 143), of mixing or *mestizaje*, and that the concept involves “a discursive, enunciatory, cultural, subjective process having to do with the struggle around authority, authorization, deauthorization” (qtd. in Bahri 147). To this point, the amalgamation of multiple voices, registers, and language levels works to deauthorize the colonial and national canons and to authorize some of the cultural and discursive practices from the margins.

In *La guaracha* the paradoxical stasis of the traffic jam expresses literal movement, and the hybrid, multiple voices enter as digressions through “flashbacks, fantasy, daydreams, as wells as cross-cutting between episodes and characters” (Perivolaris *Puerto Rican* 117). This technique of narrative movement allows for cross-cultural representations of a “nationality in transit” (59), a tension between a colonized homeland and a home abroad, which Sánchez develops in “La guagua aérea” (1983/1997), an essay exploring Puerto Rican identity utilizing the motif of a back-and-forth flight, or “flying bus,” between San Juan and New York. At one point in the essay, a woman answers the question of her origins by saying she is from Puerto Rico and, asked to further specify the town (“pueblo”), she replies, “New York.”

In a similar fashion, all of the main characters in the novel, including senator Vicente Reinoso, his wife, Graciela Alcántara, his mulatto mistress, La China Hereje, and his parasitical

son, Benny, undergo this pendular, cross-cultural movement. In one such example, Benny, in a sexualized, consumerist symbiosis with his fetishized Ferrari, takes the feminized car for a spin from San Juan to Caguas, and back, after giving it a meticulous polish: “Benny ocupa las mañanas en el lustre meticuloso de su Ferrari... me gusta que mi Ferrari me vea comiendo... el Ferrari tiene un tigre en el tanque: jipea, rojos los cachetes, ríe” (212). The literal movement involves the San Juan-Caguas round trip, while the cross-cultural motion points to personality traits determined by a complex of global tendencies and national ills—global capitalism, consumerism, fetishism, impotence, and class status amalgamate to produce, and critique, the Puerto Rican decadent type represented by Benny.

Moreover, travel is closely connected with insular discomfort, another trait of Caribbean culture and long the object of analysis in Puerto Rican history. Antonio S. Pedreira’s essay, *Insularismo* (1934), recognizes insularity’s geographic, economic, and cultural components. Pointing out that “nosotros quedamos al margen de las rutas europeas” (102) that favored Mexico and Peru, Pedreira explains the resulting culture as a logical derivative of the island’s marginality and little size: “gajes de la pequeñez.” Echoing this idea, a recent critic emphasizes the relevance of island geography among Caribbean writers seeking to define their cultural and national identity: “The features of the island are persistently analyzed and . . . identified as the underlying cause of a wide range of traits, conditions, and circumstances” (Goldman 36).

Insularity remains a historical and cultural factor of this and other Caribbean literary productions, beginning with the early, ideological “invention” of America—the Europeans’ coming to terms with the New World as geographic and cultural space that simultaneously completes and upends the medieval, classical, and Christian notion of the *orbis terrarum* (O’Gorman 139-43). Although America completes and destabilizes European culture, opening possibilities for discourse, science and economic imperial expansion, the role that the Caribbean islands play in the projects of discovery and conquest is potentially diminished. America as a whole is exploited and forced to transfer much of its economic production to Europe, but Caribbean insularity gets especially sidetracked (except as a key “tube” of wealth transfer) in order to accommodate the needs of important economic nuclei in Mexico and Peru, in addition to the colonial centers in Spain and, later, the United States.

The metaphorical island signifies constraint, underdevelopment, and uncivilized isolation. It also stands for mid- or end-point involving Africa, Europe, and the United States,

an in-between position rife with cultural compromises and appropriations. Illustrating this negative connotation, *La guaracha* points specifically to backward vulgarity and cynical Christianity as further traits of the Puerto Rican type represented by Graciela: “Vendida hasta la vela de mi agonía para que en Suiza nevada y pura tú fueras una educanda solvente a pesar de tu procedencia de una isla que Isabel y Fernando...no debieron autorizar a habitar” (186). Seemingly, the goal of any (upper class) islander is to get away from such constraining geography, aided by one good European value, a satirized Christianity, so as to reach a higher state of purity, completion, and humanity represented by a white, snow-covered Switzerland. The desired goal, however, retains a mere potentiality, since a key point in the novel is the impossibility of cultural erasure.

Puerto Rico’s colonial submission under Spain and the U.S. does not escape the reality of urban decline common to other Latin American nations suffering under foreign commercial and political interests: “Puerto Rico, colonia sucesiva de dos imperios e isla del Archipiélago de las Antillas” (Sánchez 105). This explains why writers like Sánchez return to dissecting the sordid, globalized conditions of the island’s shantytowns, slums, and traffic jams, and why his and other narratives that analyze these circumstances take the form of an urban chronicle, like Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá’s *El entierro de Cortijo* or Oscar Lewis’s testimonial *La vida: una familia puertorriqueña en la cultura de la pobreza* (1969) (Díaz Quiñones 50-52). The writer in Juliá’s novel, observed and observant at the same time, details the conditions and attire of poor workers whose second-hand clothes (a shirt with a design of palm trees: “the Arcadia of his beautiful Borinquén”) produce, as Jean Franco notes, “a certain egalitarianism at least in attitudes if not in wealth” (194). Here the urban chronicle combines, as much as in Sánchez’s novel, cityscape and musical background, where music attempts a circumvention, or transcendence, of the social conditions of globalization and historical time.

The oblique gaze that opens the novel characterizes the island’s wretched traits through the metaphors of the sex trade and the traffic jam, in clear contrast with nationalistic, outmoded “neo-jibarista” productions (Abreu-Torres 1). The reader/gazer is invited to look sideways at the mistress/prostitute musing about television, popular culture, and popular song, while criticizing her client, the old, well-to-do lawyer and senator, running late for their encounter. The traffic jam symbolizes a colonized, cement-covered nation at a stifling standstill: the “Traffic Jam Nation that cannot move forward” also stresses the “degradation of the landscape and the people who inhabit it” (Acosta Cruz 123).

Insular malaise is only made worse by the island's extreme climate (heat and sweat everywhere), absurd domestic space (a sofa that only makes sense in the poles), and anthropological quaintness—the allusion to *Tristes tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss's travelogue and study of Brazil's indigenous peoples: “sofá tapizado con paño de lana, útil para la superación de los fríos polares pero de uso irrealísimo en estos trópicos tristes” (105). The construction of the nation means its globalized, cultural translation. The nation's borders are delimited by a cultural network comprised, to the minutest detail, of inside and outside traces by way of a parade or compilation of objects, products, and voices: clippings from U.S. movies, TV shows and personalities, magazines, songs, commercials, foreign products, or radio talk (Kressner 101-05). Like the novel, the nation begins with a factual and ideological imposition—the historical fact of the conquest or colonial oppression followed by an onslaught of capitalistic products and consumerist values.

Cultural translation in such a context is a function of postcolonial, nation-engendering paradigms that result from the movement of people and global cultures, the simultaneous interface of linguistic and cultural processes. According to Emily Apter, this productive notion of cultural translation is

a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history... of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements. (qtd. in Pym 158)

Hybridity and borderline notions play here a significant role as socio-historical and theoretical elements that deliver a “salubrious blow to narcissism, both national and individual,” so that translation turns out to be “a medium of subject re-formation and political change” (Apter 6).

Paramount in the hybrid nature of *La guaracha* is the cultural and linguistic pendular travel between English and Spanish. Spanglish, or code-switching, whether mimetic or literary, allows for “new possibilities for metaphors, imagery, syntax, and rhythms,” as Frances Aparicio notes (qtd. in Dumitrescu 1). These metaphors, imagery, and rhythms must be taken into account for a full understanding of the novel and of Puerto Rican culture. Indeed one of the criticisms that Gerald Guinness raises against Rabassa's translation of *La guaracha* is its “inability to convey the horrors of linguistic transculturation,” including “the whole feel of a culture and the manner of being of its people” (190). One example, “me pongo isi, rilás, redi para el toqueteo”/“I take it easy, relax, ready for the flattering” may be “neat and necessary”

but does not convey what Guinness calls, justifiably so, “the mongrel quality of the original” (190).

In *Tristes tropiques* the translators John and Doreen Whitman state that the author requested the French title be kept in the English translation. Besides, they add, “Sad Tropics,” “The Sadness of the Tropics,” “Tragic Tropics,” etc., do not quite correspond “in meaning or in implication” to the French original, “which is at once ironical and poetic, because of the alliteration, the taut rhythm (—U—U) and the suggestion of ‘Alas for the Tropics!’” (11). Like other co-texts in this multi-textual novel, Levi-Straus’s text offers an original for the echoes, sounds and ironies in Sánchez’s traveling cultural vignettes around San Juan: *Macho Camacho’s Beat* conjures up rhythm and itinerary, ironies and alas’s, but it also advances an unwitting, ironic reversal: French, once the higher language of European reason and of cultural domination in Puerto Rico—and throughout Latin America—interprets the tropics, a move of definition and appropriation. French reclaims its higher, epistemological status. In order for the tropics to be truly melancholy, sad, and fully understood, they have to remain *tristes*.

### **Carnival, Hybridity, and Consumption**

This is not to suggest that *Tristes tropiques* is not sympathetic to the tropics or the New World, but merely to submit that Sánchez’s work, by ironic incorporation of Western culture, questions the value of “modern,” colonial reason from Europe, “Harvard,” or the conservative Spanish tradition. Against those hegemonic notions the narrative marshals the multifaceted theme of carnival, which offers a satirical, postcolonial response to foreign cultural and political domination. The crossing and embracing of cultural borders enact the hybrid nation, even as its caricature representation is being drawn. Pereira suggests as much, preferring negative critique to plaudits that lead to “conformidad, rutina y vanagloria.” And although he is not specifically referring to a carnivalized narrative, he explains that “[e]l pesimismo y la duda son fuerzas vitales que mueven a examen de conciencia” (18).

The novel, a travelogue between two cultures, the colony and the colonial power, compiles a series of perceived national features by way of a sardonic gaze that focuses on, describes, validates, and breaks apart these cultural productions. This gaze has some points of contact with the pseudo-picaresque perspective (Luis Vélez de Guevara’s *El diablo cojuelo*, 1641, for example), but in *La guaracha* the first person narrator has disappeared almost entirely, and

the reader, instead, is invited to become witness and author, observer of the strange genesis and doings of globalized nationhood, a Babel-like confusion with carnivalesque resonances throughout:

“las hazañas genitales de Ricardo Montalbán y yo” (120), “tanto santo cagado nadie lo viera. Y la boca de Benny...: una letrina o mingitorio obstruido con el graffiti más sórdido” (159); “el mismo rabo que trampado en la garganta convidaba al vómito” (148); “que hay que meter mucho y largo para meter bien: qué expansión la de mis adentros, qué fresca y qué frescota es mi morada interior. ¿Tereso de Ávila en el horizonte? (178); “Trajeron varas y hojas , lo hurgaron, lo mordieron, lo orinaron . . . y bendita la verruga de tu vientre, alcantarilla del cáncer” (199); “se escupe de maneras mil” (289); “la mano que juguetea con la fofa desnudez del cuerpo” (258); “Ferrari nuestro que estás en la marquesina, santificado sea Tu Nombre” (257); “no pudo atrapar un eructo, limpiada la boca con la manga de la blusa . . . Yo voy a tomarme un purgante de unos purgantes que vienen en forma de bombón” (197).

According to Bakhtin’s definition, “the essential principle of grotesque realism [the chief characteristic of carnival] is degradation” (qtd. in Dentith 67). But the degradation “enacted in carnival and carnivalized writing” is also an affirmation. If linguistic allusions to genital and alimentary excretions lead to cleansing and regeneration, this is due to the materiality of the (people’s) body and its simultaneous attack on established authority (Dentith 65-70). As carnivalized texts disrupt “false hierarchical links,” they do away with social divisions (Bakhtin 169) through laughter originating in a set of motifs, or “series,” focused on graphic depictions of physiological bodily needs: anatomy, clothing, food and food intake, drink and drunkenness, sex and copulation, death, and excretions/defecation (170). In “destroy[ing] traditional connections and abolish[ing] idealized strata,” carnival laughter forces together crude, unheard-of associations that canonical tradition “seeks to keep separate” (170).

One excretory example, the spittle, embodies Puerto Rico’s ill-mannered backwardness, savagery, and conservative mores, but the crudeness of the taboo also denounces, and devalues, the hierarchical traditions of Spanish royalty and U.S. imperialism. It is an attack against Western, epistemic Law. The values of carnival, parody, literary orality, and transgression prove fundamental in the construction of the nation (Gozo 123-24, Rotker 23-27):

pecado *eso* [alluding to sex], uyy: como si tuviera mierda en el zapato, ganas de escupir por tanto asco. No escupe porque en Suiza nevada y pura aprendió a no escupir. Porque en Suiza nevada y pura no se escupe, en este bendito Puerto Rico sí . . . escupir: costumbre desclasada de país desclasado: Isabel y Fernando nunca debieron. (243)

[E]l catálogo del escupir puertorriqueño ordenado por un escupirólogo importado de la Universidad de Harvard. (289)

Carnivalized writing recuperates the repressed sexual body and mocks Western values over their limiting hierarchies. This and other examples denounce conservative values, class-related social practices, Spanish colonial imperialism, and U.S. science.

Under such carnivalized dis/order, degrading the nation means the cleansing of it, which is enacted by the exposure of the people's bodily excretions and by the blending of parodied religion, crass commercialism, and reader involvement. On this point, Cruz-Malavé defines *La guaracha* as a "carnavalesque collection of voices" manipulated by an "authorial voice" seeking to advance a pedagogic, ethical goal, as "the narrator forces us as readers to recognize... their (and his) 'performative' identity" (Bergmann and Smith 155). The people that perform their own cultural identity do so through carnivalized writing, which in postcolonial times has to be immersed in capitalistic production and consumerism—what Dalleo calls a "commodified public" (199-200).

In the context of the larger Caribbean, specifically Cuban, literary criticism Fernando Ortiz's transcultural binary, or dynamic "counterpoint," between tobacco and sugar plays a significant role in making sense of local history and culture, of insularity and carnival (Ortiz 3-93). This relationship brings together, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo points out, a complex panoply involving, on the one hand, carnival and the sacred, and on the other, Western capitalism, science, and patriarchy: "tobacco is carnival, the word-rhythm, ritual sacrifice, sacred dance, the drum that talks and unites... immediate sensuality," the world of poetry and art; it is a "super-signifier that refers to the oldest traditions of Africa, Asia, America, and Europe" (172). On the opposite side of this transgressing notion, sugar refers to the concept of order and repression: "the rhythm of law and work, of patriarchal hierarchy, of scientific knowledge, of punishment and discipline, of superego and castration." It is the space of capitalistic production and slavery, "a signifier that offers itself as center, as origin... for that which signifies the Other" (172).

Such tension produces a culture resulting from negotiations between extremes and having divergent elements that partake of that multi-layered, discursive network. Hence any text that attempts to replicate or represent such a culture with any degree of accuracy would have to reproduce all underlying tensional elements. The argument can be made that in Sánchez's work the relationship between the prostitute/mistress and the Old Man doubles for that between carnival and order, sensuality and patriarchy. But in this relationship the former concept (rhythm, carnival, gender) constantly questions, undermines, and exposes the latter (the law of patriarchy). In one vignette the woman's untidy house contrasts with the man's meticulous care to hang his jacket and pants before the sexual romp, which exposes the man's weakened rule (268).

Paternal order, however, is not necessarily destroyed, in part because of the redeeming qualities of gender and transgression. Although the senator's sexual practices, which are compared with atypical Western actors and films (Hedy Lamarr, Linda Lovelace, Marlon Brando's *Last Tango in Paris*), do expose the limits of traditional culture, the carnivalization of the patriarch relieves the pressure and delivers him, however temporarily and inadequately, to the non-traditional aesthetic discourses of sensual expression, caricature, and hypocrisy (Sánchez 268-71, 282-84).

An admixture of music and cultural practices pervades the novel. Practices and song commingle into a political identity partaking of historical and cultural forces from Spain, Africa, Asia, and the Antilles. In Caribbean literary discourse music is an ingredient facilitating the search for roots and identity, as Benítez-Rojo has noted regarding Alejo Carpentier's works (186). In *El reino de este mundo*, for example, music brings together revolutionary praxis, socio-religious identity, and the birth of the nation, all in the middle of an apocalyptic milieu, in the chapter titled "El pacto mayor," which summarizes some of the Latin American rationalizations for the wars of independence (Carpentier 77-81).

At one point in Sánchez's novel, senator Vicente Reinosá's caricature identity repeats an anaphoric, iterative, and alliterative drumming that jumbles together some of Puerto Rico's alleged features of national character: utter superficiality, hollow vanity, rank hypocrisy, crass commercialism, and holier-than-thou traditionalism:

Vicente es decente y su verbo es contundente. Vicente es decente y su honor iridescente... Vicente es decente y su estampa es absorbente. Vicente es decente y su mente omnipotente. Vicente es decente y nació inteligente.

Vicente es decente y respeta al disidente. Vicente es decente y su entraña fluorescente. Vicente es decente y su razón es excelente. (284)

The resulting musical effect combines hammering monotone, political slogan, absurd logic, exorbitant praise, and creative improvisation to create a mosaic representing some of the major failures of the island nation, all of them tied to empty rhetorical flourishes. In *Insularismo* Pereira noticed this characteristic and he too associated it with musical imagery and carnival content:

Hay en nuestro pueblo un entusiasmo atávico por la sofistería. Más que amor a la eficacia de la palabra a tiempo, es voluptuosidad por las palabras en *manadas sinfónicas* . . . La crónica social parece que se inventó para nosotros: es la *cloaca* de nuestro retoricismo . . . ¿Quién no ha sentido *náuseas* espirituales al leer tanta *bazofia* . . .? (99; my emphasis)

As this voluptuous excess of words becomes a low type of animalized symphony, the newspaper pages where the upper classes parade their social events become a sewer, a deposit of trash that is figuratively eaten, or read, which leads to nausea and possible regurgitation—the cleansing move to throw away such empty rhetoric.

Such level of caustic, carnivalized criticism against national ills notwithstanding, the denunciations trace the roots and historical memory of the imagined, needed, and postmodern nation, a concept worth saving, according to Sánchez:

Ese reconocimiento de la necesidad de la nación, que las disoluciones posmodernas peyoratizan y las teorías del fin de la historia interpretan como otra babosada telúrica. En la nación convergen la agritudlura del propio descubrimiento, los rostros encadenados por unas fechas y unos recuerdos... cual señas de identidad. (qtd. in Perivolaris “Little Stories”) 200)

For all its limitations, cultural and political oppression, the nation remains an ideal, all-encompassing hybrid network arranged along the lines of geography, music, history, globalization, and culture. Lived life and self-discovery, dates, and memories congeal into a set of signs that contribute to define Puerto Rican identity.

The narrative’s commitment to a multi-dialogical orality that constructs the postcolonial nation presents us with a strategy, and paradox, for Caribbean nations under siege by the forces of globalization, which threaten to drown out all self-engendered cultural productions. The carnival paradox involves self-denunciation and self-valorization and may

be conceived as a current recreation of what Benítez-Rojo calls a contradictory proto-Caribbean notion first encoded in the writings of Bartolomé de las Casas at the beginning of the sixteenth century. This insightful reading of Las Casas suggests that one of the factors producing Caribbean insular consciousness—and by logical implication, Latin American consciousness—may be attached to a notion of sin and guilt over the extermination of indigenous peoples and their substitution with African slaves.

Self-denunciation repeats the sin and guilt experienced by Las Casas and other like-minded friars who first denounced the exploitation of Caribbean indigenes and, later, that of African slaves. Subsequently valorization defends the status quo either as a colonial utopia or earthly paradise—what Las Casas once might have envisioned—or as a nation intent on keeping its “own” vernacular and historical identity. Benítez-Rojo’s reading is based on the first official importation of African slaves in the Caribbean with the purported goal to spare or alleviate the exploitation and wholesale death of the natives. Secondly, it includes a plague of black ants that devastated the economy of Hispaniola circa 1520 and the pairing of this plague with the “plague” of slave rebellions. Third, it brings up the “uncanny” connection between the ants attracted and killed by a sexualized *pedra solimán*. Finally, it involves Las Casas’s mea culpas for having been an accomplice in the implantation of slavery in the New World (Benítez-Rojo 85-111). The “process of transgression, guilt, and fear of punishment” by god the father (the Law) for the sins of extermination and slavery, followed by the resulting cultural and racial chaos or “confusion” (Pereira’s word), plays a recurring, and not altogether coherent, role in Caribbean writing.

The Las Casas context in *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* occurs between the senator’s genital self-manipulation, vainglorious pride, “¿por qué seré tan formidable?,” and the description of his mistress. The result is a parodic, violent, and erotic *mestizaje* involving all major ethnic groups, European, African, and Caribbean:

Pero el trigueño subido [de la mujer] es de aquí: aquí crecido sobre los reclutamientos de Bartolomé de las Casas.

Bartolomé de las Casas, reclutador de la negrada de Tombuctú y Fernando Po, negrada que culea, que daguea, que abre las patas a la blanquería de Extremadura y Galicia, blanquería que culea, que daguea, que abre las patas a la tainería de Manatuabón y Otoao, tainería de Manatuabón y Otoao que culea,

que daguea, que abre las patas a la negrada de Tombuctú y Fernando Po... El trigueño subido de aquí. (176-77)

This seminal moment signals the historical beginning of colonial exploitation of indigenous and African peoples. At the same time, it explains through carnival a type of ethnic mixing that was in many instances anything but harmonious. In fact, this proto-Caribbean, brutal, colonial moment continues to be enacted by the senator, a representative of paternalistic energies that allow him to possess, use, and buy black women, mistresses or prostitutes, current avatars of postcolonial subjugation.

Carnival also defines Puerto Rican nationhood by resorting to the metaphor of the animal, denouncing European stereotypes about America's savage grotesquerie and sinful sloth: the nation is equated with a sore-covered reptile, a slithering and lazy entity constantly in decline, falling and vomiting another lizard's tail:

Como un reptil manchado por escamas y llagosidad abrupta.. desperezándose, poniéndose de pie y despatarrado, vómito y baba bajando... despierta la idiotez, despierta y amenizada con cubos de más baba y más legaña... y resbalando y cayendo y cayendo y cayendo: caído y vomitando el rabo de otro lagarto (197).

The description is not just another constant of the tropics but of a feral America that both attracts and spurns; a lazy, indolent and decaying nation, like rotten and forbidden fruits lying in god-forsaken landscapes. The lizard symbolizes torpor and "idiocy," usually associated with Latin American backwardness, while the excretory trope emphasizes lethargy and decadent regeneration. In the end, the lizard vomiting another lizard brings up both the early demonization of the imagined Carib/Cannibal as well as Latin America's stereotypical commonplace of self-hatred and low self-esteem, features generally tied to a purported desire to undermine one's own kind.

In jumbling together an excess of objects, products and idiolects from a variety of levels and registers, the novel attempts the cultural translation of the postcolonial Caribbean island—a renewed instantiation of a mythical Babel moved by economic activity and ambition. But the confusion that in the biblical myth undoes the city plays a positive role in Sánchez's carnivalesque nation. Nor is this a strange interpretation of Caribbean production, for Benítez-Rojo attempts a similar reconstruction by resorting to the value of Chaos in order, and vice-versa, so as to understand the articulation of the so-called "meta-archipelago" (The Caribbean) into a world system inaugurated in the sixteenth-century by Spain's fleet "machine," which

brought together all of the economic, cultural, and social elements that allowed that very capitalistic machinery to flourish.

The pressures of globalization, of commercial and cultural products, play a significant role over dependent, postcolonial nations both directly in coercive terms and indirectly by hegemonic means. The carnival character types depicted in *La guaracha* are direct consumers of commodities and of hegemonic discourses aimed at their “soft” control. Hegemony, “the organization of consent” through processes that hold sway over subjugated groups without resorting to violence or coercion (Barrett 238), involves both foreign and autochthonous discourses. The two modes of consumption may be read separately but often act in tandem to produce Dalleo’s “commodified” individual.

The flooding of commercial products steers the colonized subject down the road of capitalistic consumption to the point of voluntary consent, as shown by Pepsi cola consumption. Disneyland, in turn, becomes a cultural product with a wide range of meanings well beyond its touristic implications: social status, psychological regeneration, dream-like space, idealized imperialism, capitalistic fairy tale, infantilized adulthood, etcetera: “Hola, hola, pepsicola: ingenio colonizado . . . He dicho que está la señora deprimida . . . Mándela a Disneylandia... El encuentro con el Perro Pluto puede que le devuelva las ganas de vivir” (136). Identity cannot be found in an impossible rejection of globalization. Instead, the bombardment of commercial products and foreign influences is openly embraced by a carnivalized narrative attempting to outline the national soul and then, by dwelling on its ugly sores, to cleanse it.

Consumption also involves the interaction of food items from the U.S. and Puerto Rico, which “lays bare the complex relationship that has existed between” island culture and U.S. imperialism (Huard 244-45). The novel questions “the *alimentary* American Dream or the false promises of prosperity... portrayed through U.S. foods in the text” (245). The hammering enunciation of U.S products, as well as the rank commercialism of Benny, a representative of the neocolonial nation, suggests an ambivalent Puerto Rican identity that valorizes, and simultaneously deprecates, the resulting cultural mishmash. The novel may thus be considered an extended pastiche of postcolonial Caribbean identity.

### **Self-criticism and The Nation**

In Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing!* (1998), a novel where dialogue on the meaning of Puerto Rican culture and nationhood takes central stage, we read:

—¿Y Julia de Burgos y Palés Matos?

—Perpetúan nuestra opresión—atollados, retrasados—en el eterno tapón de la guaracha. Queremos liberarnos (167)

Popular guaracha music and high poetry (Burgos), even one of Afro-Antillean nature (Palés Matos), may play a negative role. Such literary and cultural creations act as a stopper (“tapón”) keeping Puerto Rican culture from moving forward, from circulating toward freedom and out of the dirty backed-up waters of cultural oppression. The apparent contradiction makes sense because typically “native” or “exotic” representations may be conceived as so many reproductions of the status quo of national culture: Margot Arce de Vásquez's ideal of “Borinquen” as “paisaje puro” (Acosta Cruz 119) is an early twentieth-century reincarnation of Columbus's paradisiacal Caribbean, a notion that belies the actual truth of poverty and colonization.

So too with *grifería*, which may potentially rescue the popular and ethnic culture and language of the oppressed, ethnic underclass, but which, in overplaying and perpetuating those ethnic codes, goes on to reaffirm racial stereotype: It raises false popular and linguistic culture as an obstacle to a true ethnic expression. Palés Matos, in fact, was from the first attacked for what was, and is still considered, a stereotypical depiction of blacks as having supposedly oversexed bodily energies, creative musical rhythms, and rich and carnivalesque excretory functions. One critic goes so far as to say that Palés Matos's *poesía negrista*, in trying to replicate and represent Puerto Rico's Afro-mestizo hybridity, manages only to produce a caricature of female eroticism in a collection of “mumbo-jumbo sounds” of exotic mimicry and stereotype (Smart 107; see Vásquez Arce 86-87 for the opposing view).

Such false European representations of America in general, and specifically of Caribbean cultures, are considered “stages” of spectacular representations that simulate and perform for the sake of foreign observers. They also respond to the West's need for the picturesque “native” and the sensual “blithe Negress.” But behind these novelistic performances lies “the myth's hidden skin...the cords that connect to Africa, to Asia, and to pagan Europe” (Benítez-Rojo 220). Excessive and grotesque though they may be, the carnivalesque protagonists, or multiplicity of voices, in *La guaracha* uncover the hidden links that tradition insists on maintaining fully clothed.

Recounting an anecdote from his childhood days at school, Pereira derides Puerto Rico's bias toward hyperbolic bombast, which led his teacher to a rank misinterpretation of satirical intent in Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quijote*. Cervantes assigns the famous passage beginning, "Apenas había el rubicundo Apolo..." to Don Quijote's lips in a clearly satirical take of courtly, fastidious rhetoric (Cervantes 106), yet Pereira's teacher took such parodic language as a serious and ideal example for proper speech:

Y con este párrafo, inflado de mal gusto y de sátira cervantina, nos adiestraba en el castizo manejo del idioma . . . ¡El párrafo menos cervantino . . . se convertía, por obra y gracia del retoricismo importado, en un bello modelo ejemplarizante! (94).

In a similar fashion, though aided by the corrosive forces of carnivalized narrative, *La guaracha* ridicules this affected rhetoric, not to destroy the nation but to reveal the underlying energies that are kept in check by those limiting and hierarchical rhetorical practices, and to endow such empty speech with material substance:

ni el señorío voceado ni el apellido de primera ni la caballeridad ni la finura ni demás notaciones del pedigrí, importunan . . . con mano tentacular, el Senador Vicente Reinoso—Vicente es decente y su carácter envolvente—se saluda el animal insomne entre las piernas, saludo marcial. (176)

Carnivalized speech implies self-critical appraisals and sideways valorization of the national project. The parody of rhetorical speech ("caballeridad," "finura") is brought down to the level of sexual need and genital description ("animal solemne"), and back to official rhetoric ("saludo marcial") now contaminated, by context and juxtaposition, to the bodily, genital and sexual, motif.

### **Concluding Note**

In the biblical myth, an inflexible Law causes Babel's confusion and dispersal of people and languages, the Father's punishment against unjustified, unitary pretensions. When applied to the Caribbean context of nationhood and island identity, the analogical model presents two noteworthy differences. First, the shift of power from Spain to the United States in the Caribbean context diminishes the symbolic authority of (post) colonial patriarchy, due in part to the mid-century rise of black consciousness and civil rights in the U.S. mainland. Secondly,

the Caribbean has always been a field of language confusion and interaction involving five major European languages (Spanish, French, English, Portuguese, and Dutch) in addition to indigenous, African tongues, and hybrid productions. In such a context, the novelist, traveler and translator, deals with an array of cultural and consumer values, linguistic registers, idioms, and songs in order to mirror the complex of island society without betraying its accurate true rhythm and expression. Hence the novel's attempt to depict national culture through literary orality.

From the Caribbean perspective, Babel is a myth of unity in dispersion—linguistically, culturally, and economically. Multifarious confusion remains, but it becomes a source of comprehensive history, of unified progression. In Pereira's words, "El elemento español funda nuestro pueblo y se funde con las demás razas. De esta *fusión* parte nuestra *con-fusión*" (Pereira's emphasis) (25). This confusion is promoted by the dynamic of neocolonial and globalizing forces working to keep the apparently chaotic transculturation running. According to one interpretation of the myth, the inhabitants of Babel were consumed with the sin of pride, which made them think they could keep their unity, as a tribal and linguistic group, forever; so, driven by their "desire to renown," they wanted to build a tower to the sky in order "to make themselves a name" (Keil and Delitzsch 173). But the resulting confusion of tongues, these critics insist, goes beyond an outward change in organs of speech and has in fact "a much deeper foundation in the human mind" (174). Previous and entrenched sin, the disruption of "inward unity," causes the people's "outward" linguistic fall and uncovers their errors—the emergence and fall of Babel.

In stark contrast to the myth, confusion of tongues and ethnic dispersal—the punishment of God/Father-Conqueror/Western episteme—have been the very *raisons d'être* in the Caribbean sphere since the beginning of its colonial history. The resulting punishment has undergone an illogical reversal, or quite logical per the laws of capitalism: confusion of tongues and ethnic exploitative dispersal turn out to be the very roots, and lingering marks, of Caribbean cultural experience since the very inception, the genesis, of its history.

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