

Decolonizing the Commonwealth:  
A Postcolonial Reading of  
Gloria Vando's *Promesas:  
Geography of the Impossible*

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In a comment about the function and vision of her poetry, the Nuyorican poet Gloria Vando has noted that she writes poetry in response to injustice and betrayal, at both the personal and the political levels.<sup>1</sup> Although political poetry seems to be frowned upon in the multicultural climate in the U.S. these days, she added, her poetry is nonetheless political, because she grew up in a political environment. Her ideas and beliefs have been interminably shaped by her father's and maternal uncle's *independentista* ideology and struggles for the liberation of Puerto Rico from over a century of US imperial hegemony. There is a double irony in this situation of a Nuyorican with connections to the Puerto Rican independence movement in relation to the dominant ideologies and national mythographies in both insular and metropol-

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itan spaces. On the one hand, the Hispanophilic nationalist *independentistas* find no place for these Nuyoricans in *la gran familia Puertorriqueña* (the great Puerto Rican family), even if their significant Others were passionate advocates of that same movement. The Puerto Rican nationalists excise these communities from the pedagogical narratives of the insular nation and alienate them from the national imaginary in that space of contamination and moral degeneration, called the (Yankee) diaspora. On the other hand, the U.S. nationalist discourse, with its increasing intolerance of foreign Others within its domestic borders, views these Nuyoricans as a serious threat to the domestication of the ethnic Other into a good American citizen. In their defiance of assimilation into an Anglophone hyphen-nation, Puerto Ricans are the only group who do not identify themselves as Puerto Rican-Americans. How does Vando situate herself between these discrepant positions across imperialist, nationalist, racial, cultural, and gender axes of difference? How does she work through these contradictory identity narratives and how does she represent them in her work?

In this analysis of Gloria Vando's first collection of poems, *Promesas: Geography of the Impossible* (1993), I'd like to argue that in her search for a viable cultural identity and political agency, Vando departs from the traditional assertions of "double consciousness" (DuBois 1989), opting instead to position herself on the outside of the pedagogical narratives of nationalism in both the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Rather than simply embrace a sense of belonging to both places, cultures, and nations at once, Vando chooses to belong *ni de aquí, ni de allá* (neither here, nor there). In her personal essay, "A Stain Upon Silence," Vando repudiates the mystifications of double consciousness and asserts her own sense of marginalization and outsidership:

My American friends did not understand that I was different—how could they? I had no accent and I have the light hair and green eyes of the gringa. They would make certain assumptions about me that simply were not valid—until they would hear me speak Spanish for the first time. Gradually, as they'd begin to perceive me as the "other," their behavior toward me would take on a new gentleness, as if to compensate for some past slight, real or imagined. "Funny, you don't look Puerto Rican!" became an irritating life-long refrain. To add to my dilemma, I was considered a Yankee in Puerto Rico. And in the States, I was looked upon with suspicion by other Latinos, as if I were an imposter. So I have straddled the fine line of patria all my life: no one fully claims me. (Vando 2000, 300)

Vando feels at home nowhere: Her attempts at translating between her discrepant worlds fail and she is forced to inhabit an outsider position that alienates her from everyone else. Out of her sense of marginalization as colonial, feminist, and (second-class) citizen, Gloria Vando reconfigures the limits of

both national and diasporic discourses, redefines their traditional referents, and articulates alter/native narratives of identification, dislocated yet unwilling to assimilate.

Interlacing the lyrical and the confessional with the political, Vando decenters the dominant nationalist narratives in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. She manages to recast these discourses through two main strategies: first, she contextualizes U.S.-Puerto Rico relations in the long history of European colonialism, especially the Spanish colonization of the Americas, and exposes the colonialist tropes used in U.S. public discourse to talk about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. Moreover, she demystifies the American dream, foregrounding the discrepancies between the promises of modernity and democracy and the realities of racism and oppression in the metropolis. Second, she decenters the hegemony of insular national discourse in two ways. One, she demands that the insular national imaginary embrace Puerto Rican writings in English as well as those Nuyoricans who are predominantly English monolinguals as legitimate members of the Caribbean nation. Two, she renounces the sense of return to a primordial home/land, or patria, a myth that lives in the heart of many Puerto Ricans in the mainland. She thus remaps the borders of the *Boricua* nation and decouples the diaspora from the romantic attachments to an authentic Self as well as an originary place upon which it is predicated.

These strategies have to be understood in the context of Puerto Rico's paradoxical situation, in but not of the U.S. federal union. Puerto Rico occupies an anomalous and anachronistic colonial position in the union as an "unincorporated territory" and Puerto Ricans enjoy the status of both colonials and (second-class) citizens at once in the U.S. political and cultural unconscious. This anomalous condition has been caused by the interplay of four major historical, cultural, political, and economic narratives: One is a hundred and more years of U.S. imperial domination of Puerto Rico, after the island was ceded to the U.S. from Spain in the Treaty of Paris on August 12, 1898. Underlying the U.S. colonial policy in Puerto Rico has been the ideology of assimilation, which (mis)carried out the general ideology of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in turning Puerto Ricans into good North American citizens through education and language (De Guetierrez 1987, Morris 1995). In 1952, however, the U.S. government created the Free Association State, or Commonwealth, allowing the native population to be self-governing in their internal affairs. The colonial status of Puerto Rico never changed, nonetheless. The only reason the Commonwealth was established was to relieve the U.S. of submitting reports to the United Nations, whose charter required all colonial powers to make regular reports for their colonial possessions (Dietz 1986, 233-37). Two is the granting of U.S. citi-

zanship to Puerto Ricans in the 1917 Foraker Act and the freedom of movement in the U.S. offered by it. Many Puerto Ricans, in fact, still valorize their U.S. citizenship and its privileges and cannot imagine the future of the island without a form of political union with the U.S. (Torres, Vecchini, and Burgos 1994; Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997). Three is the Puerto Rican exodus to the U.S. mainland in the late 1940s as a practice of Governor Muñoz Marín's "escape valve" policy to ease the high unemployment rates on the island. As the Commonwealth and its economic development program (Operation Bootstrap) were facing many economic, social, and political challenges, Puerto Ricans were officially encouraged to migrate to the continental U.S., as a way of channeling the surplus labor outside of the island. The proximity of Puerto Rico to the mainland and the relatively inexpensive air fare between the U.S. and this Caribbean island have made it possible that by 1990, forty-four percent of all Puerto Rican descendants lived in continental U.S. And four is the integration of the island in the international division of labor, and the intense penetration of Puerto Rican society by mass commodity culture. Used by the U.S. government and global capitalism as a showcase for the Caribbean and Latin America, Puerto Rico nonetheless remains the poorest nation in the union (Dietz 1986). These narratives, and their material effects, provide the backdrop, against which Vando reconfigures her outsider location *vis-à-vis* national identities and borders, the diaspora, and the forces of globalization.

The title of Vando's first poetry book invokes the exterior position she inhabits through a postcolonial critique of the Commonwealth. She situates a century of U.S.-Puerto Rico relations not only in the context of the contemporary conditions of racism, oppression, and exploitation of Puerto Ricans in the mainland but also in the context of five hundred years of Western imperialism. The ironic title of her book, *Promesas: Geography of the Impossible*, evokes in its promises those lies and discrepancies between the American dream and the realities of urban living in the U.S. These promises refer to the vows, or promises, that the author sees tacked to the wall on her trip to Los Alamos. In particular, the title refers to a father's prayer, in which he vows to walk 150 miles, if God returns his son Juan safe "from combat duty in Vietnam" (1993, 75). Like other U.S. ethnic writers, Vando interrogates the Vietnam war, its objectives, and the role of U.S. minorities in a war that they had nothing to do with. Especially for a Nuyorican with *independentista* linkages, Vando is very sensitive to the irony of fighting for a superpower overseas, when that same power denies her own nation its right to self-determination and the full privileges of their U.S. citizenship.

This discrepancy between the promises of modernity and the realities of living inside the whale accentuates Vando's sense of outsidership. This sense

is further developed in Vando's reflections on the experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York. In her poem "Fire," for example, Vando contrasts the garden apartment where the Irish family lives with the "inland brown rooms" to which "the rest of us, the Puerto Ricans" are relegated. The lush green colors that typify the Irish are intermingled with biblical allusions to the garden, forming an image of bliss and rapture, from which the dwellers of the brown rooms are excluded. Living in these stifling and depressive brown rooms leads to nothing but despair and absurd forms of nihilism, for as Vando writes, these rooms have "blotted out the memory of hope." In an unconventional inversion of the location of the inferno, moreover, Vando describes these rooms, when the fire breaks out in the building, as "an *upstairs hell*, this darkness, this gloom, this view of brick and cement and dried pigeon dung" (15; my emphasis). Vando criticizes this concrete jungle of urban living and mocks the naïveté of traditional narratives of upward mobility, or the "voyage in" as Edward Said calls them (1994). For the inhabitants of the brown rooms, wherever they are—up or down—life is a living hell, and for that mainland U.S. remains a site of alienation and exile.

The outsidership that Vando experiences in the metropolis results not only from the horrors of urban living but also from the psychological wounds inflicted upon minorities in mainstream culture. Vando depicts the Othering of Latino/as in continental U.S. through the experiences of racism and violence in mainstream culture. She thus writes about the racist stereotypes that mainstream culture imposes upon Latino/as in Nueva York, where "all Hispanics blend into one / faceless thug, one nameless spic" (1993, 63). For mainstream culture, Latino/as are portrayed through the "mark of the plural" (Memmi 1965): they are first rendered invisible, faceless and nameless, lacking in any distinctive individual traits. Second, they are criminalized and stigmatized. But Vando quickly inverts this mark of the plural in her description of her mother, who was mugged in Central Park (1993, 64). Vando deconstructs here the criminalization of Latino/as in American pop culture, by turning her mother into a potential victim of violence and simultaneously linking her to the foreign victims U.S. imperial aggression abroad. The "Muggers," she says, "are out . . . / Blending into shadows, bushes, / trees, like preview footage of Vietnam, / waiting to assault whatever breathes" (64). This is a very important strategy in debunking common popular myths and stereotypes of America's cultural Others, especially Latinos. The image of the Puerto Ricans in the U.S. cultural unconscious, in particular, remains that of the Other, criminal, dependent, and childlike. Lanny Thompson attributes such representations to William Smith Bryan's orientalist text, *Our Islands and Their People* (1899), which portrays Puerto Ricans not only as inferior and dependent people, who are in need of U.S. tutelage, but also as relics of a

degraded Spanish imperial culture that lacked the capacity for autonomy and sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> These colonialist constructions of Puerto Ricans in American popular culture still remain powerful in shaping public discourse and mass culture. Disney, for instance, was reported to be aggressively pursuing the authors of the 1961 classic *West Side Story* in a bid to remake a script of romance, decadence, and gang culture, while Paul Simon's ill-fated Broadway production *The Capeman* (1997), with the collaboration of Derek Walcott on the lyrics, dramatizes the tragic life of a Nuyorican teenage gang member, Salvador Agron. Despite their intention to produce a musical that investigates the possibilities of redemption, Simon and Walcott regrettably continue to sensationalize those images of deviance reproduced in the media, failing to offer images that abrogate the mystification of the Puerto Rican Other in U.S. cultural unconscious. This racist stereotyping alienates Vando from the continental U.S., because in its efforts to impose an image of the nefarious Other on her people, mainstream culture is forcing Latino/as to live, as she calls her first section of the book, "In the Dark Backward."

To experience the "Dark Backward" in mainland U.S. also invokes the second part of the title of Vando's book, *Geography of the Impossible*, and its embeddedness in the history of western colonialism. The phrase "in the dark backward" reconnects the contemporary manifestations of racism in the metropolis to the excesses of western imperialism through Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where Prospero asks Miranda, "What seest though else/ In the dark backward and abysm of time?" (1.2.60). Framing U.S. imperialism within the history of Western colonization and its colonial tropes is accomplished, nevertheless, even before this reference to *The Tempest*. This is evident in the four epigraphs that Vando chooses for her book: She begins with a quotation from the 13th century text, *The Land of Cockaigne*, to establish the imperialist trope of the search for an utopian space on earth. That utopian space was, needless to say, founded upon the denial of the existence of the indigenous population and their natural rights over their lands. This is followed by another quotation from Christopher Columbus's letter, in which the Admiral Colon informs their Highnesses of "an Other World here, by which our holy faith can be so greatly advanced and from which such great wealth can be drawn" (Vando 1993, n.p.). With Columbus, the textuality of the colonial archive had already been established. Columbus could raise the banner of God and Gold without finding it necessary to acknowledge the Otherness of the natives. Vando's third quotation comes from Jean Delumeau's *Sin and Fear* (1960), where he pulls all these rhetorical colonialist tropes together, linking the Lands of Cockaigne "in a distant somewhere else" with the exoticisation of the natives and their ultimate historical decimation after contact. Vando implies that Puerto Ricans and other natives have lost any virtue the Euro-

American imperial machine has assigned them, once contact with civilization was established. This trope of contact with civilization and its redemptive consequences are deconstructed and abrogated through the epigraph from Pablo Neruda, "Oh, poor Puerto Rico, Puerto Pobre [poor port]" (Vando 1993, n.p.). In one epigrammatic line, Neruda explodes all the myths about colonialism and its modernity project, showing the adverse effects colonialism, be it their poverty, underdevelopment, or total annihilation, has on this Caribbean nation.

Vando thus debunks colonial myths and history not only by condemning the imperialist decimation of the Tainos but also by rehumanizing them and celebrating their memory through local myth and folklore. In the "Legend of the Flamboyán" Vando depicts this tragic history of the Tainos after their encounter with the Spaniard conquistadors and, centuries later, with the Yankee imperialists. As a postcolonial poet, Vando is very much interested from the beginning in affirming the humanity of the Tainos, without lapsing into naïve romanticization of the natives, as evident in the recent Taino revivalist movement in Puerto Rico. She rehumanizes them by foregrounding the doubts and ambivalent feelings they entertained toward these pale foreigners. They are not savages who are only capable of grunting and growling. Vando rather imagines them in a tribal meeting, quibbling about the best course of action, finally deciding it is "Best to rejoice . . . and welcome/ the silver giants to Borinquén" (1993, 43). Their hospitality and desire to accept the Other with open arms were interpreted, nonetheless, as signs of servility and an innate willingness to be dominated. Echoing the colonial tropes used in her first three epigraphs, Vando writes:

The Spaniards responded by  
 Taking first their freedom,  
 Then their land, then  
 Using them as human picks to dig  
 For gold—gold for the crown  
 Gold for the holy faith  
 Gold for the glory of Spain. (Vando 1993, 44)

This take-over is sarcastically called "old-fashioned victory" (43), and Vando further continues to subvert the traditional tropes used in colonial discourse to describe such victory. She ironically states:

It was calm, it was civilized—  
 They emerged from the ocean,  
 And claimed their paradise. (Vando 1993, 43)

The colonial trope of the civilizing mission and its cold rationality, or calmness, contrast sharply with Vando's catalogue of horrific images that underscore the brutality of the Spanish colonization of the Americas. The Spaniards not only enslaved the Tainos and confiscated their lands, but forced them to work in dark mines, which

consumed them, sapped  
their laughter, their song,

Locking them into perpetual night. (Vando 1993, 44)

Vando goes on to depict the wounded psychology of the suffering Tainos, and their self-imposed silence and invisibility "in the strangers' eyes—not to look, not to be seen" (1993, 44). Unable to resist the colonialist machinery of subjection and subjugation, the Tainos still struggle to maintain a sense of their humanity. Vando brilliantly recuperates that humanity by affirming the Tainos' need for intimacy with their beloved ones through which they could survive their oppressive condition:

They bowed their heads, folded  
Into themselves like secrets  
Whispered only in the safety  
Of brown arms. (Vando 1993, n.p.)

This intimacy and the affirmation of humanity does not, however, save the Tainos from their tragic destiny: In order to bring an end to this history of repression, dehumanization, and genocide, the Tainos plan and commit a collective act of self-immolation. In her postcolonial poetics, Vando does not stop at condemning the brutal history of conquest and genocide, but insists also on celebrating and remembering the Tainos' courage and desire to live with dignity. Vando thus commemorates the tragic history of the Tainos and their heroism through the local myth of the flamboyán (royal Poinciana). According to this myth, the spilled blood of the Tainos was magically transformed into the bright and showy red flowers of the flamboyán "all over the island" (1993, 45). The brutality of the conquest alienates Vando from the traditional narratives of discovery and progress, placing her on the outside of official records of western historiography and culture.

Vando continues to clear a space for herself outside the dominant narratives of Eurocentricism and imperialism in her interrogation of the relation between Puerto Rico and the U.S. In the next poem, "Cry Uncle," Vando explicitly links U.S. imperial domination to the history of Western colonialism in general, and the Spanish colonization of the Americas, in particular. Her uncle, who assumes mythic proportions here, is meant to stand for the *independentista* movement in Puerto Rico. She alludes to this mythic status in



the title by referring to El Grito de Lares (The Cry of Lares), which has been used as a symbol for the struggle for independence from U.S. hegemony. She writes,

They say he was a revolutionary  
 In single-handed combat with contemporary  
 Conquistadors who invaded his island's shores. (Vando 1993, 46)

The Yankee soldiers are nothing but conquistadors now, and the whole American propaganda machinery that was mobilized to assimilate Puerto Ricans into good North American citizens is exposed for its imperialist and colonialist mission. Vando thus refers to various U.S. imperialist policies in Puerto Rico that were designed to achieve these imperial goals, agendas that unravel the imperial trajectory of U.S. foreign policy and that foreground her sense of outsidership from this imperial culture. In "Nuyorican Lament," for instance, she mentions Roosevelt's policies of imposed cultural assimilation that "tried in vain to blot the language out" (1993, 50). In "At my Father's Funeral," she criticizes the violation of the civil rights of Puerto Ricans who are identified or affiliated with the *independentista* movement. The poetic voice expresses a deep sense of trauma as she sees these "dark-suited men in the distance, / blending into the trees, documenting / our sorrow with hidden cameras / and tape recorders" (55). The government's surveillance of its suspect citizens ruptures that alleged sense of security and unity those citizens take for granted and displaces them from any prevailing conception of the *e pluribus unum* nation.

In her critique of U.S. imperialism, Vando also situates herself in a transnational framework. In "Commonwealth, Common Poverty," she addresses a Hungarian friend and maps uncanny similarities in their conditions as colonized peoples. Vando indicts the Russian occupation of Hungary in the same breath she condemns, "Teddy's boys [who] made it to the top of San Juan / Hill" (1993, 59), for destroying the social fabric of a colonized culture by fragmenting families and alienating their members from each other. Vando thus links the decimation of the Tainos with the poverty of the Puerto Ricans and, by echoing Neruda, invokes the ironies of U.S. colonialism and its defunct project of modernity and progress. In one brush, the U.S. democratic experiment and liberal, enlightened rule are seen as no less vicious than the brutal communist colonization of Eastern Europe. Invoking the history of her ancestors, and their tragic destiny under the Spanish empire, Vando makes another link to the contemporary conquistadors, who inundate the insular culture of Puerto Rico with American symbols in their unsuccessful bid to assimilate the Spanish-speaking, Catholic, and multiracial Puerto Ricans into the Anglophilic, Protestant nation. Moreover, Vando manages to

break the confines of national borders and look outward across the Atlantic, in order to form networks of solidarity with other oppressed groups in the world. This international consciousness functions as the grounds for her decentering of the pedagogical narrative of the nation.

Vando's sense of outsidership cannot though be attributed only to U.S. imperialism and racism but also to insular nationalist discourses. Alienated from the image of the insular nation represented by the nationalists, Vando attempts to decenter the traditional referents of national identity and culture, especially the pristine image of the island as an authentic insularity and the place of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the national imaginary.<sup>3</sup> Vando manages to deconstruct this mainstream nationalist discourse by showing first that Puerto Rico is no longer that pure national locale, which can fantastically exist outside foreign influences. She implicitly interrogates the work of the Puerto Rican intellectual Antonio S. Pedreira, whose *Insularismo* represents Puerto Rico as a closure upon itself, a space of stability and sameness existing not only in isolation from but also in resistance to the outside (colonial) world (Duany 1996). In various poems, therefore, she talks about the forces of globalization and how they have changed the face of this *creollo* nation into another market for global capitalism. Globalization, to be sure, is disorienting, and can definitely lead to uncertainty about the traditional topographies of identity and belonging as well as the location of the subject within these spaces. In her "Nuyorican Lament," she bemoans:

Only yesterday, I knew where I belonged,  
 I knew my part,  
 And now, you see me here,  
 A trespasser in my own past,  
 Tracing a faint ancestral theme  
 Far back, beyond the hard rock  
 Rhythm of the strand.  
 I walk down El Condado, past  
 Pizza Huts, Big Macs and  
 Coca-cola stands  
 Listening for a song—  
 A wisp of a song—  
 That begs deep in my heart. (Vando 1993, 51)

The authentic interiority of the island that every nationalist strives to maintain has been ruptured by the vicious expansion of capitalism, consumerism, and tourism culture. The faint ancestral rhythm that Vando aspires so hard to

connect with is lost in these strip malls that simulate American pop culture to the rest of the world, replacing the rich blend of spices in creollo cuisine with the bland taste of the burger.

More importantly, Vando dismantles the negative representation of the diaspora, its identities and literatures, in the insular national imaginary as the insignificant national Other that simply exists *de allá* (there). The diaspora has presented an intractable challenge to nationalist ideology in Puerto Rico and has posed a threat to the integrity and continuity of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* (the great Puerto Rican family). Because she inhabits an outsider position by virtue of her birthplace and language (she identifies herself as Nuyorican and writes in English), Vando posits that the diasporic Puerto Ricans are as Puerto Rican as Puerto Ricans can be, even if they have not seen the island or lived on it, and even if they are English monolinguals, or predominantly English, as we see in Vando's own work. Although Spanish is scattered all over her book (there is also a Glossary at the end of the book), Vando departs from the radical Latino/as poetics, with their experimental linguistic games and mixtures, which seem to be very popular in the ethnic literature market today. Rather, Vando mainly attempts in her work to force the insular literary establishment as well as the nationalist movement to recognize English as a Puerto Rican language that can coexist with Spanish. Like other postcolonial writers, she seeks to acknowledge and affirm the Otherness of the Self through the heteroglossia that weaves her existence. In particular, the assertion of the self's Otherness disavows the reification of English as the official language of the U.S. in the same breath it rejects Spanish as the official language of the Commonwealth. Recognition of the transnational spaces within the mainland such as the Puerto Rican barrio, la Loisiada, in the Lower East Side of Manhattan as well as Levitown in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, forces both discourses to reconsider both English and Spanish as the legitimate languages of literary production as well as the public sphere in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.<sup>4</sup> Uncovering these repressed transnational spaces and processes in the construction of U.S. and Boricua cultural unconscious decenters the assumed isomorphism between the U.S./Puerto Rico, its Anglo/Spanish culture, and its American/ Puerto Rican identity. As such, Vando redefines the referents of insular national identity, proposing instead to construct a more inclusive national imaginary.

Decentering the myth of the monolingual nation clears up a space for Vando to dispel the nationalist dream of the end of the diaspora and the return of the migrant to his or her original homeland. In traditional theories of migration and exile in the Caribbean archipelago, Caribbean subjects are said to overcome the psychological scars of alienation, which result from centuries of colonial domination, social fragmentation, and exile, in two related

ways: first, by recuperating an originary ethnic identity (African roots) that can reunite the subject with its authentic Self, as posited in the influential philosophy of negritude and the Black Power movement in its different Caribbean incarnations.<sup>5</sup> And second, by affirming their allegiance to a primordial homeland they can always return to, as postulated by teleological narratives of migration (Davies 1994). For Vando, Nuyoricans abrogate this romantic nostalgia for the homeland, asserting the impossibility of return. In the pain of surviving urban life, these Puerto Ricans are

Wondering where exactly they had made  
 A wrong turn, a wrong choice, knowing  
 (despite rumors they were transient)  
 That there was no turning back,  
 That the only paths left to them led  
 To other stairwells in other tenements,  
 To other windows facing other brick walls. (Vando 1993, 15)

In her penetrating vision of the life of Puerto Ricans, Vando thus repudiates the myth of circular migrancy and fabulation of errancy that has gained much currency in postmodern theorization of the Puerto Rican experience as “living in the air” or “nation on the move.” James Clifford, for example, reifies the Puerto Ricans in an aerial space in-between, where “everyone is more or less permanently in transit” (1992, 109). In an ironic twist, Clifford turns the circular migrancy of thousands of unskilled Puerto Rican laborers and their struggles for survival in both Puerto Rico and metropolitan U.S., their search for dignified living in other stairwells and in other tenements, into a site for the articulation of a postmodern location, extra-territorial and disembodied of any investment in the matrix of national and collective identities they inhabit.

In this poem, she also recounts how her *abuela* (grandmother), a proud woman, manages to maintain her dignity in such an alien and alienating place, an image that refutes the nationalist dismissal of immigrants as people who lost their dignity, or the stain of the plantain (*la mancha del plátano*). Vando’s depiction of her *abuela* cannot be completely comprehended without considering it as a revisionist postcolonial feminist reading of the canonical Puerto Rican drama *La Carreta* (*The Ox Cart*) by the major playwright René Marqués. In his dramatic serenade to the (mother)land, Marqués appeals for an end to the diaspora, which he quickly dismisses as a topos of moral excess and dissipation, and for an evocation of a nostalgic return to the rustic values of an Edenic pastoral past. *The Oxcart*, a three-act play, depicts a peasant family that abandons their land in the countryside for the slums of

San Juan, despite the objections of the grandfather, Don Chago. Impelled by her son's desires of attaining the gospel of wealth and progress of the American dream that can be achieved through technology and industrialization, Doña Gabriela, the widowed matriarch, moves with her three children to La Perla, a San Juan slum, and eventually to the South Bronx. Their lives fall apart even before leaving Puerto Rico when the two sons are lost to larceny and unemployment and the daughter Juanita is barbarically raped. But in the metropolis things get worse: Luis, the oldest son, tragically perishes in an industrial accident and Juanita becomes a prostitute. The misfortunes of her family compel Doña Gabriella to vow not only to abandon the language of progress and excess but also to return to "the red earth of [her] village," in a symbolic reclamation of communal belonging and rootedness in the land.<sup>6</sup>

As an exponent of nationalism, Marqués intended this drama to represent a sentimental reinscription of the iconography of peasant innocence and rustic idyll. The tripartite structure of the play affirms the idyllic happiness of native culture: plunge into the abyss; abandonment and disintegration; and return—hope/redemption. Underlying Marqués's drama is that conflict between colonialism and nationalism, modernity and tradition, the urban and the rural. For him, modernity evokes images of change, technocracy, alienation, dissolution of ancestral heritage, and loss of dignity and pride, while tradition embodies values of stability and the ethics of communal wholeness. Nonetheless, Marqués's glorification of rural culture and tradition is constructed on the aestheticization of poverty, deprivation, and scarcity. Marqués thus ignores the roles technology and industrialization can play in facilitating the reclamation or the dissemination of cultural tradition beyond the confines of a specific community. Marqués's problem, of course, as Frank Bonilla has pointed out, is:

We are perhaps developing a dangerous virtuosity in documenting the prostration, insecurity, ambivalences, and ideological bafflement within our ranks and assigning too little value to the contrary signs that point to a remarkable capacity for survival in a context of prolonged and radical ambiguity. (Bonilla 1987, 457)

Evidently, Marqués has no faith in the immigrants' struggle to maintain multiple linkages with discrepant sites of belonging and identification. Like Pedro Pietri in his *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973), Marqués writes a threnody of Puerto Ricans who could have only lost whatever dignity, honor, and identity they had had when they traveled to the US. He insists that once in continental U.S., Puerto Rican immigrants will immediately attempt to acculturate themselves to the host culture at the expense of their cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup> For Vando, such dreams of return are mere fantasies, for they assume that the simple act of return to an imagined home/land can guaran-

tee a person's happiness and wholeness. As a woman whom other Puerto Ricans dismiss as gringa, Vando knows better!

In *Promesas: Geography of the Impossible*, Gloria Vando rethinks the traditional topographies of ethnic identity in the multicultural U.S. through the prism of postcolonialism. Locating herself on the outside of the dominant narratives of Euro-American imperialism and Puerto Rican nationalism as a woman, (second-class) citizen, and colonial, Vando remains dislocated and oppositional in her rejection of oppression and injustice, national and global alike. She manages to magnify the gaps between the promises of U.S. democracy and the realities of urban living for Latino/as, since these gaps are now contextualized within five hundred years of conquest, exploitation, and oppression. Moreover, Vando problematizes the linkages and location of the diaspora in relation to the nation, exploding the myth of the authentic nation and its linguistic unity or purity, clearing a space for the inclusion of the diaspora within its borders. Her outsidership enables her not only to challenge these dominant narratives of imperialism and nationalism but also to redefine her sense of belonging, relocating her within a transnational network of solidarity with other oppressed groups in the world.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gloria Vando made these comments in a question-answer session at the Conference of the Poets of the Americas that was held at Stetson University, DeLand, FL, Nov 28-Dec 1, 2001. I'd like to thank the Spanish Program of the Department of Foreign Languages at Stetson University especially, Dr. Iliana Mankin, who made it possible for me to meet Gloria Vando and to present a version of this article to them.

<sup>2</sup> I'm indebted to Duany (1996) for this discussion of Lanny Thompson and her critique of William Smith Bryan's *Our Islands and their People* (1899).

<sup>3</sup> Rethinking the limits of nationalism in Puerto Rico has been the subject of various recent sophisticated critical studies such as Flores (1993; 2000), Duany (1996; 2001), and Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel (1997).

<sup>4</sup> For a similar argument, see Arcadio Díaz-Quñones's *La Memoria Rota* (The Broken Memory). See also Dunay (1996) and Flores (2000) for useful discussion of this book and its significance for Puerto Rican public and literary discourses on national identity and the diaspora.

<sup>5</sup> The classical Puerto Rican work that has popularized and reified the African basis of Puerto Rican culture is José Luis González's *Puerto Rico: The Four-Storeyed Country* (1993). González managed in fact to obliterate the presence of the Tainos from Puerto Rican culture, deferring the inscription of the New World into the Puerto Rican space until the US invasion.

<sup>6</sup> For more discussion of Marqués's play, see Dauster (1964) and Reynolds (1985).

<sup>7</sup> Marqués is in fact notorious for his lack of faith in his fellow Puerto Ricans, and his infamous representation of the character of the Puerto Rican in terms of the vanquished psyche of the oppressed. In *The Docile Puerto Rican*, Marqués contends that the syntax of impotence and inadequacy defines Puerto Ricanness. Thus, for him, the docile Puerto Rican lacks the will to overcome the overwhelming feelings of resignation, passivity, and fatalism. As such, the dissipation of national culture and identity is inevitable, for the metropolis will make sure that Puerto Ricans will lose the stain of tropical origin (*la mancha del plátano*). His analysis becomes even more problematic, when he viciously condemns Puerto Rican women for complicity with US imperialism, and thus, the desire to undermine Spanish patriarchal nationalism. Demanding that Puertorriqueñas valorize their cultural and national identities over any other identity narrative they might sustain, Marqués denounces Puerto Rican feminists as US imperial collaborators. As Diana Velez notes Marqués “went so far as to state that Puerto Rico was in danger of losing its cultural identity to a North American matriarchy” (1989, 35).

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