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The Commuting Island

Cultural (Im)mobility in *The Flying Bus*

Physical and cultural connectivities among spatial locations constitute an important area of concern and investigation in mobility studies. Aside from the transcultural formations such connectivities tend to induce, they also call for interrogations of the role of the nation as either a form of resistance or object of assimilatory desires. Under the current conditions of globalization, both “assimilation” and “cultural resistance” have to be rethought and reconfigured, because the terrains of power have begun to shift away from the nation as both the target and means of integration and of counter-hegemony. A number of literary and cultural artifacts that have recently come under scrutiny in mobility studies projects respond to economic and political globalizations by discarding the nation as a repository for essentialist and chauvinistic imagery and narrative strategies, and continue to draw attention to the socio-political conditions of people who either choose, or are forced into, states of mobility.

In contrast, the notion of connectivities also points to the fact that cultural articulations, more often than not, do have specific points of reference, spatial and national, which should not fall by the wayside when analyzing various forms of mobility and their cultural representations. Hence, aside from emphasizing certain anchorages of cultures that enable mobility in the first place, the focus on connectivities also takes into account that while certain cultural traditions move and merge freely, others tend to be quite immobile and resistive to transculturation and hybridization, two forms of cultural formation that are most commonly associated with globalization.

Another assumption of mobility studies is that the analysis of cultural representations requires a sustained attention to the occasions and locations that are pivotal sites of mobility. These pivotal sites, for instance, motels, bus stations, airports or border zones, lend themselves for the study of mobility because they provide locales of connection between people, ideas and cultural practices. They also tend to energize an aesthetic that relies foremost on fragmentation, recycling, intercultural ambiguities, parody and the blurring of various kinds of borders. At the same time, however, such an aesthetic rarely abandons the space of the nation altogether; instead, “the nation” often remains at least an implicit, virulent site of reference for devising cultural representations in and of mobility.

This ambiguous role of the nation is especially salient in Puerto Rican literary and cultural texts. Faced with the historical absence of national independence, the question of cultural identity for Puerto Ricans has been highly contested for centuries. It generally revolves around moments of rupture such as the island’s European discovery in 1493, the colonial turnover from Spain to the United States in 1898, the granting of “Free Associated Statehood” in 1952, and two referenda in 1993 and 1998, when a majority of Puerto Ricans voted against independence and in favor of maintaining the political status quo. Time and again, Puerto Rican authors and intellectuals have looked to these and other seminal events in the island’s history and have, as a result, engaged in what might be termed a “reflexive nationalism,” that is, the contemplation of the role and function of the nation—both Puerto Rico and the United States—for identity formations (Duany 2000, 8–17).

The aim of this essay is not to trace the historical complexities of Puerto Rico’s political, economic or cultural connections to the United States and Latin America, which have turned the island into a testing-ground for cultural transfer in the Americas. Rather, I am interested in current cultural figurations and discursive formations that are intricately linked to the mobility of people and cultural practices betwixt and between two national sites: Puerto Rico and the United States. This chapter hence focuses on Luis Rafael Sánchez’s 1987 short story *The Flying Bus*, in which an airplane *en route* between San Juan and New York City is portrayed as a pivotal site of mobility and, as such, as a means of forging connectivities between national cultures. Sánchez’s writings have repeatedly been celebrated for their critical stance on

Puerto Rican nationalism and for marking points of innovation in the literary canon of the island. As John Dimitri Perivolaris observes, Sánchez generally writes against “a tendency in Puerto Rican intellectual and political life to reduce all issues to a fatalistic identification with the island’s colonial status or a call to arms against colonial exploitation” (Perivolaris 2000, 18). His *oeuvre* thus ties in with other pan-Caribbean writings, for instance by José Martí, which deny a reductive call to cultural homogeneity by illustrating the fissures of a society and culture which is, and has been, constructed and imagined both from the inside out and the outside in.

Originally composed in Spanish, Sánchez’s short story employs the metaphor of the “guagua aérea,” meaning “air bus” or “flying bus” for a particular kind of diaspora situation in which Puerto Ricans have been increasingly involved since the 1960s and which consists of an incessant switching back and forth between the island and the United States. In fact and fantasy, the airbus, with its constant commuting between these two locations, traverses carefully guarded national airspaces, carrying people, identities, symbols and languages horizontally across nations. For the Puerto Rican passengers in Sánchez’s story, as well as in real life, the repeated journey to the promised land is not a future event but already part and parcel of Puerto Rican everyday life and culture.

This is evinced at the outset by Sánchez choosing the word “bus” for the title of his story. Such a choice of signifier is worth noting because the bus is not only a means of inexpensive and more or less convenient mobility in many regions of Latin America and the Caribbean but, moreover, a folkloric object. By opting to call an airplane a “flying bus,” Sánchez uses a symbol of Euroamerican modernity and rationality and transforms it into a cipher for Caribbean everyday culture. In addition, what is lost in the translation of the Spanish title “La Guagua Aérea” into English is the two-fold cultural meaning that the word “guagua” evokes. This onomatopoeic referent reproduces the typical sound of a bus horn in the southern Western Hemisphere and also that of a crying infant. Hence, Sánchez aestheticizes an ambiguous signifier based on everyday language, turning it into a metaphor of Puerto Rican modernity that is, by Western standards, still developing (Herlinghaus 1999, 30–31; Duany 1996, 263).

The Flying Bus serves as an insightful case study for investigating cultural and discursive formations that have resulted from the “first mass migration by airplane in modern history” (Laó-Montes/Dávila 2001, 20) because it maps transnational social spaces between San Juan and New York City that are configured by mobility, allowing and forcing the Puerto Rican passengers on the plane to be at home in more than one place – to live plurilocally. The notion of “transnational social spaces” has in the past been used by sociologists and cultural critics to describe the increasing disjuncture of geographic and social spaces during a time of intensified globalization and mobility. Whereas in the past, the geographic space one lived in and the social community one belonged to were generally congruent, new information technologies and relatively cheap travel costs allow an increasing number of people to live in one geographic space and interact with social communities located elsewhere (cf. Glick Schiller/Basch/Szanton Blanc 1995, 48–63; Goldring 1996, 69–104; Pries 55–74; Rouse 1991, 8–23). The application of the term “transnational social space” seems especially apt with regard to Puerto Rico because almost half of its population lives on the American mainland, with thousands of people shuttling back and forth on a regular basis (Duany 2000, 6). Aside from causing and demanding identities that bypass a reconciliation of a unified expression of nationality, life in transnational social spaces often leads to what Salman Rushdie has termed “stereoscopic vision,” a perspective on the world that results from simultaneously being cultural and physical insiders and outsiders, residents and migrants, assimilated and alienated (Duany 2000, 18).

Sánchez’s short story represents the physical “dwelling-in-mobility” of Puerto Ricans in transnational social spaces not only in form and content. For instance, the publication history of *The Flying Bus*, which went through different printed versions and has been published in Spanish and English, echoes the evolving and floating nature of a population segment that is more or less constantly on the move. On the level of content, the story introduces a host of characters who have developed the stereoscopic vision that Rushdie considers especially characteristic of migrant and mobility conditions. The reader learns, for instance, that one of the Puerto Rican passengers on board the plane “live[s] with one leg in New York and the other in Puerto Rico” and another who claims that she is from “New York comma Puerto

Rico” (Sánchez 2002, 635). Designating “New York, Puerto Rico” as home can be seen as a performative act of reclaiming the space of the colonizers by those who migrate from the margins to the center of power. It asserts that Puerto Rico is no longer an affiliated territory, nor is New York City part of the United States; instead, New York has become integrated into a network of transnational social spaces that span across the Americas.

“New York comma Puerto Rico” also illustrates that the island cannot be considered as a bounded, fixed location in space but has to be seen as a mobile locale, a “repeating island,” to borrow Antonio Benito-Rojos’ term, in the sense that it can be, and is, re-created on the North American mainland. The cultural, economic and political re-creation of the Caribbean island in the diaspora is, however, not a mimetic reflection of the original but rather a repetition with a difference. That this repetition with a difference marks a structural characteristic of the transnational spaces between Puerto Rico and New York City is emphasized in the story by the frequent repetitions and slight changes of sentences and sentence fragments. In doing so, *The Flying Bus* postulates that Puerto Rican communities in New York City and San Juan do not present mirror images of each other. Rather, the narrator, by employing repetition and difference on the levels of form and content, fictionalizes multiple renderings of Puerto Rico both on the island and on the American mainland. These renderings are quite similar to the images one encounters when looking at funhouse mirrors, found at carnivals and amusement parks, where a variety of concave and convex mirrors present slightly bent and distorted versions of the original.

The funhouse and the carnival are, in fact, recurring motifs in *The Flying Bus*. For example, the story opens *in medias res* with a “terrified scream,” caused by the premonition of the plane being hijacked, which slowly gives way to a crescendoing laughter among the Puerto Rican commuters. At first, the passengers’ laughter seems to be merely a comic form of relief after the threat of a hostile take-over turns out to be caused by two crabs, which have escaped from the bag of one of the passengers, causing some travelers to panic. It soon becomes clear, however, that the laughter, which quickly infects almost all passengers on the aircraft, functions as a means of confronting the socio-political status quo between Anglo-Americans and Puerto Ricans on the ground; it becomes a tactic of transgression that tem-

porarily disrupts and subverts colonial power structures and hierarchies between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. The narrator accentuates the counter-hegemonic potential of this collective laughter when he describes it as “disorderly,” “sedicious” and almost reaching “the point of depressurizing the cabin” (Sánchez 2002, 632, 634). The laughter also serves as a means of articulation that is marked by, and marks, cultural difference on and off the plane. The collective laughter of the “Third World” passengers is juxtaposed by the rationality, silence and discipline of the Anglo-American crew, and the attempt by the Captain to bridge the cultural divide by telling “little jokes which do not catch on, do not cling, do not threaten anyone” fails (Sánchez 2002, 634). Hence, by resorting to what Renato Rosaldo has called a “politics of laughter,” the Puerto Rican passengers gain a communicative agency that at once alienates the Anglo-American crew and, at the same time, creates a commonality among the commuters based on their cultural conditioning and experiences. Such a “tactic,” in the Certaeuan sense, becomes a potential means of empowerment vis-à-vis U.S. colonialism and imperialism in Puerto Rico because the laughter momentarily transforms negative experiences of minoritized subjects into positive affirmations of mobility, shifting borders and intercultural transit.

The telling of anecdotes that soon replaces the passengers’ laughter introduces a similar “transgressive” element of disrupting political, social and cultural orders. After the threat of hijacking has passed, the passengers begin to weave a

“chain of anecdotes [that] is linked to a chain of resounding interjections; anguished and laughable anecdotes, some heart-breaking, others superficial, others dearly heroic in their formulation of resistance against insult, against open or concealed prejudice; an infinity of anecdotes where Puerto Ricans take a center stage in acts of roguishness, of witticism, of impudence, of craftiness.”
(Sánchez 2002, 634)

In aesthetic terms, this quotation exemplifies how Sánchez attempts to map a polyrhythmic Puerto Rican culture onto the written page, by the variation of long and short sentences, his use of punctuation and word choice. In political terms, the polyrhythmic culture represented by the passengers’ anecdotes is once again portrayed as a potential

means of subverting the cultural and political hegemony of the United States from the inside.

In contrast to what I have claimed earlier, one might read the commuters' anecdotes and laughter, which create a sense of familiarity and belonging, as a means of *national* rather than *transnational* community-building. This argument can be supported by pointing out how the story lacks a single focal point or protagonist; instead, the emphasis lies on a Puerto Rican collective. The narrator, with his privileged though not detached position toward the events he is telling, is part of the collective and a cultural insider who is aware of the power asymmetries on the ground. Even though he is seated in the tourist class and participates in the community created through laughter and orality, he is also able to report on those passengers sitting in the first class. The narrator thus relates a quasi-national polyphony on the plane and, at the same time, takes part in it: his voice is one among many on the plane and he enters into dialogue with other commuters. The assertion that the story strives to imagine a national rather than a transnational community is further supported by how the narrator posits the plane as a border in motion, "an invisible but tangible line between them, the gringos, and us, the Puerto Ricans" (Sánchez 2002, 632). Such an "othering" of the Anglo-American dominant, evinced by Sánchez choosing the derogatory and colloquial term "gringo," is indicative of how the story replicates a sense of Puerto Rican proto-nationalist cultural pride through a reversal of the dichotomy between colonizers and colonized.

The text fails to entirely support this interpretation, however, because the portrayed "nation" is not grounded in a singular, exclusive place and because the "national" metaphors it evokes are deeply ironic: the community on the plane remains heterogeneous in terms of social standing and achieves unity only in the limited time-space allotted by the airplane. Furthermore, the story shows how class differences cut across the borders of race, ethnicity and nation, for instance, when the narrator describes the social disparities between Puerto Rican commuters in the tourist class and the business class, which preclude the integration of all passengers into a monolithic national collective. In short, the passengers on the airplane function as metaphors of a fragmented transnational group rather than of a homogenous Puerto Rican nation. As Perivolaris explains, "The pas-

sengers' accounts of their lives draw the multiple boundaries of the nation by charting a disparate topography ranging from the island's forests and beaches, provincial towns, [...], to the South Bronx [...] a Jewish pawnshop, and a project in New Jersey" (Perivolaris 2000, 61). The story thus maps a space of belonging that bends and extends the borders of one national cultural community (Puerto Rico) into that of another (the United States), within the political jurisdiction and borders of the U.S. nation-state. While the passengers are political (albeit second-class) citizens of the United States, their cultural citizenship operates within and across transnational spaces between the Caribbean island and the mainland. With this representation of transnational existence, the story ultimately renders obsolete the traditional linkages between language, territory and culture, which mark the pillars of nationhood and national identity.

Popular culture is another means with which *The Flying Bus* creates a unity of effect that centers on transnational cultures in and of mobility. Throughout the story, one finds repeated hints at Puerto Rican food, music and American movies, all of which are depicted as traveling freely on and off the plane. For instance, the reference to the movie *King Kong* is an interesting intermedial allusion that evokes associations of the arrival of a monster from the savage world at the center of American modernity: New York City. This ironic self-reflexivity playfully points to the potential dangers that the islanders' cultural practices might pose both on the aircraft and in the United States. The story's employment of popular culture can thus be considered as "the perfect allegorical representation of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean; a popular culture whose everyday workings exemplify the democratic possibilities of a flexible and open nationality, that bypasses established political structures, perhaps marking their obsolescence" (Perivolaris 2000, 187). In addition, Sánchez's story denies the enlistment of popular culture either for the cause of Puerto Rican nationalism or for a continuation of the island's "yankeezation" (Sánchez 2002, 636). By doing so, it illustrates a central aspect of connectivities in cultures in/of mobility: challenging the role of the nation as either a form of resistance or object of assimilatory desires.

Moreover, instead of postulating popular culture as a harbinger for new, hybrid cultural formations, located in a third space between Puerto Rico and the United States, the story focuses on certain cul-

tural practices that travel without undergoing transculturation, for instance, by alluding to traditional Puerto Rican food recipes or folk music. *The Flying Bus* thus refrains from replicating a common feature of many U.S.-Latino literary and cultural articulations—the fusion of seemingly incompatible cultural practices or icons—and, instead, hints at how mobility also brings to the surface certain stubborn chunks of cultures that refuse to melt and that remain immobile. Through such an aestheticization of (im)mobility experiences, Sánchez’s short story explores how cultural citizenship in transnational social spaces between New York City and the Caribbean can be an empowering, yet at times also conflictual process of selecting, negotiating and discarding certain cultural elements that are either brought along or encountered in mobility.

Another aspect of cultures in and of mobility that the story negotiates is the praxis of keeping an open return trip ticket “that certifies that in New York you are insured against the growth of roots that can only grow in your island, against the risk of being buried in an icy land unlike yours” (Sánchez 2002, 637). While this quotation seems to reveal the narrator’s conviction that cultural roots cannot be transferred from Puerto Rico to New York City, the story immediately deconstructs the essentializing of the island as the place of belonging by listing accounts of people on the plane who can no longer bear to live permanently in Puerto Rico for a variety of social, economic, political and cultural reasons. Instead, *The Flying Bus* conveys a sense of how, for many passengers on board the plane, the meanings of “here” and “there,” and also of roots and routes, have become increasingly indistinguishable. In doing so, the story constitutes an aesthetic representation of bending together, in James Clifford’s words, “both roots and routes to construct [...] forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference” (Clifford 1997, 251; *emph. orig.*). As a narrative of mobility *par excellence*, the story negotiates the historical and present paradoxes of belonging to, dwelling in and moving between several national cultural spaces and with this emphasis, the story problematizes aesthetic paradigms authorized by, and authorizing, a singular national culture.

In *The Flying Bus* roots can be, and often have to be, replanted from Puerto Rico to New York and back, and, as a result, circulation be-

comes the core of human experience and consciousness: “an arrival accomplished in order to be able to-go-out-again-and-come-back-again” (Sánchez 2002, 637). By depicting arrival as neither complete nor permanent but rather as a fleeting stage in the circular mobility of people and cultures, the story asserts that belonging is, and has to be, an open-ended process. Puerto Rican culture and identity in the story are thus not depicted as becoming reterritorialized anywhere, but as indefinitely deterritorialized elsewhere. For the narrator, such a seemingly never-ending form of mobility is ultimately something positive and worth striving for, as the last sentence of the story emphasizes how Puerto Rico and New York City are “immersed in the traffic of hope” (Sánchez 2002, 638).

While it seems tempting to close this chapter with this quote from the story and, in doing so, to express agreement with Sánchez’s benign vision of cultural and physical mobility, such a conclusion would fail to capture adequately the complexity that the story’s ending presents. Although *The Flying Bus* can certainly be read as a poetic celebration of mobility in the Western Hemisphere, it also points to the impossibility of sustaining the innovative and emancipatory potentials generated from and in this mobility, because eventually, the flight, and by extension the carnivalesque agency performed by the passengers, will, according to the laws of gravity, have to come to an end. It is precisely the untold rest of the story—namely that after the plane has landed, the passengers are likely to return to their ethnic enclaves in New York City—that draws attention to the troubled and uneasy state of cultural and political relations between the islanders and the dominant society. New York City functions as an imagined space of belonging with no “real” representational contours; it appears, instead, as a symbolic proxy for a state of certain uncertainty on the ground, where Puerto Ricans are subsumed under the transnational ethnic umbrella “Latino” and othered by the U.S. mainstream as being culturally, racially and politically inferior.

The absence of arrival hence highlights the presence of immobility. That is, by not depicting the plane’s touchdown and the fate of the passengers, the story emphasizes the contrast between the unrest on board the plane, and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of changing relatively rigid ethnic hierarchies on the ground. The story hence posits the reversal of colonial relations as a utopia, an idealist vision

that can only be entertained temporarily in the no-place provided by the airplane. In doing so, *The Flying Bus* is indicative of how cultural mobility cannot be thought without taking into consideration the constraints posed by assimilatory pressures, juridical standing and the mirage of melting-pot unity which Puerto Ricans in transit between two spatial and cultural locales face almost necessarily. Put differently, off the aircraft—both before departing and after deplaning—the passengers are subjected to a paradoxical situation of belonging to, but not being part of, the United States of America, and the contradictions between mobility and immobility portrayed by Sánchez echo the constitutional limbo of Puerto Rico and its inhabitants within the U.S. federal system.

Although Sánchez's narrative perhaps all too optimistically designs mobile subject positions and their possibilities for change, the story deserves credit and attention for its representation of the popular normalcy of mobility, physical and cultural, between Puerto Rico and New York City. By denying the territorialization of people and culture on either side of "the pond," *The Flying Bus* aestheticizes socio-cultural formations that are no longer primarily constituted around essences of the nation but that are organized relationally, connecting different spaces and places. In doing so, the story charts flows of difference, situated in unstable occasions and locations that constitute contemporary cultures as the provisional grounding of people, their values, beliefs and practices, in motion. Sánchez's short story can therefore be seen as an example of how cultures in and of mobility often organize themselves neither around the drawing of boundaries and, as a consequence, the defense of unique, distinguishable features, nor around a "Third Space of enunciation" that facilitates emancipatory cultural agency by postulating hybrid cultural formations (Bhabha 1994, 37). Rather, by depicting passengers who commute between the island and the mainland, the story illustrates how cultures in and of mobility are centrally about people being "in touch," about transnational connectivities, interactions and dialogues.

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