BETWEEN TWO CULTURES: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN CARMEN RIVERA'S *LA GRINGA*

by

AILEEN M. VEZEAU

(Under the Direction of Sharina Maillo-Pozo)

ABSTRACT

This analysis evaluates identity formation of Puerto Rican migrants based on María's experience in *La Gringa* by Carmen Rivera. In this play, María, the daughter of Puerto Rican migrants, has an unstable foundation of identity, not feeling part of the dominant culture in New York, and she hopes to find a sense of self when she travels to Puerto Rico for the first time. During her stay on the island, she experiences a rude awakening that she is viewed as an outsider in Puerto Rico for being too "gringa." I interpret María's experience through the lens of Juan Flores' description of (im)migrant identity development in "'Que Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.," as María undergoes a transformative process where she reaches a newfound confidence in her bicultural identity, accepting that she possesses both Puerto Rican and US cultures.

RESUMEN

Este análisis se centra en la identidad de migrantes puertorriqueños según la experiencia de María en *La Gringa* de Carmen Rivera. En esta obra teatral, María, hija de migrantes puertorriqueños, no se siente parte de la cultura dominante de Nueva York y espera encontrarse a sí misma cuando visita Puerto Rico por primera vez. Durante su estancia allí, se da cuenta de la triste realidad de que no la aceptan allí porque la consideran como una "gringa." Leo las experiencias de María a través de la teoría de Juan Flores en "'Que Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.," que describe el proceso de ajuste de los (in)migrantes y el desarrollo de las futuras generaciones. A la larga de la obra, María acepta su identidad bicultural como puertorriqueña y estadounidense y posee una nueva confianza en cuanto a sus raíces.

KEY WORDS: Bicultural, Bifocal, Boricua, Latinx Identity, Latinx Theatre, Migrant, Nuyorican Consciousness, Nuyorican Poetry, Puerto Rican Consciousness, Taíno.

BETWEEN TWO CULTURES: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN CARMEN RIVERA'S *LA GRINGA*

by

AILEEN M. VEZEAU

BA, The University of Georgia, 2019

BBA, The University of Georgia, 2019

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2021

BETWEEN TWO CULTURES: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN CARMEN RIVERA'S *LA GRINGA*

by

AILEEN M. VEZEAU

Major Professor:	Sharina Maillo-Pozo
Committee:	Dana Bultman
	Alberto Villate-Isaza

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2021

DEDICATION

To my parents Liana and Jeff for my bicultural upbringing. Thank you to my mother for teaching me Spanish and for taking me to Panamá so I could appreciate my roots and carry with me some of my earliest childhood memories with my grandparents Tina and Raúl in Villa Lilla in their backyard tropical garden.

Thank you to my parents and to my grandparents Barbara and Mike for instilling in me a value for education and a desire to learn that has continued to grow over the years. I remember sitting on the stairsteps of the Marietta house with Jenni surrounded by stacks of books. Not much has changed since then.

Finally, to my twin sister Jenni. Thank you for your constant support even from 1000 miles away. During our conversations one-on-one and with our mom, I always seem to find a breakthrough. Thank you for listening to me and for your encouragement. Thank you to my family for your continued love and support throughout my personal and academic journeys.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis began as a class presentation entitled “Ni de aquí ni de allá: Reflexiones sobre *La Gringa*.” Following the positive feedback and encouragement from Sharina Maillo-Pozo, I decided to expand this project into my final research paper in my Latinx Studies class. Thank you to Marcela Garza and Grace Parker for reading the first draft of that paper and providing helpful comments for my final submission. During the class presentation of my final research paper, Ramón Luciano Capellán’s dialogue with the incorporation of Jorge Duany’s theory in my research allowed me to reflect upon alternate ways to incorporate this theory into further research. What started as a class presentation became a final research paper synthesized into a two-minute TED Talk activity and mock conference presentation, which planted the seeds for further expansion of this research into a thesis.

Thank you to my major professor Sharina Maillo-Pozo and committee members Dana Bultman and Alberto Villate-Isaza for your time, availability, and guidance in preparation for my comprehensive exams and thesis preparation and completion. Thank you to Kristina Medina-Vilariño at St. Olaf College for your suggestions on research materials on the Taínos, which guided me with the composition of the third chapter. Also, thank you to Laura Shedenhelm for assisting me with refining my research techniques in preparation for the thesis. Many thanks to Michael Palma Mir for the photographs from *La Gringa* found in the “List of Figures.”

Reflecting on my journey in the master's program in Hispanic Studies at the University of Georgia, I think back to how the journey began. Thank you to Magda Matuskova and Nicolás Lucero for encouraging me in my pursuit of graduate studies and thank you to Mark Anderson and Alicia Arribas for guiding me during this transition.

Finally, thank you to all my Hispanic Studies professors who have contributed to my academic growth and advancement throughout my graduate studies: of course, my committee members Sharina Maillo-Pozo, Dana Bultman, and Alberto Villate-Isaza as well as Nora Benedict, Lesley Feracho, Betina Kaplan, Nicolás Lucero, and Elizabeth Wright.

PREFACE

When I began to read *La Gringa* by Carmen Rivera, I felt mesmerized with the protagonist María's experience which so closely resembled my own. While the play follows the progression of María's fluctuating identity as a second-generation Puerto Rican migrant in New York, I closely identified with the character's dynamic growth in her identity due to my personal experience as a Panamanian-American who grew up in a bicultural household with a Panamanian mother and an American father. Like María, during my early primary education, where I was among the few or perhaps the only self-identifying Latina student in my classes, I wondered "where is my place?" or "where do I fit in?" feeling that I alone was battling the thoughts of being from "neither here nor there" (C. Rivera 78). When I was tasked with giving a presentation over the play *La Gringa* during my first year in the master's program, I reached an "aha moment" since the play conveyed the same sentiments that I struggled with during my youth and adolescence as a bicultural individual who sought to identify her place within the dominant culture. While I had overcome these existential questions during my undergraduate years at the University of Georgia, reading this play reminded me of the complexity of embracing two enriching cultures to develop a bicultural identity.

With respect to my own identity, what I used to see as a deficit, I now see as a gain. The parallels between my own acceptance of my bicultural background and that of María's in *La Gringa* solidified my personal connection to the field and opened my eyes to research interests in first and second generation (im)migrants' experiences in the

United States. This personal connection to María's experience fueled my desire to expand my research on *La Gringa* and to discuss important identity issues pertinent to many Latinx (im)migrants who straddle two (or more) cultures.

GLOSSARY

Atabey. The principal divine feminine Taíno being "of fresh water and human fertility" (Rouse 13). She is also associated with fertility, procreation, and childbirth (Stevens Arroyo 224).

bifocality. "[…] the dual frame of reference through which expatriates constantly compare their home and host countries. Many migrants routinely engage in activities and relationships that bind them to both 'here' and 'there' in their everyday lives" (Duany, *Blurred* 2).

bomba. "The *bomba* synthesizes several African musical currents as they converged in the plantation environment […] *Bombas* were sung and danced principally around sugar mill areas, on Saturday evenings and other holidays such as the closing of the harvest season (the *zafra*). Hence they were closely tied to the plantation's life cycle and followed the ebbs and flows of the sugar industry" (Duany, *Puerto Rico* 37-38, original emphasis).

borderlands. "[…] the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (Anzaldúa 19).

Boricua. One of the terms that the indigenous people of Puerto Rico identify themselves with, although they are commonly referred to as Taínos. Also used as a patriotic term for people of Puerto Rican origin to define themselves.

Coatlicue state. "Those activities […] which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life […] Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The Coatlicue state can be a way station or it can be a way of life (Anzaldúa 68).

coquí. A national Puerto Rican symbol: "tiny, melodious frog native to Puerto Rico that popularly represents 'Puerto Ricanness'" (G. Pérez 102).

güiro. "indigenous percussion instrument" (Duany, *Puerto Rico* 36).

intracolonial migrants. Migrants whose "migrations are founded in the contacts between coloniality and diaspora, between imperial systems of rule and the individuals who traversed these spaces [are viewed] as the invisible and impossible citizens of a non-sovereign nation and eventually impossible imperial motherland" (Martínez-San Miguel 97).

Nuyorican. There are two connotations of the term. Originally used by Puerto Rican islanders to refer to Puerto Rican migrants as inferior. Through Miguel Algarín's poetry collection that gave new meaning to the label, many artists and intellectuals have assumed this label to define themselves and situate their hybrid identity as Puerto Ricans occupying US spaces (Duany, *Blurred* 76).

playtext. Written script of a play; used to distinguish from the performance. In accordance with the terminology employed in *La voz Latina: Contemporary Plays and Performance Pieces by Latinas*.

Yocahu. Principal male Taíno supernatural being. "The lord of cassava and the sea" and son of Atabey (Rouse 13).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"What does it mean to live in between / What does it take to realize / that being Boricua is / a state of mind / a state of heart / a state of soul" (Fernández 20-25). These powerful verses from "Ode to the Diasporican (pa' mi gente)" by Mariposa María Teresa Fernández, a Puerto Rican poet born and raised in New York, refer to the experience of a Puerto Rican straddling two cultures. More generally speaking, this quote conveys what Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as an existence on the "borderlands" where "two or more cultures edge each other," which creates a "place of contradictions" (Anzaldúa 19). This conflicting existence is the case for many Latinx (im)migrants in the United States who face the impositions of US dominant culture but seek to maintain their cultural ties to their home country. Perhaps in the case of Puerto Rican migrants who leave their native homeland for economic reasons provoked by US impositions on the island, the feelings of "in-betweenness" are felt at a greater degree due to a continued history of US subjugation. Due to the US occupation of the island in 1898, Puerto Ricans' US citizenship rights dating back to the Jones Act of 1917 and Puerto Rico's status as a US Commonwealth since 1952, Puerto Ricans occupy a unique position in comparison to all other Latinx (im)migrants. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel refers to Puerto Rican migrants as "intracolonial migrants" where these "migrations are founded in the contacts between coloniality and diaspora, between imperial systems of rule and the individuals who traversed these spaces [are viewed] as the invisible and impossible

citizens of a non-sovereign nation and eventually impossible imperial motherland" (Martínez-San Miguel 97).[1]

Despite possessing rights to US citizenship, Puerto Rican migrants are oftentimes considered cultural "others" in the United States and "are often treated as foreigners in the 'mother country,'" as noted by Jorge Duany in *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (Duany, *Blurred* 8). Ironically, in the same way that Puerto Rican migrants are condescendingly viewed by US society, Puerto Rican migrants are also treated as "others" by Puerto Rican islanders. In fact, some islanders began using the pejorative term "Nuyorican" to label Puerto Rican migrants who settled in New York. In an interview conducted by Carmen Dolores Hernández, Miguel Algarín, co-founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café along with Miguel Piñero, discussed an experience where he was deemed "Nuyorican" by a bystander who witnessed a conversation of his with Miguel Piñero:

> I came to Puerto Rico once with Miguel Piñero and when we came out of the plane we were talking away. We had had some drinks and kept talking, and then I heard the word *newyorican* but I did not know they were talking about Piñero and me. I did not understand. Finally, when we were waiting for our bags I paid attention: *new-yo-rican*, that is, New York and Puerto Rican. They were looking down on us, as if we were nothing. We were Puerto Ricans talking in English, and that to them was contemptuous. (Hernández 39-40)

[1] I employ the term "intracolonial migrant," coined by Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel in *Coloniality of Diasporas: Rethinking Intra-Colonial Migrations in a Pan-Caribbean Context*.

From that individual's perspective, Piñero's and Algarín's use of English took away from their "Puerto Ricanness." According to Jorge Duany, "The Nuyorican stereotype highlights the migrants' supposed Americanization, including their way of speaking, dressing, and walking. […] Typically, islanders deem Nuyoricans as more aggressive, disrespectful, and promiscuous than themselves" (Duany, *Blurred* 74). Despite the offensive implications from the "Nuyorican" label, Algarín and Piñero chose to reclaim it by giving it a new meaning.[2] Therefore, they entitled an anthology of poetry *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* to "take the insult that the islander threw at [them] and take away its sting by making it the title of a book" (Hernández 40). For Algarín, along with many of the other poets of the period, "*Nuyorican* is both a social identity and a poetics, inseparable from the public sharing of a communal language" (Noel 46).

While poets like Miguel Algarín identify as "Nuyorican," Duany notes that "Except for some writers, artists, and intellectuals, Puerto Ricans in the United States seldom call themselves 'Nuyorican'" (Duany, *Blurred* 76). Rather than assume this term used by a niche group, most "[…] stateside Puerto Ricans continue to define themselves primarily as *puertorriqueños* or *boricuas*" (Duany, *Blurred* 76). These more general terms eliminate the geographic specificity tied to New York as implied with the term "Nuyorican," although some individuals outside of New York still choose to define themselves as "Nuyorican."

[2] In the same way that Puerto Rican migrants unwillingly received the label "Nuyorican" from those from their homeland, other Latinx (im)migrants have been labelled in derogatory terms by individuals from their respective home countries, as is the case of Mexican immigrants labelled as "Chicanos" and New York Dominican immigrants labelled as "dominicanyorks." In all three cases, these words have been reclaimed to challenge negative labels and to assign them new meanings.

Because of the more representative nature of the term "Puerto Rican" versus "Nuyorican," I redefine Juan Flores' theory of "Nuyorican consciousness" in his essay entitled "'Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity" as a "Puerto Rican consciousness." I expand upon this theory to include Puerto Rican migrants (and subsequent generations) in New York and beyond who identify as "Puerto Rican" rather than "Nuyorican" and trace the trajectory of María Elena García's "Puerto Rican consciousness" in Carmen Rivera's play, *La Gringa* (1994).[3] In accordance with the mindset of Puerto Rican migrants who resist assimilation to the dominant culture, Juan Flores describes the process whereby Puerto Rican migrants adapt to the clashes experienced between two cultures as "four moments of Nuyorican cultural interaction with U.S. society, briefly summarized as the here-and-now, Puerto Rican background, reentry and branching out" (Flores, *Divided* 192). Flores specifies the interaction particular to Puerto Rican migrants in New York who develop a "Nuyorican cultural consciousness," meaning an awareness and integration of one's Puerto Rican roots in the New York present, which creates a culture of inclusion in defiance of assimilation (Flores, *Divided* 186). This process of self-awareness and embrace of one's heritage consists of interconnected phases which "aris[e] simultaneously at the individual and collective levels" (Flores, *Divided* 186). Therefore, this nonlinear process does not imply that these "stages [occur] in a chronological sense, nor do the transitions follow one another in any set order" (Flores, *Divided* 186).

---

[3] Juan Flores affirms that his "observations may be readily generalized to apply to other colonial minorities" and in that case are not only limited to those who identify as "Nuyoricans" (Flores, *Divided* 185).

The written script of *La Gringa* was published in 1994, and the first performance of *La Gringa* debuted in 1996.

This process begins with the first stage, the here-and-now, where a Puerto Rican migrant (or second or third generation migrant) experiences a sense of loss amidst New York's surroundings (or another US city). In contrast to the "abandoned buildings, the welfare lines, the run-down streets, the frigid winter nights with no heat, in short, the conditions of hostility, disadvantage and exclusion," an individual longs for home through memories of the Puerto Rican island, which sets the stage for the second moment in the process: Puerto Rican background (Flores, *Divided* 186). Beyond the "romanticized, idealized image of Puerto Rico" which contrasts with the destitution observed and experienced on New York streets, a Puerto Rican migrant identifies with indigenous and African roots as an intracolonial migrant in the United States, as experienced by María through her encounter with Atabey and through her participation in *la bomba* (Flores, *Divided* 187). Because of the continuation of oppression which stems from colonial racial hierarchies and the subjugation of African and indigenous peoples, the revival of African and indigenous practices not only signifies cultural appreciation but also survival from an oppressive past which continues in the present. This encounter with one's collective history and yearning for survival propels the Puerto Rican migrant to the stage of reentry. During this stage, an individual connects the New York present to Puerto Rico due to the identifications with an individual and collective past. The Puerto Rican migrant integrates Puerto Rican customs into New York daily life through an "awakened national consciousness, or consciousness of nationality" rooted from a higher sense of purpose through the collective recovery of indigenous and African roots (Flores, *Divided* 191). Tío Manolo's affirmation of María's Puerto Rican identity and her acknowledgment of understanding following her uncle's passing indicate her passage into

a heightened consciousness. In the final stage, branching out, this consciousness extends itself to interactions with New York society at large. The Puerto Rican migrant participates and contributes to New York City by establishing community with other marginalized groups, such as "Black Americans and other migrants from the Caribbean and Latin America" (Flores, *Divided* 192). The individual maintains their Puerto Rican identity while maintaining solidarity with other groups who face common oppressions. Interaction with other marginalized groups indicates an awareness of a common struggle and the embrace of a culture apart from the dominant culture. While the conclusion of the play ends in Puerto Rico and María's actions upon her return to New York are open for interpretation, I deduce that she will actively engage with other marginalized groups and participate in activities like *la bomba* and continue to seek out the African and indigenous *parts* of her identity.

As the daughter of Puerto Rican migrants born and raised in New York City, María struggles to find a place within New York dominant culture, as she recognizes her status as an intracolonial migrant who is viewed as a cultural "other" because of her Puerto Rican background. Therefore, at the age of twenty-two when she travels to Puerto Rico for the first time, she hopes to find a sense of belonging. Contrary to her expectations, María learns that she too is viewed as a cultural "other" in Puerto Rico for being "too American" and finds that she, along with other multi-generational Puerto Rican migrants are "perceived as standing apart on both sides of the conjunction as outsiders to both mainland and island cultures" (Antush x). Because of her status as a "second-class citizen" in the United States and her lack of total immersion in Puerto Rican culture due to her upbringing on the mainland, María occupies a state of "in-

betweenness" where she feels that she is from "'Nideaquinideallá' (which translates as 'neitherfromherenorfromthere'), a term that indicates geographic, linguistic, and transcultural dislocation and remapping" (Luis, "Afro-Latino" 39-40). After undergoing stages of the development of a "Puerto Rican consciousness," María eventually reconciles her bicultural upbringing as a Puerto Rican born and raised on the US mainland.

In the 2007, 2008 Samuel French's edition of *La Gringa*, two poems precede the playtext: "Ode to the Diasporican (pa' mi gente)" by Mariposa María Teresa Fernández and "Apología to the Last Cacique" by Vincent Toro, which mirror María's experience in her search for identity.[4] In addition to setting the tone for *La Gringa*, these poems also reflect some of the stages described by Flores throughout the establishment of what he defines as a "Nuyorican consciousness" and what I redefine as a "Puerto Rican consciousness." I begin with "Ode to the Diasporican (pa' mi gente)" quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The poetic voice challenges those who refuse to accept her as "Boricua" or "Puerto Rican" because of her upbringing in New York:

> Some people say that I'm not the real thing
>
> Boricua, that is
>
> because I wasn't born on the enchanted island
>
> because I was born on the mainland north of Spanish Harlem
>
> because I was born in the Bronx
>
> Some people think I'm not bonafide

---

[4] I use the term "playtext" in accordance with the vocabulary denoted in *La voz Latina: Contemporary Plays and Performance Pieces by Latinas* to distinguish between the written text (playtext) and the performance.

> because my playground was a concrete jungle
>
> because my Río Grande de Loiza was the Bronx River. (Fernández 6-13)

The poetic voice continues to make stark contrasts between New York city life and the "paradise" of Puerto Rico through the description of "summer nights…filled with city noises / instead of coquis" (Fernández 16-17).[5] Despite the lack of physical connectedness to the island and an idealized image of Puerto Rico as "just some paradise / that we only saw in pictures," the poetic voice chooses to assert herself as Puerto Rican in defiance of others' disputes with respect to her "inauthenticity," likely a response to those on the island who contemptuously label her as a "Nuyorican" (Fernández 18-19). Rather than dispute geographic matters, the poetic voice asserts her Puerto Rican identity by arguing that "being Boricua is / a state of mind / a state of heart / a state of soul" (Fernández 22-25). Like María, her journey to come to terms with her identity involves an internal spiritual process. In "Nueva York, Diaspora City: Latinos Between and Beyond," Juan Flores notes that

> Mariposa thus gives voice to the sentiments of many young Puerto Ricans, and of many Latinos in general, in their defiance of a territorially and socially confined understanding of cultural belonging. Place of birth and immediate lived experience are not wholly definitive of cultural identification, which in this view has more to do with political and social experience, and with personally chosen ascription. (Flores, "Nueva York" 74)

[5] The *coquí*, a national Puerto Rican symbol, is a "tiny, melodious frog native to Puerto Rico that popularly represents 'Puerto Ricanness'" (G. Pérez 102).

While “Ode to the Diasporican (pa’ mi gente)” addresses the complexities of identity which surpass geographic boundaries, “Apología to the Last Cacique” depicts the conflicting aspects of Puerto Rican identity rooted in Spanish colonial encounters which are further complicated by US subjugation in the present. The poetic voice laments the devastations brought onto his Taíno ancestors at the hands of the Spanish. Even more disturbing for the speaker is that he shares common lineage with both the victim and the “villain.” In this clash between two parts of himself, the poetic voice takes the side of the oppressed and rejects the Spanish imperial past: “I slip off this imperial clothing to hug the heart of a / Stolen Batey to pray…to pray…to Yocahu” (Toro 24-25). The poetic voice favors indigenous practices to venerate the central Taíno supernatural beings Atabey and her son Yocahu as a rebellion against the coerced conversion to Catholicism dating back to Spanish colonial encounters (Fewkes 53).[6] The poetic voice’s identification with Taíno practices, a conscious distance from his Spanish lineage, and his “apology to the Last Cacique / As ritual to expel the Ponce De Leon in [him]” serve as a break away from generational bondage from the Spanish Conquest (Toro 39-40).

Although similar in nature to the epic poem “I am Joaquín” by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzáles, which depicts the Chicanx identity struggle that acknowledges the coexistence

[6] Atabey and Yocahu are the principal Taíno supernatural beings, referred to as *zemis*. Atabey is a “feminine personage, associated with the fresh water in rivers and ponds” in conjunction with procreation and childbirth (Stevens Arroyo 221-224). Yocahu, which means “spirit of cassava,” is associated with the harvest (Rouse 118). According to Taíno beliefs, neither is “creator god” as the universe “was supposed always to have existed” (Fewkes 53). From a comparative religion perspective, Yocahu would be considered the equivalent of a creator, but there is no such a thing in the Taíno belief system.

Also note that I refer to the Taínos as “supernatural beings” or “divine beings” as opposed to “gods.” In “Los indoantillanos precolombinos no creían en dioses,” Roberto Pérez Reyes argues that “La respuesta obligada es, aceptar que no hablamos de dioses o entes semejantes, sino más bien, de hombres y mujeres figurados o ficticios colmados de las lógicas indoantillanas al respecto del ser (ontológicas)” (Pérez Reyes 172).

of indigenous and Spanish parts of his identity, the poetic voice of "Apología" blatantly rejects his Spanish lineage, evident in his disdain toward Ponce de León and his "No thank you's to the Spain in [him]" (Toro 14). While the poetic voice of "I am Joaquín" denounces the actions of conquistadors such as Hernán Cortés, he positions himself as both "tyrant and slave," as does the poetic voice in "Apología" when he asks the last cacique for forgiveness for being "the sin and the sinner, the oppressor and the oppressed" (Gonzáles 35; Toro 45). In "Apología," the poetic voice acknowledges the biological origins of his Spanish blood, although he posits a more radical stance distancing himself from his Spanish heritage. The freedom from the conflicting Spanish and indigenous heritage in his apology to the last cacique facilitates the poetic voice's confidence to embrace a Puerto Rican identity: "Now I absolve me. I resolve me. I solve & I evolve me / Into the Post Neo Sorta Rican I been born to be" (Toro 49-50). As is the case with María in *La Gringa*, in order to resolve present-day conflicts with respect to a hybrid identity, the poetic voice overcomes his painful past through identification with his indigenous roots and an overt rejection of the Spanish aspects of his identity.

In addition to mirroring María's experience in *La Gringa*, "Ode to the Diasporican (pa' mi gente)" and "Apología to the Last Cacique" depict key stages of the development of a "Nuyorican consciousness" proposed by Juan Flores. In "Ode to the Diasporican (pa' mi gente)," the poetic voice contrasts the New York here-and-now with a romanticized image of Puerto Rico. In "Apología to the Last Cacique," the poetic voice reaches a "Nuyorican consciousness" through revival of indigenous beliefs, but the process to reach this consciousness in "Ode to the Diasporican (pa' mi gente)" is more ambiguous. The poetic voice in "Ode to the Diasporican" reaches an epiphany in which

she comprehends that her "Puerto Ricanness" defies geographic boundaries, but the path to this realization remains unclear. Rather than focus on her spiritual journey to reach that stage or explain the contradictory aspects of *mestizaje* like the poetic voice in "Apología," she focuses on her renewed state where she proudly proclaims her Boricua identity. While the final stage of branching out is not explicitly addressed in the poems, it can be deduced that the process of the "Nuyorican [or Puerto Rican] consciousness" extends itself to an active immersion in New York City in cooperation with other marginalized groups, as is also the case with *La Gringa*.

Like the poetic voices in these poems which preface *La Gringa,* María develops a renewed mindset with respect to her identity and learns that her identification with Puerto Rico surpasses geographic boundaries; she learns to grapple with her contradictory existence which dates back to the Spanish Conquest and continues in the present as an intracolonial migrant. In the subsequent chapters, I frame María's experience in *La Gringa* according to the four-stage process to reach a "Nuyorican consciousness" described by Juan Flores in "'Que Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S." These four stages are summarized as "the here-and-now, Puerto Rican background, reentry and branching out" (Flores, *Divided* 192). As I have mentioned, I redefine María's increased awareness as a "Puerto Rican consciousness" as she proceeds to identify herself as a "Puerto Rican." The second chapter describes the collaborations of playwright Carmen Rivera and director René Buch in the successful theatre production of *La Gringa* in addition to the aesthetic elements of an archived performance by Repertorio Español which contribute to María's "performance" of her identity. In the following two chapters, I discuss María's

development of a "Puerto Rican consciousness" through Flores' framework in "'Que Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S." I begin with the first two stages, the here-and-now and Puerto Rican background, where María draws upon memories of the busyness of New York in comparison to the tranquility of Puerto Rico through her identification with nature. Beyond her romanticized view of the island, she reaches a profound level of identification with her ancestors by visiting her grandmother's grave and by exploring El Yunque, the Puerto Rican rainforest, and reviving Taíno traditions. Her identification with her Taíno heritage enables her to begin to heal from her individual and collective trauma which ultimately allows her to establish her "Puerto Rican consciousness." The fourth chapter examines María's acceptance of her Puerto Rican identity guided by her Tío Manolo and the reconciliation between those deemed "Nuyoricans" and those on the island. Her encounters with her African roots confirm the plurality of her identity which embraces her indigenous and African heritage, as evident with María's playing of the indigenous instrument, the *güiro*, and the simultaneous celebration of *la bomba* at the conclusion of the play.

Although the plot begins and ends in Puerto Rico, the playing of *la bomba* connects María to New York because of the diasporic evolution of *la bomba* in the city. This musical component symbolizes the continuation of the exploration of María's identity upon her return to New York and represents a continued resistance to assimilation to dominant culture, which completes the final step of the four-stage identity formation process which María undergoes. Finally, I conclude with an examination of the impact of Carmen Rivera's *La Gringa*, as it resonates with Puerto Rican migrants and

other Latinx (im)migrants. The breadth of this play expands beyond the Puerto Rican migrant experience and depicts the experiences of conflicting identities between two (or more) cultures. This study focuses on the occupation of a third space, an alternate space which allows one to inhabit often conflicting aspects of one's identity and conveys the complexity and fluidity of identity pertaining to the Latinx population.

CHAPTER 2

"PERFORMING" IDENTITY IN *LA GRINGA*

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the performance of the "longest running off-Broadway Spanish language play," *La Gringa* (1996) performed at Repertorio Español (Repertorio Español). Written originally in English by Carmen Rivera, *La Gringa* was co-translated in Spanish by playwright Carmen Rivera and director René Buch, co-founder of Repertorio Español. For twenty-five years, the play has been performed in Spanish with English subtitles at Gramercy Arts Theatre in Manhattan. Due to COVID-19; however, *La Gringa* and other Repertorio plays, such as the classic *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, are available to stream online. Within a company that "presents over 300 performances of 15 different productions in rotating repertory," how has *La Gringa* achieved such success and longevity (Repertorio Español)?

To begin with, Carmen Rivera's and Repertorio Español's visions coincide to form a complementary pairing, as they both seek a representative theatre. In an interview with Jason Ramírez, playwright, Carmen Rivera, underscores the value of work "for us and by us," that is, art cultivated by Latinx creators (Ramírez 29). As a graduate of the MA program in Playwriting and Latin American Theatre from New York University, it is likely that Rivera's quote not only originates from popular culture's hip-hop apparel brand FUBU but can perhaps be traced back to W.E.B. Du Bois' perspectives on a representative theatre:

> The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: I. *About us*. That is, they must have plots which reveal real Negro life as it is. 2. *By us*. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. *For us*. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. *Near us*. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people. (Du Bois 165, original emphasis)

Although in a different context, Rivera advocates for representative works which convey the experience of those living on the "borderlands" who view themselves as "'other[s] in a world of 'others'" (Ramírez 15). In *La Gringa*, Rivera highlights the dynamic character María who occupies a third space in defiance of binary positions that society establishes with respect to identity, which mirrors Rivera's experience where "both Puerto Rico and the United States are home'" (Ramírez 69). Her upbringing as a second-generation Puerto Rican born and raised in the United States who feels "'not quite American yet not quite Latino'" inspired the ultimate creation of *La Gringa* (Ramírez 4). What originally began as a brief two-act, nine-page play called *The Universe* transformed into *La Gringa*, which received an OBIE in 1996 the year of *La Gringa*'s debut. Not only does the play resonate with Puerto Ricans with a similar experience as that of Rivera, but the nature of the play resonates with other Latinx, ethnic, and racialized subjects in the United States. In addition to opening the door for representation among various cultural and racial groups, the play depicts the female perspective of a Puerto Rican in the United States, which can be applied to other groups.

As Rivera advocates for the "importance of maintaining a space for racially and ethnically marked theater within the United States" as argued by John Rossini, Repertorio Español's mission is founded on "introduc[ing] the best of Latinx, Spanish and Hispanic-American theatre in distinctive, quality productions, and to bring theatre to a broad audience in New York City and across the country, including seniors, students and Hispanics of all national backgrounds" (Rossini 11; Repertorio Español). In *La Gringa*, Rivera depicts the preoccupations of a Latinx woman, which serves to represent the female experience but also can be generally applied to any Latinx individual, ethnic group, racialized subject, or anyone in general due to the relatability of identity struggles for people in all walks of life. The core message of *La Gringa* speaks to the concerns of Latinx (im)migrants, but the content contains a universally applicable message which applies to a wide array of groups. This relatable message with respect to the complexity of identity formation coincides with Repertorio's mission to cater to a broad audience.

Since 1968, the year of the founding of Repertorio Español by René Buch and Gilberto Zaldívar, Repertorio Español has sought to target Latinx and Spanish-speaking populations in Manhattan and beyond by presenting performances in Spanish that are captioned in English to also include non-Spanish speakers. In an interview conducted by Arthur Bartow, René Buch underscored: "Now we don't specify whether we're doing a Puerto Rican play, or a Cuban or South American play. We're working on the element that touches all of them, doing a play that interests everybody, using the one thing we have in common, our heritage and our language" (Bartow 47).[7] By not specifying

[7] Ironically, María, the protagonist of the play, does not fit Buch's definition of what constitutes a "real" Latino, as she does not speak Spanish fluently. While Buch indicates that the ability to speak Spanish is an inherent quality for a Latino, in *La Gringa*, Carmen Rivera demonstrates that *latinidad*, more specifically

nationalities when advertising their performances, Repertorio Español has created a pan-ethnic project which blurs the borders between Latin American countries, thus creating a message of unity that resonates with the Latinx population. Repertorio Español's perspective toward a representative theatre in tandem with *La Gringa*'s focus on hybrid cultural identity paired well to reach the Latinx community and beyond.

The collaborations of Carmen Rivera and René Buch converted the English script into a performance given in Spanish for purposes of accessibility to Spanish-speakers which "captured the spirit of the Puerto Rican experience," according to a *New York Times* review (Bruckner). Following the passing of René Buch on April 19, 2020, Carmen Rivera commented in an interview conducted by the *New York Times*: "'They say writers write and directors interpret, but he [Buch] really delved into this play. He was a story excavator'" (Green). Notable is the fact that Buch's concept of "bringing a play to life" is informed by a minimalistic approach to staging that emphasizes the space. In a recent interview conducted by Néstor David Pastor from the Latinx Project at New York University, Carmen Rivera notes that with respect to set design,

> [Buch] wanted to reconfigure the set in a minimalistic style. He worked with the designer [Robert Weber Federico] to create a metaphoric set. They used wooden panels and white fabric, which would change colors with the lights and project images. This minimalist/ metaphoric style really added a universal aspect to the play—where the search for Puerto Rican identity in *La Gringa* became a human search for self. (Pastor)

"Puerto Ricanness" depends on other factors beyond the ability to speak Spanish. Rivera's own personal experience with the Spanish language compares to María's.

The intimate atmosphere created by the scenography in addition to the captivating message of *La Gringa* have contributed to its ability to "capture the spirit of the Puerto Rican experience" and beyond because of its pan-ethnic applications and resonance with individuals beyond the Latinx community in the universal "search for self" (Bruckner; Pastor).

In this chapter, I analyze the archived performance of *La Gringa* in Spanish available on Repertorio Español's website in honor of the twenty-fifth-year anniversary of its debut.[8] Although I focus on Samuel French's English version of *La Gringa* (2007, 2008) in subsequent chapters, this analysis highlights the Spanish performance of *La Gringa* (2021). The staging creates a universal aspect which gives room to imagine other experiences and plays between the passage from one space to another, as evident with the stage curtains, which I discuss later. The transformation of the English playtext into the Spanish performance bridges the two linguistic "borderlands" and represents María's contact with both US and Puerto Rican cultures. Like the conversion of the English written script into an accessible performance to Spanish-speaking audiences, the following analysis of the Spanish performance followed by the English playtext mirrors María's experience between two cultures and languages and represents a reconciliation between the occupation of these spaces, an individual and collective representation of (im)migrants' experiences.

During María's first encounter with the Puerto Rican island, María obsessively feels the need to "perform" her *latinidad*, more specifically her "Puerto Ricanness"

[8] According to Diana Taylor, "A video of performance is not a performance, though it often comes to replace the performance as a thing in itself (the video is part of the archive, what it represents is part of the repertoire" (Taylor 20).

through external identity markers upon her arrival to Puerto Rico. I read María's "performance" of her Puerto Rican identity through the lens of Wendy Roth's "Performing Race Strategically" in *Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race* in which Roth argues that individuals "perform" their racial identity to exhibit their ethnic or racial belonging and in some cases downplay their affiliation with a certain ethnic or racial group. According to Roth, "Latino migrants can use these strategies, to the extent that their appearance allows, to try to shape whether they are seen as Latino or as White or Black Americans in different situations" (Roth 151). Although the "performance of race goes beyond appearance to ways of interacting, body language, and mannerisms," I focus on María's consumption and use of articles of clothing which overtly display Puerto Rico (Roth 154). In María's case, rather than "enact race by performing it," she performs her ethnic identity by "adopting types of behavior, styles, and routines that signal who [she is] within a[n] [ethnic] framework" (Roth 151). María's "performance" of her identity through her wardrobe choices and accessories serves as a means to display her "Puerto Ricanness," and the background on the stage parallels María's dynamic character development throughout the course of the play.

When Iris, María's cousin, arrives home after picking her up from the airport, she complains to her mother Norma about her embarrassment of being associated with María who "stages" her Puerto Rican identity on the island by wearing a flashy jacket with a large Puerto Rican flag (See Fig. 1). Even the luggage María brings with gifts displays the Puerto Rican flag, as if she needs to prove her "Puerto Ricanness" publicly. When Iris complains to Norma about "Miss Puerto Rico," Norma responds "Es que ella no es de

aquí. Se crió *gringa*" in a condescending tone (Repertorio Español, my emphasis). Although the animosity Norma and Iris feel toward María is immediately apparent in the playtext, their opposition to María's visit is conveyed even more so in the performance through their closed-off body language and dry tones. Norma's hostility is even more evident than Iris' with her immediate use of the label "gringa" and her coldness toward María. In contrast to Norma's dryness, Tío Víctor's and Tío Manolo's good nature comes across more clearly in the performance through their dialogue, tone, and body language. Shortly after Víctor greets María when she tells him that she studied Spanish in college, he comments light-heartedly: "Eso está muy bien. Que aprendas *tu* idioma. Eh, ¿pero habla muy bien el español *para ser una americana*, verdad" (Repertorio Español, my emphasis). He directs this question to Iris, after which she turns away and crosses her arms to distance herself from María and to avoid responding to the question. Even though Víctor labels María as an "americana," which creates a distinction between her and Puerto Ricans on the island, his upbeat tone provokes no negative response from María.[9] She merely responds, "Thank you" and proceeds to take spontaneous pictures of Víctor. While it appears that Víctor means no harm in referring to María as an "americana," he still imposes a label onto María solely based on her place of upbringing. However, he does not dismiss María's Puerto Rican heritage when he says "Que aprendas *tu* idioma;" he still includes María as part of a possessor of Puerto Rican culture despite her americanization (Repertorio Español, my emphasis).

[9] Although the use of the term "americana" poses ambiguity in the sense that it can be used to describe anyone from the Americas (norte americanos [which includes Mexicans, Canadians, and "Americans" from the United States], latinoamericanos, centroamericanos, etc.), in this context, the word "americana" refers to someone from the United States. In the performance and playtext, all references to "americana" or "American" refer to someone from the United States.

When it comes to Tío Manolo's initial interaction with María regarding identity, María rejects the label "gringa" that Manolo imposes upon her. After Manolo criticizes Puerto Rican Studies as a major by saying "Que bobería," he tells María: "Hablas muy bien el español *para ser una gringa*" (Repertorio Español, my emphasis). María firmly and assertively responds, "Yo no soy gringa," which she construes as a negative label (Repertorio Español). Manolo quickly resolves this conflict by humorously replying: "Okay…okay…excuse me," to which María laughs, and they continue with their conversation (Repertorio Español). Notably, María responds casually when Víctor describes her as an "americana" versus when Manolo labels her as a "gringa." While both words in this context denote the origin of someone from the United States, "americana" carries a more neutral tone in contrast to "gringa" which implies contempt.[10] Although the terms "americana" or "American" in many cases are "associat[ed] […] with White non-Latinos, or *gringos*," "gringo/a" carries with it a more overt sense of rejection in contrast to "americana" which can simply refer to someone based on their place of birth or upbringing (Roth 161). In the case of Manolo's use of the word "gringa" toward María, while spoken affectionately by him, the word nonetheless still carries a weight that provokes offense for María.

[10] In her dissertation entitled *El teatro puertorriqueño: choque, resistencia y negociación lingüística del español de Puerto Rico*, Naomí Maldonado-Cardenales provides a detailed description of the meaning of the word "gringa" in Puerto Rican contexts:

> En Puerto Rico, por ejemplo, [la palabra "gringa"] se ha acuñado como gentilicio adoptivo para referirse a los americanos. En este sentido se pueden comunicar dos cosas, rechazo o burla. Por otro lado también se utiliza para referirse a puertorriqueños que han emigrado o han nacido en los Estados Unidos. En la mayoría de los casos la palabra viene cargada de un sentido de menosprecio hacia quien se utiliza, por haber dejado su país e irse a vivir a los Estados Unidos, adoptando las costumbres y forma de vida en dicho lugar, pero primordialmente se utiliza para referirse a la falta de fluidez o soltura al hablar español. (Maldonado-Cardenales 230)

Although the instance that Manolo calls María a "gringa" creates no further tension or conflict in their relationship, Iris' and Norma's relationship with María continues to deteriorate. The peak of the conflict culminates when María is rejected from an employment opportunity on the island because she is not considered Puerto Rican. When María storms into the house and Manolo explains María's hurt from the circumstance, Norma cruelly laughs, and both she and Iris display no compassion despite María's altered state. While Manolo defends María and tries to convince Iris to accept her as a fellow Puerto Rican, Iris responds: "Entonces tenemos que aceptar como puertorriqueños a todos los *gringos*" in a harsh tone (Repertorio Español, my emphasis). Iris' use of this label implies a resentment toward the US impositions on the island which provoked subsequent structural changes and led to the prevalence of US-owned businesses, which displaced Puerto Rican work on the island.[11] In addition, this term conveys the superiority oftentimes felt by Puerto Rican islanders who refuse to migrate to the mainland. After this personal attack, María defends herself by saying "Que yo no soy gringa," voice quivering (Repertorio Español).

Despite María's continued attempts to convince Iris that she is not a "gringa," Iris insists on defining María's identity. While Norma watches this dispute on the sidelines, her stern demeanor toward María conveys hostility and indicates her agreement with Iris on the matter. In addition, the positioning of Norma and Iris on stage right and Manolo and María on stage left underscore their positions as adversaries during this heated

[11] Ironically, Iris excessively consumes US products, although she resents the displacement of Puerto Rican jobs because of US companies' presence on the island. In fact, Iris proudly states, "A mí me gusta mi comida de los yankee preparado en plástico o en lata" (Repertorio Español). Manolo notices this contradiciton and confronts Iris when he says: "A quién estás tú protegiendo? A ti no te importa para nada la cultura puertorriqueña. Tú lo que quieres son cosas americanas: ropa, comida; no la quieres llevar [a María] a ningún lado" (Repertorio Español).

debate. Manolo enters Norma's and Iris' "space" to confront their view of María as an "outsider" when he states: "María no tiene que haber nacido en Puerto Rico para ser boricua" (Repertorio Español). Although Manolo originally referred to María as a "gringa," he ultimately leads her to see herself as a Puerto Rican aside from extraneous details, such as place of birth and upbringing.

I return to the concept of wardrobe selections to note the difference between María's public display of her "Puerto Ricanness" with her jacket and suitcase containing the Puerto Rican flag and her private, subtle means of identification. After the conflict with Iris, María visits Manolo's room due to her restlessness. She informs him that she plans to leave the island the following day and has already booked a flight. Discouraged from the rejection from her own family, María decides never to return to Puerto Rico and dejectedly states: "¿Tú sabes qué? Yo creo que no soy puertorriqueña porque ni la canción del coquí puedo escuchar" (Repertorio Español). Ironically, at a time where María feels less Puerto Rican than ever, María wears a nightgown with all the colors of the Puerto Rican flag (See Fig. 2). While this is likely the only nightgown María had packed during her stay, it is significant that at a moment where María has completely given up on her "performance" of Puerto Rican identity, traces of "Puerto Ricanness" remain. Contrary to the superficial nature of using the jacket and suitcase as identifiers of her "Puerto Ricanness," the nightgown carries with it a glimmer of hope since its colors implicitly symbolize a connection to the Puerto Rican nation. In contrast to using the jacket and suitcase to draw attention to her Puerto Rican origins in a crowded airport, María appears not to give a second thought to her wardrobe choice at this time. For María, the nightgown does not qualify as an external identity marker, as it is an article of

clothing used in a private sphere. Rather, it symbolizes a foreshadowing of a process of internalization of her Puerto Rican identity. This scene serves as a transition between the María who insecurely "forces" others to see her as a Puerto Rican and the María who breaks free from others' impositions and finds meaning in her definition of self.

In addition to the nightgown's colors which serve as a precursor to María's eventual acceptance of her Puerto Rican identity, the white stage curtains represent a passage for not only María but also for Manolo. For María, the white stage curtains symbolize her spiritual journey of acceptance of her "Puerto Ricanness" and the cleansing from her individual and collective past since the color white represents purification. María finds freedom apart from others' opinions of her identity and finds a renewed sense of self. With this new self comes a María whose Spanish fluidity has increased throughout the progression of the play. At the beginning of the play,

> María por su parte se comunica por medio de la alternación de códigos. Esta estrategia lingüística va desapareciendo a medida que va avanzando la obra y el personaje va ganando más confianza y fluidez al hablar español […] Ya para finales de la obra María logra comunicarse completamente en español. (Maldonado-Cardenales 238)

With respect to Manolo's spiritual passage, the white stage curtains carry even more meaning with how the play concludes. In Manolo's case, the curtains represent his eventual passage into the next life and serve as a precursor to his purification in Atabey's presence in El Yunque. The visit to El Yunque allows for his spiritual liberation: "Atabey liberó mi espíritu. Ahora puedo regresar a casa totalmente libre" (Repertorio Español). After this cleansing, Manolo is at peace to leave this world and enter the next. María's

words “Él volvió a la vida” not only signify his renewed spirit following his encounter with Atabey but also foreshadow his passage into the next life (Repertorio Español). With María’s “Puerto Rican consciousness” at the end of the play and Manolo’s renewed peace with Atabey, the conclusion of the play is fitting with Manolo’s death signifying a new life. After his passing, Manolo’s figure projects on the white curtain, the medium that represented both his and María’s spiritual passages. This signifies his continued presence with María even after death and the blurred borders between the mortal experience and afterlife, which parallels María’s crossing between Puerto Rican and US cultures. In fact, the play concludes with María speaking to Manolo’s spirit who looks on as indigenous music plays in the background: “Tío Manolo, te siento. Estás aquí. Tío, ya pude escuchar la canción del coquí. Hermosa. Gracias por hacérmela entender. Tío, ¿cómo es el cielo? ¿Estás con Atabey? Bendición, Tío” (Repertorio Español).

Repertorio Español’s archived performance of *La Gringa* captures María’s passage into a state of enlightenment by means of reaching a “Puerto Rican consciousness” through the use of dialogue, music, wardrobe selections, background, and ambiance created on the stage. While the following chapters focus on the English playtext, this chapter establishes a framework for key themes which I discuss with respect to María’s four-stage process in developing a “Puerto Rican consciousness.” In the next chapter, I situate María’s views toward New York City in comparison to her idealized image of Puerto Rico and continue to discuss María’s spiritual journey as she starts to move beyond the obsessive need to “perform” her identity.

CHAPTER 3

BACK TO THE ROOTS

As a second-generation Puerto Rican born in New York City, María experiences the Puerto Rican island for the first time at twenty-two years old. While she has no personal memories there, her parents' memories passed down to her developed her strong sense of identification with it, which created the perception of Puerto Rico as "paradise" in contrast to her day-to-day realities in New York. Evident in María's dialogue with respect to her New York upbringing and her experience in Puerto Rico during her vacation, she demonstrates an awe toward the homeland in contrast to her opinions of New York. While María's parents' childhood and young adult memories contribute to María's concept of Puerto Rico, their life there was far from perfect, as they migrated to the United States for economic reasons. María's admiration toward the motherland inhibits her to clearly perceive reality, and she adopts an idealistic view toward it which places her in the position of the "here-and-now" which transitions to "Puerto Rican background" as described in Juan Flores' four-stage process of identity in "'Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity." María's longing for a "perfect" future in Puerto Rico contrasts with her far-from-perfect concept of New York, which facilitates the transition to "Puerto Rican background" where the romanticized view of the island moves to a deeper level where she identifies with her ancestors and discovers her indigenous roots.

The "here-and-now"

Although the plot takes place solely in Puerto Rico, María shares her perspectives of the external aspects of New York City. Therefore, information about New York is transmitted through María's personal experiences growing up there and through other characters' opinions. While working the land and picking produce with Monchi, a family friend and potential romantic partner for María, María feels mesmerized by her surroundings and contrasts the peace and tranquility of the farm to the noisiness and disorder of New York:

> **MARÍA**. ...What peace...I feel so calm right now, tired but calm. I grew up in front of an "EL" train. It came out of a tunnel and ran right by my apartment. The whole apartment shook everytime [sic] the train passed...I'd love to live in a place like this.
>
> **MONCHI**. New York seems to be an interesting place.
>
> **MARÍA**. Yeah…there's alot [sic] to do but you can get lost sometimes. You're always walking on asphalt and the buildings block the sun.
>
> **MONCHI**. The mountains also block the sun.
>
> **MARÍA**. It's not the same thing…Here you see things grow right before your eyes. (C. Rivera 35)

On only her first full day in Puerto Rico, María already contemplates potentially living on the island based on the momentary observations of her surroundings in addition to the influence of her parents' recollections of the motherland; her experience working on Monchi's farm solidifies her naïve plans. Her sense of peace as she "sees things grow

right before [her] eyes" informs her decision of a potential move to the island due to the stark contrast with the rowdiness of New York. While María complains about the hostile conditions of New York, Monchi seems intrigued by an unknown city to him, but María refuses to accept the positives of New York life, despite Monchi's rebuttals of her arguments. Monchi attempts to draw attention to the fact that like buildings, "mountains also block the sun" to convince María to return to reality, but she insists that the natural elements of Puerto Rico surpass what New York has to offer (C. Rivera 35).

The main difference between María's optimism toward Puerto Rico and her pessimism toward New York pertains to the natural resources which allow one to "commune with Mother Earth" on the island versus the man-made resources in the populous city of New York according to her direct observations (C. Rivera 31).[12] María's disillusionment toward New York may be felt at a lesser degree than that of her parents due to their upbringing in Puerto Rico and the greater loss felt when comparing a childhood of memories made on the island to the conditions on the mainland.

Unlike Monchi who maintains an open mind toward New York city life, tía Norma displays contempt toward the city and its inhabitants. There is no concrete evidence that Norma has been to the city, so her opinions may be informed by her own personal observations or from other sources. Regardless of whether or not she has personally travelled to the city, one can deduce that her opinions are influenced by the "Nuyorican" stereotype, which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter. In addition to María's criticism of New York City, Norma's harsh commentary depicts New York as a "filthy" place where "People […] live like animals" which implies not only a criticism of

[12] María says: "In New York it's difficult to think about our relationship to Mother Earth" (C. Rivera 70).

the city's conditions but also its inhabitants (C. Rivera 28). In addition, she describes the streets as "overcrowded and full of drugs" (C. Rivera 28). Her hostile tone toward the city in conjunction with María's pessimism contribute to the passage of the "here-and-now" through the depiction of New York as a place of "hostility, disadvantage and exclusion" (Flores 186).

"Puerto Rican background"

Due to the inherent comparative nature between Flores' first two stages in the development of a "Nuyorican consciousness," the first stage lends itself to the inclusion of aspects of the second stage because of the non-linear and interconnected nature of the phases which oftentimes overlap. The romanticized vision of Puerto Rico grows from the observations of a supposed destitution of New York. María falls "victim" to the "state of enchantment, an almost dream-like trance at the striking contrast between the cultural barrenness of New York and the imagined luxuriance of the island culture" (Flores 187). On her first full day on the island, after visiting major tourist attractions, María enters this trance-like state of captivation from her surroundings:

> **MARÍA.** While I was walking around, I had this feeling of…of…peace. As my feet touched the stones, it felt right…I was hypnotized by the sound of the waves crashing against the fort's walls…. I realized then that I had come home…The sound of the coquis, the smell of nature, *the sun that burns your skin in one day*…. (C. Rivera 27, my emphasis)

Quite surprisingly, María reframes negative interactions with nature, such as sunburns and mosquito bites, into a positive. Rather than view her mosquito bites as an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience, María chooses to view them as an indication of her

"initiation into the tribe" (C. Rivera 23). María's unusual interpretation of her sunburn and mosquito bites are rooted in her desire to "bond with Puerto Rico" through external markers of identity (C. Rivera 15). Sun-tanned skin, or in María's case, sun-burnt skin, and mosquito bites, are external consequences of one's stay or inhabitance in a tropical location; thus, María believes that these natural consequences make her "appear" more Puerto Rican. María's obsession with external identity markers fuels her "performance" of identity through "a series of superficial gestures: kissing the earth when she arrives, wearing a jacket decorated with the Puerto Rican flag, and taking a sightseeing tour of island monuments" (Godsey 39). Through her "performance" of identity through ridiculous claims that mosquito bites signify an "initiation into the tribe" and her constant need to show her identification with vital aspects of Puerto Rican culture, such as the *coquí*, María attempts to overcompensate for her lack of a firm foundation in her identity (C. Rivera 15).

During María's pursuit to deeply identify with the island through Mother Nature and her "performance" of her identity to "prove" her "Puerto Ricanness," she experiences brief ruptures from her idealized view of the island. After María's conversation with Monchi about the authenticity of Puerto Rican land in comparison to the industrialization of New York, a lizard becomes tangled up in María's hair. Rather than use that opportunity to "get close to the land […] to bond with Puerto Rico," María frantically begs Monchi to get it off her (C. Rivera 15). Ironically, María refuses to welcome an opportunity to "bond" with the lizard and thus grow "closer" to the land. If mosquito bites are markers of Puerto Rican identity, according to María, why does the encounter with the lizard not qualify as a "symbolic" moment to "exhibit" that identity? It appears

that María selectively chooses which aspects of Puerto Rican culture to display, such as when she explores the island wearing the jacket with the Puerto Rican flag. While she claims that she wants to identify with nature, when presented with the opportunity to do so through her encounter with the lizard, María rejects that opportunity to "bond" with nature while ironically welcoming mosquito bites. In addition to the lizard incident, María temporarily breaks from her idealized vision of the island due to a cultural misunderstanding when tío Víctor cooks the rabbit she thought he gifted her as a pet. Because María had already named her rabbit (Stella) and treated it as a pet, not as a meal, María chooses to forego the rabbit dish even though generally speaking, she eats rabbit. After these temporary circumstances which caused discomfort and confusion, María returns to her naïve view toward Puerto Rico; however, her whole world changes when she is denied a job "because she's not a Puerto Rican national" (C. Rivera 53).

When María's identity comes into question during a job interview with the Hato Rey office of the US-based company she works for, she truly reveals her unstable identity foundations and insecurities regarding her identity as an "other" in the United States and a "gringa" in Puerto Rico:

> **MARIA.** I'm not accepted in America… There is no place for me!! I am a foreigner in my place of birth. I am exotic, I am from the island, I'm an immigrant who's taking American jobs away from Americans, I am a welfare burden!!! A Spic! (C. Rivera 54)

After the interview incident, María no longer views mosquito bites as a symbol of her "initiation into the tribe" (C. Rivera 23). Instead, she complains that "It's too hot, too

humid and too many mosquitos" (C. Rivera 58). She completely reverses her opinion of mosquito bites as a "tribal rite" to a form of rejection against her:

> **MARIA.** I think they bite me so I can leave. *The mosquitos are the true defenders against invaders*. I guess they don't think I'm Puerto Rican either…. (C. Rivera 59, my emphasis)

Through this experience, Manolo instructs María on establishing a firm foundation of identity that cannot be shaken by others' comments or imposed labels, an idea that he plants in María's mind during her entire trip.

Because of María's disillusionment after her profession that she does not belong anywhere, Manolo brings María back to her roots and takes her to visit her grandmother's grave and El Yunque. Despite Manolo's insistence that "Nobody can take your roots away from you. Even the smallest plants have roots," María still feels "rootless" (C. Rivera 40):

> **MARÍA.** It doesn't matter anymore. I am nobody, everywhere—no roots, no home… (C. Rivera 63)

Manolo hopes that taking her to these significant places, her grandmother's grave and El Yunque, will allow María to establish a firm foundation in her identity through identification with her ancestors and her Taíno roots. Upon her arrival to the grave, María recalls stories her grandmother shared with her about Puerto Rico. Through the recollection of these memories and the profound sense of her ancestors' presence on the gravesite, Manolo reminds María that the deceased live on through a continued connection with the living:

> **MANOLO.** One day you're here, then you're gone. But she's [María's grandmother] here, she's not just dust. She's in me, she's in you. She still lives in us. […] We will always be connected, it doesn't matter where we are. (C. Rivera 68-69)

This continued connection between the living and the deceased serves as a transition for María to visit El Yunque, "reputed to have been the home of the last cacique" where she encounters Atabey, the divine feminine Taíno being "of fresh water and human fertility" (Rouse 24; 13). These encounters between the natural and supernatural realms create another border crossing in addition to the one between the living and the dead. Upon María's arrival to El Yunque, Manolo declares:

> **MANOLO.** Atabey is welcoming you. She never welcomes anyone on their first visit, except for me of course. […] She's opened the door for you. (C. Rivera 71)

In fact, Atabey receives María in the midst of a thunderstorm where María "*begins to be immersed in DRY rain*" (C. Rivera 71 [stage direction]). This scene where María immerses herself in the provisions from Atabey (the rainwater) signifies the beginning of her spiritual healing and renewal in the form of baptism. The "old being" fades and the "new being" emerges free from strongholds from her individual and collective pasts.

With respect to freedom from a collective past marked by colonial impositions, the encounter with Atabey grants María freedom from generational "chains," a long-lasting consequence from the Spanish Conquest and consequential annihilation of the Taíno people.[13] Gloria Anzaldúa describes these "chains" as "This weight on her back—

[13] Despite scholarly arguments regarding the extinction of the Taínos, "[…] the findings by Juan Martínez-Cruzado and colleagues of the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez [indicate] that 61 percent of Puerto

which is the baggage from the Indian mother, […] the baggage from the Spaniard father" (Anzaldúa 104). The nature of María's genetic makeup as a product of *mestizaje* is the root of her contradictory existence which fuels her identity struggles. While María battles against the imposition of labels such as "gringa," she first must return to the origin of these labels which date back to Columbus' first encounter with her indigenous ancestors. While the first people he encountered are referred to as "Taínos," this term resulted from a cultural misunderstanding:

> Indeed, before 1492, there were no "Taínos." When Christopher Columbus first landed on the northern coast of "Hispaniola," he promptly named the island in honor of his Spanish benefactors. Just as expeditiously he designated the indigenous people whom he encountered "Taínos" because he assumed that in greeting him with the word "taíno" they were naming themselves. In fact, they were offering assurances of their harmlessness (the word, the Spanish would soon learn, actually meant "noble" or "good"), and were trying to distinguish themselves from their more aggressive neighbors, the "Caribs," who inhabited the islands to the southeast. (Jiménez Román 109) [14]

Rather than refer to themselves as Taínos as the Spanish did, María's indigenous ancestors in fact "called themselves Borinquen, their name for the island" (Rouse 5). María's difficulty in identifying herself as Puerto Rican traces beyond her present

---

Ricans today possess Amerindian mitochondrial DNA […]. Mitochondrial DNA is inherited *from the female line only*" (Castanha, "Adventures" 44).

[14] In *The Myth of Indigenous Caribbean Extinction*, Tony Castanha notes that the term "Taíno" "became popularized in the twentieth century through the anthropological works of Jesse Walter Fewkes, M. R. Harrington, Sven Lovén, Irving Rouse, and Ricardo Alegría" (Castanha, *Myth* xv).

perceived as a “gringa” in Puerto Rico and as an intracolonial migrant in the United States. Her struggles with determining an accurate label to identify herself stems not only from others’ impositions upon her but also from cultural miscommunications dating back to Spanish colonial encounters. While the term “Taíno” originates from the indigenous Caribbean language, it varies from their original identifier “Borinquen” and led to an undesired and unintended name change, which continues to be used today. These cultural miscommunications as a result of Spanish and indigenous cultural encounters produced identity struggles in subsequent generations which persist today, as evident in María’s experience in *La Gringa* and those of the poetic voices in “Apología to the Last Cacique” and “I am Joaquín.” In addition to present-day tensions originating from colonial encounters, neo-colonial encounters add additional degrees of complexity with respect to identity, evident in the clashes between María’s Puerto Rican background and US influences.

In order for María to overcome her identity struggles between her Puerto Rican heritage and her US upbringing, she has to arrive “below the surface” and receive healing from collective trauma to arrive at a place of peace. In “Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies,” Irene Visser argues that “The traumas of the colonial legacy are shaped by collective and individual experiences with repressive authority structures” that carry over from generation to generation (Visser 111). Mayra Santos-Febres echoed this sentiment in her talk “Fractal Caribbean and the Notion of Self in Contemporary Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban Literature and Thought,” where she stated that individuals are the sum total of their ancestors, meaning that burdens from a

colonial past of forced labor, enslavement, and oppression transfer generationally.[15] In María's transcendental experience with Atabey, the Taíno divine spirit initiates María's liberation from generational baggage which also prompts her to obtain freedom from her individual identity conflict evident from her "amazing sense of inner peace" and more significantly through Monchi's declaration that "Where there is death there will be life" (C. Rivera 73).

This freedom from her collective past facilitates María's resolution of her individual identity struggles. What begins as an identification with superficial elements of Puerto Rican culture develops into an appreciation for the land and eventually transitions into a meaningful encounter and identification with indigenous Taíno roots. María's identification and cleansing granted by Atabey facilitates her passage into the third stage of Flores' identity formation process where she develops a "Puerto Rican consciousness."

[15] Santos-Febres, Mayra. "Fractal Caribbean and the Notion of Self in Contemporary Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban Literature and Thought." 15 January 2020, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, Lecture.

CHAPTER 4

ENTERING A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

María's visit to her ancestors' grave and El Yunque fulfilled the objective of her trip; through both experiences she was able to "connect with [her] ancestors…[her] grandmother, [her] great-grandmother…[her] family" and she found renewed hope through her spiritual encounter with Atabey, an experience which allowed her to expand beyond her individual identity to comprehend the collective (C. Rivera 26). We must remember what led to this visit in the first place. Because of her identity crisis provoked by an employer who rejected María as a Puerto Rican, María entered an emotionally tumultuous state, what Gloria Anzaldúa coins the "Coatlicue state," a site of opportunity to those who manage these circumstances wisely and find a purpose through the discomfort. *Coatlicue* represents the Aztec goddess, the "Lady of the Serpent Skirt, [who] contained and balanced the dualities of male and female, light and dark, life and death" (Anzaldúa 54). Anzaldúa describes the *Coatlicue* state as a trying experience with the potential to produce growth:

> Those activities or *Coatlicue* states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself. Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning

> out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The *Coatlicue* state can be a way station or it can be a way of life. (Anzaldúa 68)

In María's case, the rejection experienced from her family and the employer culminates in her frustration and increased confusion which leads her to enter the *Coatlicue* state. After this "rupture in [her] everyday world," María further questions her identity based on the labels and definitions from others (Anzaldúa 68):

> **MARÍA.** […] the people at the job don't think I'm Puerto Rican…my OWN family doesn't think I'm Puerto Rican. You know what? I'm not Puerto Rican! I can't even hear the coquí song. (C. Rivera 59)

As Manolo observes María in this dejected state, he mentions to her the appropriate response to the situation by reframing it as a transformational experience, as a lesson:

> **MANOLO.** You were touched by Puerto Rico today. You were born today.
>
> **MARÍA.** I was slapped by Puerto Rico.
>
> **MANOLO.** Babies are slapped when they're born. You were born today.
>
> **MARÍA.** One birth per lifetime is sufficient.
>
> **MANOLO**. You're born hundreds of times throughout your life. Everytime [sic] you have an experience you're born.
>
> **MARÍA**. How many times do I have to be slapped?
>
> **MANOLO.** In your case, it might be more than a million. (C. Rivera 59)

Although María originally resists this uncomfortable experience and prefers to run away from it by booking a flight to leave Puerto Rico early, Manolo acts as her spiritual guide

by taking her to El Yunque and to her grandmother's grave, which Manolo recognizes will lead her to reach a heightened state of awareness as a product of the *Coatlicue* state. While at the gravesite and El Yunque, María confronts her reality by delving into the past and confronting collective trauma, as discussed in the previous chapter. During this time, María surrenders the negative energy from her emotionally taxing experiences with respect to her identity and is "reborn," as Manolo professed in their conversation about rebirth. Interestingly, María confronts her contradictory existence as someone who feels from "neither aquí nor allá" (Pérez Firmat 6) within the *Coatlicue* state, which also signifies a site of contradiction since in Aztec tradition; this goddess represents a "fusion of opposite: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror" (Anzaldúa 69). Thus, the very definition of the *Coalticue* state and what the Aztec goddess embodies depicts María's conflicting existence and emotions as she undergoes this transitional process.

In processing her collective trauma through her encounter with Atabey as the liberating aspect of the *Coatlicue* state, María moves on to the third stage of Flores' identity formation process "reentry" to develop a "Puerto Rican consciousness." Based on the playtext and performance, a Puerto Rican identification is the most accurate label based on character dialogue. Why does María identify with a "Puerto Rican consciousness" instead of a "Nuyorican consciousness" or even a "Taíno consciousness?" Before addressing María's "reentry" into New York with a "Puerto Rican consciousness," I analyze why María's newfound identity is not categorized as "Taíno" or "Nuyorican," respectively.

Although María's encounter with Atabey represents her value for Taíno traditions and demonstrates a spiritual interest in subaltern practices often dismissed in the occidental world, her revival of Taíno customs differs from assuming a "purely" indigenous identity apart from the Taíno revival movement or Neo-Taíno movement. The Taíno revival movement originated in the 1960s during a politically active time for marginalized groups and dates even further back to the independence movements in colonial Cuba and Puerto Rico in the 1840s. This movement led to the creation of various groups in the 1990s which include

> Nación Taína, Taíno del Norte, the Taíno Intertribal Council of New Jersey, El Consejo General de Taínos Borincanos, Maisití Yucayeque Taíno, and working coalitions or confederations, such as "La Asociación Indígena Taína." In their own specific ways, all of these groups have worked to reclaim or recreate the Taíno language, culture, religion, and an essentialist Taíno identity for their members and other interested persons. (Haslip-Viera 3)

While María recovers indigenous Taíno culture by following in Manolo's footsteps through her belief and acceptance of Atabey, María differs from the Taíno revival groups in that María views her indigenous roots as a *part* of her whole being, in contrast to the Neo-Taínos who not only "attempt to revive the rituals and the polytheistic religious beliefs of the pre-Columbian Taínos" but also "attempt to re-create the lost Taíno language through compilation of word lists and the development of a 'Taíno'/ English 'dictionary'" to form an entire lifestyle revolved around Taíno identification (Haslip-Viera 4). Instead of assuming a "purely" Taíno identity, María finds balance in the often-

conflicting nature of the "Puerto Rican consciousness," comparable to what Anzaldúa coins the "mestiza consciousness" which includes indigenous and African heritage in addition to acquired US customs from her upbringing.[16] Within this consciousness, one "embodies a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes […and] operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out […], nothing rejected, nothing abandoned" (Anzaldúa 101).

Like the concept of a "Taíno consciousness" has been shown not to apply in María's case, the term "Nuyorican" fails to depict her experience and is most frequently used within intellectual and artistic circles rather than in the mainstream. I return to the original connotations of the word "Nuyorican" used by islanders, as mentioned in the "Introduction." The original use of the word "Nuyorican" carried a negative connotation with respect to Puerto Rican migrants to the mainland who were deemed as "traitors to fakers, from arrogant gringos or criminal low-lifes [sic], but always with an overt or veiled class and racial subtext" (Flores, *Diaspora* 174). With the creation of their Nuyorican poetry anthology,

> [Miguel] Algarín and [Miguel] Piñero […] then re-signified the word, giving it a positive valence and spelling it in a truly hybrid, thoroughly bilingual way, Nuyorican. They were proud to be New Yorkers, and proud to be Puerto Ricans, and rather than adopt a hyphen they opted for their own name, thus marking off their own unique identity. (Flores, *Bomba* 174)

[16] I discuss María's embrace of her African heritage later in this chapter.

Although the term "Nuyorican" allows stateside Puerto Ricans to mark "off their own unique identity (Flores, *Bomba* 174) and opt into a term that depicts their occupation of a third space, it is not the best label for María's consciousness. The label "Nuyorican" spells out "*new-yo-rican*, that is, New York and Puerto Rican" (Hernández 40), which in fact depicts the tensions María experiences between New York and Puerto Rico; however, in line with the theme of reconciliation between stateside Puerto Ricans and those on the island in the playtext, María chooses to elect a term applied to all Puerto Ricans, regardless of place of inhabitance.[17] If María were to use the label "Nuyorican," that would create, at the very least, a further linguistic divide between her family members in Puerto Rico and herself. While of course María's experience varies from that of her family in the motherland, she is still just as much Puerto Rican as they are. For purposes of unity between María and her family, I describe María as "Puerto Rican" in contrast to Jason Ramírez and María Godsey, who label María as "Nuyorican" in *Carmen Rivera: The Theatre of Latinidad* and *U.S. Latina Theater: Scripting Feminine Subjectivity*, respectively.

In addition to creating further family division if María were to claim the Nuyorican label, it never appears in the playtext. In the Samuel French's edition of *La Gringa*, however; María's character description reads:

> **MARÍA ELENA GARCÍA-** 22 year-old Puerto Rican-American woman, born and raised in New York City. She's considered a "*Nuyorican*." María is young and naïve. (my emphasis)[18]

[17] I elaborate on this point in the next several pages.

[18] Although the character description labels María as "Puerto Rican-American," I agree with Juan Flores' argument that "Puerto Ricans in the United States live a life 'off the hyphen'" (Flores, *Bomba* 180). Likely, the label from the character description underscores María's bicultural identity as a Puerto Rican raised in

While no character uses the term "Nuyorican" in the dialogue explicitly, Norma and Iris' commentary about New York indicates that they view Puerto Rican migrants pejoratively. Norma's comments about New York contribute to the setting of the stage of the "here-and-now" and also points to the inferior treatment of those oftentimes deemed as "Nuyoricans" and those considered as "*los de afuera* [which] refers to Puerto Ricans who currently reside on the island after many years of living in the United States" (G. Pérez 111). Norma distinguishes herself from Puerto Rican migrants and return migrants by referring to "People in New York [who] live like animals" and the city as "overcrowded and full of drugs" (C. Rivera 28). Norma's negative depiction of New York residents as "filthy" and morally corrupt demonstrates her prejudice toward Puerto Rican migrants, who are "allegedly responsible for contaminating, polluting, and corrupting national identity" (G. Pérez 111). Like Norma, without ever using the term "Nuyorican," Iris characterizes Puerto Ricans who live on the mainland as "betray[ers] [of] their national roots and losing their cultural essence" (Jiménez Román 117) when she says:

> **IRIS.** Well, when they [María's parents] left, they gave up all their rights to the island… (C. Rivera 55).

"Reentry"

Although María's adversaries' (Norma, Iris, and the employer) heighten her identity struggles, María overcomes the hostile components of her visit and defies

---

the United States who has adopted US customs while maintaining her Puerto Rican roots, as we see come to pass by the end of the storyline. Similar to how William Luis underscores the distinctions between Puerto Ricans born and raised in the United States in comparison to their "counterparts living on the islands" by using the label "Puerto Rican American" in *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States*, this label represents the tension between two cultures in the United States, although it includes the "hyphen" which Puerto Ricans typically reject (Luis, *Dance* 293, nt. 1).

geographic boundaries to establish confidence in her identity after enduring the painful yet productive *Coatlicue* state. In Tato Laviera's collection of poems entitled *AmeRícan,* the poetic voice's experience in "nuyorican" applies to María's visit to Puerto Rico for the first time. Like the poetic voice in "nuyorican," María learns that she does not belong in Puerto Rico due to society's definition of what a "true" Puerto Rican is. Despite dismissal from others who question her identity as a Puerto Rican, María chooses to embrace her bicultural background and carry her Puerto Rican roots with her to New York, as does the poetic voice in "nuyorican" by Tato Laviera:

> yo peleo por ti, puerto rico, ¿sabes?
> yo me defiendo por tu nombre, ¿sabes?
> entro a tu isla, me siento extraño, ¿sabes?
> entro a buscar más y más, ¿sabes?
>
> pero tú con tus calumnias,
> me niegas tu sonrisa,
> me siento mal, agallao,
> yo soy tu hijo,
> de una migración,
> de un pecado forzado,
> me mandaste a nacer nativo en otras tierras
> por qué, porque éramos pobres, ¿verdad?
> porque tú querías vaciarte de tu gente pobre,
> ahora regreso, con un corazón boricua, y tú,
> me desprecias, me miras mal, me atacas mi hablar,

> mientras comes mcdonalds en discotecas americanas,
>
> […]
>
> así que, si tú no me quieres, pues yo tengo
> un puerto rico sabrosísimo en qué buscar refugio
> en nueva york, y en muchos otros callejones
> que honran tu presencia, preservando todos
> tus valores, así que, por favor, no me
> hagas sufrir, ¿sabes? (Laviera 1-16, 19-24)

Although María's experience parallels that of the poetic voice in "nuyorican" who assumes the "Nuyorican" label evident from the title of the poem, I hypothesize that María elects the term "Puerto Rican" consistent with Manolo's continuous affirmation of her identity as a fellow Puerto Rican:

> **MANOLO.** The truth is she's Puerto Rican. She really wants to know about her culture. […] María doesn't have to be born in Puerto Rico to be Puerto Rican. She will always be Boricua! (C. Rivera 54-55)

Consistent with Juan Flores' argument of Puerto Ricans' life "'off the hyphen,'" Manolo identifies María as a Puerto Rican (Flores, *Bomba* 180). I argue that the playtext concludes with María's proud affirmation of her Puerto Rican identity due to her statement to tío Manolo by means of apostrophe following his death: "Thank you for helping me understand" (C. Rivera 84). This statement implies that as a result of Manolo's teachings, María has comprehended that she too, has a right to proudly profess her Puerto Rican identity despite the fact that she was born and raised in the United States.

While María ultimately identifies as Puerto Rican, María's antagonistic cousin Iris ironically affirms María's status as a bicultural individual, a possessor of both Puerto Rican and US cultures:

> **IRIS.** We are family, and that is very important to me. Blood is thicker than…than…geography. You shouldn't go to New York angry about a fight that's about neither here nor there. And you know what, *even though you're a Gringa, you're still Puerto Rican*. (C. Rivera 78, my emphasis)

During this apology and reconciliation between Iris and María, Iris' tone shifts and this time her use of the word "gringa" carries an endearing tone.[19] Iris' positioning of María as a "gringa" and a "Puerto Rican" reflects María's bifocality, her "experience of two […] interconnected spaces, markets, polities, and […] languages" (Duany, *Blurred* 32).[20] With María's bifocal identity, she "bridg[es] two […] states, markets, cultures, and languages [and thus] […] challenge[s] dominant discourses of the nation based on the equation between cultural and legal definitions of identity and citizenship, between borders and boundaries" (Duany 233).

Based upon the subsequent amends of the tension between María and all of her family members on the island, "Puerto Rican" is the most appropriate label to depict María's experience compared to "Nuyorican" or "Taíno" since it symbolizes the unity between both groups, especially considering the textual evidence which points to an embrace of a Puerto Rican identity in any location. In fact, María states:

---

[19] Iris previously says, "Then we should accept every *gringo* as a Puerto Rican" (C. Rivera 54, my emphasis)?!

[20] While María's acquisition of the Spanish language took place during her Spanish classes at the university level, her progression of the Spanish language advances throughout the course of the plot, as noted by Maldonado-Cardenales.

> **MARÍA.** […] there are many things that separate us and there are many more that unite us. I'm choosing the things that unite us. (C. Rivera 78)

As a final indication of the celebration of her Puerto Rican identity, María celebrates *both* her African and indigenous heritage at the conclusion of the play, *parts of the whole* that make up her identity as a Puerto Rican. With respect to María's African roots, her celebration of *la bomba* with her family signals an appreciation for her African heritage, a critical component of her value for her Puerto Rican identity because of the historical context of the music: "The *bomba* synthesizes several African musical currents as they converged in the plantation environment" (Duany, *Puerto Rico* 37, original emphasis). The continuation of the celebration of *la bomba* honors the legacy of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, María's antecedents, and functions as a means of survival and a communal healing process to overcome a traumatic history (R. Rivera 11). While originally not very familiar to her, María chimes in to sing *la bomba* along with the others and partakes in a family celebration that unites them all and symbolizes a continued cultural survival.

Following Iris' reconciliation with María during the celebration of *la bomba*, Norma asks María for forgiveness for her unwelcoming behavior and says, "You belong here with your family" (C. Rivera 81). Here, Norma shifts from her cynical attitude toward María to include her in the family dynamic, which represents the reconciliation between Puerto Rican migrants (sometimes condescendingly labelled "Nuyoricans") and islanders. Significantly, Norma urges María "don't be afraid" when Manolo prompts her to play the *güiro*, "the indigenous percussion instrument" at the conclusion of *la bomba* (C. Rivera 81; Duany, *Puerto Rico* 36). After playing the güiro, María listens to the coquí

song for the first time, and Norma hears it as well. This solidifies their bond and symbolic representation of the reconciliation between Puerto Ricans in New York (or elsewhere) and those on the island.

In addition, the combination of the playing of *la bomba* and the musical instrument *el güiro* represents the cultural diversity of Puerto Rico and an embrace of Puerto Ricans' African and indigenous heritage. The communal gathering of *la bomba* among María's family and Monchi serves as an extension of her spiritual healing process which began in El Yunque because of the healing implications of *la bomba*. With respect to the placement of the singing of *la bomba* near the end of the playtext, it functions as a metaphor for diaspora, since *la bomba* is the product of diaspora as a result of the African Slave Trade, the introduction of syncretic rhythms combined with Spanish influences, and its evolution in the United States due to Puerto Rican migration (R. Rivera 7-8). *La bomba*, like María, has been influenced by New York culture, which connects the plot back to New York and leads us to the final stage in the development of María's "Puerto Rican Consciousness": "Branching out."

"Branching Out"

Although the plot of La *Gringa* concludes in Puerto Rico, by no means does that imply that María's personal development ends there. As is the case in the development of a new consciousness according to Juan Flores, in the final stage "Branching out," one retains one's culture as a means of resistance against the dominant culture. María's "Puerto Rican consciousness" serves as the "weapon" which defies dominant US culture (and Eurocentric thought) through her spiritual "awakening" where she learns to cope with a traumatic past through her initial encounter with Atabey and her participation in *la*

bomba. The playing of *la bomba* in Puerto Rico circles the plot back to New York to create an imagined ending due to the diasporic nature of *la bomba*, which like María, has been shaped by New York influences.

With this imagined ending in New York enabled by *la bomba* and the universality of *La Gringa*, María can bring her acquired knowledge back to New York to demonstrate that "being Boricua is / a state of mind / a state of heart / a state of soul" to grow in her consciousness (Fernández 22-25). To describe María's interaction in New York City upon her return from Puerto Rico, I return to Tato Laviera's collection of poems *AmeRícan* and employ the poem "AmeRícan" to postulate her position within society following her life-changing trip. With her renewed self who values her indigenous and African heritage, I believe María will participate with other marginalized groups as a means of solidarity while maintaining her unique bicultural identity. In the same way that she found her "true" self by exploring her roots, I believe she will interact with like-minded individuals who celebrate their heritage and empower fellow Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and members of other marginalized groups to "integrat[e] in new york and defin[e] [their] / own destino, [their] own way of life" (Laviera 48-49). Rather than signify assimilation, the use of the word "integrate" denotes participation in an inclusive society, "a new generation" (Laviera 1) that

> salutes all folklores
> european, indian, black, spanish,
> and anything else compatible. (Laviera 10-12)

What can be supposed as María's participation in society at large contributes to a ripple effect which leads to a change in the structure of society from generation to generation as a byproduct of the appreciation for one's own culture and a respect for others.

María's story resonates with others, as *La Gringa* has been in the repertoire for twenty-five years at Repertorio Español. Not only does María's experience speak to many Puerto Rican migrants' experience but also to other Latinx (im)migrants, marginalized groups, and individuals who combat individual and collective personal identity issues. The identity struggle experimented by María in *La Gringa* is not new when examining the Latinx community and will continue to become more relevant in the United States in the coming years given that "Hispanics [are] forecast to become a majority in the most populous and powerful states of California, Florida, Illinois, New York and Texas by mid century [sic] [and] Hispanic […] bicultural identity […] ha[s] potential to transform the very national identity of the United States in the world of tomorrow" through a continued pursuit of the occupation of a third space (Kanellos 24). Although the "coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque,* a cultural collision […] The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (Anzaldúa 100-101, original emphasis). María, an embodiment of the new *mestiza*, represents the Latinx experience: past, present, and future.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa asserts her bicultural identity by stating: "Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a *state of soul*—not one of mind, not one of citizenship. *Neither eagle nor serpent, but both*. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders" (Anzaldúa 84, my emphasis). In the metaphor of inhabiting both spaces as the eagle and the serpent, the reference pertains to the Mexican flag which contains the prophetic sign where the Aztecs observed "an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus" (Anzaldúa 27).[21] Anzaldúa states that "The eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the struggle between the spiritual/ celestial/ male and the underworld/ earth/ feminine" (Anzaldúa 27).[22] This conflict between both the eagle and the serpent depicts the tensions experienced by those living between two cultures, such as the case of María in *La Gringa*.

To depict María's "in-betweenness" and entry into a third space, the "Puerto Rican consciousness," I expand the eagle and the serpent metaphor to María's acceptance of Puerto Rican and US cultures. Like Anzaldúa, in the context of her Puerto Rican

---

[21] Anzaldúa's stance on embodying both spaces dialogues with Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzáles' "I am Joaquín" where the poetic voice proudly states: "I am the eagle and the serpent of the Aztec civilization" (Gonzáles 33).

[22] Interestingly, in Taíno beliefs, the serpent represents a site of contradiction. According to Tony Castanha, "In indigenous Caribbean tradition, the energy of the serpent represents the Earth Mother and the waters of life. It is a symbol of continuity, and unity of the female and male energies. The snake is also a symbol of awakening and the coming of a new era" (Castanha, *Myth* xvi).

background, María occupies a space of *neither eagle nor coquí, but both*. In María's case, the eagle signifies her US identity, and the *coquí* represents her Puerto Rican identity. Both collide to form her entry into a "Puerto Rican consciousness" that reconciles the two.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* Rev. and Extended ed. London; New York: Verso, 1991.

Antush, John V. "Introduction." *Nuestro New York: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Plays*.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 25th anniversary, 4th ed., San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012.

Bartow, Arthur. "René Buch." *The Director's Voice: Twenty-One Interviews*. 1st ed., Theatre Communications Group, 1988, pp. 36-50.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 2004.

Bruckner, D.J.R. "A Bit of the Ridiculous In a Search for Her Roots. *New York Times*, 7 March 1996.

Castanha, Tony. "Adventures in Indigenous Caribbean resistance, survival, and continuity in Boriken (Puerto Rico)." *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2010, pp. 29-64.

---. *The Myth of Indigenous Caribbean Extinction: Continuity and Reclamation in Borikén (Puerto Rico)*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Duany, Jorge. *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

---. *Puerto Rico: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Du Bois, W.E.B. "'Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre': The Story of a Little Theatre Movement." *Theatre in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology*. Blackwell Pub., 2008, p. 165.

Fernández, María Teresa. "Ode to the Diasporican (pa' mi gente)." *La Gringa*, Samuel French, 2007, 2008.

Fewkes, Jesse Walter. *The Aborigines of Puerto Rico and Neighboring Islands*. University of Alabama Press, 2009.

Flores, Juan. *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*. Columbia UP, 2000.

---. "Open Mic: Poetry, Performance, Emerging Identities." *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning*. Routledge, 2009, pp. 173-197.

---. "Nueva York, Diaspora City: Latinos Between and Beyond." *Bilingual Games: Some Literary Investigations*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 69-76.

---. "'Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity." *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*. Arte Público Press, 1993.

Godsey, María Y. *U.S. Latina Theater: Scripting Feminine Subjectivity*. 2016. University of Houston, Ann Arbor, PhD dissertation. *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global*.

Gonzáles, Rodolfo "Corky." "I am Joaquín." *Latin American Studies*, http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/latinos/joaquin.htm. Accessed 5 April 2021.

Green, Penelope. "René Buch, a Force in Spanish-Language Repertory Theater, Dies at

94." *New York Times*, 20 May 2020.

Haslip-Viera, Gabriel. "Introduction. Competing Identities: Taíno Revivalism and other Ethno-racial Identity Movements among Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean Latinos in the United States." *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics*, edited by Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001, pp. 1-31.

Hernández, Carmen Dolores. *Puerto Rican Voices in English: Interviews with Writers*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997.

Jiménez Román, Miriam. "The Indians are coming! The Indians are coming!: The Taíno and Puerto Rican Identity." *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics*, edited by Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001, 138.

Kanellos, Nicolás. "The Latino Presence: Some Historical Background." *Latinos and the Nation's Future*. Arte Público Press, 2009, pp. 15-25.

Laviera, Tato. *AmeRícan*. 2nd ed., Arte Público Press, 2003.

Luis, William. "Afro-Latino/a Literature and Identity." *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*, edited by Suzanne Bost and Frances R. Aparicio, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 34-45.

---. *Dance between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States*. 1st ed, Vanderbilt UP, 1997.

Maldonado-Cardenales, Noemí. *El teatro puertorriqueño: choque, resistencia y*

negociación lingüística del español de Puerto Rico. 2008. State University of New York at Buffalo, Ann Arbor, PhD dissertation. *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global*.

Martínez-San Miguel, Yolanda. *Coloniality of Diasporas: Rethinking Intra-Colonial Migrations in a Pan-Caribbean Context*. 1st ed., New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Noel, Urayoán. *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014.

Pané, Ramón. *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios: l primer tratado escrito en América*. 4th ed., Siglo Veintiuno, 1980.

Pastor, Néstor David. "25 Years of *La Gringa*: An Interview with Carmen Rivera." *The Latinx Project*. 2 March 2020.

Pérez, Gina M. *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration, Displacement, and Puerto Rican Families*. University of California Press, 2004.

Pérez, Marvette. *América Latina en tiempos de globalización: procesos culturales y transformaciones sociopolíticas*, edited by Daniel Mato, Maritza Montero and Emanuele Amodio, 1996, pp. 187-200.

Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. Rev. ed., University of Texas Press, 2012.

Pérez Reyes, Roberto. "Los indoantillanos precolombinos no creían en dioses." *El secreto mejor perdido: las ciencias escondidas en el 'arte taíno' y otros antiguos 'artes' alrededor del mundo*. 1ª ed., Ediciones MUCH MA' HO'L, 2017, pp. 171-177.

Picó, Fernando. *Historia general de Puerto Rico*. 4th ed. rev. y aumentada., Ediciones Huracán, 2008.

Ramírez, Jason. *Carmen Rivera: The Theatre of Latinidad*. 2009. The City University of New York, PhD dissertation. *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global*.

Repertorio Español. https://repertorio.nyc/#/. Accessed 18 January 2021.

Rivera, Carmen. *La Gringa*. Directed by René Buch, performance by Frank Robles, et. al, Repertorio Español, Accessed January 2021.

---. *La Gringa.* (English version), Samuel French, 2007, 2008.

Rivera, Raquel Z. "New York Afro-Puerto Rican and Afro-Dominican Roots Music: Liberation Mythologies and Overlapping Diasporas." *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2012, pp. 3–24.

Rossini, John D. "Introduction: Writing, Righting and Wrighting Ethnicity."

Roth, Wendy D. "Performing Race Strategically." *Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race*. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2012, pp. 151-175.

Rouse, Irving. *The Tainos: Rise & Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus*. Yale UP, 1992.

Santos-Febres, Mayra. "Fractal Caribbean and the Notion of Self in Contemporary Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban Literature and Thought." 15 January 2020, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, Lecture.

Stevens Arroyo, Antonio M. *Cave of the Jagua: The Mythological World of the Taínos* 2nd ed., University of Scranton Press, 2006.

Taylor, Diana. "Acts of Transfer." *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural*

Memory in the Americas. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2003, pp. 1-52.

Toro, Vincent. "Apología to the Last Cacique." *La Gringa*, Samuel French, 2007, 2008.

Visser, Irene. "Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies." *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, edited by Michelle Balev. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp.107-129.

Contemporary Latino/a Theater: Wrighting Ethnicty. Southern Illinois UP, 2008, pp. 1-25.

La voz latina: Contemporary Plays and Performance Pieces by Latinas, edited by Elizabeth C. Ramírez and Catherine Casiano, University of Illinois Press, 2011.

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig 1: Photograph of María Wearing Jacket with Puerto Rican Flag, 2019, Courtesy of Michael Palma Mir, Photographer.

Fig 2: Photograph of María Wearing Tri-Colored Nightgown, 2019, Courtesy of Michael Palma Mir, Photographer.