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Four decades of Puerto Rican emigration: Different contexts, same realities

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Commenting on

the subject of Puerto Rican emigration to the United States, the celebrated author, José Luis González, writing in the latter half of the last century, states the following: “Esa emigración ... representa uno de los hitos capitales de la experiencia nacional puertorriqueña. No hay aspecto de la vida del puertorriqueño en este siglo— social, económico, cultural y psicológico— que no esté marcado por las vicisitudes de ese éxodo en masa” (Falcón 1984: Epigraph). And, as is the case with other important aspects of Puerto Rican sociopolitical experience, the significance of this reality is strongly reflected in every literary genre. In the theatre, René Marqués’s *La carreta* (1953) has been the seminal work dealing with this theme. This work, which has formed part of the Puerto Rican literary canon, has clearly been the inspiration for Roberto Ramos-Perea’s *Malasangre*. Given the changes that have inevitably taken place in the more than thirty years that separate the appearance of these two works, it is not difficult to identify important differences in the representation by the two dramatists of this emigration phenomenon. However, this paper seeks to demonstrate the continuity of circumstances of the emigration experience as reflected in the two works.

Perhaps the similarity to be found in these two plays should not cause great surprise. It can be argued that the influence of the former on the latter reflects the influence of Marqués on Ramos-Perea, an influence that the latter acknowledges in a very forthright manner: “El escritor puertorriqueño que niegue la influencia de René Marqués es un embustero. Yo estoy influenciado por René Marqués, desde que era chiquito, desde los pies a la cabeza” (Montañez 1996: 103). It is interesting also to note, in relation to the two plays, the similarity of comments made by the respective authors regarding the major characters— indeed regarding the origin of the dramas

In spite of these and other differences, the plays are similar in important respects and highlight fundamental areas in which important elements of the emigration experience have not changed. Both are characterized by the search for a better life. Historically, this has been, and continues to be, the primary reason for Puerto Rican emigration to the mainland. For the *La carreta* family, headed by doña Gabriela, life on the land has become untenable because of the inability of the family to meet its financial obligations; hence the decision to move away. Luis recognizes the changing circumstances. He has concluded that there is now no future on the land for a family like his. He recognizes that, in order to survive, abandonment of the land is necessary, and adjustment to the new reality of industrial development is inevitable. He expects that life will improve once he leaves the countryside. He is convinced that more jobs, better schools, more opportunities are available in San Juan and (as he will later come to believe) in New York. In a sense, he lives at a juncture of history, which is significant in that it requires a new perspective in order to survive. As he says to don Chago, “Loh tiempoh cambean, abuelo” (26).

What drives Luna to abandon Puerto Rico, not only physically but also emotionally, is a yearning to be free of the severe economic constraints imposed by underemployment and the concomitant inability to meet basic living expenses. According to her, an overpopulated Puerto Rico has nothing to offer, not even to the educated of its population. Emigration represents the opportunity to change all that, to earn more money and to lead a better quality of life. As she, in her effort to convince a reluctant husband, says, “¡Imagínatelo, Mario! La oportunidad de no tener que padecer ni deudas, ni sobregiros, ni préstamos, ni alquileres, ni favores, ni ninguna cosa que te obligue a trabajar para otro, sino para ti” (34). In *Malasangre*, the epigraph taken from the French dramatist Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* seems to establish from the start the importance in this work of the search for happiness. In addition to her desire for economic stability, Luna is embarking on this quest, motivated by a desire to excel and to receive recognition for her talent and accomplishments. The frustration associated with not being able to maintain oneself, the sense that life is not only stagnant but also economically stifling, drive Luna and her husband from Puerto Rico in the same way that doña Gabriela and her family are driven first to San Juan and then to New York. For Luna as well as for Luis (both of whom have the task of convincing the rest of their families), emigration represents hope, new opportunities, and a better future.

The process of family disintegration spawned by the emigration experience is another element to which both dramatists lend particular emphasis. Alberto Sandoval, in analysing a series of Puerto Rican dramatic works written over a

of the metropolitan way of life. He is also jealous of his wife's success, which he does not consider himself to be sharing. As one commentator puts it: "Los sueños de una ... son opresiones para el otro ... Las alegrías, éxitos y felicidades de aquella, son tristezas y fracasos para aquél" (Quiles Ferrer 1997: 126). And, outside of the more traditional environment of Puerto Rico, where both were undergoing similar rigors of unemployment or underemployment, it becomes more difficult for them to surmount the obstacles because of Mario's continued longing for Puerto Rico, which impedes the process of adjustment for him at the same time that Luna is enthusiastically embracing the new environment and what it offers.

The issue of possibly changing roles arises as an additional element in the conflict that leads to the dissolution of the family, with Luna installing herself in a lucrative job, while her husband remains unemployed. Mario's concern, inspired by his commitment to old-fashioned values, is poignantly expressed in the following observation: "Tú serás la jefa de la familia entonces. Serás proveedora, se invertirán los papeles" (30). He resents the prospect of becoming a *mantenido*. Luna tries to convince him that what is hers is his, success and all, but he is unable to accept this perspective because of his traditional view of family roles. Eventually, the tensions created by an ambitious wife who must take advantage of the opportunities before her in a new environment (or who, some might say, is selling herself in the name of career advancement) and an unmotivated husband, serve to undermine the very fabric of the family relationship. Mario seeks refuge in returning to Puerto Rico rather than in making a meaningful effort to adjust to a new, and admittedly demanding, environment. The effect is the dissolution of the family.

Contrasting perspectives of the implications of emigration also constitute one of the key areas of similarity between the plays. Both works present the audience with characters who desire to emigrate because of their perception of the benefits to be gained and others who resist the idea of emigration because they focus on the less tangible, but more important, things which they believe will be lost through emigration. On the one hand are presented those whose primary concern is for the materially better quality life which emigration offers. This is associated with a view of Puerto Rico's land as having little to offer the person who wants an improvement in living standards. These characters are contrasted with those who lament the perceived moral and cultural dangers inherent in emigration and the supposed abandonment of one's heritage, who are content with the status quo even though it does not provide them with their basic material needs, who have little or no ambition for a better life, who are emotionally attached to the land, and who fail to recognize the need to adjust to changing realities.

To illustrate this point, it is to be noted, first of all, that most of the characters of *La carreta* do not want to migrate. Juanita is reluctant to be torn away from her

people living in Puerto Rico at the time had been living on the mainland five years earlier (Fitzpatrick 1987: 23). Writing in 2002, Jorge Duany further shows that the level of net migration from Puerto Rico has continued to fall to the extent that he concludes that “contemporary Puerto Rican migration is best visualized as a transient and bidirectional flow ... rather than as an irrevocable and unilateral displacement” (Duany 2002: 212).

Mario and the *La carreta* family are operating at two different levels socially and intellectually—hence the specific circumstances and conditions that lead them to return to Puerto Rico are different. However, in a broader sense, and making allowances for changes that inevitably would have taken place with the passage of time, they are the same. The return of Mario and the *La carreta* family is not surprising, given their reluctance to leave in the first place and their continued emotional attachment to the Island. A series of events converge to precipitate the return of Marqués’s characters. They receive a letter from a relative in Puerto Rico offering a plot of land that they can cultivate; Luis then dies in a tragic accident on the job, and, significantly, Juanita reaches a point of frustration and dissatisfaction with some aspects of life in New York. Doña Gabriela is perhaps also being influenced to return by the fact of her declining strength and the desire, common among Puerto Rican emigrants, to spend her last days on the native soil. The fact, therefore, of the family (or what is left of it) returning to the same circumstances is intended by the dramatist to indicate that don Chago was right indeed and that commitment to the land and the values it symbolises must be maintained.

Mario’s experiences, consistent with more contemporary circumstances, are very different, but they lead him to the same conclusion. These experiences revolve around his relationship with his wife. It becomes evident toward the end of the second act that he has been harboring ideas of getting Luna to return to Puerto Rico. But, no doubt, he is also aware of the difficulty in persuading her to do so. Hence, after an initial reluctance, he agrees with Luna’s colleague Elsa’s scheme to damage his wife’s drawings, which if accepted by the company would, according to Elsa, confirm Luna in her commitment to stay in Texas. When this desperate effort fails, Mario gives up all hope and decides to leave immediately for Puerto Rico, even though he cannot afford to pay the fare. Why is he returning to Puerto Rico? He is convinced that living in the United States is tantamount to selling oneself, to betraying one’s country: “(Todos están comprados! A todos se les brota la sucia malasangre de no tener patria, de negarla, de traicionarla, de maldecirla ...)” (68). For him, United States, for all that it offers, is not for Latins:

Esta es la tierra de las grandes oportunidades! La tierra del capitalismo, de la libre empresa, la recolectora del talento mundial ... Pero es de ellos,

And she is not afraid to sign a petition of protest against the sentencing of seven black men for the attempted rape of a white woman, a situation that particularly angers her in view of her own ordeal in San Juan. Hence, her firm rejection of Luis's claim that all are equal in America: "Y eso de que aquí somoh tan buenoh como cualquiera eh un buen chihte. ¡Ja! Se me parte el labio riéndome. Con lah patáh que nos dan a toah horah. Sí, sí, somoh igualeh. Sólo que tótirimundi vale aquí máh que nojotroh" (131).

Luna claims that in Texas she will be paid what she is worth, her talents will be recognized, and the fact that she is a woman or a Puerto Rican will be irrelevant to the way she will be treated there. But if one is to believe Mario's assertions, this is not the case. Certainly, Ramos-Perea offers no examples of crass exploitation and discrimination that were the lot of emigrants of the *La carreta* era. However, Mario has the unpleasant experience of seeing an American, with no knowledge of Spanish, preferred to him for a job in a Spanish-language television station. According to him, not only are Puerto Ricans, and indeed Latins in general, not treated equally, but also this is inevitable because of fundamental American attitudes.

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One significant structural similarity in these works is the fact that the action in both plays is built around a strong female character, even though they are set at least a full generation apart. One of the concerns of a writer such as Marqués is for the developing social influence of women, which he attributes to the influence of the metropolis. Doña Gabriela typifies one of the types of women to be found in some of his earlier works, women of strong moral convictions. In subsequent works, Marqués is clearly very critical of the weakening of the patriarchal system in the face of the emerging influence of women, following, as he believes, the American model. This he expresses by portraying "caracteres femeninos de gran fuerza, símbolos de la ruina moral, de la desorientación que sufren las mujeres en nuestro ambiente, aminoradas, bien sea por la burguesa frivolidad que impera en sus vidas, o bien por las crueles circunstancias a las que se ven sometidas" (Palmer Bermúdez 1988: 45). It may be argued that Ramos-Perea creates in Luna a protagonist who is indeed strong and determined, as is doña Gabriela, but at the same time completely oblivious to the

moral decline, the armchair points to doña Gabriela's determination to hold on to the values that she has inherited and that she has struggled to pass on to her children.

The use of symbols also assumes some dramatic significance in *Malasangre*, particularly in relation to the portrayal of Mario. Perhaps most outstanding is the saxophone, which originally belonged to Mario's brother Rubén and which he now keeps and values greatly to the extent of refusing to entrust it to his father. This instrument, along with some old letters, serves as a constant reminder of his brother, killed in the Vietnam War and whose fate he sees as paralleling his own and that of his family, including Luna herself. It is not surprising that the kind of music Mario plays is solemn and funereal. Not only do these articles associated with Rubén help to keep Mario focused in the past, but they also reinforce his negative attitude to the United States and obstruct the process of his adjustment to his new environment:

Este país ya nos mató, Luna. Comenzó matando a Rubén en una selva de Cambodia. Luego mató a mi madre [...] Luego coge de estúpido a mi viejo, le vende un ideal, lo engaña y le hace comprar su propia ruina. Ahora te compra a ti por unos cuantos billetes y me quiere matar a mí porque te hice caso [...] Le hemos vendido el alma a esta nación del demonio y para colmo hemos venido a morir en su propia casa. (85–6)

In developing his action, Marqués depends heavily on irony. For example, Luis is determined to abandon the land for a better life in the city, but after several jobs in the space of only one year, the only thing left to him was to work as a gardener, a harsh fact that is not lost on doña Gabriela. Similarly, doña Gabriela, fearing for her family's honour, is influenced to leave the land partly in order to separate Juanita from her boyfriend. As it turns out, Juanita is raped in San Juan and has an abortion and eventually turns to prostitution in New York, while Luis is apparently drawn into an affair with a married woman in San Juan. The young son Chaguito is arrested for stealing and sent to a reform school. The irony associated with Luis's obsession with machines has already been discussed. Of course, the greatest irony of all is the fact that the family, after an arduous and quite unfruitful journey, returns to the land that it had abandoned, with the daunting prospect of starting life all over again.

In a sense, *Malasangre* is also based on a great irony. Luna leaves Puerto Rico, promising Mario that things would be better for both of them. She clearly foresees a future of progress, prosperity, and fulfillment. How ironic that in her determined quest for these things, Mario is left behind! Mario returns to Puerto Rico in the same state of unemployment in which he left. He is concerned about becoming a "mantenido," but he does nothing that would help to change that situation.