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Don Faustinio (played by actor José Luis “Chavito” Marrero) disembarks from the plane. Image captured from the film La guagua aérea.
PROBLEMATIC IDEAS OF PUERTO RICO IN PUERTO RICAN CINEMA: LUIS MOLINA CASANOVA’S LA GUAGUA AÉREA

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ABSTRACT

Many Puerto Rican critics from the island and from the mainland have argued that Puerto Rican identity is characterized not as “either/or” but as “both/and”; that is, it is an in-between site of transgression that encompasses everything, including contradictions and discontinuities. What are the consequences when “both/and” intercultural relations mark one’s identity as a “native of nowhere”? In the 1993 comedy film La guagua aérea, a loose adaptation of Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez’s 1983 essay of the same title, Puerto Rican filmmaker Luis Molina Casanova showcases Puerto Rican identity as one that expands beyond the island’s geopolitical boundaries. In the film, Puerto Rican identity is portrayed in a state of constant transit between island and mainland political, social, and cultural sites, yet it is also constrained and limited by conservative narratives and myths of Puerto Rican essence and uniqueness. Throughout the film, the ideas of identity construction and the geo-politics of knowledge create tensions and limitations that problematize the production of definitions and meanings of “Puerto Rico” versus being a native of nowhere in Puerto Rican cinema. [Key words: Film, Puerto Rican cinema, migration, Luis Rafael Sánchez, decolonialism, identity]
mainland have argued that Puerto Rican identity is characterized not as “either/or” but as “both/and”, that is, it is an in-between site of transgression that encompasses everything, including contradictions and discontinuities. What are the consequences when “both/and” intercultural relations mark one’s identity as a “native of nowhere”? (Georas 1997: v). Literally, the term native of nowhere means a nomad who travels everywhere without settling permanently in a specific place. Here it refers metaphorically to the daily negotiations that constructs cultural and national identity and crosses its arbitrary boundaries, without being restricted to an exclusive geographical area: “my land/ my body from which i [sic] remove the earth with each step/ i travel that territory called myself/ before i become extinct/ once again” (Georas 1997: vi). Being a native of nowhere creates tensions by questioning definitions of national purity and cultural authenticity. Similarly, cinema also crosses transnational networks particularly in collaborative financing of multinational co-productions and as an object of consumption for transcultural markets. Although cinema contributes to the construction and creation of national identity and culture, its circulation of images intersect with other cultural discourses and forms of aesthetic expressions, thus uncovering multiple “points of convergence among seemingly disparate elements” (Fornet 1997: xvii); in this way, cinema also reveals identity not as a singular and authentic entity, but rather as a transnational and transcultural complex hybrid process.

In the 1993 comedy film La guagua aérea, a loose adaptation of Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez’s 1983 essay of the same title in combination with two short stories from his first anthology En cuerpo de camisa (1975 [1966]), Puerto Rican filmmaker Luis Molina Casanova showcases Puerto Rican subaltern identity as one that expands beyond the island’s geo-political boundaries. In the film, Puerto Rican national and cultural identity is portrayed in a state of constant transit between island and mainland political, social, and cultural sites, yet it is also constrained and limited by conservative narratives and myths of Puerto Rican essence and uniqueness. Throughout the film, the ideas of identity construction and the geo-politics of knowledge create tensions and limitations that problematize the production of definitions and meanings of “Puerto Rico” versus being a native of nowhere in Puerto Rican cinema.

Many literary and cultural critics, such as Frances Negrón Muntaner and Clara E. Rodríguez, have extensively analyzed and criticized the portrayal of Latinos,
including Puerto Ricans, in U.S. films—either as violent gangsters in West Side Story (1961), dirty low-class thieves in Ghost (1990), subservient maids in Sabrina (1995), or melodramatic loud families in Nothing Like the Holidays (2008). In the early years of cinema, social and political activists like Bernardo Vega were already reporting incidents of Puerto Ricans in New York criticizing the negative and exotic tropical stereotypes exploited in Hollywood films (Vega 1984: 52–3). These films present Puerto Ricans as a racialized Other, different from the traditional dichotomy of white and black racial relations, yet subordinated to a position of inferiority.

According to sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel, this “racialization as the result of a long historical process of colonial/racial subordination on the island as well as on the mainland... the moment that person identifies her/himself as Puerto Rican, s/he enters the labyrinth of racial Otherness” (1999: 38).

In response, many Puerto Rican filmmakers from the island and the mainland have made the effort to counteract these negative portrayals by reclaiming and transforming them into more realistic interpretations in their own films. Despite the existence of early silent film shorts made by foreign directors—for example, the short features by U.S. soldiers reporting the events of the 1898 Spanish-American War—by 1912, many Puerto Rican filmmakers like Rafael Colorado and Juan E. Vigué were already producing and making films about local themes with the support of foreign companies (García Morales 1997: 1). Many years later, the Puerto Rican government created and supported the Division of Community Education (DIVEDCO in Spanish). From its inception in 1949 until 1989, this government agency hired foreign and local artists like photographer Jack Delano and playwright/writer René Marqués to use cinema—along with other visual/musical/literary arts—with the purpose of educating the rural population about different topics, from personal hygiene to social values and cultural symbols of Puerto Rico, such as Los peloteros (1953) and Modesta (1956). The populist agenda of DIVEDCO was to inculcate “an idealized, organized vision of social conflicts” in which communities developed democratic solutions to everyday problems, even if they clashed with other government programs such as promoting migration to the U.S. (Mongil Echandi and Rosario Albert 1994: 36, 38).

However, it was not until the late 1980s that a significant increase in Puerto Rican filmmaking emerged. Among the more contemporary examples are Marcos Zurinaga’s La gran fiesta (1985), Jacobo Morales’ Lo que le pasó a Santiago (1989), and Iván Dariel Ortíz’s Héroes de otra patria (1998) and El cimarrón (2007). All these films aim to present Puerto Ricans in light of the island’s reality of development and its modernist discourses that transformed Puerto Rican society from agrarian poverty to industrial promise of progress since the 1950s. Unfortunately, productions from the Puerto Rican film industry have been sporadic due to the lack of public funds.²

In the shadows of Latin America’s big cinemas—those of Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, along with Cuba, Chile, and Venezuela—are numerous marginal national cinemas for whom the production of a feature film is an event of considerable importance. Regardless of its quality, such a film is likely to attract a sizable audience through sheer novelty value. If it is also well made and a faithful portrait of national reality, then it will occasionally exceed the box-office performance of Hollywood blockbusters. But this kind of success is rare. Ambitious projects often fail for a
variety of reasons, including the filmmakers’ shortcomings and failure to understand their intended audience and its expectations. An element shared by all these productions is the difficulty involved in completing them mostly or entirely with only national funding. (2005: 265)

Nonetheless, Puerto Rican filmmakers such as Zurinaga, Morales, Ortíz, and Molina Casanova have produced films portraying their diverse interpretations of Puerto Rican reality and these films have been supported by local audiences. Although most present less stereotypical images commercially, they still tend to fall into the trap of the “logic of coloniality.” In his study of historical definitions and constructions of Latin America, literary critic Walter Mignolo defines the “logic of coloniality” as the “colonial matrix of power that operates through human experience, such as economic control, political control of authority, control of gender and sexuality manifestations, and control of knowledge and subjectivity” (2005: 11). In this case, the film La guagua aérea indirectly shows how this logic entraps and controls the passengers’ subjectivity with problematic meanings of Puerto Ricanness.

Aside from sporadic newspaper reviews and movie advertisements in the media and the Internet, few academic critics, other than John D. Perivolaris, have critically analyzed La guagua aérea in context of the essay and/or other literary works by Sánchez. Using a film and cultural theory model based on Mignolo’s ideas of coloniality logic and filmmaker Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s arguments on Puerto Rican colonialism and cultural politics, I propose that beneath its conservative narrative, the film La guagua aérea implicitly reveals in some scenes the dissensions and contradictions that threaten to disrupt the foundations of Puerto Rican nationalist discourses and cultural politics in racial, social, gender, and language terms. Despite the cheerful resolution of the comedy celebrating traditional Puerto Rican cultural politics into a tightly knit, happy family as opposed to U.S. colonial imperialism, some of the characters threaten to disclose their Puerto Rican cultural nationalist tendencies as a conservative imaginary construction full of tensions and contradictions. Behind the veil of humor, Puerto Rican subaltern identity places the production of definitions of “Puerto Ricanness” in conflict with the anxious notion of being a native of nowhere.

This hilarious tale is about a group of Puerto Rican passengers who take the cheapest midnight “red-eye” flight from San Juan to New York City during the Christmas holidays in 1960. The film presents a microcosm of Puerto Rican society that shifts literally and metaphorically between the sites of the diaspora and “home.” In Sánchez’s essay, a nameless intellectual narrator describes how the Puerto Rican passengers’ initial silence is broken by the blond flight attendant’s terrified scream at the unexpected sight of two huge smuggled crabs running loose onboard the airplane. Once the passengers realize that the scary possibility of a skyjacker is only a false alarm, loud and disorderly laughter breaks out among them. They start to joke and tell anecdotes about their migration experiences—throughout the whole flight—to the annoyance of the U.S. crew who try unsuccessfully to control the vacilón.³ Yet, in contrast with the essay’s content, which illustrates the complexities of being neither Puerto Rican nor U.S. American, but rather Neo-Rican/Nuyorican hybrid bicultural subjects, in the film Molina Casanova loosely adapts the essay’s main plot and mixes it with two short stories, “La maroma” and “Tiene la noche una raíz,” from En cuerpo de camisa (1975 [1966]) to construct stories of two of the passengers:
Mateo the beggar who pretends to be blind and the nameless prostitute. Even though the film appropriates the essay’s main elements and its humor, it ends up a commercial product whose aim is more to entertain rather than satirize the dominant nationalist discourses (as criticized by Perivolaris and others). At times the film appears to capture the carnivalesque parody of the essay, for example, the scene of the passengers’ chaotic fear of a deadly storm caused by high-altitude turbulence, but the concept of nation is not openly dismantled nor does the film construct alternate spaces for the diverse manifestations of subaltern Puerto Ricanness. Instead, the film bases its idea of Puerto Rico on dominant elite discourses that construct Puerto Rican society as a populist model of literary and political culture that unsuccessfully seeks refuge in the utopian return to a nostalgic, agrarian criollo past; it represents the paradoxical ideas of Puerto Ricanness as a culturally free one, despite being entrapped in its colonial tie with the U.S.

Both the essay and the film satirically expose the perennial negotiations of Puerto Rican national identity in terms of constructs such as race, class, gender, and language differences. The title itself La guagua aérea (literally, a “flying bus” in Spanish) humorously compares the airplane to a bus taking off from the ground and flying in the air transporting its human cargo, from one stop to the next. This paradoxical image shows a Puerto Rican society gliding ambiguously among political, social, and cultural networks. Indeed, the metaphor of the flying bus is itself the metaphor of a metaphor. This aerial metaphor becomes a floating border zone that literally and textually conveys the ambiguities, contradictions, and dislocations that constitute the passengers’ heterogeneous, migrant identities as natives of nowhere.

In Sánchez’s essay, the colonized subjects take advantage of the situation to negotiate and challenge both the U.S. colonial state structures, as well as the Puerto Rican social, political, and cultural projections of national identity. Molina Casanova’s film also challenges U.S. colonialism, yet it does not dismantle the foundations of national identity, nor does it openly criticize the dominant discourses that construct Puerto Rican identity in social, political, cultural, and economic terms. Rather, the film fortifies the threatened symbols of Puerto Rican identity as a resistance to U.S. colonialism. Thus, “far from destroying Puerto Rican national identity, the import of U.S. culture has strengthened the sense of Puerto Ricanness by providing a counterexample of what Puerto Ricanness is not” (Morris 1995: 152). The film challenges the content of coloniality but not the terms that aim for another direction to decolonize and eliminate dependency from master narratives of Puerto Ricanness (Mignolo 2005: xviii).

Despite the negative criticism the film received in academic reviews, which saw it as continuing the status quo and upholding the dominant parameters of political culture (Perivolaris 2000: 85–8; Rosado 2001: 394–5), La guagua aérea continues to attract general audiences on the island and on the mainland. The film borrows heavily from TV melodrama and comedy, while also adopting the style of disaster movies such as Airport (1970) and its spoof Airplane! (1980). The movie premiered during a plane flight from Puerto Rico to New York City “haciendo eco a la trama de la película” (“echoing the film’s main plot”) (Ríos Díaz y González 2000: 41), then became a popular hit in Puerto Rican movie theaters, mainly because it presents national and cultural values in a nostalgic vein very different from Sánchez’s original purpose, which was to challenge and parody them. One of the possible reasons for the film’s attraction is that its conservative narrative tends to celebrate the persistent colonialist and nationalist mythic discourses that insist on a nostalgic view of the
past and resist continual challenges from the margins. As critic Nancy Morris observes in her study of political construction of Puerto Rican identity in relation to U.S. colonial politics, “[W]henever Puerto Ricans have perceived a threat to symbols of their identity, they have responded by demonstrating an increased commitment to those symbols” (1995: 152). This is particularly true in cinema, which invites general Puerto Rican audiences to continue the illusion of belonging to a Puerto Rican imaginary nation and even to enjoy it.

The film’s handling of the concept of nostalgia manipulates the passengers to believe and construct the cultural memories of a community whose members move constantly from one site to another for economic, political, and social reasons. Indeed, nostalgia affects the constructions of the diverse Puerto Rican identities that constitute the imagined community scattered on the island and on the U.S. mainland. One example is the contrast of the unsavory airline food of turkey and pickle sandwiches with Coca Cola versus Puerto Rican rice with pigeon peas and *coquito* (an eggnog-like coconut alcoholic beverage) that the passengers pass around and frantically consume as greatly appreciated cultural products that allow them to show off their nationalist pride. Food considered as “poor man’s dishes” are appropriated by dominant discourses as symbols of the national identity construction (Ortíz Cuadra 2006: 266). In this scene, nostalgia affords an apparent stability and an illusion of linearity to a community’s common past and selective memories; it represents the community’s history as seamless, instead of as a conjunction of discontinuous fragments (Bennett 1996: 4). As Puerto Rican writer Ana Lydia Vega astutely comments in her cultural analysis of contemporary Puerto Ricanness:

*Siglo y pico de dominación política y manipulación psicológica ha dejado una hambruna de identificación que se alimenta de símbolos. Por más inocuos que luzcan esos símbolos, algún entusiasmo secreto logran desatar. Por más huecos que resulten, algún vacío inconfeso intentan colmar. El peligro, no obstante, se esconde en la autocomplacencia. Un patriotismo que no conduzca a la soberanía puede condenarse a un laberinto retórico de éses que siempre terminan en el mismo lugar. (2008: 242)*

[More than a century of political domination and psychological manipulation has left a vast hunger of identification that feeds on symbols. Even though those symbols seem innocuous, at least they try to satisfy an unconfessed secret enthusiasm. Nevertheless, the danger hides in self-complacency. A patriotism that does not lead to sovereignty can be condemned to one of those rhetorical labyrinths that always end up in the same place.] (author’s translation)

Still, it is ironic that within the food scene are three close-up shots of a U.S. American tourist couple enjoying the feast of Puerto Rican food as well. Whereas the oppositional practices in the essay dismantle this mythic unity in favor of alternative manifestations of Puerto Rican heterogeneous identities, the film, while attempting to celebrate the supposed national unity, also ends up shattering it. Presumably, the tourists happily participating in the feast refers to the exotic consumption of the Other, disrupting an affirmation of national unity.

Initially, most of the plane’s passengers establish cultural, social, and political affiliations to temporarily consolidate their collective identity and to erase differences of class and race for the duration of the flight. These characters construct a network of solidarity in order to establish their own communal identity, creating a cultural
connection based on an apparent equal nationality. For example, before the plane’s departure, Mr. Orlando Colón (played by Ángel F. Rivera), a pro-American Dream mestizo businessman, and Don Faustino Román (played by the late José Luis “Chavito” Marrero), the film’s austere and traditional narrator, politely shake hands; this gesture implies that passengers are on the same level on board the plane. Not all characters participate in this networking, however. One such holdout is a sullen prisoner, who represents the violent discourses of nationalist Puerto Rican independence against colonial control. He is traveling handcuffed to an FBI agent who does not allow him to participate with the others, particularly the sharing of the food. Ironically, during the crab incident, it is the prisoner who yanks the FBI man into his seat, thus preventing him from controlling the situation in a comic reversal of roles.

The inter-connection becomes progressively problematic; two other characters fail to participate in the gleeful networking with their fellow passengers. One is Don Tiburcio (played by Santos Nazario), a shark-like vendor—as his name implies—who sells religious amulets to the frightened passengers to make a profit during the chaos generated by the turbulence. Don Tiburcio justifies his opportunistic behavior by commenting very matter-of-factly: “Hay que ganarse las habichuelas” (“One has to earn the beans [a living] somehow”). The other character is a nameless prostitute (played by Idalia Pérez Garay), who is traveling to escape the suffocating religious and paternalistic discourses of moral decency on the island, and to seek more freedom in the metropolis. Both on the island and in the plane, the prostitute appears dressed in bright red, a symbol of the fallen woman. The founding myths and colonizing patriarchal discourses that contribute to the construction of Puerto Rican national identity become problematic with these marginalized characters who do not interact with the rest of the passengers. In her study of cultural identity construction by commercial venues, the sociologist and critic Arlene Dávila points out that,

Each individual, even if of extreme nationalist persuasion, reproduces the ambiguities of transnationalization which emerge from the ambiguous status of colonial people like the Puerto Ricans.... [The present status quo] produces an ambiguous situation to the extent that on some issues people mobilize discourses on national identity.... Identities need to be understood as constructions that emerge from political strategies within specific power relationships. (1997: 6)

This point has also been observed by Grosfoguel, who states in his sociological study that Puerto Ricanness “as a form of identity means different things for Puerto Ricans” living on both sides of the ocean (1999: 39). Thus, for the characters in La guagua aérea, Puerto Rico represents either an opportunity to earn a quick profit or a suffocating oppression in the name of moral decency.

During the networking episode, most passengers comment on the social and ethnic discrimination against Latinos in the U.S. For example, a young mother (played by Alba Nydia Díaz) who declares herself a frequent flier talks with a fellow nameless passenger (played by Eugenio Monclova) making his first flight to New York City. She bursts his bubble of achieving the American Dream by warning him about the discrimination she suffered there. She even says that in New York City “there are no stars in the sky,” in reference to the skyscrapers that block the view, perhaps metaphorically alluding to the illusory equality of community on the plane that is absent in the big city. The discrimination “reinforces a feeling of belonging to, and an idealization of, the imagined place of origin. Moreover, this feeling is more
pronounced with the constant circulation of Puerto Ricans given the open border between the island and the mainland” (Grosfoguel 1999: 39).

However, as mentioned above, not all the passengers bond in this illusion of a “happy family.” There is also social discrimination among them; for example, Mr. Colón (whose name alludes both to colonization and to Christopher Columbus) and Ms. Sandalia Serrano, a schoolteacher (played by Esther Marí), who represent the emerging professional middle class, disdain their fellow lower-class compatriots’ rowdiness by describing them as “trash” with “no manners.” Mr. Colón is ashamed of his ethnicity and affects a disdainful difference of class in his tone of voice and his drink of choice, a glass of champagne. In his discussion of the American Dream with a taxi driver—an allusion to Puerto Rican writer and political activist Jesús Colón’s 1966 short story “Easy Job, Good Wages”—the driver (played by Mario Roche) acidly counters Mr. Colón’s enthusiasm with the realities of exploitation and ethnic/racial discrimination, including the U.S. American’s treatment of “spics.” Ironically, Mr. Colón emphasizes social discrimination by patronizing the taxi driver with an offer to become his personal chauffeur. The taxi driver ironically responds, “Sí, pa’ eso somos los Boricuas: para ayudarnos” (“Yes, that’s what we Puerto Ricans are for: helping each other”), while glaring angrily at Mr. Colón. Although at the end of the film the passengers politely exchange their New York City addresses, viewers can see that they are strangers united only temporarily under the illusion of belonging to an authentic and singular national country, and unable to recognize Puerto Rico as an imagined community inhabited by natives of nowhere.

The tensions become more evident with the relative absence of references to African heritage and the small roles played by black Puerto Rican actors. The film advances the idea of Puerto Rico as a celebration of selective heritage (Spanish) that erases, silences, and marginalizes the Other (black), while sinking into the “logic of coloniality.” Two minor black characters are in the scene at the airport in San Juan: a close-up shot of actor Victor Santos portraying a smiling Santa Claus and a middle-aged woman talking without audio in the background during a conversation between two other characters. Inside the plane, a black senator travels to New York to escape a scandal yet is identified by some passengers as an embarrassment. Throughout the film, the passengers recreate an imaginary restoration of their place as the model of popular and political culture despite Puerto Rico’s ambivalent position in U.S. coloniality. In the matrix of colonial power, the passengers hide U.S. colonialism under the carpet “without criticism nor decolonization” (Mignolo 2005: 66–7) via the “vacilón,” and fail as well to see the social hierarchies among themselves. For most of the passengers, Puerto Rico is the site of struggle in which they must conceptualize an imaginary construction consisting of the national elite discourse, U.S. coloniality, and industrial modernization, while leaving others (black, mulattos, and mestizos) out of the equation. One scene, however, does acknowledge African roots: the flashback of Mateo (played by Teófilo Torres), the man who pretended to be blind back home in Puerto Rico in order to earn a living as a street beggar, singing a story about Rosario “la prieta,” a black woman punished for doing laundry on a Good Friday, who defiantly casts a spell (“echar un jujú”) on whomever mocks her misfortune.

The film also portrays contradictions in the paternalistic discourses of gender, particularly those concerning women. For example, the narrator, Román, an older man in his 60s, flies to New York City to talk to his older son Lito about the matter of selling the old family home already targeted for demolition in the name of progress. Román’s austere narrative voice-over represents the
foundational discourses of Puerto Rican nationalism and paternalism against the promise of industrial material benefits brought about by the U.S. government’s industrialization program, Operation Bootstrap. At the beginning of the movie, the narrator refers to a masculine viewer, “oiga, compay” (“listen, compadre”), and sets the tone of the film by describing the airport as a verbená (festival) with Puerto Rican folk music playing in the background and characters greeting each other as one big happy family. Román says, “Me iba a encontrar con otro país, no con Nueva York, sino con mi propio país flotando en las nubes.” (“I would find another country, not New York, but my own floating in the clouds.”) For him, Puerto Rico is a “sacred land”; when he bids farewell to his son Lito, the music shifts to a nostalgic and sentimental tune in a landscape of palm trees and a golden sunset. Yet this idyllic tropical scene is threatened by ideas of feminism, which took root in Puerto Rican society during the turbulent 1960s—as noted and criticized elsewhere by writer René Marqués in his essay *El puertorriqueño dócil* (1967). On the island, for example, the women in Román’s family push him to trade in the country house for one in a modern suburb (a theme borrowed from TV soap-operas). Inside the airplane, the women, particularly the “bad girls,” are criticized by the other passengers as being either too modern (Dominga, chided by her sister Miguelina—played by the late Norma Candal) or too loose (the prostitute, by her neighbors on the island). Both Dominga (played by Gladys Rodríguez) and the prostitute deal with paternalistic and machista attitudes on their own terms, however. Dominga, a single, middle-aged woman who smokes and aspires to become a sophisticated modern woman, subtly rejects the sexual advances of Mr. Bob Barker (played by Emmanuel “Sunshine” Logroño), the self-described ladies’ man, by concentrating her attention on the food he serves her. She also sighs heavily without giving him an opportunity to kiss her, thus frustrating his attempts at flirtation. At the end of the hall, the prostitute remains somewhat indifferent to the passengers’ reaction to the turbulence and menacingly tells Don Tiburcio, “Mire, se necesitan dos como usted para asustarme” (“Look, it takes two of you to really scare me”) to reassure him of the minimal possibility of a crash. She even approves smilingly and in silence when a young teenaged girl (played by Adamaris López) slaps Mr. Barker in the face as a blunt answer to his unwanted sexual advances.

The passengers’ spoken lines intermix Spanish and English both at the airport and on the plane. For example, a mother insists in Spanish to the airline employee that her overgrown son is nine years old, and the boy responds in English, “Nine, misi [Miss].” On the plane, although Ms. Serrano sympathizes with Mr. Colón’s social complaints, with a sweet sense of superiority she corrects his English (“investor” versus “inversionist”) to his utter embarrassment. Others, such as Barker and the taxi driver, long-time residents of El Barrio, use words in Spanglish, such as “marketa,” “renta,” and “factoría,” as part of their everyday language. Another example is when the taxi driver shouts triumphantly, “I got it, ya sé dónde lo conozco a usted [I already know from where I know you],” when he finally identifies passenger Aguayo (played by Orlando Rodríguez) as the black senator who flies to New York City to escape an embarrassing love-triangle scandal. In addition, two of the traditional Christmas carols are sung and translated literally in English, for example, “Arrive, arrive, arrive the Christmas time” (“Llegó, llegó, llegó la Navidad”), which parody the characters’ attempts at hybridity. Even though cultural hybridity, according to Grosfoguel, is not tolerated either by nationalist intellectuals or most middle class Puerto Ricans (1999: 39), still, the audience can observe in the film how it makes its way through language into the imagined community of airline passengers.
The final tension appears in the last full shot in which Román is about to get off the plane. Despite the soothing nostalgic music, the scene shows Román framed between the narrow threshold of the exit, tucking in his loaned coat and hat before exiting the plane to face the frigid weather in New York City. At this point the frame freezes, suggesting a character frozen (literally and figuratively) between the constraints of insular nationalist discourses upheld by Román and the disturbing winds of colonial industrialization. This scene suggests that the continuity of the discourses of nationalism and paternalist tradition is not without tension and conflict. Even though the film has a typical, comedic resolution, some doubt lingers about the possibilities of change, particularly regarding any challenge to the “logic of coloniality” as described by Mignolo; thus Puerto Rican values remain on shaky ground.

Even though Molina Casanova once claimed in an interview that the film “representa un homenaje a la puertorriqueñidad y a los millares de inmigrantes que, no importa cuánto tiempo hayan permanecido lejos de su patria, siguen sintiéndose orgullosos de ella y defendiendo nuestra cultura” (“pays homage to Puerto Ricanness and to the thousands of immigrants who, regardless how long they’ve lived outside of the country, still feel proud of it and defend our culture”) (López Ortíz 2005), the final scene reveals the illusion of overcoming coloniality, with the colonized subject wrestling to disengage from a subaltern status. In other words, despite their efforts, Román and the rest of the Puerto Rican passengers cannot escape their location at the threshold of the global order as a modern, self-managed colony, frozen in the “logic of coloniality” (Mignolo 2005: 1), without acknowledging their own complicity.

Although La guagua aérea presents affirmative images of Puerto Ricanness, some scenes fall into the trap of the logic of coloniality. In one, for example, the U.S. flight crew marches to military music in the airport, as if enacting the U.S. invasion of 1898. In another scene, Mr. Colón and Román confront each other after the crab incident, representing the clash of assimilation and dissension between U.S. colonialism and Puerto Rican nationalism. At the end of the confrontation, the latter triumphs with Roman’s affirmation of dignity, accompanied by background folk music, a victory only to be shattered in the final exit scene.

To counteract this trap of coloniality, critics like Negrón-Muntaner argue that Puerto Rican filmmakers ought to make films that dismantle the foundational discourses of national identity and address their own complicity and participation in the colonial practices and processes that lead to becoming natives of nowhere in their own land (2004: 152). She urges Puerto Rican filmmakers to create projects that counter the industry’s dependency on modern master narratives, and to allow “multiple spaces of debates” that concern “crucial political and cultural questions” of Puerto Rican identity (1993). According to Negrón-Muntaner, many Puerto Rican films have the tendency to show “the notion that every Puerto Rican’s life should be a duel to death with the evil forces of colonialism (as if it were exterior to our own practice)” (2004: 154). Such films present a false image of cultural stasis; instead of showing Puerto Rican identity as an ambivalent interrelationship with other communities and cultures, they portray one limited by outmoded discourses of coloniality. Negrón-Muntaner argues that these films resist the dissection of the “Puerto Rican Dream” to return to the island and relive the glories and privileges of the plantation past. In her view, Puerto Rican cinema “homologizes the symbolic gathering of the nation” (2004: 61). As Mignolo argues in his Idea of Latin America, identity in politics changes not only the context of the conversation but also the terms that rule the conversation (2005: xviii). Thus, instead of challenging the
practices of coloniality, most films—like Jacobo Morales’ *Linda Sara* (1994)—instead reproduce it. Other films, however, such as Ivan Dariel Ortiz’s *Héroes de otra patria* (1998) portray Puerto Rican national identity as an invention in the colonial imaginary that is either contested or maintained according to the needs of the colonized, thus leading to a complex power struggle between them and the colonizers. Cinema becomes a giant text in which identity “as a narrative we constantly reconstruct with others, is also a coproduction” (García Canclini 1997: 257). As historian Silvia Álvarez Curbelo (1997: 406) states elsewhere, “las casas de la nación se renuevan y sus cimientos autoritarios terminan por ceder ante el empuje de otras propuestas que dan cuenta de las diversas maneras de ser puertorriqueño” (“the house of the nation is renewed and its authoritarian base ends up giving way to other proposals that render the diverse forms of being Puerto Rican”), even as a native of nowhere.

NOTES

1 Luis Molina Casanova (b. 1951, Ciales, Puerto Rico), current resident filmmaker and professor of cinema at the University of Sagrado Corazón in Puerto Rico, directed and produced the film *La guagua aérea*, which is considered as one of his best long features (Flores Carrión nd). His films consist mainly of educational documentaries, such as *Boleto de ida* (One Way Ticket, 1983) and *La historia de la farmacia en Puerto Rico* (History of Pharmacy in Puerto Rico, 1992), which explains the humorous tone mixed with his purpose of making “cine educativo de calidad, ameno e informativo” (“educational quality cinema, entertaining and informative”) (Ríos Díaz and González 2000: 33). In the opening credits of *La guagua aérea*, he labels himself as a “quijote de la cinematografía puertorriqueña” (“A Quijote of Puerto Rican cinema”).

2 Film critics such as Kino García Morales, Luis Trelles Plazaola, Marisel Flores Carrión, and others, have written extensively about the development of Puerto Rican cinema since its beginnings in early 20th century. However, research shows that Puerto Rican cinema has been analyzed more in historic terms (Trelles Plazaola 2000 and García Morales 1997), and less in artistic and cultural terms (Rosado 2001; Negrón-Muntaner 1993).

3 *Vacilón* in Puerto Rican Spanish means “funning and funning on, fun-making and making fun” (Flores 1993: 220).

4 Originally, the word “metaphor” came from the ancient Greek “metaphorein,” which meant to transfer or transport; in modern Greek, it means a bus (de Certeau 1984: 115).

5 The image of the airbus—as stated in the titles of the essay and the film—is not new. Before Sánchez, many Latin American authors, such as Cristina Peri Rossi, had already reworked the medieval image of the ship of fools in their respective works. In Puerto Rican literature, essayist Antonio S. Pedreira used it as a metaphor in the 1930s to represent Puerto Rican culture as “una nave al garete” (“a boat adrift without a set course”). By the 1970s and 1980s, writers like Ana Lydia Vega appropriated this image to criticize Caribbean-U.S. political and economic relations in her short story “Encancaranublado” (1982) about a Haitian, a Dominican, and a Cuban risking their lives in a dingy little raft to go to Miami and discussing their respective countries’ problems like a mini United Nations, but without the diplomacy. On the mainland, Puerto Rican poet and painter Jaime Carrero reworked this aquatic image as an aerial one in his 1964 poem “Jet neorriqueño/Neo-Rican Jetliner.”

6 The narrator tells the story of two young unskilled Puerto Rican migrants living in New York during the 1930s who apply for an apparently easy job of scraping labels from recycled bottles with the promise of good wages. After working for three hours, the main character decides to quit: the job is harder than the ad promised because he has to scrape the labels with his thumbnail in a tub full of cold water, and eventually his right thumb becomes swollen and calloused.

7 This moment recalls a similar one in Puerto Rican writer Miguel Meléndez Muñoz’s short story from *Cuentos del cedro* (1936) of a man who invites some friends for a pig roast feast at his
place. When the friends show up, the host has nothing for the promised feast; he only invited his friends as an act of politeness without really intending to fulfill it.

8 Operation Bootstrap began in 1948 with the intention of transforming the island from an agrarian society to an industrialized one.

9 The definition of “compadre” means literally “godfather,” but it also implies close friendship in many Hispanic societies.

REFERENCES


