

**Copyright © Antonia Domínguez Miguela**

· This article appeared in *The Atlantic Literary Review* 2.4 (2001): 60-71. ISSN: 0972-3269. Please note page numbers do not correspond to the printed version.

· It may be cited or briefly quoted in line with the usual academic conventions. You may also print it for your own personal use. This paper must not be published elsewhere without the author's explicit permission. But please note that if you copy this paper you must include this copyright note.

· You should observe the conventions of academic citation in this electronic version: Domínguez Miguela, Antonia. "Bridges in the Air: Literary Tropes for Border Identity in U.S. Puerto Rican Literature." *US Puerto Rican Literature*. 20 January 2002. <Date of access>< <http://www.uhu.es/antonia.dominguez/latinas/bridges.pdf> >

## **Bridges in the Air: Literary Tropes for Border Identity**

### **in U.S. Puerto Rican Literature**

Antonia Domínguez Miguela

*Universidad de Huelva*

The concept of "border" is indeed a very productive one that has recently allowed many scholars to develop different interpretations of physical, political, cultural and emotional borders. Puerto Rico, its society and cultural production, both in the island and the mainland, is a privileged site for the study of the development of border identities and for the study of a postmodern concept of a *transcultural* and *transnational* identity, concepts that further develop the one of "border identity." In the island, Puerto Rican national and cultural identity is still in a process of definition as a result of a long history of colonization and migration, and of political indeterminacy. Mainland Puerto Rican writers and thinkers have been more easily drawn to discussion and reflection on Puerto Rican identity, fortunately showing what I consider a clearer understanding of border cultures and identities. Therefore, our purpose is to focus on the literary representation of Puerto Rican identity as an unstable concept that is best represented in constant movement within the cultural borderlands.

Most of these literary works are written in English and make use of metaphorical

elements denoting instability and movement in order to represent a *transnational* identity that challenges previous concepts of national, cultural and political identity. The new identity that emerges in many contemporary works by Puerto Rican writers in the United States, responds to an increasingly common process of *transculturation* that is especially noticeable in the United States. The term was coined by Fernando Ortiz in *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* who defines it as follows:

el vocablo *transculturación* expresa mejor las diferentes fases del proceso transitivo de una cultura a otra, porque éste no consiste solamente en adquirir una cultura, que es lo que en rigor indica la voz anglo-americana *aculturación*, sino que el proceso implica también necesariamente la pérdida o desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse una parcial desculturación, y, además significa la consiguiente creación de nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse *neoculturación*. (86)<sup>1</sup>

The process of transculturation, is indeed a process that takes place in any “*transfrontera* contact zone” (12) as José David Saldívar argues, where identities interact and where a new identity, a transcultural and transnational one emerges. This border zone does not necessarily refer to a physical space but as Saldívar comments, “is the

---

<sup>1</sup> “The term *transculturation* expresses in a better way the different phases of the transitional process from one culture to another, since this process not only consists of acquiring a culture, which is what the Anglo-american term *acculturation* really denotes, but it also implies a necessary loss and uprooting from a preceding culture, that is a partial deculturation and, it also means the subsequent creation of new

social space of subaltern encounters, the Janus-faced border line in which peoples geopolitically forced to separate themselves now negotiate with one another and manufacture new relations, hybrid cultures, and multiple-voiced aesthetics” (13-4). This cultural encounter is especially hard for the Puerto Rican population in the United States when we take a look at their socioeconomic situation. Though the first Puerto Rican migrants left the island for political reasons at the beginning of the century—a period when Cuban and Puerto Rican nationalist groups settled in New York and gained increasing strength—it was in the 1950s when the economic breakdown of the island and the subsequent measures taken by the government, known as “Operation Bootstrap,” finally provoked a massive migration to the United States in search of a better future. Notwithstanding Puerto Ricans’s privilege as US citizens since 1917, they soon realized that they were not received as warmly as other immigrants. Nowadays, the Puerto Rican population in the United States resides in the lower levels of the social scale, with the highest percentage of welfare recipients and the highest percentage of female-headed households, for instance. What distinguishes Puerto Rican migration from other ethnic group’s migration is the persistence of mobility between the island and the mainland, mostly thanks to their American passport. Certainly, the trip from both geographical spaces has become such a daily routine that airplanes connecting both places have been familiarly called the “guagua aérea” (“airbus”) (Sánchez 120).

In the last decades much controversy has emerged regarding the transformation of Puerto Rican identity as a result of migration. This is an increasingly relevant issue

especially at a time when the Puerto Rican population in the mainland nearly surpasses that in the island. Furthermore, the island has been continuously influenced by American policy, system of values and cultural habits. These changes in the island and the growing population with a transformed sense of Puerto Ricanness in the United States have provoked the appearance of many studies that try to revise old concepts related to national and cultural identity in the light of later political and social events.

New terms have been offered to describe Puerto Rican identity such as “ethno-nation” (Grosfoguel, Negrón y Georas 17), a cultural ‘nation’ that is not attached to a geographic space, national recognition or sovereign territory, or “translocal nation” (Lao 177) that also implies a disrespect for geographical borders or fixity to the original lands. Besides, the development of *transnationalism* is also affecting the concept of nation and state, and official nationalism (patriotism) in the United States and in the island. This is not a localized phenomenon but it is obviously more significant in multinational societies like that of the United States. As María de los Angeles Torres comments, transnational practices have an increasing role in multinational countries: “The notion of a transnational or hybrid identity presents an interesting personal and political vision for diaspora communities. It proposes not only that communities be transformed, but that their host *and* home countries undergo transformation as well” (181). This role is particularly relevant for the Puerto Rican population in the United States which is clearly adopting these practices. All these terms are, in fact, more appropriate terms to deal with the complex experience of Puerto Rican migrants in the

United States who develop a separate identity from that of the island.

This sense of in-betweenness and constant mobility that characterizes Puerto Rican identity is portrayed more significantly in recent literary works where tropes such as that of the flying bus and the air bridge constitute key elements of a symbolic Puerto Rican identity. Among these works we may distinguish those written from an islander’s perspective that usually present departures from the island airport as the entrance into the dramatic experience of migration and what it brings with it: dislocation, alienation, identity crisis, cultural shock, and anxiety. However, many contemporary Puerto Rican authors writing in English in the United States are transforming that image into a positive one that serves to represent a new fluid identity. This identity is not necessarily characterized by fragmentation and division but it may be metaphorically located in a geopolitical space that transcends physical boundaries and cultural limits as it is represented by the trope of the floating identity in constant movement back and forth along an air bridge that links both existential spaces. Most of the works we will be mentioning, introduce characters that somehow built especial relationships with spaces such as the airport or the airplane, borderlands where conceptual fixity begins to delude into a complex array of circumstances and experiences.

The earliest Puerto Rican work that addresses the issue of air migration is *La carreta* (1952) a play by René Marqués where the airplane finally substitutes the traditional *carreta* used when migration started from the rural areas to the cities in the

island. The play shows the odyssey of a nation and a family under the influence of island colonialism, oppression and unhappiness. For Luis and Juanita, the airplane they see from their window represents their dreams of prosperity in New York but their dream has a tragic end when, after travelling to New York, Luis dies in an accident at work and the family has to return to Puerto Rico.

Since the 1960s, a number of Puerto Rican writers who travelled and stayed for some time in the states began writing about the immigrant's experience in New York describing the frustration and disillusion that it often provokes in the population. For most of these characters the flight to New York is the beginning of a long and painful emotional exile that will increasingly erode their identity as Puerto Ricans. The first short story in *Spiks*, “La cautiva,” opens the collection at the Airport of Isla Verde where the action takes place. A young woman is sent to New York to separate her from his lover, her sister's husband. She has no return ticket as a punishment. Thus, the airport becomes the starting point for a new life that breaks her heart and her dreams of love.

In “El pasaje”, a story published in the 1953 collection *Veinte cuentos y paisa*, José Luis González addresses the nostalgia and anxiety that the longing for a return ticket to the island produces in early migrants. Jesus, a Barrio resident who lives surrounded by poverty and poor working conditions, dreams of getting a return ticket as he remembers her beloved island. This longing will bring about the final tragedy when he is shot dead after trying to rob a delicatessen armed with a knife. Nostalgia for the safe place of the island accompanies the dark future that awaits many Puerto Rican migrants

in the difficult streets of El Barrio in New York.

In the story “Siempre el sol” from the collection *El hombre que trabajó el lunes* by Emilio Díaz Valcárcel, the airplane is again the entrance to a dark world of misery and unhappiness. Pablo leaves Puerto Rico and he soon realizes that Puerto Rican values are changed in the north. He is obviously disillusioned by New York and by the American dream. When he and his friends remember Puerto Rico, their words are always tainted by nostalgia, by a feeling that, in any case, it was better in the island though they were hungry. In New York recent migrants are unhappy and afraid of what awaits their children in a racist land. At the end of the story Pablo falls asleep dreaming of his wife waving goodbye at the airport in a sunny day. That dream is just the end of his previous dream and the beginning of his nightmare the moment he gets aboard the airplane.

The emigrant is not prepared for a new metropolitan life. The uprooting will be painful in a climate so different, in a world so cold. This is the tone of much poetry written by poets already settled in New York. That is the case of the Nuyoricans who reclaim their new identity as fruit of the experience of migration. However, they are also a generation that has inherited the effects of a difficult transition and dreams that do not come true. In Pedro Pietry’s collection *Puerto Rican Obituary* the airport is portrayed as an inhospitable place that forebodes the sad future that awaits newcomers from the island:

To the United States we came

To learn how to misspell our name

To lose the definition of pride

To have misfortune on our side

.....

We got off

the two-engine airplane

at Idlewild airport

(renamed Kennedy airport

twenty years later)

with all our furniture

and personal belongings

in our back pockets

We follow the sign

that says welcome to America

but keep your hands

off the property

violators will be electrocuted

follow the garbage truck

to the welfare department

if you cannot speak English. (13-5)

After landing, Puerto Rican migrants are transformed by the dislocation and uprooting that will inevitably estrange them from their previous stable identity. The landing and arrival in America represents the entrance to a world where they will have to face cultural and social discrimination. The airport is a symbol for a new existential zone where identities are diluted and where a new identity awaits the traveller. Previous values and national identity are left in the island airport as these passengers embark in a new existential journey. The airport is always a transitional place in search for a home in the States and a symbol of the unstable concept of identity that affects Puerto Ricans after the experience of migration. Their identity is located between a here and there, a departure and an arrival. This first generation of migrants is the one that retains the myth of the enchanted island while they dream with a final return to their homeland. However, they painfully realize that there is rarely a return ticket for them. They become homeless not finding a comfortable place in the United States and not being able to feel Puerto Rico as home anymore.

For the second generation of Puerto Ricans, the fruits of the great migration of the 50s and 60s, the future is not only filled with nostalgia and longing for a place they do not belong to or feel like home. The island is for them a site of cultural heritage they may or may not want to visit. For them, the New York airport or the airplane itself becomes a perfect metaphor of their new identities. As mainland Puerto Ricans, they get used to living at a crossroad, between different cultures. Their identity is forged in

a constant flux, in permanent mobility among cultures, continuously crossing an air bridge back and forth as we can see in the work of Judith Ortiz Cofer, Esmeralda Santiago, Edward Rivera or Ed Vega.

We can find many instances where the experience of air migration comes to signify a sense of loss and separation. This is fairly clear in the first autobiographical work by Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*. A new life is expected in the States but the airplane is attached to a negative feeling of cultural deprivation, dislocation, separation from beloved relatives and friends and fragmentation of one's identity:

Several times I bumped into Mami as I walked backwards, unwilling to face the metal bird that would whisk us to our new life. Mami pushed me into the plane, down a long aisle lined with seats dead-ending against a wall -- my first glimpse of what New York would be like.

Across the aisle, Mami's eyes were misty. She stretched her fingers toward mine, and we held hands as the plane rose above the clouds. Neither one of us could have known what lay ahead . . . For me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican *jíbara* who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting. (209)

The transformation that already starts to take place inside Negi is literally represented in the description Santiago gives of this first airplane experience. It is not surprising that Negi experiences the flight as a rebirth, a stage at which a part of herself dies and a new unknown part of herself begins to develop. In a dream-like state that resembles a metamorphic ritual, the airplane becomes similar to a womb that nurtures a new person that will awake in a new life and place:

The sky darkened, but we floated in a milky whiteness that seemed to hold the plane suspended above Puerto Rico . . . The drone of the propellers was hypnotic and lulled us to sleep in the stiff seats . . . I dozed, startled awake, panicked when I didn't know where I was, remembered where we were going, then dozed off again, to repeat the whole cycle, in and out of sleep, between earth and sky, somewhere between Puerto Rico and New York. (214)

This border identity in the making, crossing the air bridge between the emotional and cultural space of Puerto Rico and the United States, is the central message of many contemporary works. The first work that address this representation of Puerto Rican identity as a “floating identity” is Jaime Carrero's collection *Jet Neorriqueño/Neo-Rican Jetliner* (1964) where the airplane becomes a new existential site “entre dos aguas,” straddling cultures. Crossing the physical space across the air implies the entrance into a new space of being where identities are irrevocably

transformed and where the experience of migration undermines the stability of pre-established definitions of nation and culture. Furthermore, Carrero introduces a term such as Neorican or Nuyorican that would later be identified as distinctive of Puerto Rican migrants in New York and their experience. Since the 1960s, a group of intellectuals we have mentioned as Nuyorican, would constitute the *Nuyorican Poet's Café* where a new Puerto Rican poetry with peculiar themes related to the geographical location of New York would address the problems and vicissitudes of this increasingly growing population.

Luis Rafael Sánchez's "The Flying Bus," stands out as an audacious literary enterprise that further develops the trope of the airplane as a site of identity formation of the new Puerto Rican migrant. The story takes place within a plane as a group of Puerto Ricans embark in the migratory experience to the United States, usually identified as the "Nuevayores." The narrative space becomes the omnipresent element in the story as the characters interchange comments and memories of migration in New York and back in the island. A turmoil similar to a cultural festival invades the airplane as passengers produce much of their carry-ons: Puerto Rican food, music, ballads, smells, tastes and even crabs.

However, most of the characters are trapped within the "floating identity" syndrome as they relate to their fears and tragi-comic episodes in both existential places. These passengers are inhabitants of the plane, products of a culture of mobility that especially characterizes Puerto Rican migration back and forth. Political

discussions also abound among these passengers, what further exemplifies the indeterminacy of Puerto Rican population concerning their own destiny as a people or nation. Their own confusion is clearly observed when the narrator asks a woman where she is from:

I ask her although I do not even have to guess at the answer . . . ‘*from Puerto Rico*. . . “ forcing me to say, as a reasonable medium in a rehearsed séance “ *even a blind man can see THAT,*” and, still, I add “*from what town, I mean.*” And she clearly specifies, “*from New York.*” It all may seem, of course a smoothed-out commonplace or a pitiful geographical blunder, or a sarcastic joke out of a resounding box or a new category of the frontier or, perhaps, the sweet and swift revenge of the invaded who succeeded in invading the invader's domain. (25)

Certainly, these passengers are residents of a “translocal nation” as Negrón and Montaner term it, that surpasses geographical restrictions, national frontiers, physical borders. They are Puerto Ricans and it doesn't matter where they are, they can be in both places just by crossing back and forth the cultural air bridge that easily opens up for them. The flying bus, thus, emerges as their emotional link, their necessary connection to all the pieces that make up what they are:

Puerto Ricans with their lives hanging from the hooks of the question marks *allá?*

*acá?*, Hamletian disjunctives that ooze their lifeblood through both adverbs. Puerto Ricans installed in a permanent errancy between “being there” and “being here” and who, because of it, deflate all the adventurous formality of the voyage until it becomes a mere “ride in a bus.” (24)

Other critics such as Alberto Sandoval have also tried to describe the Puerto Rican experience as a hybrid product coming from many different elements such as racial heterogeneity, bicultural competence, nomadic lives and constant movement, physical and psychological between the mainland and the island. Sandoval also sees in the image of the airplane as a creative space that “exemplifies identities in transition, as dislocated, alienated, uprooted passengers” (197). However, we can observe that this sense of dislocation is overtaken by the dynamism and creativity that such a place offers. It is possible to mold one’s identity in similarity to a place that is not fixed to a geophysical space and therefore that it transcends constraining cultural concepts that are no longer appropriate to describe Puerto Rican identity. Instead of identifying with a geophysical space, the identification with an air bridge or an airplane resolves the dilemma of having to choose a definition of oneself, choosing a state of constant flux and movement.

This creative use of the airplane as a trope for a new identity, as an emotional bridge, a place located in the physical and psychological borderlands is especially relevant in the work of the Puerto Rican writer Judith Ortiz Cofer, a writer whose power

to communicate the Puerto Rican experience has been widely acknowledged by critics and readers. The habit of movement characterizes much of her literary production where images of travelling and flying abound as we can see in some of her first poems such as “A Partial Remembrance of Our First Year in This Country” from *The Native Dancer*, where Ortiz Cofer locates her own genesis and metaphorical birth to a new life in the plane:

When we came with naked heads, eyes in a vacuum,  
we were shocked by the cold and the wide,  
like fetuses we were expelled  
from the warm belly of an airplane. (6)

The image of birth as an arrival and gestation within the airplane is the most relevant element in the poem. The arrival clearly signifies the beginning of a new life in a foreign country. This is a rebirth by which the airplane becomes a ‘patria natal,’ a new homeland, a metaphorical place where a transcultural and translocal identity is born. This place reminds us of the crossroads and the borderlands where Gloria Anzaldúa locates the identity of the *mestiza*, the creation of a new consciousness (*Borderlands* 28). The image of herself as a constant traveler with a habit of movement will often reappear as we can notice from the start of her collection *Reaching for the Mainland* in the poem “The Birthplace”:

They say  
when I arrived  
traveling light,  
the women who waited  
plugged  
the cracks in the walls  
with rags in alcohol  
to keep drafts and demons out. (3)

The idea of building an air bridge is also recurrent in her fiction and most especially in *The Line of the Sun*, her outstanding first novel, that literally becomes an emotional bridge in both directions uniting the multiples spaces of her identity. The two spaces that permeate the novel, the island and the United States, are balanced to such an extent that the narrator herself, Marisol, overcomes the fixity of identity to the land “carrying home on [her] back as a snail” (234). The line of the sun that runs deep and clear through her hand is used as a symbol for the place she also chooses right in the middle, as a balance between the two spaces. The line of the sun, that becomes the book’s title, represents the bridge in her world, the borderlands where balance is reached, where multiplicities coalesce. Ortiz Cofer’s project comes to fulfill Marisol’s mother’s desire to be able to cross a bridge to her island anytime she wants: “do you

think there will ever be a bridge across the water to my island? “ (285). The author herself has commented on her role as a constant traveler between cultures that builds a bridge of her imagination in a similar way to that of an air bridge where identity comfortably rests:

My mission as an emerging writer became to use my art as a bridge, so that, unlike my parents, I would not be precariously straddling the cultures, always fearing the fall, anxious as to which side they really belonged; I would be crossing the bridge of my design, at will; not abandoning either side, but traveling back and forth without fear and confusion as to where I belong to- I belong to both. (1997, 13)

Most of the works mentioned show how recurrent literary images such as the bridge, the airplane and constant movement come to reinforce the fluidity that characterizes Puerto Rican identity in a similar way to other Latino groups like Chicanos and other minorities also straddling between cultures. The literary representation of a transnational identity that challenges traditional concepts of nation and culture serves to imagine a creative space where borders are overcome turning into powerful dynamic sites of self-creation.

### **Works Cited**

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Carrero, Jaime. *Jet Neorriqueño: Neo-Rican Jet Liner*. San Germán: Universidad Interamericana, 1964.

Díaz Valcárcel, Emilio. *El hombre que trabajó el lunes*. Rio Piedras: Ed. Cultural, 1976.

González, José Luis. *Veinte cuentos y Paisa*. Rio Piedras: Ed. Cultural, 1973.

Grosfoguel, Ramón, Frances Negrón-Muntaner y Chloe S. Georas. 1997. “Beyond Nationalist and Colonialist Discourses: The *Jaiba* Politics of the Puerto Rican Ethno-Nation.” *Puerto Rican Jam. Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*. Eds. Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel. London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 1-36.

Laos, Agustín. 1997. “Islands at the Crossroads: Puerto Ricanness Traveling Between the Translocal Nation and the Global City.” *Puerto Rican Jam. Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*. Eds. Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramon Grosfoguel. London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 169-188.

Marqués, René. *La Carreta*. Rio Piedras: Ed. Cultural, 1963.

Morales, Jacobo. *100X 35/Poesía*. Rio Piedras: Ed. Antillana, 1975.

Ortiz, Fernando. *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar*. La Habana: Ed. Imagen, 1940.

Ortiz Cofer, Judith. 1981. *The Native Dancer*. Bourbonnais, Illinois: Lieb/Schott Publications.

- . *The Line of the Sun*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989.
- . *Reaching for the Mainland and Selected New Poems*. Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1995.
- . "And Are You a Latina Writer?" *Mascaras*. Ed. Lucha Corpi. Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1997, 11-19.
- Pietri, Pedro. *Puerto Rican Obituary*. New York: Monthly Review, 1973.
- Saldívar, José David. *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Sánchez, Luis Rafael. "The Flying Bus." *Images and Identities: The Puerto Rican in Two World Contexts*. Ed. Asela Rodríguez de Laguna. New Brunswick: Transaction, 1987, 17-25.
- Sandoval Sanchez, Alberto. "Puerto Rican Identity Up in the Air: Air Migration, Its Cultural Representations, and Me 'Cruzando el Charco'." *Puerto Rican Jam. Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*. Eds. Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel. London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 189-208.
- Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Soto, Pedro Juan. *Spiks*. Rio Piedras: Ed. Cultural, 1973.
- Torres, María de los Angeles. "Transnational Political and Cultural Identities: Crossing Theoretical Borders." *Borderless Borders: U.S. Latinos, Latin Americans, and the paradox of Interdependence*. Eds. Frank Bonilla, Edwin Meléndez, Rebecca Morales

© **Antonia Domínguez Miguela.**

“Bridges in the Air: Literary Tropes for Border Identity in U.S. Puerto Rican Literature.” *The Atlantic Literary Review* 2.4 (2001): 60-71.  
ISSN: 0972-3269.

---

and Maria de los Angeles Torres. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998, 169-182.