

Relational Identity in Myrna Casas' *El gran circo EUkraniano*

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Todo caribeño, esté donde esté, se encuentra suspendido en medio del vacío del Viaje a la semilla, entre un suelo que viaja de acá hacia allá, y un cielo raso que viaja de allá hacia acá. (Benítez Rojo 290)

In *El gran circo EUkraniano* Myrna Casas stages the limits of fiction and reality in order to address the question of identity, a topic that has been of concern to many Puerto Rican writers, and that Alvin Joaquín Figueroa has labeled the “unitemario puertorriqueño” (9). Through the joint articulation of fiction and reality, I argue that Casas redefines the concept of identity as identification, as a constant state of flux and re-construction rather than as a fixed and authentic core that transcends the political context. It is on this invisible bridge between fiction and reality that Casas locates the elusiveness of both individual and national identity. She shows that the very definition of a nation’s identity needs to adjust to the historical moment and the political circumstances. This implies that it is no longer necessary to define a single authentic identity, but, rather, to accept change critically.

The question of individual and national identity has been a constant in Casas’ work, and is discernible in four plays she published during the sixties: *Cristal roto en el tiempo* (1960), *Eugenia Victoria Herrera* (1963), *Absurdos en soledad* (1963), and *La trampa* (1964). These four plays examine Puerto Rico’s political situation as a Spanish colony first and then as a United States Commonwealth. In broad terms, the first two emphasize loss of national identity by examining past ties with Spain, and the last two depict a search for identity in Puerto Rico’s precarious state as an Estado Libre Asociado. Even though both *Eugenia Victoria Herrera* and *Cristal roto en el tiempo* are written in a realist mode and consider traditional values, the first advocates the significance of traditions by maintaining close ties to the land, and the second juxtaposes two contentious political positions: a status quo stance and the

promotion of social progress. In *Absurdos en soledad* and *La trampa* Casas abandons realistic representation and adopts the tenets of the theatre of the absurd to continue to explore the question of national identity. *Absurdos en soledad* undertakes the search through the highlighting of theatrical techniques while *La trampa* metaphorically “evokes Puerto Rico’s anomalous neocolonialist situation” (Unruh 133).

As a preamble to my reading of *El gran circo Eukraniano*, it is important to present two opposing interpretations of *Absurdos en soledad*, because they indirectly support my argument that the play in question disrupts the concept of identity as a fixed notion. Gloria Waldman suggests that in *Absurdos en soledad* Casas creates a tension between fiction and reality, which is played out through the relationship between the main characters, a little girl and an actress, in order to depict the search for identity. For Waldman, the little girl’s world is one of fantasy and imagination, whereas that of the actress is concrete and ordinary, in other words, realistic. Indeed, in the first *soledad* the actress enters asking for the entrance to the stage, while the little girl contends that they are not in a theatre but in a park. Waldman reads the little girl’s ability to imagine a park as a capacity for invention and the actress’s search for the entrance as simultaneously a prosaic act and a metaphor for the search of identity (81).

Six years later, Luz María Umpierre inverts Waldman’s observations on fiction and reality, thus emphasizing the fluidity of the terms as well as the dramatic situation presented on stage. For Umpierre it is the actress who defends theatrical reality (i.e. fiction), while the little girl asserts that their surroundings are part of the world outside the theatre. Furthermore, her remark that “los niveles teatro y sociedad aparecen también señalados ya mediante las posturas de los dos personajes” sets up the paradigm theatre/society where the first suggests a world of make-believe and the second a world grounded on certainty (“Inversiones” 4). However, Umpierre’s inversion of Waldman’s take on the representation of fiction and reality indirectly reminds us that the opposition is not stable. Finally, her classification of the play – “pertenece al teatro épico ya que convierte al observador y/o lector en partícipe” (12) – is of interest to us because Casas uses the same Brechtian techniques in *El gran circo Eukraniano*, though in this case with the specific purpose of delineating the limits of individual and national identity.

In order to reflect upon Puerto Rico’s lack of a definite identity and to scrutinize its social, economic, political, and linguistic condition, Casas creates a traveling troupe of five actors and actresses whose individual identities are

displayed in front of an audience and become an allegory of national identity. Their identity consists of four markers: name, family background, profession, and language, although ultimately it will be impossible to verify their authenticity. Even though the members of the troupe explicitly deny it, their role is to travel around the Island to measure its political climate and make it public on stage.

The entire cast of characters consists of Gabriela José, Nené, Alejandra, Cósima, and Igor (all members of the troupe called *El gran circo Eukraniano*) as well as Alina and her brother, who pretend to be members of the audience. Despite the name of the troupe, the characters are not circus performers, but rather actors who consider, like Hamlet, that their duty is to reflect the flaws of society, to hold a mirror up to the audience. Thus, they travel from town to town performing dramatic scenes based on the information they gather at each place and inviting the audience to partake in the event:

NENÉ: Mire, mírese aquí y luego allí. Verá su retrato, a lo mejor el de un amigo o algún conocido, algún pariente.

ALEJANDRA: Reconózcase, mírese bien, vea en el fondo del ojo el fondo de su alma y después quizás podrá verse en mí allí en escenario.

(14)

Despite assuming the role of mirror to society, the acts of returning to the past and performing in front of an audience also invert the mirror and force the members of the troupe to see themselves.

The characters relive their past in the present when they find themselves in a town they had visited before, but which they did not remember. The act of going back evokes Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return which, according to Zarathustra, suggests that "if no one has ever gone to the end of these roads, it is not possible for anyone to 'come again'" (Stambaugh 38). What this quotation and Casas' play suggest is that returning to the past reminds us to look at ourselves, to examine our subconscious. Going back, however, does not guarantee that we will find the answer to who we are, but simply that we will have the opportunity to reflect upon the questions of identity and identification. This backtracking process takes place both within the fictitious reality of the play as well as in the extra-textual reality of the playwright. For Casas it was imperative to return to the theme of identity, although no longer grounding its importance on the land and on Puerto Rico's relationship to its ancestors – as she did in *Eugenia Victoria Herrera* – but rather on Puerto Rico's current political reality as a Commonwealth of the United States.

To return to the town, or, in the case of Casas, to the question of identity, requires new research and the use of new dramatic techniques. Casas returns to the *unitemario puertorriqueño*, but this time she resorts to metatheatre to stage what appears to be a rehearsal. The play the audience experiences comprises a series of conversations among the members of the troupe, presumably improvised skits, and direct exchanges between the actors and the audience. The reality the actors transform functions as a two-way mirror because it simultaneously reenacts for the audience their customs, beliefs, and follies as it reflects back something about the life of the actors. The conflict of the drama lies precisely here, since the process of transformation sets up a complicated game between fiction and reality. The biographical information about each of the members of the troupe, like the superficial, though tangible, aspects of the town, make it impossible to distinguish between truth and illusion. The actors have created their own fictions and have found refuge in the theatre in order to hide their “true selves” behind the roles they play. Just as the disguises used in the theatre veil the characters, certain signs of progress obfuscate Puerto Rico’s true socio-economic condition.

Even though the criticism of Puerto Rico is piercing, Casas avoids a didactic tone through the skillful use of humor. The mirror that the actors place in front of their audience is like those we find at county fairs. At the same time that we see something of ourselves in the reflected and distorted image, we can nonetheless laugh at it, knowing that we do not look exactly like that. But we should make no mistake: it is our tortured image reflected in the mirror; it just is not an image we are accustomed to seeing. Thus, Casas criticizes the façade Puerto Rico presents to the world when she alludes to the air-conditioned hotels, the numerous cars on the streets, and the countless number of television antennas on rooftops, all false indices of a non-existent wealth. She also censures the transportation system, unemployment, political corruption, drug problems, the welfare system, and the inability of the government to provide housing for all of its citizens.

An example of the use of humor, which mediates the political critique, is the manner in which she condemns the transportation system. Nené, the character in charge of gathering information about the town, announces the government’s plan to solve the transportation problem on the island with a new system known as the “aguaguagua.” In Puerto Rico the bus is called a “guagua,” thus, this new means of transportation would be a type of waterbus that would circumnavigate the island. But by pointing out that the “aguaguagua”

would not connect San Juan directly to other cities and that it would not be completed until twelve years later, Casas exposes the corruption and incompetence of the government. She denounces the lack of vision of those in charge of developing a new system that far from eradicating the communication problem between the capital and the rest of the island would in fact exacerbate it. A transportation system such as the proposed “aguaguagua” ultimately sustains San Juan’s isolation from Puerto Rico, even though it is the capital of that “state,” precisely in order to draw it closer to the United States, to which it nevertheless remains marginal.

The humorous presentation of problems incites laughter and produces an Aristotelian effect, that is, it appeals to the audiences’ emotions and not to their intellect, creating a distance between the audience and the social issue. However, the play’s use of metatheatrical and distancing techniques yanks the audience from that emotional state and situates it back in a process of self-reflection and intellectual participation that requires critical thought and, therefore, awareness of the social problems. To call particular attention to the theatricality of the play, Casas removes the fourth wall using four dramatic strategies. First, she has the actors come onto the stage from within the audience rather than from backstage, emphasizing that the actors are not different from the audience. Second, she invents a character that constitutes a member of the audience and functions as a bridge between the audience and the actors. Her name is Alina and she is allowed to step onto the stage and join the performance. Third, Casas establishes a relationship between the actors and the audience either through direct address or by continuously asking them for their opinion. And fourth, she develops situations on stage that derive from the audience’s daily experience.

The last point is vital to the analysis of the play in so far as it exposes the way in which external reality is brought into the theatre and fiction is taken back to society. This exchange evidences the inversion of the mirror and emphasizes the impossibility of determining at what instance “los integrantes del circo están actuando la información recogida [. . .] o interpretando sus propias vidas” (Minero 5). We must point out that what Minero calls “sus propias vidas” are already fictitious since they are all characters in a play, even though their roles dictate that they be actors who narrate stories from “real” life.

Casas uses at least three metatheatrical techniques to show her audience its imperfections and to oblige them to contemplate Puerto Rico’s political situation. She uses the concept of the play within the play, the self-

awareness of the act of creating, and Lionel Abel's idea that "in the metaplay life *must* be a dream and the *world* must be a stage" (79). Even though *El gran circo Eukraniano* begins as soon as the actors get on stage, it creates the illusion that we are watching them prepare to start the performance. While the actors are waiting for Nené to arrive with the information about the town in order to show the audience the "Kalideoscopio Pueblerino o Prisma Ambarino, de tropical miopía de una Isla Metrópolis o metrópolis isla" (13), some of them improvise their skits beleaguered by Alina's constant interruptions.

Her presence among the audience, along with her interruptions, continuously opens the play to an ostensibly non-theatrical presence. We are always at the limit of fiction and reality. Her questions compel Gabriela José, the owner, to explain the function of the company: "Señorita, aquí todo es inventado, invento, invención, imaginación. Esto es un teatro" (9). Learning that it is simply about inventing, Alina replies, "eso es fácil" (9), and consequently, the actors invite her to join them on the stage. When they suggest that she end the number begun by one of the other actresses, she realizes that she cannot improvise. The unprofessional manner in which she begins her narration underscores the difference between the magic of art (to be read as the arduous rehearsals that a seamless performance requires) and everydayness. Instead of speaking "naturally" like the actress, Alina begins: "Pues esteee . . . ¿Qué digo? [. . .] Ah, sí, la señora del avión. [. . .] ¿Cómo era? Ah, sí, el cinturón, le molestaba el cinturón" (9). Notwithstanding her conspicuous lack of professionalism, the self-reflective nature of the play allows at least two readings. On the one hand, Alina's stuttering displays a lack of preparation as an actress, yet on the other, it demonstrates her histrionic talents, for she is able to do a perfect imitation of an incompetent or unprepared actor. Moreover, Alina's ability to move back and forth between the audience and the stage underscores both the differences and the similarities between art and life. Her role turns into that of bridge between reality and fiction, and her undefined position makes her an ambiguous character. Is she an actress or a spectator? The blurring between the two alludes to the constant flux of identity and the impossibility of stabilizing it.

Although most of the play consists of a conversation about the performance, a rehearsal of the skits that will be performed, and interactions between the actors and the audience, there is also a play within the play that would presumably find its way in the play we never see. It is titled "Auto de la Providencia, Sacramental metropolitano entre Carolina y Cangrejos" and

depicts three couples (Carmen y José, Cuca y Pancho, Bobby y Beba) who are driving to their respective homes at three in the morning. Their conversations contemplate problems endemic to couples: divorce, infidelity, boredom and the lack of communication. Unlike the main play, this intercalated piece could be classified as traditional because of its realistic scenery (it takes place on city streets) and because the actors abandon their roles as actors to impersonate one character or another. As they assume their roles, the appearance of the classic fourth wall automatically separates them from the audience. The actors introduce themselves in the following manner:

CÓSIMA: Son las tres de la mañana y yo soy Carmen.

IGOR: Son las tres de la mañana y yo soy José.

ALEJANDRA: Llueve a cántaros y yo soy Cuca.

SANDRO: Llueve a cántaros y yo soy Pancho.

NENE: Yo soy Bobby y tú eres Beba. (*Toma a Alina de la mano y se sienta.*) (24)

Once the performance begins, the plot absorbs us and we forget the original identity of the actors. Nevertheless, the fourth wall is not permanent; it topples when Alina interrupts the action to point out an inconsistency between the type of play they are performing and the language they are using. She abandons her role to explain that bad words should not be used in a morality play because it is “una obra teatral de tema religioso,” but one of the actors clarifies jokingly that “lo de auto es porque representábamos tres parejas cada una dentro de un automóvil” (32). Thus, the use of the play within a play, at least here, illustrates the manner in which traditional theatre involves the audience in the dramatic situation while epic theatre creates a space for self-reflection and critical awareness. The moment Alina comments upon the play she is performing, she moves out of her creative trance, abdicates her role as Beba, and becomes an outside observer.

The continuous fluctuating of Alina’s acting (as actress, as audience; on stage, off stage) delineates a process of distancing and closeness, as much from herself as from those around her, and serves to highlight the space between fiction and reality. Still tied to the quotidian and completely conscious of being Alina, the first time on stage she is unable to improvise, but once she abandons her ego and is veiled by the mask of a character named Beba she is able to act without inhibition. In a parallel situation, referring to D. H. Lawrence, Robert Langbaum asserts that:

A properly reciprocal sexual relation is impossible so long as each partner is locked up in self-consciousness. . . . In *Women in Love*, Ursula and Birkin achieve relative success in love when they learn to lose their individuality and then find it again – when they are able to meet as archetypes, at the unconscious phase of identity. . . . (251)

Thus, Alina, as well as the other actors in Casas's play, must unlock self-consciousness in order to be able to perform their respective skits. They must resort to certain acting techniques or the use of props to forget who they are and become the characters they represent.

However, because the members of *El gran circo Eukraniano* have been acting for so long, they are unable to distinguish between their own lives and the roles they must play, between the stage and the "real" world, and between what is real and what is invented. Gabriela José, for example, confides in one of her friends that all this time she has been lying about her ex-husband's profession "para poder empezar a creérmelo" (41). As the difference between co-workers and family, between home and theatre blurs, so does the line between reality and fiction. Gabriela José, for one, introduces herself and the performers to the audience as "la gran familia circense" (13). Nené reiterates: "Somos una familia" (33). Recalling the past, Alejandra asks Cósima if she does not miss her family and the latter responds: "Ustedes son mi familia" (20). And finally, Gabriela José repeats Cósima's exact words to Sandro (42).

Their position in that invisible space between fiction and reality reinforces the relational quality of their identities. When they adopt a confessional tone to reveal personal information, they all seem to occupy an unconscious phase of identity that allows them to open up to the audience. However, at the most intimate moments of their stories, the actors disappear behind their role and lose their connection with the audience. The disconnection occurs because at the same time that the monologues seem to narrate personal-lived experiences, they also include invented realities. This becomes evident at the end of each narration when another actor intervenes to ask a question or to challenge the veracity of the story just told. By making them defend their position as actor and individual, the interruptions force the actors to step out of character and confront themselves. It is also possible, however, that they already represent themselves and that the interruptions allow them to examine themselves in (their) character.

Alejandra's act is of particular interest because it portrays a woman named Alejandra Sital whose son was killed over drugs. After she finishes her performance, Alina asks for her last name and when she answers Sital, both Alina and the reader joyfully confirm their suspicion that the narrator and the protagonist are one and the same. However, Alejandra denies ever having mentioned anyone by the name of Alejandra Sital because *she* is Alejandra Sital. Art seems to give her the freedom to express herself, to transcend to that unconscious level where she is able to reveal herself, a freedom she does not find in "real" life. Having fallen into the trap of Alejandra's Artistotelian drama, we, like Alina, assume to know something about her true identity, but are forced to reevaluate her words when she tells the circus owner: "Yo hablaba en serio. Era mi vecina. No era yo. Estaba haciendo un número, cumpliendo con mi deber. [. . .] No [tuve] una familia, no" (17-18). These contradictory words, as well as what others say about her, compel us to reassess all of her lines and to accept that identities are relational.

The same is true of Igor. According to his story, he descends from a poor, hard-working family of eleven. He claims their father abandoned them when they were all young and their mother died shortly thereafter. But Alejandra appears on stage during his act to prove him wrong:

No crean nada de lo que les dijo. Su padre era millonario. Sí millonario. Lo sacó de la casa porque no quiso estudiar. No quiso trabajar en los negocios de la familia. Quería ser cantante de ópera. ¡Ja! Cantante de ópera. Y el viejo le dijo un día. "Ah, sí, pues andando, al camino a cantar." (12)

Igor asks her to stop, but she repeats that he is lying: "No le gusta la verdad. A nadie le gusta" (12). As he exits, he looks directly at the audience and insists: "Mentira, no era millonario, mentira. Nos abandonó" (13).

The exchange between the actors exhibits the various levels at which the play functions. On the one hand, the actors, because they are supposedly waiting for Nené to arrive with their acting material, appear to interact as if backstage, yet they intermittently appear on stage to perform their skits. The stories they tell appear to be personal accounts, and not performances, therefore, the audience is drawn into the emotions of the particular plot. However, the interventions of other members of the troupe, who dismiss them as mere lies, distance the spectators from the plot and force them to assume a critical stance. At the end of the performances, as we strive to

discern the characters' foundational or determinant true identities, we recognize both the impossibility of such revelations and its lack of importance. What matters is the realization that identity is in a constant state of flux, that we must continuously reevaluate our status in society and ceaselessly ask who we are.

While through *Alejandra* and Igor Casas shows that the theatre provides a forum for probing individual and national identity, by placing the entire cast in a site they had forgotten, she enables them to come to terms with a past they all thought was buried. Despite all their years together, Gabriela José confesses for the first time that she had abandoned her son for her career. She had convinced them that her son was in a better circus and that she had sacrificed herself for his well being. However, the presence in the audience of a young man who could be her son, forces her to admit what “really” happened.

About her past, Cósima reveals that before she became part of the circus, she was an important executive, but *Alejandra* uses sarcasm to discredit her: “Tenías oficina con alfombra tan cara y tan cara que se le hundían a uno los pies hasta las rodillas” (5). The fact that Cósima’s narrative takes place on stage – where according to Gabriela José “todo es inventado, invento, invención, imaginación” (9) – keeps us from learning the truth about her life. The removal of her mask, as well as that of her fellow actors, does not help us to elucidate the characters’ true identity. But it does allow the actors to look into their own mirror and perform an act of introspection – they who thought their job was to present a mirror to society. This introspection into the self advocates a critical relation to identity that the author would like to see at the national level.

Finally, the play, as it rehearses and examines society’s problems, proposes that the social function of theatre is to bring out the audience’s critical instinct. Like the actors, the spectators must undergo a process of self-analysis in their relation to Puerto Rico’s political situation in particular and to the world in general. The play begs one to formulate the following questions: What interventionist roles should powerful nations play? If the characters have to return to their place of origin to confront their multiple beings, where does a Commonwealth – with a Hispanic heritage and which finds itself between two world powers (alluded to in the title) – go to think of its identity? What are the alternatives for a country whose identity is subject to that of others? Robert Massa examines Puerto Rico’s state of in-betweenness and points out: “The play’s title is a Spanish pun suggesting both ‘brainy circus’

[because of its close relation to *cráneo*] and ‘Ukrainian circus.’ Early on, a character says that the performance has nothing to do with the Ukraine, yet by the end it becomes clear the playwright does intend an analogy between U.S. and Soviet hegemony” (94). Vicky Unruh also suggests that the “eu” in *Eukraniano* is “an oblique reference to the neocolonialist presence of the *Estados Unidos* or United States” (139).

By highlighting the fluidity of fiction and reality, and combining the United States and the Soviet Union in the title, Casas insinuates that it is no longer necessary to choose a fixed or stable identity, because the identity of a nation and that of its citizens continually adjusts to the political times and the social circumstances. This makes critical distance and constant awareness important given that the act of building an identity is a continuous work-in-progress. In this process art holds a mirror to the nation and its citizens’ actions, for it is through the exchange in which art reflects back what it takes from life that the in-betweenness of the nation becomes less a problem to overcome in the search for stability and permanence, than the ever changing and elusive context through which to come to terms with identity.

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Notes

¹ The seed of this essay was planted several years ago during conversations with Teresa Cajiao Salas while we were working on the anthology *Women Writing Women: An Anthology of Spanish-American Theatre of the 1980s*. Our exchanges would not have been as fruitful without the many materials that Casas sent us, including the reviews her play received after its staging by Joseph Papp at the 1988 New York Theatre Festival. I also wish to thank David E. Johnson and Carine Mardorossian for their invaluable insights and suggestions.

² Mariza L. González quotes this passage on page 25 in her essay on Luis Rafael Sánchez.

³ Sandra M. Cypess includes Francisco Arriví, René Marqués and Luis Rafael Sánchez among those writers who “have dealt with the theme of national identity especially as it intersects with the problem of colonialism” (182).

⁴ According to Derrida, “an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures” (28). In this regard, identity is the illusion of a stable in itself inscribed within the fluid effects of identification.

⁵ In her provocative essay on this play, Cypess points out that Casas “appears to follow the traditions – both theatrical and national – only to subvert the past” (182). Because it is the youngest daughter, as opposed to the first-born male, who identifies with the land, Cypess asserts that the play “considers a definition of national identity that is broad enough to include women as active agents in the inheritance and maintenance of the national patrimony” (183).

⁶ Luz María Umpierre, in “Introducción al teatro de Myrna Casas,” explains that the play “se compone de seis secciones llamadas ‘absurdos,’ cada una de ellas precedida por una sección llamada ‘soledad.’ Todas las soledades tienen a los mismos personajes: una niña y una actriz – trazas signo mujer. Todos los absurdos tienen, como personajes principales a objetos inanimados y personajes innominados del teatro tradicional” (53).

⁷ Umpierre’s essay is not specifically interested in the question of fiction and reality, but rather explores the role of women within the theatre and Puerto Rican society.

⁸ Brecht’s distancing technique, or what he termed *Verfremdungseffekt*, postulates that the theatre’s role should not be to appeal to people’s emotions, but that instead it should make them think. Above all, the play should keep people from identifying with the characters in order to be able to reflect without obstructions upon the social and moral aspects of the play. Martin Esslin lucidly illustrates Brecht’s theory in “The Brechtian Theatre: Its Theory and Practice,” the sixth chapter of *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*.

⁹ The markers of identity are ultimately useless because we can never confirm if the members of the cast use their given names or if they have assumed artistic names. Also, a character who appears to be part of the audience tells us from the beginning that she changed her name from Amaryllis to Alina. The members of the troupe are unable to distinguish familial from professional relationships and, finally, there is a scene in which the use of Spanglish blurs, subverts, and contests the distinction between Spanish and English.

¹⁰ Gabriela José, the owner of the troupe claims they cannot discuss politics because “estamos de paso por aquí” (10). However, their transient status does not inhibit the raising of political issues.

¹¹ As we all know, in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* stages a drama that will reflect his uncle’s and mother’s image back to them in order to force the uncle to admit that he killed Hamlet’s father. Hamlet’s desire is “to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure . . .” (3.2.20-24).

¹² The idea of the theatre as a mirror to society is quite common, but not the idea of turning the mirror onto oneself, although short stories such as “Axolotl” by Julio Cortázar and “Parque de diversiones” by José Emilio Pacheco do invert the traditional role of the observer as subject into the object under scrutiny.

¹³ Art in general and theatre more specifically, play a similar role. They are meant to provoke questions and reflection, but not to prescribe solutions.

¹⁴ My reading deviates from Vicky Unruh’s who maintains that *El gran circo Eukraniano* “contains lingering traces of a Marquesian nostalgia for a more rooted past, as performers reminisce about the island’s generous rural people and good coffee” (139).

¹⁵ For an excellent review of critical studies on metatheatre, including Richard Hornby’s position, see Catherine Larson’s essay “Lope de Vega and Elena Garro: The Doubling of *La dama boba*.” Her explication is much more complete than anything I can develop here, but basically, metatheatre comprises three main components: the self-awareness of creation, the concept of the play within the play, and the constant reminder that what the audience is experiencing is fiction.

¹⁶ With regard to the question of wealth in Puerto Rico, José Luis González remarks: “Poverty, injustice, and nonconformity still persist in present-day Puerto Rico, but in disconcerting coexistence with the ideological buffers created by two generations of Puerto Rican and North American reformers in order to disguise and downplay them: poverty with food stamps; injustice with Associated Free State or, more euphemistically, “Commonwealth”; and nonconformity with alienating and institutionalized demagoguery” (13).

¹⁷ The “aguaguagua” evokes Luis Rafael Sánchez’s “La guagua aérea,” which both celebrates and critiques Puerto Rico’s idiosyncrasies during a flight between San Juan and New York City. For Unruh, it is the “portable bilingual and bicultural space” of the first skit in which

a character “recalls being in the airplane en route to the island” that summons Sánchez’s “short story” (138). I place “short story” in quotation marks because other critics, among them Mariza L. González, refer to “La guagua aérea” as an essay.

¹⁸ A transportation system in Puerto Rico called an “aguaguagua” did operate between San Juan, Cataño, and Hato Rey for a short period of time in the mid to late 90s, but it is now defunct. The failure of the system confirms the inadequacy of the government and justifies the social criticism in the play.

¹⁹ The same effect is achieved, as Alberto Minero remarks, by reflecting the audience’s life on stage. According to Minero, such a reflection demythifies the “carácter de ‘exótico’ con el que muchas veces la gente, por miedo a sus efectos transformadores, caracteriza a la propia actividad artística” (5).

²⁰ The many cultural references make evident that the ideal spectator and reader is a Puerto Rican audience, despite the fact that many of the social problems are endemic to all societies. Referring to the lack of identity, for example, Robert Massa observes: “This is a theme that resonates in all times and places, though it must be especially vivid in Puerto Rico today, a state that is not a state, a place where an uneasy mix of Spanish, African, and Native American traditions is thrown smack up against mainland homogenization” (94).

²¹ It is in this skit that Casas dramatizes the current intercultural and “interlingual” status of Puerto Rico. Unlike her mentor, René Marqués, for whom keeping the purity of the Spanish language was crucial – Juan G. Gelpi-Pérez claims that “Marqués está obsesionado por fundar un discurso puro, un discurso que niegue y desdeñe todo tipo de contaminación lingüística o barbarismo” (177) –, Casas recognizes, like Luis Rafael Sánchez in “La guagua aérea,” that the continuous movement of Puerto Ricans between the United States and the Island has produced a new language and a new culture for the people of Puerto Rico. I take the term “interlingualism” from Juan Bruce Novoa who uses it to refer to the hybrid speech through which “Chicanos and Nuyoricans or Riqueños blatantly assert a new hybrid identity, which in turn redefines the nationalistic binary opposition into a preliminary dialectic form which has begun to spring the logical, irrepressible international synthesis” (232-3).

²² This reference presumes, of course, that she is “really” a member of the audience and not part of the cast of *El gran circo Eukraniano*.

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