

The Migrant Nation in *La guagua aérea* by Luis Rafael Sánchez

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*Después, con el paso de los años, con el advenimiento de la
transportación supersónica, el viaje se confirma como una
metáfora estremecedora del ser y el existir
puertorriqueños—el continuado ir y venir con que se pelea
el arraigo en la extraña nación, Estados Unidos de
Norteamérica.*

--Luis Rafael Sánchez, "Tarjeta de embarque,"
La guagua aérea

Screams break the silence of the routine nightly flight from San Juan to New York. A blonde flight attendant shrieks, terrifying the passengers into thinking a group of hijackers have been discovered on board the plane (Luis Rafael Sánchez, *La guagua aérea* 12). Soon they learn the reason for all the commotion—a healthy pair of crabs, having gotten loose from their cage, walk down the aisle harmoniously (12). Having realized the terrorists are a pair of Puerto Rican crabs en route to becoming food in New York, laughter spreads throughout the hundreds of passengers (12). Figuratively, the Puerto Ricans are no longer imprisoned in their seats, and the crabs have given rise to a carnivalesque scene. As shrieks of laughter fill the cabin, disorder reigns and the passengers now pose a new threat to the crew, for together they represent a migrant nation, one formulated on the airbus, en route to transgress or better yet, infiltrate the borders of the United States.

In his introduction to his collection of twenty-four essays and five interviews titled *La guagua aérea* (1984, 1994), Luis Rafael Sánchez explains that the text by the same name centers the rest of the work, for the theme of *el viaje* implies more than just the trip Puerto Ricans embark upon from San Juan to New York. It is much more than the "traslado de un lugar a otro, generalmente distante, por algún medio de locomoción. Quiero que implique desafío y riesgo, desperdigamiento y diáspora, paroxístico amor a la tierra dejada atrás" (7). The voyage symbolizes a defiant border-crossing, but also Puerto Ricanness in-transit, an identity migrating between the past (Puerto Rico) and the future (New York): "La guagua aérea oscila entre el tumulto y el peso de la quimera, entre el compromiso con el salir adelante y la cruz secular del *Ay bendito*" (14). The airbus, an airplane-bus hybrid, functions as what Homi Bhabha calls "'in-between spaces' [which] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (2). In my opinion, Sánchez's story yields productive insights into Bhabha's literary theory. In fact, I would argue that *La guagua aérea* stages a reimagining of the "nation," but more significantly, this occurs because Sánchez renders a new version of Puerto Ricans' migration experience in the microcosm of the airbus. Though critics have taken note of how *La guagua aérea* questions Puerto Rican nationalist identity, the connection between how identity is reformulated in this text and Sánchez's rewriting of the migrant experience using both the performance of orality and the carnivalesque has yet to be examined.¹

I would suggest, therefore, that we think of the airbus metaphor within the wider context of migrant literature. As Jorge Duany has previously theorized, the airbus' *vaién* (back and forth) voyage serves as a metaphor for Puerto Ricans' "circular migration" as a "nation on the move" (32-38). In referring to Puerto Rico as a "nation on the move," Duany contests Benedict Anderson's thesis that the nation as an imagined community is a bounded and fixed space (Duany 8).² Explaining the island's political situation, he concludes that "Puerto Rico exemplifies better than other places the significance of cultural nationalism in that it is still

a colony, rather than a nation-state, and yet most people on the Island (as well as on the mainland) continue to identify themselves as Puerto Ricans as their primary collective affiliation” (Duany 18). Hence, according to Duany, Puerto Rico’s cultural nationalism, “the construction of cultural identities,” provokes “the constant transgression of the boundaries of territory, language, and ethnicity established by standard views of the nation” (18). Carlos Pabón, on the other hand, argues that it is time to rethink our definition of a nation altogether because “las naciones son construcciones discursivas en tanto los rituales de inscribir fronteras, imaginar territorios y poblaciones [...]. La nación no es una ‘cosa,’ sino una manera de hablar y pensar sobre ‘otros’ que no son como ‘nosotros’” (314).³ In his analysis, the nation encapsulates more than an imagined construct, it is “una fantasía, la proyección de un deseo imposible [...] la *nación no existe*” (Pabón 318). In my view, however, a text like *La guagua aérea* revolutionizes the national discourse by having a marginal group—the Puerto Rican *mestizo* passengers sitting in coach class—reconstitute Puerto Ricanness by redefining themselves as a “placeless” community, one without a permanent home. Nevertheless, a nation in the form of a unified migrant community will come to exist in the airbus. If we agree with Pabón’s thesis that the nation is a discursive product, a way of talking about an “us,” what then occurs to the imagined nation on the airbus?

Sánchez’s text transmits the Puerto Rican migration experience through the performance of both popular speech and the carnivalesque, and in turn, the questioning of a nationalist identity surfaces from these performances. In saying *La guagua aérea* portrays the Puerto Rican migration experience as carnivalesque, I am invoking Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (1965), and with respect to the Caribbean, Antonio Benítez Rojo’s idea of the Caribbean carnival as a metaphor for the political, cultural, and economic postcolonial systems at work in the Caribbean.⁴ In *The Repeating Island* (1992), Benítez Rojo claims that the study of the Caribbean is (repeatedly) chaotic. The author contends that academics are faced with numerous obstacles in their attempt to study the Caribbean due to “its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity; its contingency and its impermanence; its syncretism, etc” (1). Benítez Rojo’s system establishes the Caribbean not as “a common archipelago” of islands, but as a “meta-archipelago,” which “has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center” (4). In *La guagua aérea*, however, the carnivalesque scene has the opposite effect—it introduces boundaries and generates a new center in this microcosm.

The carnivalesque scene commences the moment “ese gentío mestizo” realize the terrorists on board are a pair of crabs migrating with them to New York (12):

Mas, esta noche, el uso de la guagua aérea como fortuita servidumbre de paso convierte los jueyes en sujeto de comentarios ágiles y vivaces novelerías; comentarios y novelerías que precipitan la intranquilidad que, ahora, reina. Y que la expresa el verbo agitado, los cuerpos que se agachan, los cuerpos que se incorporan, los cuerpos que se desmembran en los asientos carcelarios, los cuerpos que desparrama el barullo. (12-13)

Puerto Ricanness becomes a performance characterized by an oral language that like the passengers’ bodies is now in flux, liberated from the seats trapping it. Like Bakhtin’s characterization of “the carnivalesque crowd,” the *mestizo* passengers come to be “organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity” (*Rabelais* 255). In *La guagua aérea*, the crabs precipitate a fluid stream of consciousness language that in turn hastens the generalized disorder disrupting the nightly flight, but that more notably unifies this community by homogenizing and ordering it via popular speech. The infectious laughter resulting from the performance of orality threatens to dethrone the reign of the flight attendants and to depressurize the airbus, to veer it off course. Only the crew, “uniformemente gringa esta noche,” remains

immune to the contagious laughter (12). Again, we are reminded of Bakhtin's characterization of the carnivalesque, where "old authority and truth pretend to be absolute, to have an extratemporal importance. [...] They cannot and do not wish to laugh [...]" (212). Consequently, the uncrowning of the crew gives way to the passengers' reign.

More importantly, a realization takes place amongst the passengers of what Bakhtin calls "its [the carnivalesque crowd's] unity in time," which though momentary, is not static but continuous (255-56). In Bakhtin's vision the carnivalesque "affirms the people's immortal, indestructible character" while "established authority and truth are relative" (256). The contact between the bodies making up the crowd "acquires a certain meaning" because through this contact, the individual becomes part of a collective body, and "the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself [...]" (Bakhtin 255). While it is a state of awareness, the carnivalesque experience also offers the crowd a look into the future and the realization that in said instance they are a collective being (Bakhtin 256).

In Sánchez's work, the airbus passengers come together as a collective body when their escape from their seats triggers the storytelling that fuels the carnivalesque episode:

La intranquilidad azuza el discurso patriótico y el contrainterrogatorio anexionista [...]. La intranquilidad azuza la confesión a que se entregan los pasajeros de la guagua aérea—pues la autobiografía seduce a los puertorriqueños tanto como el amistar repentista y sin cuidado. La intranquilidad la engorda el recuento de las humillaciones sufridas por los puertorriqueños en el *cross town* y el *elevator*, el *fucking job* y la universidad liberal, la *junkería* del judío. Eso sí, humillaciones ripostadas con elocuencia, pundonor natural y carácter. (13)

The anecdotes relayed during the flight unite this community that, for one reason or another, have to land in New York, either to make a living to then return to Puerto Rico (regardless of whether they return alive or to be buried postmortem), to bring themselves and/or family members little souvenirs from home, or in the worst of cases, to bail a son out of jail. Regardless, there is a need for solidarity, to give rise to a collective whole, and this is expressed in a shared performance of orality: "Una resonante escolta de interjecciones encadena las anécdotas dramáticas y risibles, desgarradas y livianas, que formulan la resistencia a las afrentas, a los prejuicios a cara pelá, a los prejuicios disfrazados; anécdotas infinitas en las que los puertorriqueños ocupan el centro absoluto [...]" (15). The oral anecdote is the genre privileged by the migrant community because they can employ an "arroz y habichuelas" hybrid style understood by the passengers flying coach class who have in one way or another suffered prejudice, unemployment, and hunger while being "colonizados hasta el meollo" (15).

Sánchez's use of orality as the means by which a Puerto Rican community connects has been previously examined by Agnes Lugo-Ortiz in her study of Sánchez's short story "Jum," part of a 1966 collection of short stories titled *En cuerpo de camisa*. Like in "Jum," orality is the voice of the marginal subjects, and this audible popular speech constitutes the community, which "appears to become one in the act of a musical utterance: in a shared voice and in simultaneous bodily movements. [...] Through this encounter, the community—subliminally—establishes itself and its limits, stating its unwritten laws [...]" (Lugo-Ortiz 116). Taken together, the anecdotes recounted on this airbus relay the contemporary Puerto Rican migration experience: "Anécdotas, por millar, de boricuas que viajan, a diario, entre el eliseo desacreditado que ha pasado a ser Nueva York y el edén inhabitable que se ha vuelto Puerto Rico" (15). They tell the story of a migrating community searching for permanence whether it be here or there. In the in-between space of the airbus, with the performance of their oral anecdotes, the placeless *mestizos* find their place.

The anecdote, henceforth, is the discourse of the airbus transmitted in Puerto Rican Spanish. Additionally, the transformation of Puerto Rican Spanish, which is also a hybrid since it incorporates English

words, into a migrant language is another element of the Puerto Rican migratory experience. With combination of orality and a discourse of migration, we can better understand how the airbus microcosm illustrates Puerto Rican transnationalism. In her study of the postcolonial Caribbean, Shalini Puri defines transnationalism as the study of “aspects of human experience and societies that cannot be contained within the boundaries of a nation-state” (6).⁵ By containing the imagined Puerto Rican nation in an airbus flying over “el charco azul a que los puertorriqueños reducen el Atlántico,” *La guagua aérea* combines a specific *local* cultural and political context while conjuring up the transnational experience of migration (19). Sánchez, therefore, utilizes the airbus metaphor to propose transnationalism as a way to read the Puerto Rican migratory experience. Transnationalism, then, can be a new lens, a new literary theory, through which our study of Puerto Rican literature is enhanced.

Due to the constant roundtrip migration of Puerto Ricans between the Island and the United States, the discourse surrounding Puerto Rican nationalism and its post/colonial status is always “up in the air” to use Alberto Sandoval Sánchez’s phrase. The basis for Sánchez’s *La guagua aérea* is the history of Puerto Rican migration to the United States, but his focus is on the migrants’ formulation of their hybrid identity concretized spatially by the airbus, but also audibly by their oral performance and textually by the roundtrip airplane ticket stuffed in their pockets. As the narrator puts it, “[los] puertorriqueños que suben a la guagua aérea si llevan en el fondo del bolsillo el pasaje abierto que asegura la vuelta inmediata [...]” (19). The airbus passengers can only make this trip knowing they have a way back, keeping their transnational, hybrid identity intact as a written text—as an airbus ticket.

With respect to “discourses of hybridity” and the formulation of Caribbean hybrid identities, Puri explicates that these discourses “have been central to the Caribbean’s political culture” for the very reason that “the Caribbean has had to negotiate its identities” first with “its colonizing settlers” and now with “the United States of America, its imperial neighbor” (2). In *La guagua aérea*, we witness this process of negotiation via the carnivalesque because “la intranquilidad, en fin, tiende una raya, invisible pero sensible, entre el bando de los gringos y el bando de los puertorriqueños” (13). The carnivalesque experience is unidimensional, since only the *mestizo* passengers participate in it, and the negotiation resulting from this carnivalesque moment divides the passengers into two groups: the flight attendants alongside the Puerto Ricans sitting in first class and the Puerto Ricans in coach class. Thus, the carnivalesque sets in place these class and racial divisions—where an “us,” the *mestizos*, counters a “them,” the gringos and the bourgeoisie Puerto Ricans. Beyond the performance of orality, this migrant coach class community unifies in its naming of an “other”—the authoritarian figures of the crew and the Puerto Ricans in first class—to represent the antinationalist discourse. Put differently, this “other” does not form part of the nationalist discourse formulated on the airbus. Interestingly, the demarcating line between both groups is “la mulata que nutre el bebé con los caldos de una caldosa y radiante teta [...]” (13). She sets the barrier between both groups—the community of *mestizos* who form part of the performance of orality and the crew and first class Puerto Rican passengers who do not—by metaphorically feeding the performance of Puerto Ricanness.

Knowingly, the airbus crew remains immune to the anecdotes shared amongst the coach class, and decides to combat it like the plague with food and a movie starring Richard Pryor in an effort to silence this community (16). As one of the passengers notes:

El Capitán quiere matarnos la nota. El Capitán quiere matarnos la nota poniéndonos a ver una película del moreno que se achicharró por andar arrebatado. El Capitán quiere matarnos la nota para que soltemos los topos. El Capitán quiere quitarnos los topos para acabar el vacilón que le montamos los puertorriqueños a treinta y un mil pies sobre el nivel del mar.
(16)

The attempts to disrupt the mass conversation ultimately fail, and in fact, have the opposite effect, fueling the relaying of more anecdotes about the Puerto Rican migratory experience and the exacerbation of “chapucería costumbrista, mediocre color local, folklore liviano. Hasta síndrome del lelolai” (18). The migration anecdotes render a new vision of the contemporary Puerto Rican migration experience, a modern portrayal of, as Pabón puts it, “una colonia poscolonial, posmoderna y globalizada” that breaks the illusion of a homogenous national identity (335).

The passenger on the airbus who truly problematizes the question of Puerto Rican identity is an older female who asks the narrator where he is from to which he replies Puerto Rico. When asked what part of Puerto Rico he is from, he replies “De Humacao” (20). In order to humor the older woman, the narrator asks her the same questions (21). Her first answer does not vary, but when he asks what part of Puerto Rico she is from, he receives an unexpected answer—“De Nueva York” (21). In saying this, she smiles triumphantly, a smile the narrator shares with her as he ponders what her answer means: “Parece, claro está, un manoseado lugar común o un traspie geográfico. Parece, sin lugar a dudas, una broma” (21).

The female passenger stakes claim to her hybrid identity by affirming she is from New York, Puerto Rico, but the narrator takes this a step further by uncovering the defiant nature of her response: “Parece una hábil apropiación. Parece la dulce venganza del invadido que invadió al invasor” (21). Indeed, she can and probably does inhabit both places—the there and the here—but moreover, what this response suggests is her appropriation not only of her hybrid condition, but also of a transnational Puerto Rico that migrates with her. In this instance, the performance of orality suggests, as Julio Ortega has posited, that “el sujeto definido no tiene instrumento más poderoso que el habla contra la tiranía de los códigos” (15). By saying she is from New York and Puerto Rico, she has debunked the notion that she has to be from one place or the other. Instead, she can and is from both places. As Sandoval Sánchez puts it, “what is really at center stage is Puerto Rican identity,” one that is formulated “in midair where identity intersects, overlaps, and multiplies” (196-97).

In a reversal of René Marqués *El puertorriqueño dócil* (1960), Sánchez’s text employs a female *mulata* to present a new image of Puerto Ricanness. She is triumphant, for she, the migrant, has colonized the colonizer, and in so doing, she breaks the myth of “la docilidad o calidad de dócil del puertorriqueño actual” exemplified according to Marqués in the Puerto Rican literature of his time (154). The characterization of “los puertorriqueños [que] soportan y callan, desempeñando, con ejemplar mansedumbre, su tradicional papel de pueblo “generoso,” “hospitalario” y “democrático” shatters the instant she makes New York her own, a part of her Puerto Ricanness (209). Like the character, *La guagua aérea* ruptures the myth of the docile Puerto Rican by giving the authoritative voice to the airbus passengers sitting in coach class, whose anecdotes prove to be defiant as well: “anécdotas protagonizadas por un jíbaro que no habla dócil” (15). As Ortega has already noted, “la oralidad es también una operación relativizadora porque el habla es un flujo disolvente, que desata lo atado, y hace los códigos equivalentes al rebajarles la autoridad atribuída” (15). In other words, orality reconstitutes the center. Now, the margins, the marginal subject takes center stage because “lo oral es el espacio de lo comunitario, la fuente de identidad [...]” (Ortega 15). The performance of orality has revised the Puerto Rican national identity in the airbus microcosm.

What’s more, the performance of orality during this carnivalesque scene provides the setting for what the narrator describes as “el desafío del Tercer Mundo” (13). I concur then with Dimitri Perivolaris’ affirmation that “the incapacity of official politics to conceive a postcolonial project that might fulfill national aspirations is countered by a type of Bakhtinian carnivalization, or ‘permanente fiesteo’” (118). By imbuing his characters with a rebelliousness born from the performance of orality, Sánchez has managed to break off from the paternalistic canon of Puerto Rican literature.⁶

It is worth returning to Sánchez’s introduction where he states that the migratory voyage implies “desafío y riesgo, desperdigamiento y diáspora, paroxístico amor a la tierra dejada atrás,” but moreover, the

voyage becomes a metaphor “del ser y el existir puertorriqueños—el continuado ir y venir con que se pelea el arraigo en *la extraña nación*, Estados Unidos de Norteamérica” (7-8). The voyage now encapsulates what it means to be Puerto Rican. Puerto Ricanness is a voyage, and it is time that the history of this voyage is revised, that the truth be uncovered:

Es la historia que no se aprovecha en los libros de Historia. Es el envés de la retórica que se le escapa a la política. Es el dato que ignora la estadística. Es el decir que confirma la utilidad de la poesía. Es la recompensa a la zozobra de los miles de compatriotas que vieron la isla desaparecer, para siempre, desde la borda del vapor *Coamo* y la borda del vapor *Marine Tiger*. Es la reivindicación de los miles de compatriotas que subieron, aliados y pioneros, a las catorce horas de aflictivo encierro en las antiguas y tembluzcas máquinas de volar de la *Pan American World Airways*. Es la reclamación legítima de un espacio, furiosamente, conquistado. (21-22)

La guagua aérea ends with this suggestive passage, concluding that the migratory experience has indeed redefined how the Puerto Rican nation is (re)imagined. More significantly, it is the reality of the Puerto Rican migrants, who should have formed part of the History books, but did not. I would say that *La guagua aérea*, like Martínez Justiniano argues about *Seva*, “es la otra cara de la moneda: es la historia del puertorriqueño resistente, rebelde, luchador, valiente, inteligente, orgulloso, confiado, heroico e indócil. Un pueblo que por oponer resistencia tuvo que ser masacrado y borrado de la historia para que no existiera constancia de su rebeldía” (Web). In addition, Sandoval Sánchez’s claim is accurate in that “the migrant condition of Puerto Ricans [...] puts into question the coherence, stability, and homogeneity of their national identity” (197). Perhaps, this is part of what the narrator speaks of in the last passage.

The truth is that we are confronted with a migrating nation—an airbus nation that remains afloat over the Atlantic Ocean. The *mulata* confirms this reality, this truth, by revealing not only her hybrid identity and that of the narrator, but also that of the nation. Like the crabs that have gotten loose, this migrant community is also on the loose and ready to claim a national space: “¡El espacio de una nación flotante entre dos puertos de contrabandear esperanzas!” (22). This “placeless” community has found its collective home in the nightly flight between San Juan and New York.

Notes

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¹ See Alberto Sandoval Sánchez’s “Puerto Rican Identity Up in the Air” in *Puerto Rican Jam*, since he sees this as a staging and doubling of identity formation. Additionally, I agree with his thesis that *La guagua aérea* “testifies that a nationalist identity is not valid anymore: a residual nineteenth-century nationalism is obsolete, not sufficient for the postmodernist diversified migratory experience” (199). For Sandoval Sánchez, the metaphor of the airbus exposes “the experience of migration as a site of/for hybrid cultural production and identities” (197). Hugo Rodríguez-Vecchini reads *La guagua aérea* as “an attempt to represent, within the confines of an airplane microcosm, the living culture of Puerto Rican migrants” (63). Though I clearly concur with this statement, there is an element of rewriting that Sánchez employs in narrating the migrant experience of the airbus passengers, and the way he does so is through the carnivalization of the migratory voyage, specifically how the carnivalesque relates to orality. The significance and function of the popular voice in Sánchez’s works has been noted by Luce López-Baralt in her study of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*. Finally though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is also important to note the role collective memory plays in *La guagua aérea*. For more on how collective memory is fundamental not only for identity construction, but also for national formation, see Arcadio Díaz Quiñones’ *La memoria rota*.

² See Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

³ For a detailed debate on how a nation should be defined and how then to define Puerto Rico's situation, see Pabón's *Nación Postmortem*, where the author reviews and finds fault with leading theorists' definitions of a nation (281-318). It is important to note, however, that Pabón does acknowledge that even if the nation does not exist, he can still recognize it when he encounters it (314-318). According to Charles V. Carnegie, "nations are communities of people who see themselves as such" (5), and identities, specifically those relating to the nation, "are made meaningful only through our representation of them" (9). Also, see the introduction to *Puerto Rican Jam*, where the editors also discuss Puerto Rico as an ethnonation, forming "part of a 'transnation' or translocal nation" (15).

⁴ Robert Young defines the conditions of a postcolonial culture as that "which radically revised the ethos and ideology of the colonial state and, at the same time, reoriented the goals of the independence movement towards the very different conditions of national autonomy" (57).

⁵ In his discussion of the "worlding" of literature, Bhabha has previously posited that "transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature" (17). Puri's *The Caribbean Postcolonial* (2004), however, provides much awaited answers to the not yet answered question of the practicability of postcolonial theory for the study of Caribbean Literature. As Puri says, "Latin America and the Caribbean (particularly the non-Anglophone Caribbean) have been marginalized from the canon of a Postcolonial Studies still dominated by the English Crown and still often conceived in terms of East/West binaries" (2). Also see, Christopher Miller's *Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture*.

⁶ See Juan Gelpí's *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico* for a discussion on how Sánchez distances himself from the paternalistic discourse, rupturing the canon. As Consuelo Martínez Justiniano affirms: "contamos con 45 años de trayectoria literaria, pero con el mismo discurso: el puertorriqueño es un ser deprimido, sin identidad, dócil, oprimido, dominado" (Web).

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