

REWRITING HISTORY AND CULTURE: «EL BAÚL DE MISS FLORENCE» BY ANA LYDIA VEGA

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Falsas crónicas del sur (1991), Ana Lydia Vega's collection of short stories, which includes «El baúl de Miss Florence,» is based on the history, legends, and oral tradition of the coastal villages of the southern part of Puerto Rico.¹ The tales have elements that are a product of Vega's imagination, indeed, but they are also based on her research in public libraries and private archives. Her ultimate goal, as she explains, was «confirmar la proteica multiplicidad de 'los hechos' y la desconcertante ambigüedad de las perspectivas. Sobre las siempre cambiantes versiones de sucesos vividos o escuchados, construí éstas que ahora someto a la imaginación de ustedes» (*Falsas crónicas* 1).² She wants to offer us another version of how events may have occurred; one that includes traditionally silenced voices as well. Within *Falsas crónicas* the ultimate example of this rewriting of history is found in «El baúl de Miss Florence,» based upon real characters (according to Vega):³

Del paso de los Lind por tierras arroyanas, apenas quedan vestigios concretos: unos muros ahogados por la maleza en la carretera de Arroyo a Patillas y unas tumbas

¹ *Falsas crónicas del sur* (*False Chronicles from the South*) has not been translated into English. However, an English version of «El baúl de Miss Florence» («Miss Florence's Trunk») is included in Ana Lydia Vega's *True and False Romances*. The «El baúl de Miss Florence» English quotes I use in this essay have been taken from *True and False Romances*. All other translations are mine.

² «To confirm the protean multiplicity of 'the facts' and the uncertain ambiguity of the perspectives. Upon the events' always changing lived and listened versions, I constructed these that now I submit to your imagination.»

³ This perspective is observed in another story from *Falsas crónicas del sur* titled «Cuento en camino,» also included in *True and False Romances* as «Eye-Openers.»

maltrechas en el cementerio viejo. El apellido, sin embargo, sobrevive en los descendientes de aquellos esclavos que labraron con sus manos la majestuosidad versallesca de La Enriqueta.

Nadie ha podido explicar aún las trágicas muertes de los protagonistas de esta historia. El misterio favorece los designios de la autora y su afán de rellenar con tinta las lagunas. (2)⁴

The goals that Vega sets for herself are clearly expressed in the title of the book, which the author explains in an interview with Elizabeth Hernández and Consuelo López Springfield. There, she declares that all chronicles are, of necessity, false because «oral tradition imparts a new history each time one tells it» (820). Consequently, throughout her book she questions the inevitably biased nature of the historiography enterprise, which she defines as «a story told by people as they see it» (820). The term «falsas,» thus, can be interpreted not only as an adjective that describes the inaccuracy of Vega's own «crónicas,» but also as an indictment of official (hi)stories that cannot be factual versions of particular events (as they pretend to be).⁵

An explanation for Vega's uneasiness about history is found in her essay «Nosotros los historicidas.» In that significant essay, Vega, echoing Magali García Ramis in «Para narrar el tiempo escondido,» denounces how during the 1950s their history education only covered until 1898. Her generation, as a result, grew up unaware of significant episodes in the history of Puerto Rico, including the existence (and repression) of the nationalist movement. Likewise, the history of minority groups was absent from textbooks, as Vega explains:

La vida y milagros de Juan del Pueblo no cualificaba todavía para protagonizar manuales de historia. Y menos aún la de Doña Juana. En cuanto a nuestros venerables antepasados multiculturales (léase taínos y africanos) mientras menos se hablara de ellos, mejor. («Nosotros los historicidas» 24)⁶

As a response to this state of affairs, Vega –in «El baúl de Miss Florence»– sets out to rescue some of the forgotten threads of Puerto Rican history, culture and identity,

⁴ «Concrete vestiges from the Lind's passage by Arroyo territory hardly remain: Some weed-suffocated walls on the route from Arroyo to Patillas and some battered tombstones on the old cemetery. The family name, however, survives on the descendants of those slaves that carved with their hands La Enriqueta's versaillesque majesty.

Nobody has yet been able to explain this story's protagonists' tragic deaths. The mystery favors the author's designs and her urge for filling the gaps.»

⁵ Other interpretations of the title *Falsas crónicas del sur* can be found on Yazmín Pérez Torres' «Falsas crónicas del sur y la escritura de la historia,» and Mary Ann Gosser-Esquilín's «Ana Lydia Vega's *Falsas crónicas del sur*: Reconstruction and Revision of Puerto Rico's Past.»

⁶ «Juan del Pueblo's experiences did not qualify to play the main part in history manuals. And Mrs. Juana's even less. As for our venerable multicultural ancestors (that is the Taínos and the Africans) the less they were talked about, the better.»

while defying the literary canon. Vega's contribution to the task is most visible in how she incorporates the narrative voice of marginal women, in her use of the feminine journal as a method of historical transmission, and in her defense of the extraordinary role that popular and African cultures have played in the formation of a Puerto Rican identity. But Vega is not alone in her revisionist enterprise. Her stories take shape in the context of a new wave of critical and theoretical work by several contemporary literary and cultural critics such as Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, Juan Gelpí, Juan Flores, and Frances Aparicio.⁷ Before analyzing Vega's short story, thus, it might be helpful to discuss some of the most relevant ideas of these critics, since they offer a most productive theoretical framework for Vega's own creative efforts.

In their research about the past, Díaz Quiñones, Gelpí, Aparicio and Flores conclude that the interpretation of history and culture as envisioned by previous authors such as Antonio S. Pedreira, Tomás Blanco, and René Marqués, is in crisis. In his «Recordando el futuro imaginario: La escritura histórica en la década del treinta,» for instance, Díaz Quiñones localizes the beginning of that crisis at the end of the 1960s, when the Puerto Rican «economic miracle» collapsed and those who supported the anti-national occidentalist discourse that justified modernization were no longer able to create spiritual and material values that justified their authority (16-17). According to Díaz Quiñones:

En el nuevo clima de crisis, todas las verdades se hacen sospechosas. El espacio abandonado por el «fracaso» del modelo puertorriqueño, queda libre para nuevos discursos y nuevos proyectos. La crisis del llamado «modelo» puertorriqueño ha alentado la búsqueda de nuevas respuestas. Ha estimulado asimismo el cuestionamiento y la confrontación de los códigos que permitieron el funcionamiento de los discursos dominantes. Ha dinamizado la literatura y la historiografía puertorriqueña. (18)⁸

Díaz Quiñones calls this process, initiated in 1970, the new history (18), since it reacts to the hegemonic ideology present in Puerto Rico from 1940 to 1970, as based in books like *Insularismo* (1934), by Antonio S. Pedreira, and *El prontuario histórico de Puerto Rico* (1935), by Tomás Blanco.

Equally relevant for an understanding of Vega's «historical» enterprise is Juan Gelpí's landmark study *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico* (1993). This book

⁷ It is also important to take into account that Vega's work reveals the close relation between history and fiction observed in much of contemporary Latin American literature, as Yazmín Pérez Torres suggests.

⁸ «On the new crisis climate, all truths become suspicious. The space freed up by the 'failure' of the Puerto Rican model remains open to new discourses and new projects. The crisis of the so-called Puerto Rican, 'model' has encouraged the search for new answers. Likewise, it has stimulated challenging and confronting the codes that allowed the dominant discourse's operation in the first place. It has made Puerto Rican literature and historiography more dynamic.»

examines how the paternalistic literary canon was constituted in Puerto Rico, but it also analyzes its crisis and the daring transgressions effected by some contemporary authors. Likewise, Frances Aparicio, in *Listening to Salsa* (1998), discusses the use of countercanonical strategies by Puerto Rican writers since the early 1970s, a use that «democratizes literature and destabilizes the patriarchal and elite ideologies that had characterized Puerto Rican literature since the end of the nineteenth century» (4). The democratization of literature to which Aparicio refers is accomplished in part by incorporating elements that belong to the realm of popular culture. For Aparicio, this entails a postmodern politics that in Puerto Rico «blurs the boundaries between the elite and the popular» (5) and that «has been engaged in by writers who reexamine, contest, and ultimately deconstruct the hegemonic articulations of Puerto Rican culture» (5).

In addition to the important contributions by the authors previously mentioned, I consider Juan Flores' *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (1993) a fundamental contribution to understanding the limitations of what for three decades was considered the predominant cultural canon on the island. One of Flores' essays in that collection, «Cortijo's Revenge: New Mappings of Puerto Rican Culture,» is helpful in elucidating the ideology behind «El baúl de Miss Florence.» Flores' article denounces the Eurocentric point of view that has traditionally prevailed in the definition of the Puerto Rican culture, which has prompted some analysts, such as Rafael Hernández Colón, to consider the African contribution a «mere rhetorical adscription» (95). In this context, Flores explores how a proposal to name the Puerto Rican Centro de Bellas Artes after the well known black *plenero* Rafael Cortijo in August 1988 generated a debate on the island «which would have made not only Cortijo but Antonio S. Pedreira turn over in his grave» (92). The mention of Pedreira above alludes to his famous answer to the question «who are we and what are we like,» as formulated in *Insularismo*, where he fails to recognize the significance of the African roots of Puerto Rican culture. According to Flores:

It took the towering presence and symbolic passing of a black popular musician of the uncontested stature of Cortijo to force the question of African and working-class culture onto the agenda of every-day Puerto Rican life... the threat to sanctify the name of Cortijo and the ensuing reactions from all quarters of the cultural establishment bring into rare focus the still unfinished business involved in exposing the theoretical confines of *Insularismo*. (93)

As Flores emphasizes in his essay, the contribution of African heritage in the formation of Puerto Rican identity is a topic that can be detected in the work of authors from different generations since the nineteenth century; but it was only in the 1980s that «the balance tipped, and the new Afro-Caribbean horizon has come in full view» (97). He adds that the 1980s were also the decade of wariness in the works of most cultural theorists over «the dangers of essentialism in defining identities of any kind, by class, national, racial-ethnic or sexual standards» (98),

and he emphasizes the importance in this sense of contemporary authors such as Ana Lydia Vega. Flores also asserts that «[i]t is not the popular, African component in itself that goes to define the 'real' Puerto Rican culture, but its interplay with the non-African, elite and folkloric components» (98). For him, this interplay is the most characteristic contemporary response both to Eurocentric, elitist privileging, and to the relativism of the syncretism model. He refers to his model as the «relational one» since it «aim[s] to identify not some originary identity but the contacts and crossing experience by the culture as social practice.» (98)

Flores sees an example of the relational response in *El entierro de Cortijo* by Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, in which he considers women as the emblems of identity. According to Flores, the relevance that Rodríguez Juliá grants to women is of extreme importance since Pedreira characterized them in his *Insularismo* as «weak and frivolous» and not as capable as men to take firm command of the educational tasks of the country and to lead the way out of collective insularity (100). The women's perspectives, according to Flores, typically complement the dimensions of Africanism and popular culture and they «foster a critical awareness of their basic importance in the culture» (101). In fact, as Judith Kegan Gardiner suggests in «On Female Identity and Writing by Women,» «many women remember what men choose to forget» (188). Consequently, when women write they may feel the need to talk about historical events that have been ignored by a tradition of male historians. This, in turn, forces us to ask whether or not women's versions of history are in some way different from men's. For example, and as a way to enter into the analysis of «El baúl de Miss Florence,» a male author(ity) such as Tomás Blanco in «Elogio de la Plena» (1935) asserts that *mestizaje* is proof of the absence of racial prejudice in Puerto Rico. But, in an apparent answer to Blanco and others, Frances Aparicio reminds us that «[t]he marginal relations between white males and mulatas, usually never made official, have indeed been the structural principle that maintained the growth of *mestizaje* in the Caribbean islands» (43). Interrogating that uncharted territory may thus serve as an instance of rewriting Puerto Rican history from a gendered point of view hitherto absent from the public discourse.

In a sense, this is one of the many ways in which Vega transgresses the patriarchal canon, by handing over the narrative voice (in «El baúl») to Miss Florence and Bela, two women who had marginal places in the mid-nineteenth century society that the story recreates. Besides Miss Florence and Bela's voices, Vega also makes use of other narrative elements in «El baúl de Miss Florence.» For example, an omniscient narrator is found at the beginning of the story's first part, as well as on several occasions during the second section, and as the only narrator on the third part. Miss Florence is an English governess who goes to Puerto Rico to work for the Lind family and who writes a journal about her experiences. After finishing her work, she discontinues her journal and moves to New York, trying to escape from the oppression of the *hacendado* world that the Linds represent. But Miss Florence returns to Puerto Rico thirty years later, when she reads in a newspaper about Mrs. Lind's death. This new trip to Puerto Rico constitutes the second part of the story. The

events that Miss Florence recollects in this later visit are part of a second journal. In contrast with the more intimate, self-reflective tone of the first diary, her subsequent narrative opens up to incorporate the voice of Bela, a black slave woman who had been working for the owners of «La Enriqueta» and who won the affection of both Mrs. Lind and her son, Charlie. Once free, and even after Charlie's suicide, Bela stays with the Linds, because she feels sorry for the depressed Mrs. Lind. Charlie's death is his last resort to rebel against his dominant father, whose authority he has been challenging since he was a child. Bela starts playing an ever more active role in Miss Florence's narration as the only witness of the Linds' final years. Since both women love the young Charlie, they share an equal interest for his story and are equally affected by his tragic death. An allegorical reading of this incident would permit us to interpret it as a reflection on the fate of a nation in search of an elusive independence.

Their shared feelings toward Charlie (and, allegorically, toward Puerto Rico itself) bring the two women closer to one another regardless of the social and racial differences that separate them. This process of identification and closeness reaches its climax in the scene where they see each other after almost thirty years. The encounter is described by Miss Florence as follows: «Las lágrimas que no había podido contener corrían ahora libremente por mis mejillas, confundíendose con las suyas» (69).⁹ Since eyes in this story are repeatedly presented as a major means to acquire knowledge (hinting at the tension between the witnessed versus the narrated), this episode may be interpreted to indicate not only how Miss Florence steps forward in the direction of freedom from her personal prejudices, but also as a sign of acceptance of the racial other through the motif of the confusion of their tears. At the allegorical level, the episode becomes a commentary on the need for this kind of racial tolerance in the remapping of Puerto Rican history and culture.

Returning to Miss Florence's journal, it is clear that Vega introduces that kind of private annals in her short story to call attention to the possibility that there might be many other private eyewitness accounts of Puerto Rican history, whose aim is not the grand narrative of History, but the first person account of everyday life on the island. Additionally, of course, the journal as a genre is part of a long tradition of feminine self-analysis and discourse. It is both a means to construct a social memory and a method to express a personal identity. But, as a self-addressed artifact, and

⁹ «The tears I had so far been able to contain ran freely now down my cheeks, mixing with Bella's own» (243). This scene reminds us of Rosario Ferre's popular «Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres.» At the end of that short story Isabel Luberza and Isabel La Negra, two women of different race and social class, find a novel sense of closeness. But, as in the case of «El baúl de Miss Florence,» I agree with Frances Aparicio when she asserts that Rosario Ferre's short story's ending «is not a metaphor for a facile, reconciliatory paradigm of racial mestizaje, similar to the one textualized earlier by Tomás Blanco. Instead, it proposes a vision of cultural dialogism by which the central role of African-based culture in Puerto Rico would be recognized as equally as that of the European-based one» (53).

contrary to the historical text, it does not presuppose an audience beyond the writer herself. Not surprisingly, at the end of the story Miss Florence rhetorically dismisses the idea that someone might ever be interested in her experiences when she wonders «Quién leerá estos labios mudos? ¿Quién desenterrará mi trunca historia de amor y le pondrá palabras?» (84).¹⁰ Consequently, she burns her trunk full of memories, including her journal. In thus incinerating her (memory of the) past, Miss Florence seems to perform a rite of purification here. She also conveys a desire to destroy and silence a personal history marked by the racism, prejudice and lack of understanding that characterized the years that she worked for the Linds, a period in which she was afraid to compromise her own freedom in order to help in the liberation of others. The act of burning the journal can also be a reminder of the kind of self-censorship imposed over the centuries by the woman artist upon herself, for fear of social ostracism and other forms of marginalization.

Ironically, though, Ana Lydia Vega's short story is an answer to Miss Florence's questions about her (hi)story and its potential interest to others. It is Vega's way of acknowledging the importance of women's experiences while advocating for their dissemination in order to fully understand culture and history. Vega's recuperation of Miss Florence's testimony is a response to the Puerto Rican paternalistic literary canon compiled by the 1930s generation that, according to Gelpí, considers the novel about the immediate past and the essay of historic interpretation «literatura de hombres, de políticos, de constructores de naciones,» and the only genres worthy of forming part of the canon (12).¹¹ Needless to say, that attitude had as a consequence the exclusion of other genres such as lyrical poetry, the autobiographic memoir, or the journal (Gelpí 134), an exclusion that Vega is not willing to accept.

In her attempt to recuperate the female version of history, Vega also gives a significant place in it to the voices of slaves, as well as to African culture, both previously ignored and minimized in the Puerto Rican canon.¹² Even in the diegetic world of «El baúl de Miss Florence,» the abolitionist Doctor Fouchard comments on this circumstance. The doctor wants to show Miss Florence the other side of the grandeur of the hacienda «La Enriqueta» that had been, in some way, hidden from her. Commenting on the status of the hacienda workers, Fouchard states:

Es curioso que no se les llame por su verdadero nombre: esclavos, como si nos obstináramos en negar su condición, como si al evitar nombrarla lográramos esquivar todo el horror que esconde. ¿Pero qué son sino eso? Laboran en los campos de sol a sol: viven encerrados y amontonados como las bestias; sufren en carne viva

¹⁰ «Who will read these mute lips? Who will exhume my thwarted story of love and give it words?» (261).

¹¹ «literature of men, of politicians, of nation builders.»

¹² For more on the importance of African cultures and negritude in Ana Lydia Vega's short stories, see Augusto Poleo's «Ana Lydia Vega, the Caribbean Storyteller,» and Rafael Falcón's «Aleluya a la caribeñidad: Los cuentos negristas de Ana Lydia Vega.»

castigos que podrían avergonzar a los bárbaros; van, vienen, respiran al ritmo que les toca nuestra voluntad... (32)¹³

This declaration is a response to the elite's way of thinking, represented in the story and in reality by Samuel Morse, whose view on slavery Vega chose as an epigraph: «Slavery per se is not a sin. It is a social condition ordained from the beginning of time for the wisest purpose, benevolent and disciplinary, by Divine Wisdom.» (4)¹⁴

Vega's response to Morse is also an indictment of Pedreira, who, according to Flores, «considers the abolitionist literature of the Island and Spain and not the waves of rebellions to have been the backbone of social reform» (22). In contrast, Vega gives the slaves the protagonist role in their own liberation. It is for that purpose of restoring a sense of agency that she mentions in «El baúl de Miss Florence» the episode of the escaping slaves, and the attempt at rebellion in one of the haciendas, as well as the African revolts in Haiti and the French Antilles. Moreover, Vega stresses the importance of a vibrant African culture for the life of every inhabitant of the island, and not only for those of African descent. A prime example of this is Charlie. He was born in Puerto Rico and, like many other *hacendado* children, he was nursed as a baby by a black woman (Carolina) and, in part, raised by another black woman (Bela) who «le demuestra más afecto que su propia madre» (8), according to Miss Florence.¹⁵ The contact with the slave population not only gives Charlie elements that will form part of his own identity, like the way he speaks Spanish, but it is also his only channel to express opposition to the European way of life and thinking that his parents and Miss Florence want to impose on him. His use of Spanish instead of English is an example of this rejection, as manifested by the following comment about him by Miss Florence: «El chico ha aprendido el español casi prodigiosamente y su acento, insólitamente desclasado, delata el origen africano de su escuela. Es en esa lengua que responde, a modo de malacrianza, cuando intento capturar su atención para alguna enseñanza» (8).¹⁶

As Ana Lydia Vega has explained, in «El baúl de Miss Florence» she wanted to illustrate through the character of Charlie «the situation faced by an emerging Creole class in the 19th century, a time when awareness of a distinctly Puerto Rican culture

¹³ «It's amazing that they are not called by their true name-slaves. It is as though we insisted upon denying their real condition, as though if we can but avoid naming it we may allow ourselves to be blind to the true horror of their state... But what are they if not slaves? They work in the fields from sun to sun; they live like beasts, one atop another, locked into these wretched hovels; they suffer punishments to their flesh that would shame the barbarians; they come, they go, they breathe to a rhythm set to them by our mere wills...» (199).

¹⁴ For an explanation of how the information Vega offers about Morse in her short story has changed the image that some people of Arroyo had of him, see «Nosotros los historicidas.»

¹⁵ «who shows him more affection than his own mother does» (170).

¹⁶ «The boy has learned Spanish like a prodigy, but his accent, in no way befitting a member of his class, betrays the African origins of his school. It is in Spanish that he replies, impudently, when I try to catch his attention for some lesson» (170).

was just beginning to appear» (Hernández and López 821). However, in the southern region of the island most of the landowners were European foreigners, a situation that, according to Vega, probably created «special difficulties for the emergence of the Creole, of Puerto Rican consciousness» (Hernández and López 821). The fact that Charlie is chosen by the author to personify the birth of the Creole identity, indicates the relevance that Vega bestows upon the African culture as an active ingredient on the formation of such an identity. As explained before, Charlie does not hide the love he feels for the African slaves who helped raise him nor the influence that their contact had on his way of thinking and being. For example, he considers himself a prisoner and, like some of the slaves, he possesses a rebellious spirit that brings him to choose death over obedience and oppression.

The final element that I will analyze as indicative of Vega's cultural and historical revision is her literary treatment of the ocean. As Gelpí mentions in reference to another short story by Vega, the sea «es un espacio que comunica a Puerto Rico con su entorno; no se trata, como quería Pedreira, de un espacio que lo aísla» (185).¹⁷ Casting a wider net, Flores concurs with Gelpí as well when he indicates: «it is not the shores of the Island that demarcate the '¿qué somos y cómo somos?' but the expanses of sea, land and air, which conjoin our cultural territory with the others» (98). In «El baúl de Miss Florence,» the sea plays an essential part in the process of the characters' identity formation. Several of them, like Miss Florence, were not born in Puerto Rico. They come from other places of the world and are, in that sense, «birds of passage» as the governess calls them; that is, foreigners who unload on the island their cultural baggage and who are marked as much by the trip as they are by the experience in the island. Some of them, like Miss Florence, return to the island after absenting themselves for a while; others, like Charlie, born in the island to foreign parents, can only find their Puerto Rican identity overseas, as he suggests in a letter to Miss Florence from Paris: «¿Portorriqueño? ¿Qué cosa significa ese novel epíteto cuyo sonido jamás captaron mis oídos mientras viví en Arroyo?» (62).¹⁸ The maritime experience, then, is postulated in «El baúl de Miss Florence» as a fundamental constituent of Puerto Rican identity. The sense of motion associated with it constitutes part of what Puerto Rican culture is today, as reflected for example in the title of Jorge Duany's recent *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*. In that case, the author uses movement as metaphor for «the fluid and hybrid identities of Puerto Ricans on the Island and in the mainland» (2-3).¹⁹ Even if at the historical time Vega situates her

¹⁷ «it is a space that communicates Puerto Rico with its surroundings; it is not, as Pedreira wanted, a space that isolates it.»

¹⁸ «Puerto Rican? What does this new epithet mean, whose syllables never once assailed my ears in all the time I lived in Arroyo?» (236).

¹⁹ In this book, Duany also analyzes the gradual acceptance by island intellectuals of the cultural contributions made by Puerto Ricans living in the mainland, including their use of English as a form of literary expression. This attitude is also visible in Ana Lydia Vega's essay «Saludo a los niuyorricanos,» as well as in her assertions in the Hernández and López interview.

short story Puerto Rican emigration to the United States was not as common as in the twentieth century or as today, in «El baúl de Miss Florence» Vega is pointing to the fact that the sea is not the border that contains Puerto Rican culture and identity. On the contrary, the sea is a bridge of double direction through which the Puerto Rican cultural constituents leave to come back transformed to enrich and expand the culture that they left behind. At the same time, the sea constantly takes to the island foreign new elements that will require the never-ending remapping of Puerto Rican culture.²⁰ It is, in that sense, not unlike the black Atlantic that Gilroy analyzes in his book by that title.

In their travels, the characters from «El baúl de Miss Florence» are also looking for freedom, an alternative to the stagnation that Puerto Rico represents in the story. On the island, most of them are what they do not want to be. This is the case of black characters, forced to be slaves, but also of women. The fact that both groups are deprived of their freedom creates a strong bond of solidarity among them. As Vega explains in «Women and Writing in Puerto Rico,» this parallelism was one of the topics she had in mind when she wrote «El baúl of Miss Florence» (Hernández and López 821). Slaves live in barracks where they feel asphyxiated. Their existence is justified in purely economic terms by the need to maintain the *hacendado's* riches, and they cannot act freely to change their situation. Similarly, Mrs. Lind feels like a prisoner in the hacienda «La Enriqueta,» her golden cage, where she feels she does not belong. Her whole life there centers around maintaining the social status of her husband, even if he does not respect her as a wife. But even Miss Florence, from the moment she arrives on the island, loses her freedom to make her own decisions, and her single status becomes a cause for criticism. Even if she expresses her desire to be an independent woman, that independence was not socially acceptable in Puerto Rico at the time, and she was constantly reminded of that fact. Miss Florence's first trip to Puerto Rico is then one of self-knowledge but also an awakening to the reality that surrounds her. However, it is not until her second trip, when she accepts the newly discovered truth and strips herself of all prejudices, that she is finally free.

Because of its problematizing of traditional identities, and in view of its aim to reconstruct Puerto Rican history, «El baúl de Miss Florence» finds a most relevant intertext in José Luis González's *El país de cuatro pisos y otros ensayos*. In that widely disseminated book, González debunks the myth of a homogeneous national culture as he compares Puerto Rico with a four-storied house. For González, each of those floors corresponds to a historic event with implications for racial and identity definitions: the first story is constituted by the colonial substratum (Creoles and Afro-Antilleans); the second one encompasses the Spanish immigration movement

²⁰ In the nineteenth century, immigration was mostly of European origin but lately Puerto Rico is receiving large numbers of people from other Caribbean islands such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. Their presence in Puerto Rico has not always been welcome, but their migrant experiences have been explored in the literary production of different contemporary authors like Magali García Ramis, Mayra Santos-Febre and Lizette Gratacós Wys. For a critical assessment, see Duany.

(specially from Mallorca) at the beginning of the nineteenth century; the third is a consequence of the United States invasion in 1898 and of the ensuing Americanization of the island; finally, the fourth is the result of the populism introduced by Muñoz Marín and his political party in the 1940s. Continuing José Luis González's metaphor of Puerto Rico as a four-storied country, Juan Flores suggests that the edifice that Puerto Rican culture represents cannot be complete without its basement (the Taino culture), and its roof (the migratory experience to the United States). Flores' words are representative of those who would like to further problematize Puerto Rican national history and culture. Likewise, «El baúl de Miss Florence» is an excellent literary example of the need to rethink and rewrite Puerto Rican history; but, what Ana Lydia Vega suggests is that in order to do so we need to look everywhere, not only in the books of those who considered history their territory, but also in the old trunks of those who thought (or were made to think) that their experiences were not worthy of being shared. Perhaps it is time to explore not only Puerto Rico's four stories, its roof, and its basement, but also the innumerable trunks and closets that contain yet another (in)visible part of its history.

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