

## The Haunted Puerto Rican Stage: Lucy Boscana in *La carreta* and *Vejigantes*

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“Y al son de un chancleteo presuroso, Doña Reme responde en lo que hasta el momento se considera su mejor imitación de Lucy Boscana haciendo de Doña Gabriela en *La carreta*: ‘Yaaaaaaaaa vooooooooooooooy, miiiiiiiiiiiijo, yaaaaaaaa vooooooy...’”

— Ana Lydia Vega, “Sobre tumbas y héroes”

On May 31, 2001, playwright and theatre historian Roberto Ramos-Perea posted an article on the Internet that began as follows: “El reciente fallecimiento de nuestra querida primerísima actriz Lucy Boscana, (mami Lucy para los que fuimos sus hijos), como secuela de varias pérdidas insustituibles en la memoria de la historia teatral de nuestro pueblo [...] nos obliga a la reflexión de los destinos de nuestro arte.” While Ramos-Perea’s meditations on the state of Puerto Rican theatre serve the important purpose of exposing current funding practices as unfair and detrimental to the careers of many young dramatists, the death of Lucy Boscana has led me to think about the theatre’s role as preserver of cultural memory, for she played leading roles in plays from the 1950s that enact Puerto Rico’s struggle with its identity. This article examines the ghostly presence in the Puerto Rican theatre and cultural memory of Lucy Boscana, who was cast as counterpoint mothers of the national family in René Marqués’s *La carreta* (1953) and in Francisco Arriví’s *Vejigantes* (1958). That the same actress enacted remarkably different national identity stories during the politically charged decade of the 1950s contradicts the homogenizing official view of Puerto Rican identity as

a harmonious (and hierarchical) integration of Spanish, indigenous, and African cultures.<sup>1</sup> Boscana boldly brought to life on the national stage the politically silenced issues of racism and migration imagined by Marqués and Arriví. I contend, however, that Boscana's repeat performances – over 800 of them – of the *jibara* mother in *La carreta* haunts the Puerto Rican stage to the extent that it eclipses the Afro-Puerto Rican mother in *Vejigantes* in the national cultural imaginary.<sup>2</sup> By remembering the body that protagonized these plays as well as the contexts of their performance, I hope to shed light on the mechanisms of racial prejudice in the Puerto Rican cultural memory.

### **Memorable National Mothers: Doña Gabriela and Mamá Toña**

For Marvin Carlson, the theatre is an activity characterized by repetition, for the “ghosts” of the stories dramatized onstage, as well as the materials and bodies used to tell them, “haunt” their retelling. He writes:

Drama, more than any other literary form, seems to be associated in all cultures with the retelling again and again of stories that bear a particular religious, social, or political significance for their public. There clearly seems to be something in the nature of dramatic presentation that makes it a particularly attractive repository for the storage and mechanism for the continued recirculation of cultural memory. (8)

If, as Carlson suggests, ghosts frequent all theatre, then I would argue that Puerto Rican theatre is particularly haunted because of its fixation with the family plot. As I have argued elsewhere, in the Puerto Rican dramatic tradition, family plays allegorize narratives of national identity.<sup>3</sup> The persistence of the family scenario in Puerto Rican drama records how the national community imagines itself during particular historical junctures and responds to a desire to assert an identity and history obscured by the colonial situation of the island. More specifically, the theatre in the 1950s served as an important public space for imagining national communities and therefore played a part in repairing what Arcadio Díaz-Quñones calls “la memoria rota,” the fragmentation of Puerto Rico's historical memory produced by the experiences of colonialism. For Díaz-Quñones, open debates addressing such topics as religious practices, migration, and racial prejudice that might expose Puerto Rican identity as culturally heterogeneous and conflictive were among the many lapses in the narrative of the nation during the post-World War II period, the period during which Luis Muñoz Marín's populist nationalism led the island towards an industrial capitalist modernity underwritten by United States

colonialism (46, 59). The consolidation of Puerto Rico's national theatre movement in the 1940s and 1950s coincided with Muñoz Marín's economic development plan (Operation Bootstrap) and the creation of the Estado Libre Asociado in 1952, which solidified the island's colonial relationship with the United States. To counteract the intense cultural transformations produced by these changes, the government also instituted "Operation Serenity," which initiated cultural nationalist policies intended to strengthen cultural pride and curb resistance to the new political status of the island. With the establishment of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP) in 1955, the government adopted an even more explicit role in promoting Puerto Rican heritage. Through the organization of festivals, conferences, exhibitions, and contests, the creation of museums, and the restoration of historical buildings, the ICP's goal was to circulate and preserve Puerto Rican cultural values. The collective forum of the theatre was one area in which the government could implement its project of preserving national cultural patrimony and legitimizing certain visions of national community; accordingly, in 1958, the ICP sponsored its first annual festival of Puerto Rican theatre. The event brought together university-trained actors, directors, and technicians with Puerto Rico's most influential playwrights. The performances, well publicized and reviewed, took place in Puerto Rico's national theatre, Teatro Alejandro Tapia y Rivera in Old San Juan, in front of capacity houses (Dauster 182).

The wedded discourses of family and nation are particularly evident in Puerto Rican theatre from the 1940s and 1950s by authors such as Gonzalo Arocho del Toro, Manuel Méndez Ballester, Enrique Laguerre, Emilio Belaval, Myrna Casas, Francisco Arriví, and René Marqués. These playwrights engage with the institutionalization of an "official" national culture in contestatory and complicitous ways by staging family dramas that treat the experiences of rural displacement, migration, and urbanization. Although the dramatists do not explicitly declare their writings as allegories, their works encourage audiences to draw a correlation between the two apparently distinct narratives of family plots and the discourses of national identity. In this sense, my use of the term allegory builds on Angus Fletcher's minimal definition: "in the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another" (2). Their domestic plays allegorically perform a political desire to (re)tell a national identity story. The private family story refers implicitly to another story, a public discourse on collective identity. For these playwrights, the family provides a convenient trope that lends itself to the consideration of society at large because family structures and dynamics often mimic those of the nation. The male-dominated patriarchal family, for example, evokes the hierarchies of a larger collectivity:

the paternalist political leader/father who implicitly assigns hierarchical roles to members of the national family. Similarly, the conflicts within families that develop among couples, siblings, and different generations parallel the multiple points of view at play in considering the issues of race, class, and gender in constructions of national identity. With regard to gender, Antonio García del Toro has shown in his study *Mujer y patria en la dramaturgia puertorriqueña* (1987) that many Puerto Rican female protagonists embody the patriotic sentiments of their authors. He affirms that playwrights have found in women “la figura idónea para la proyección simbólica de la realidad socio-política de su pueblo. La mujer como figura literaria sintetiza mejor que el hombre el sacrificio, la maternidad, la búsqueda del honor para nuestra tierra” (240). Two such characters who come to represent “mothers” of the nation include Marqués’s Doña Gabriela and Arriví’s Mamá Toña, for the private family dramas they protagonize are, at the same time, inquiries into cultural origins and a changing national identity.

Both *La carreta* and *Vejigantes* respond to Puerto Rico’s newly consolidated colonial relationship with the United States by examining the cultural dynamic between the two and by advancing a particular conception of Puerto Rican national identity. The objective of the brief comparative analysis that follows is to consider why critics generally hail *La carreta* as Puerto Rico’s best “national play” and invariably praise Lucy Boscana’s interpretation of Doña Gabriela, while *Vejigantes*, although consistently noted for its treatment of race, occupies a smaller space in Puerto Rico’s collective consciousness. I would argue that the plays’ contrasting production histories and different approaches to issues of migration, race, and gender explain, in part, their relative positions in the Puerto Rican literary canon. In three separate movements, or *estampas*, *La carreta* dramatizes the plight of a rural family, who, unable to pay the mortgage on their land, migrates from the mountains first to the La Perla slum in San Juan and then to the Bronx in New York. In the course of the play’s action, the family’s dreams of a better economic future are destroyed by the constant degradation of their traditional Puerto Rican values in the mechanized, industrial world of the city. The play’s *costumbrista* qualities – its representation of regional language, customs, and values, its use of melodrama and stereotypes, and the sympathetic stage presence of the mother figure – have helped to capture the imagination of its public. It premièred in San Juan in 1953 at the Teatro Experimental del Ateneo, and its success soon brought the production to the larger Teatro Tapia y Rivera, the site that became the home of the ICP annual national theatre

festivals. Revivals of *La carreta* were produced in the context of the festival throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in smaller venues, and a televised version was aired in 1972 (González 61-63). *La carreta* was also produced internationally in Europe and in New York, in Spanish and in translation. The universality of the city/country conflict explains the play's appeal to international audiences, and its narrative of migration represents one of Puerto Rico's central 20th century historical processes; it speaks specifically to Puerto Ricans as well. Moreover, as John Antush points out, one reason for the play's resonance with Anglo, Nuyorican, and island audiences is that the story of a nation's transformation from an agrarian economy into the industrial age constitutes a basic American historical experience, as, I would add, do the displacements and diasporas that accompany this process (230). The play traveled to New York soon after its première in Puerto Rico, but it was *The Oxcart*, the English language production in 1966 starring Miriam Colón, Lucy Boscana, and Raúl Julia, that achieved success with a run of 89 performances (Pilditch vi). To reach an even wider audience, Colón sought funding from New York City Mayor John Lindsay, and in the summer of 1967 she presented the play free of charge, in all five boroughs of the city, in both Spanish and English. Thus, the performance of Marqués's play gave birth to Teatro Rodante Puertorriqueño/Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, one of the most long-standing and productive Latino theatre companies in the United States.

Performances of *La carreta* in New York found an audience that identified with its drama of migration and opened up an important space for Puerto Rican self-representation in the United States. However, unlike many contemporary critics and writers who view Puerto Rican national identity as portable and free of geographical boundaries, and who celebrate the space of migration as an interstitial site of new meanings, relations, and cultural practices, Marqués's telluric imagined nation limits Puerto Rico's "authentic" identity to the rural culture of the island. The play constructs a series of binaries that overwhelmingly favor the agrarian world over the urban one. While Marqués associates the country with the stability of the past, physical and spiritual freedom, moral decency, and pride in manual labor, he associates the city with the insecure present, asphyxiating space, imposed values, materialism, sexual promiscuity and mechanized labor. Stage effects such as the use of shadow and light, and natural and mechanical sounds add atmospheric support to this opposition. Even minor events and characters serve to communicate that Puerto Ricans would do well to combat United

States imperialism by staying on the island and taking advantage of local knowledge and culture. For example, when Luis, Doña Gabriela's adopted son, whose dream is to work in industry, can only find work in San Juan as a gardener, his agricultural skills ironically serve him well. In another case, an *independentista* writer in New York has become creatively sterile, and he seeks through Doña Gabriela's daughter, Juanita, a reconnection with his roots that would inspire him to write. Migration, in this play, consistently signifies loss and portends the destruction of the Puerto Rican (national) family. The climax of the play's third *estampa*, the tragic death of Luis at the hands of the very machines that he had hoped would bring him prosperity, prompts the matriarch to return to Puerto Rico with her family to bury her son and cultivate the land:

La tierra es sagrá. La tierra no se abandona. Hay que volver a lo que dejamoh pa que noh persiga más la mardisión de la tierra. Y yo vuervo con mihijo a la tierra de onde salimoh. Y hundiré mis manoh en la tierra colorá de mi barrió como la hundía el abuelo pa sembrar lah semillah. Y mi manos volverán a ser fuerte. (171)

Re-rooted in the land, Doña Gabriela and Juanita will become as strong as native *ausubo* trees, a symbol of tradition, continuity, and the survival of Puerto Rican identity.

Doña Gabriela's moral strength and self-abnegation, her identification with the land, and her revered status as procreator and caregiver make her an "ideal" metaphorical mother of the nation. Drama critic J.C. Collins calls her a "Mother-Saint" and states that Boscana in a 1971 production "has now absorbed her character completely. Doña Gabriela . . . emerges from the drama exactly as her creator intended she should, the symbol of Puerto Rican motherhood" (198). One factor in appointing Doña Gabriela symbol of Puerto Rican motherhood that is generally left unsaid is race. The family's attachment to the land identifies them as *jibaros*, white peasants of Spanish-Creole stock. According to Arlene Dávila, "It is the *jibaro* – associated with the countryside and with freedom and rebellion, in contrast to what is modern, Western, urban and foreign – that provides continuity with an agrarian past" (72). Marqués forms part of a long tradition of national writers that celebrates these values as the essence of the Puerto Rican identity. Although it is a historical reality that most rural peasants in Puerto Rico are *mestizos*, in the literary and popular imagination the *jibaro* is usually whitened to exclude recognizable African and Taíno traits. The *jibaro* construct, moreover, is

fundamentally masculinist, and rarely includes strong female figures such as Doña Gabriela.

Doña Gabriela's strong stage presence, however, does not imply that she escapes the patriarchal trappings of this view of national identity. Elsa Arroyo has argued that implicit in the family's return to the land is Doña Gabriela and Juanita's re-incorporation into the agrarian patriarchy, an essential component to Marqués's understanding of Puerto Rican national identity (160-62). In the city, Juanita evolves from a simple country girl to become independent young woman: she distances herself from her mother, lives alone, and follows her own career path. Significantly, she voices the play's strongest critique of the inequities and prejudices suffered by blacks and Puerto Ricans in the United States.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, Juanita is raped and has an abortion in San Juan, and in New York she supports herself as an escort. Thus rather than celebrating the advancement of women, the play communicates Marqués's deep distrust of women's increasing participation in the public sector. In his essay *The Docile Puerto Rican* and in other works, Marqués advances the view that by the 1950s, North American colonialism has distorted gender roles in Puerto Rico; men have taken on the feminine characteristic of docility (the impotence of Luis and the Puerto Rican writer in New York, for example), and women's new active role fosters this weakness. From this perspective, the growing importance of women's contributions to Puerto Rican society cannot be seen as a positive development, for it provides evidence that the patriarchal agrarian world in which Marqués was formed is disappearing. Juanita's return to Puerto Rico will recuperate this mythical utopic place of origin, and her marriage to a local peasant will morally redeem her and ensure her "proper" place in the (national) family.

The national family imagined in *Vejigantes* is quite different from *La carreta*, for Arriví highlights as the foundation of Puerto Rican culture the *mestizaje* of African and Spanish cultures rather than the white, Spanish Creole heritage. Since its première at the 1958 inaugural ICP theatre festival, *Vejigantes* has enjoyed numerous important revivals in the context of the national festival as well as in other venues. Like *La carreta*, *Vejigantes* soon came to be included in Puerto Rico's secondary and university school curriculum and continues today to be Arriví's best-known piece. In the play, cross-cultural romances between the *mulata* Toña and a Spaniard, between her daughter Marta and another Spaniard, and between her granddaughter Clarita and a North American present what Matías Montes Huidobro calls the "erotic synthesis" of Puerto Rican history (151). The anxiety produced by racial

miscegenation plays out in *Vejigantes* much like Puerto Rican poet Fernando Fortunato Vizcarrondo's popular poem in which the poetic voice asks: "Mi mai se sienta en la sala/¿Y tu agüela, a'onde ejtá?" (77). Marta, who embodies the self-hatred born of a colonialist complex, banishes her mother to the back room of the house while she adopts the role of a white woman in the public space of the living room. Mamá Toña resists her confinement, and threatens to "plant" herself in the living room as though she were "una ceiba..." (49), a hearty Caribbean tree of great longevity, suggesting the pervasiveness of African roots in Puerto Rican identity.

Like Marqués, Arriví resists imagining a Puerto Rican nation made up of diverse geographical locales. The theme of migration in *Vejigantes* intersects with the play's examination of racial conflicts in Puerto Rico through the character Bill, an insurance salesman from Alabama who works and goes out with Clarita. The stereotyped portrayal of the racist southerner paints a negative picture of North American influence in Puerto Rico, particularly when Bill, surveying the beautiful Luquillo beach, expresses his country's economic interest in the island in terms of conquest: "Millones en potencia. Millones. Con un poco de inteligencia y los americanos invadirán este paraíso" (67). Marta, nevertheless, sees in Bill the opportunity to save Clarita from psychological complexes she herself has suffered. To marry Bill and move to the United States would comply with Marta's mission to "save" her daughter: "Salvarla de rencores que estrangulan el corazón. Salvarla... Salvarla... Entregársela libre al reino de los blancos" (63). Clarita, in contrast, has come to appreciate her unique cultural identity, and she ends her relationship with Bill once she discovers his racism. The use of the racial prejudice theme as a means to make clear the cultural incompatibility of the two countries comes into sharp focus when Clarita states: "Hay momentos, mamá, en que me doy cuenta que Puerto Rico es un país y Estados Unidos otro" (59). In this regard, the play echoes Tomás Blanco's earlier essay, *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico* (1937), which systematically distinguishes the nature of racial discrimination experienced in Puerto Rico and the United States and suggests that racial prejudice in Puerto Rico is enacted as colonial mimicry in response to North American influence (Marta being the play's best example of this phenomenon) (63-65). While Arriví's play contradicts Blanco's claims that Puerto Rican racial prejudice is benign and almost non-existent, its anti-colonialist sentiments look largely to United States-Puerto Rico relations to explain an internal national conflict.

The play's position seems to be that while there is no denying Puerto Rico's economic ties to the United States (Clarita's job), culturally the island

should reject an inauthentic national identity that might result from this relationship (Clarita's refusal of Bill). Clarita's future as a single, university-educated working woman contrasts sharply with Juanita's return to Puerto Rico to marry a farmer. In *Vejigantes*, there is no reestablishment of the patriarchal family at the play's end. After Bill discovers the truth about the racial makeup of Clarita's family, Mamá Toña literally frightens him away (109). She and Clarita then convince Marta to unmask the *vejigante*, the mask or psychological block that denies the African roots in Puerto Rican culture, and together they walk free in a paradisiacal garden. The image of this anti-patriarchal and non-hierarchical relationship reconfigures family as metaphor for nation. It offers an alternative to the traditional Puerto Rican family and a subject position that offers more agency for women. Unlike Marqués, Arriví does not suggest that increased mobility for women constitutes an imposition of a matriarchal foreign model and the loss of Puerto Rican cultural traditions. Rather, the family structure in *Vejigantes* presents a new perspective from which to explore a rapidly changing national community. While the dramatization of family as metaphor for national community in both plays is emblematic of the cultural nationalism of the 1950s, the image in *Vejigantes* of an urban community of economically solvent, Afro-Puerto Rican women offers a radical alternative to Marqués's nostalgic vision of a patriarchal and pre-industrial agrarian national family. Within a space of three years and in the same theatre, Lucy Boscana premièred the starring maternal roles in both *La carreta* and *Vejigantes* and subsequently played them in major revivals throughout the 1960s and 1970s, which helped to immortalize her presence as "Mami Lucy" on the Puerto Rican stage. Nevertheless, it was ultimately Doña Gabriela who captured the public's heart. Publications that mention Lucy Boscana invariably praise her role as Doña Gabriela, while her role as Mamá Toña, if mentioned, is often noted after her parts in less compelling Arriví plays such as *María Soledad* and *Alumbramiento*. The Ateneo Puertorriqueño's 1985 tribute to Boscana for example, states: "Uno de sus éxitos teatrales más importantes, si no el de mayor importancia, lo es *La carreta* de René Marqués" (9). In the legislation to rename the theatre in Boscana's hometown in honor of the "primera dama del teatro puertorriqueño," the text reads: "Cabe señalar que la actuación más reconocida de su carrera teatral fue el de Doña Gabriela en la obra *La carreta* de René Marqués." Two recently-published encyclopedia entries on Boscana make no mention of Mamá Toña, but they do note her role as Doña Gabriela, and on the cover of Alfonso García del Toro's book on women in Puerto Rican drama, Boscana

as Doña Gabriela occupies the center of a collage of photographs of Puerto Rican actresses.<sup>5</sup> Doña Gabriela even becomes the subject of postmodern parody in Ana Lydia Vega's 1987 short story, "Sobre tumbas y héroes," when the character Doña Remedios is described responding to a knock on the door "en lo que hasta el momento se considera su mejor imitación de Lucy Boscana haciendo de Doña Gabriela en *La carreta*" (133).

Conversely, even though as playwright, theatre historian, and, for many years, supervisor of the theatre wing of the ICP, Arriví was as instrumental as Marqués was in promoting a national theatre, he has never reached the canonical heights of his contemporary. Relative to the amount of criticism devoted to Marqués, there is a sort of critical silence that surrounds Arriví's work in general and the reception of Boscana's interpretation of Mamá Toña in particular. In establishing Arriví's central role in Puerto Rican theatre, for example, none of the extensive quotes by drama critics celebrating Arriví's work selected by theatre historian Angelina Morfi make reference to the text or its reception, even though it is by far Arriví's best-known play (423-29). Furthermore, in spite of the numerous artists and scholars who have, particularly since the 1980s, focused on recuperating the African, working-class and female voices in Puerto Rican history, I find that Arriví is rarely cited as a precursor to the explosion of cultural production related to these themes.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, Marqués is more frequently invoked in these discussions as an example of the hegemonic view of Puerto Rican nationalism that overshadowed the different practices and discourses such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and migration that organize Puerto Rican identities. One way to secure the place of Arriví's work on race in the Puerto Rican cultural canon would be to place it in a genealogy of texts that treat Puerto Rican black culture. For now, I turn to proposing some of the reasons why Mamá Toña, a strong, African female role brought to life by the leading actress of her time, failed to make a lasting mark on the Puerto Rican cultural memory.

### **Blackface, White Skin: Racial Prejudice and Colonialism**

In his essay, "La gente de color," Luis Rafael Sánchez attributes the dearth of critical studies and literary works dealing with racial prejudice in Puerto Rico to a reluctance to confront "un tema tenido por espinoso, por divisorio y por fratricida" (25). It would follow that texts like *Vejigantes* could run the risk of a cool reception by the status quo, because they introduce race (and therefore class) in a debate on national identity already divided

over the political status issue. Marqués's more conservative stance on national identity in *La carreta* might explain the warm recollections of Doña Gabriela, while Mamá Toña's more tenuous presence in the Puerto Rican cultural memory speaks to the island's particular brand of racial prejudice. Different from writers of earlier generations such as Blanco, Sánchez does not downplay the existence of discrimination in Puerto Rico by judging it inconsequential compared to the violent history of race relations in the United States; rather, he signals the oblique and hypocritical ways it operates in everyday life in popular culture, language, and the workforce. Similarly, my reading of a text noted for its bold treatment of a generally unspoken theme should not leave unproblematized its complicity with the subtle and not so subtle forms of racial discrimination that inform the play and its productions starring Lucy Boscana. Shifting from textual analysis to consider the play in performance raises the question of why casting a white woman to play Mamá Toña might have contributed to the fading of this black character from the minds of Puerto Rican critics and theatregoers.<sup>7</sup> As we will see, the use of blackface, the objectification of the female body, and the racial anxiety created by Puerto Rico's colonial status constitute central factors in the erasure of black subjectivity from the Puerto Rican stage and collective consciousness.

On the one hand, *Vejigantes* issued a challenge to its audience by asking it to consider a part of its collective identity that had long been repressed in the national psyche. Bombarded by the sights and sounds of the percussive, African-derived *bomba*, the predominantly white audience experienced quite a different story of the nation than many of the plays staged at the theatre festivals sponsored by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP) in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, following Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, only certain constructions of identity play out within the web of interests (social agents and institutions, in this case dominated by the ICP) that constitute the cultural-literary field of a given historical moment. Since a white woman was selected to play the lead black role, it would appear that the physical presence of the black female body dancing to African rhythms on the national stage transgressed what Bourdieu calls "the space of possibles," that is, "all that one must have in the back of one's mind in order to be in the game" (176). Conversely, in the cultural field of 1950s Puerto Rico, it was quite acceptable for white actors to play black characters. In fact, one of the dominant figures in the entertainment industry of the period was popular actor Ramón Ortiz del Rivero, best known for his television portrayal of the blackface character Diplo.<sup>9</sup> While Rivero's comic character has roots in the 19th-century performance tradition of Teatro Bufo, a

Cuban form of minstrelsy popular in the Caribbean, the casting of Boscana as Mamá Toña speaks more to the second-class status of blacks in Puerto Rican performing arts and to the reality that blackness is often construed as “Other” and therefore left out of the national cultural imaginary. Not casting an Afro-Puerto Rican actress compromises the play’s subversive potential to give visibility and voice to the subaltern in the very public sphere of the national theatre.<sup>10</sup>

The performance of race in *Vejigantes* can be likened to a racial transvestitism that has the effect of foregrounding the performativity of racial categories, that is, their status as artificial and mutable constructs of given social and historical circumstances.<sup>11</sup> In addition to Boscana’s blacked up performance of Mamá Toña, racial masquerade figures into the text itself through Mamá Toña’s mixed-race daughter, Marta. Of the three generations represented in the play, she is the most afflicted by racial complexes and goes to great length to mask her authentic heritage. She “passes” as a white woman with the help of dimmed lighting, a thick layer of white powder, clothes that cover her body completely, and a turban that hides her curly hair (33, 42). Marta’s costume misidentifies her race, and her self-conscious performance highlights the instability of racial identities and the ease with which they can be manipulated and reconstructed for certain agendas, particularly in a society where *mestizaje* has made the binary racial categories of black and white completely unstable. Nevertheless, impersonating the racial other, whether it be through whiteface or blackface, involves an act of colonization, since according to Diana Fuss, “every identification involves a degree of symbolic violence, a measure of temporary mastery and possession” (9). Just as identifying with the white “Other” does violence to Marta’s mixed-race “Self,” Boscana’s impersonation of a black person, read psychoanalytically, “operates on one level as an endless process of violent negation, a process of killing off the other in fantasy in order to usurp the other’s place, the place where the subject desires to be” (9). In spite of the presence of black musicians and dancers on stage, there is very little African self-representation in the play, considering that a white actress speaks and performs as a surrogate for a black character. The play in performance, therefore, paradoxically celebrates the presence of black culture in Puerto Rican society at the same time that it negates its representation and voice. In the final analysis, the racial masquerade in *Vejigantes* highlights the instability of racial categories without pointing to a crisis or dissolution of such categories.<sup>12</sup> Rather than breaking down the socially constructed racial binary to reveal a multiplicity of hybrid subject positions, the play maintains fixed, homogenous group identities. “Play” with racial categories,

in Michael Rogin's words, "may also provide symbolic reassurance, mastering the anxiety about mobile identities rather than challenging the social order" (33).

Theorists of minstrelsy also point out that masquerading in blackface secures the white spectators' position as superior and, as Susan Gubar puts it, allows them "to enjoy looking at a black person without having to actually see one" (76-77). Since *Vejigantes* addresses the subject of cross-racial romances, perhaps it would have been too radical to see sexual desire between Toña and the Spaniard; blackface, in effect, neutralized any potential sexual charge between blacks and whites on stage and allowed a mostly white audience to enjoy the make-believe romance. It also afforded the male spectator the pleasure of viewing a simulacrum of the celebrated beauty and sensuality of the *mulata*. Moreover, in his attempt to associate Mamá Toña with what he views as authentic and popular Puerto Rican culture, Arriví relies on a stereotypic, gendered identification with the natural and spiritual world. Marqués's characterization of Doña Gabriela in *La carreta* is similar in this sense, but here the gendered discourse is also racialized. In *Vejigantes*, Mamá Toña unfailingly asserts her sense of identity and cultural roots through folkloric language replete with nature metaphors and references to cultural practices associated with Puerto Rican black culture. More significantly, at the same time Arriví criticizes the inhumane gesture of confining Mamá Toña to the back room, the stage directions dehumanize her by presenting an image of an (uncivilized and sexual) creature of nature dancing on the beach: "Toña mulata oscura de cuerpo tenso y frescote como una palmera moza" (9). As I have noted, this body, marked by both race and gender, is destined for the male spectatorial gaze, and as much as the play uses the metaphor of sexual conquest to criticize colonialism, it does not problematize the consumption of the female body as the object of the spectacle. To be fair, the dancing scene is not gratuitous, and the annual carnivalesque celebrations of Santiago in Loíza, the region best known for the preservation of its African heritage, provide a coherent context. But to pay homage to the contributions of black people to Puerto Rican culture only through music, dance, and famous *vejigante* masks is in line with the tendency to confine black culture to the folkloric and expressive realm (Torres 2: 298).

If the theatre is, as Carlson posits, a memory machine, then the kinds of memories it produces tell us something about how a society remembers. By problematizing such topics as migration and race, *La carreta* and *Vejigantes* do their part in restoring a national archive distorted by colonialism. More specifically, the analysis of the memory of Lucy Boscana's roles in these plays helps show the very operations of colonialism that haunt

Puerto Rico's collective consciousness. The sheer number of times Lucy Boscana played Doña Gabriela may have overshadowed the "Other" mother of the nation she played in *Vejigantes*, but, as I have argued, Mamá Toña most likely figures less memorably in the Puerto Rican cultural canon because of the radical, racialized image of national identity it enacted. At the same time, playing the part in blackface missed the opportunity to create a truly memorable role for black actresses, one that might have been a benchmark in opening a space for black self-representation in the national theatre. Finally, in the context of the social transformations of the 1950s, Lucy Boscana's body becomes the scene upon which colonialist racial anxieties play out. Gladys Jiménez-Muñoz and others have found evidence of such anxiety in the 1950 census in which 80% of Puerto Ricans identified themselves as white and 20% as black (when in reality the majority of citizens were of mixed race) and the differentiation made in the United States army between "Puerto Rican whites" and "Puerto Rican blacks" (106). Implicitly, then, it would follow that "Puerto Rican white," an already extremely slippery category in a culture characterized by *mestizaje*, was different from "United States white." That is, as Puerto Ricans looked into the mirror, they had to confront how the colonizer attempted to affirm cultural difference and colonial superiority through re-defining racial categories. Even today, the continued pressures of colonialism inspire discourses on the essential *hispanidad*, or whiteness of the island.<sup>13</sup> Sánchez, linking this discourse to the annexationist movement, writes: "El falso paradigma racial cumple otras aspiraciones, nada secretas, como lo son tranquilizar el Padre Nuestro Que Está en Washington y asegurarle que la etnicidad puertorriqueña contiene un porcentaje mayoritario de gentes blancos" (29). The *independentista* underpinnings of *Vejigantes*, in contrast, carefully distance Puerto Rico from the sort of racism experienced in the United States by celebrating the island's racial diversity and rejecting racial prejudice. At the same time, however, the play's blackface performance unintentionally reveals Puerto Rican apprehension with regard to its identity vis à vis the United States, for even though *Vejigantes* presents the moment when Marta washes off her white facial powder and unmask her African heritage as cathartic, the memory of Lucy Boscana as Doña Gabriela simultaneously reassures the audience that Mamá Toña's blackface is also just a mask and that beneath it lies the face of Puerto Rico's desired (white) national mother.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Arlene Torres writes that the official endorsement of these three building blocks of Puerto Rican culture continues to provide an ideological justification for the superiority of Puerto Rico's Hispanic legacy, based on the "greater" and more significant contribution it made to the peasant and thus to the nation. The dominant explanation of Puerto Rican culture, which reduces the African contribution in relation to that of the two other components, coincides with a persistent racism and the continuous idealization of the Spanish heritage. (73) See also Arlene Torres and Lilian Guerra for more on the ideologies supporting both official and popular representations of Puerto Rican national identity.

<sup>2</sup> The figure of 800 performances appears in the entry on Boscana in *Puerto Rico Past and Present: an Encyclopedia* (50).

<sup>3</sup> This essay extends some of the ideas presented in my book, *Family and Identity in Contemporary Cuban and Puerto Rican Drama* (University Press of Florida, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to recognize that while Marqués's play promotes the ideals of the Puerto Rican *jibaro* culture, in one scene, in a paradoxically inclusive gesture, it is noted that the Puerto Rican shot in New York is black (151). I would add, however, that by focusing the scene's criticism on racism in the United States Marqués skirts the issue of racial prejudice on the island.

<sup>5</sup> See pg. 50 in *Puerto Rico Past and Present: An Encyclopedia* and pg. 247 in *Encyclopedia Puertorriqueña Siglo XXI*. García del Toro does not include Mamá Toña in his study of ten Puerto Rican dramatic protagonists who embody their authors' patriotic sentiments. My reading of Arriví's play, in contrast, places Mamá Toña in this tradition.

<sup>6</sup> In his article "Cortijo's Revenge: New Mappings of Puerto Rican Culture," for example, Juan Flores examines how writings from the 1980s on Puerto Rican identity valorize African and working-class culture. Arriví's interest in this aspect of Puerto Rican identity pre-dates this trend by two decades, but, inexplicably, Flores does not include him as a precursor. *Vejigantes* could be usefully read in dialogue with other important texts dealing with black culture such as Tomás Blanco's *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico* (1937), *Narciso descubre su trasero* (1975) by Isabelo Zenon Cruz, and *El país de cuatro pisos* (1980) and other stories by José Luis González.

<sup>7</sup> It is my understanding that Boscana sought out the role of Mamá Toña. The practice of casting is an area yet to be researched in Latin American theatre historiography. As Rosalina Perales's book on Puerto Rican director Victoria Espinosa demonstrates, there is much to be gained by the study of production and casting practices, acting methods, and the complicated relationships between artists and cultural institutions

<sup>8</sup> I characterize the audience as "predominantly white" because a national theatre festival held in the capital attracts a socio-economically-privileged crowd. By "white," I mean socially white, because the audience was undoubtedly made up of people of multiracial origins who were considered "white" because of their economic and social standing. I should note as well that I am not claiming Boscana was white, but that through her repeat role as Doña Gabriela she has been constructed in the popular imagination as white. Interestingly, by listing Boscana among famous Puerto Rican black and mulatto performers, Isabelo Zenon Cruz "outs" Boscana's supposedly true racial identity (308-09). At the same time, I have heard others speak of Boscana's apparently indigenous Taíno features. The point here is that race and ethnicity are subjective social constructs, not empirical categories.

<sup>9</sup> For more on Diplo, see [www.diplo.org](http://www.diplo.org) and Galdys M. Jiménez-Muñoz's article, "The Blackface of 'Puerto Rican Whites': Race and Representation in Postwar Puerto Rico." I thank Larry La Fountain-Stokes for drawing my attention to Jiménez-Muñoz's study, which has inspired many of my thoughts on Boscana's blackface performance.

<sup>10</sup> To my knowledge, it was not until the 1970s that a black actress played Mamá Toña in a major production of the play.

<sup>11</sup> As Michael Rogin puts it, “performativity scripts identities. It defines group members by the roles they are forced to play. Far from simply escaping power, performance also operates under its sign” (33). Like Rogin, the butlerian notion of performativity informs my approach to racial identity. Just as there is no originary or essential gender identity that exists outside of its performative acts, the constant need for repeat performances to reaffirm the norms that regulate identity reveals instability and citationality of racial categories.

<sup>12</sup> Marjorie Garber has theorized that cross dressing marks a category crisis, and challenges “the easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of ‘female’ and ‘male,’ whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural”(10). I am arguing that the racial cross-dressing in *Vejigantes* does not serve to denaturalize the racial black-white binary by signaling the fluidity of identity boundaries.

<sup>13</sup> In a 1988 speech given in Spain, for example, Governor Rafael Hernández Colón revealed his eurocentricism by remarking that the contribution of the black race to Puerto Rican culture was irrelevant. See Flores for the context of the debate that ensued.

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