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Arbino, Daniel

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# The Unwilling Orphan: Trauma and the Decaying Bourgeoisie in *Los soles truncos*

Daniel Arbino  
*University of Minnesota*

Throughout literature, orphan protagonists have been a fashionable trope because their absence of genealogical roots frees them from familial obligation and affords them the adventures that intrigue readers as hardships are faced without parental aid and met with a reader's sympathy. At the same time, it is common for orphans, because of their solitude, to want to belong. Through a "forced poetics," a state of desire prevails that provides the orphan with an outlook in which s/he has a certain position and role in a larger national "family."<sup>1</sup> But what happens when society changes and the orphan no longer wants to belong? In this article I argue that orphans who cope with trauma participate in their own alienation and displacement because they eschew societal transformations that directly weaken the colonial class status that they covet. That is, they further divide society since they elect precisely not to belong. *Los soles truncos* (1958) by René Marqués makes use of traumatized orphans of the decaying bourgeoisie in order to criticize what the author perceives to be an oppressive U.S. regime in Puerto Rico through *criollo* protagonist self-victimization and longing for power.<sup>2</sup> I postulate that though the author employs these orphans and their traumatic experiences to show opposition to U.S. occupation, the protagonists also thwart creolizing communities because they favor an outdated European colonial mindset and remain separated from other societal sectors. Afraid to relinquish their privilege, fragmentation prevails because the protagonists are unable to promote racial equality and economic betterment for the largely Afro-Antillean masses. These protagonists are not ambivalent toward the developments transforming their societies but actively resist an era Piotr Sztompka refers to as "the age of change" because of its movements for equal rights, empowerment of

the masses, universal education and suffrage (162). Instead, trauma centers on the subjects of a crumbling plantocracy which creates sympathy for them as victims of history, despite their previous role as aggressors and slaveholders.

*Los soles truncos* is the story of three orphaned sisters living together in a dilapidated house in a post-Spanish-American War society. The sisters are from a wealthy aristocratic and European/*criollo* family whose father owned a sugar hacienda. Through a series of flashbacks, the drama reveals three traumatic moments in which the sisters lost their economic means and class position as a result of a series of misfortunes culminating with the American occupation of Puerto Rico. Their hardships begin with the first traumatic moment: a romance gone awry between Hortensia and the Spanish lieutenant, for whom all three sisters pine. The failed romance causes Hortensia to lock herself in their house and her two sisters never marry either. The next flashback deals with the U.S. invasion of the island and the sisters' subsequent orphaning. The final traumatic moment is the confiscation of their hacienda by the U.S. government, thus forcing the sisters to leave the plantation and move to their urban house. The present finds the sisters living in a decaying house, the last symbol of their opulent past, in Old San Juan having lost their hacienda to pay off part of their debts. Hortensia has recently died of breast cancer. Emilia and Inés continue to try to ward off encroaching debt collectors and foreign investors interested in buying the house and converting it to a small hotel. The drama ends when the sisters, unable and unwilling to change with the times, set fire to the house, burning themselves and Hortensia's corpse as one last stand of resistance against the U.S. occupation.

*Los soles truncos* is a fruitful text for considering space, time, and social change. In "Los demonios de la duda: el existencialismo en *Los soles truncos* de René Marqués" (2004), Miguel Ángel Náter studies Marqués's use of time and space by demonstrating continuity between the sisters' mindset and their deteriorating house:

La casa deteriorada y la mente neurótica o esquizofrénica de Inés y Emilia evidentemente manifiestan continuidad. El interior de la casa es el espacio de la eliminación de lo urbano en relación con la nueva modalidad socio-económica; los personajes están instalados, de ese modo, en

el espacio de los hacendados del siglo XIX, mientras el país ha evolucionado, progresado o retrocedido (94).

According to Náter, the house, a symbol of the Burkhart sisters' own alienation and opposition to the modernization of the island, must be burned down with them inside in order for them to escape the absurdity of life around them (85). Through an existentialist framework, Náter effectively shows the powerlessness of humans, in this case the Burkhart sisters, in front of the change around them. Margarita Vargas also works with time and transition in her article, "Dreaming the Nation: René Marqués's *Los soles truncos*" (2004). Specifically, Vargas examines how Marqués uses time to reinforce a patriarchal colonial society and to denounce a matriarchal commonwealth society through the "mistrust of women in leadership positions" (42). That is to say, "during the colonial period the Burkharths represent a semi-ideal version of the family/nation with the male still as head of the household, while as a Commonwealth—with the father and mother no longer present—what is depicted is a grotesque, emasculated residue of a family" that begs for the male figure to continue the nation (42). In agreement, I evince how these orphan sisters cling to their colonial past rather than continue nationhood and arrive at a similar conclusion to that of Vargas: a consequence of Marqués's anti-United States discourse is that he endows the Burkhart sisters with conservative ideals about race, gender, and class that they then use to frustrate a creolizing society.

Perhaps the three most important studies to engage with *Los soles truncos*, all of which I will return to throughout this article, are Margot Arce de Vázquez's "*Los soles truncos: Comedia trágica de René Marqués*" (1979), José Luís González's *El país de cuatro pisos* (1979) and Juan Gelpí's *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico* (1993). Though dated, these three works have presented the foundation with which proceeding studies on *Los soles truncos* (including my own and the aforementioned articles by Náter and Vargas) dialogue. Arce de Vázquez's article, which appeared in the Puerto Rican journal *Sin Nombre*'s 1979 special issue on René Marqués, implicitly refers to trauma as the reason why the Burkhart sisters choose self-immolation as a sign of victory rather than participating in society. The author states: "La conducta personal y social de las hermanas Burkhart ilustra la incapacidad de la clase burguesa dirigente para

reconocer la verdadera naturaleza de la situación política y socio-económica del país y darle la solución adecuada” (58). Their inability to recognize the truth is precisely a result of their traumatic loss of social power due to U.S. occupation coupled with their orphaning. González’s seminal text on Puerto Rican identity denounces Marqués’s attempt to present the Burkhart sisters as representative of a national identity. González, who postulates that the first Puerto Ricans were of African descent (20), aims to frustrate the identity project posited by Antonio Pedreira in *Insularismo* (1934) and upheld by Marqués that the *criollo* planter, also known as the *jíbaro*, is the symbol of Puerto Rican identity. Therefore, González addresses critical race theory that informs my own work. Gelpí’s study bridges generations of yesteryear like Pedreira and Marqués with more recent Puerto Rican writers such as Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá by articulating a “crisis del canon” (123). The author examines this “crisis” in depth through the decaying *casa solariega* in *Los soles truncos*. With the destruction of the colonial house, coupled with the death of the paternal figure Papá Burkhart, Gelpí argues that paternalism effectively ended with Marqués’s drama, opening up the canon for women and Afro-Puerto Rican writers as well as new modes of cultural expression. The absence of the fatherly figure intersects with my use of the orphan trope, but I engage with how the orphan trope continues colonial patterns.

Whereas the aforementioned authors do acknowledge the colonial mentality of the Burkhart sisters, none of them incorporate a framework of trauma to understand precisely why these girls maintain their Europeanness. As I articulate below, Gelpí and Arce de Vázquez do allude to trauma in the work. However, I am particularly interested in how race, gender, and class intersect as a result of trauma. Such a framework articulates how Marqués conflates personal trauma (orphaning) and cultural trauma (U.S. occupation) to reaffirm his nostalgia for Spanish colonial rule and just as important, an agricultural society. What is more, only González enters into a discussion of race, but stops before acknowledging the importance of the Afro-Puerto Rican *yerbatera* in the drama. This voiceless and nameless figure that ends Hortensia’s engagement to the Spanish lieutenant by giving birth to his child is emblematic of a racially creolizing society to which the Burkhart sisters refuse to belong. Through her I discuss how Marqués creates racial tension as the *yerbatera* disrupts a

harmonious relationship that would reinforce the Burkharts connection to Europe. To that end, their self-immolation is not a catharsis as Tamara Holzapfel interprets it (155), but rather an affirmation of a colonial mindset highlighting Whiteness and Europeaness that the sisters would rather die to maintain than attempt to integrate themselves into a new society. Finally, I also introduce the orphan trope as a way to think about identity: specifically how orphans who no longer have an affiliation to their colonial past continue to still uphold it and frustrate *mestizaje* in the process.

Orphanhood and trauma are a likely pairing. Piotr Sztompka defines changes as potentially traumatogenic when they are sudden, comprehensive, fundamental, and unexpected (159). Orphanhood, without necessarily having to, fits within all four of these traits. In the case of *Los soles truncos*, the parents' deaths are sudden and unexpected, a result of U.S. occupation. Additionally, orphanhood is comprehensive because it affects all facets of the person's life; it changes memberships in groups, life standards and patterns, social relations and, particularly for single women in a colonial society, economic stability. To that end, it is a fundamental change in that the orphan's world is forever altered for she is no longer able to rely on her parents for financial or moral support. As a result, the women in the text feel unprepared and abandoned, unable to cope with the larger societal changes around them. The trauma adversely affects the mood of the women characters: they become pessimistic regarding the future while nostalgic about the past. In *Los soles truncos* the Burkhart sisters lock themselves inside their house, resigned and helpless. The traumas occur not only on a personal level in the drama, but also on a cultural level. Indeed, the social and racial situations of these characters intersect with their roles as sisters, daughters, and women who are courted and abandoned. When I use the term personal trauma, I refer to Cathy Caruth's widely accepted definition of "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which take the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event . . . [T]he event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" (*Trauma* 4-5). Thus flashback is prevalent in Marqués's play as the women re-experience events. On a larger scale, cultural trauma happens "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected



to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 1). The collectivity in *Los soles truncos* refers to the decaying bourgeoisie that remains apart from society even though resistance to U.S. intervention could effectively unify. In place of solidarity, the bourgeoisie opts to victimize themselves. This further fragments society in the process.<sup>3</sup> I say that it divides society because the bourgeoisie refuses to recognize the existence of others’ trauma and thus negate its responsibility in the affliction of other classes. They leave others to suffer alone as they restrict solidarity (Alexander 1). Furthermore, in order to cope, affected people respond to trauma with various reactions. To be certain, Robert Merton describes a typology of five typical post-traumatic adaptations: conformity, innovation, rebellion, ritualism, and retreatism (139-50). For the purpose of *Los soles truncos* our focus will pertain to ritualism, turning (or rather returning) to established traditions and routines, and cultivating them as safe hideouts to deflect cultural trauma (Sztompka 168). In so doing, the orphan protagonists in Marqués’s work halt creolization, or the fusing of heterogeneous characteristics.

Trauma drives the self-destruction of upper class *criolla* women which in turn mark them as counterproductive to building a national consciousness. In *Orphan Narratives* (2007), Valérie Loichot claims that “orphan characters . . . create and master their family narratives . . . An ‘orphan narrative’ is thus not only a narrative without a parent but, more important, a narrative initiated by the orphan . . . that challenges the master or master-text”(3). Yet because of the multiple traumas that take place, the orphans do not challenge a master-text. That is to say, they are too traumatized to break from the paternalism, linearity, and atavistic genealogy that characterize colonial society. In fact, they aim to maintain it as a vestige of their past. This reinforces a nostalgic yearning for origin, both colonial and familial, in order to make sense of the shift in power that takes place around the orphan sisters. Such desire goes against George Handley’s “poetics of oblivion” in which he argues that authors of postplantation societies build upon an acknowledged lack of root. Therefore, counter to Loichot’s hypothesis then is that family and colonial constructions win over transforming communities so that definitions of race and colonial mentalities are upheld. The dissolution of colonial power means that

solitude and isolation, instead of community, becomes the primary reference for the subject which leads to or reaffirms a weakening of community. This is played out through the trauma that haunts these women. A destabilizing force, trauma is helpful to understand why orphans are not necessarily embracing the rootlessness afforded to them and creating their own narratives. It provides a lens to contest these women characters as resistant orphans who fight against usurpers for the betterment of the “imagined community.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, when combined with trauma orphan narratives further splinter society because they reinforce the master-texts from which they would otherwise break. The individual subject, failing to process her loss and abandonment, becomes too entrenched in not belonging to identify with a larger community. Therefore trauma becomes exclusive as “something that cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability” (Scarry 4).

#### CLASS TRAUMA

“Trauma reveals the limitations of historical as well as psychological truth, in part, by blurring the lines between official histories and individual experiences, between external events and internal reactions to them” (Russ 121). The Burkhart sisters experience a double orphaning in that both parents die in addition to a metaphorical orphaning from their Europeanness. Thus it can be difficult to distinguish personal from cultural traumas as the two are inextricably linked in *Los soles truncos*. This is particularly noteworthy because it connects the plantocracy to the nation; ostensibly one and the same since much of the plantocracy’s trauma, as they interpret it, happens because of the insular society’s foreign occupation. This is evident in *Los soles truncos* when Papá Burkhart blames the United States for his wife’s death: “El dolor de ver flotar una bandera extraña donde siempre flotara su pendón de rojo y gualda. ‘De eso muere vuestra mamá, niñas’” (53). When Papá Burkhart blames the United States, he connects two traumas. The wane of bourgeois power after U.S. intervention (a cultural trauma) alongside the rupture of a previously united and well-to-do family (a personal trauma) evinces that Marqués is manipulating the U.S. occupation of their islands to fuse together loss, melancholia, and racial hatred with personal stories of dispossession and displacement. Considering Antonio Benítez Rojo’s statement that “hay que concluir

que la historiografía del Caribe, en general, se lee como un largo e incongruente relato de legitimación del plantador blanco . . .” (294), one notices that the ill effects of this orphaning continue a process of legitimizing the planter within the nation through parallel occurrences. That is to say, as the plantocracy suffers, so does the nation. This in turn neglects other cultures’ contributions to society. Since no historical event *necessarily* qualifies in itself as a cultural trauma (Smelser 35), and since cultural traumas are historically constructed (Smelser 37), it follows that this sentiment of loss and abandonment is not a comprehensive cultural trauma that affects all insular groups equally. On the other hand, the traumas present in this text effectively overlook the traumas of the Afro-Antillean sectors that served as the workforce for the plantocracy’s rise to power. Furthermore, the traumas do not consider how U.S. occupation and urban Black Nationalist movements benefit these sectors.

Marqués is regarded as one of Puerto Rico’s key playwrights of the twentieth century. Also a novelist and essayist, he often combines political and psychological themes (Cypress 241). Although he staunchly rejected U.S. occupation in favor of independence, in *Los soles truncos* Marqués reveals that nostalgia for Spanish rule shrouded his pro-independence beliefs. Biographically speaking, Marqués is a descendant of the lighter-skinned land-owners in Puerto Rico which influences the trauma their characters experience.<sup>5</sup> He came to be one of the most prominent authors of “La generación del cincuenta” but as Arce de Vázquez points out, Marqués is also a continuation of “La generación del treinta,” the children of *ex-hacendados* led by Antonio Pedreira who lauded Spain’s paternalistic legacy and denounced both the United States and African elements on the island.<sup>6</sup> Of equal relevance is that Marqués’s mentality is comparably outmoded for his generation, which is why he is so often considered alongside Pedreira.<sup>7</sup> That is not to say that other authors of “La generación del cincuenta” are not for independence, but rather that they do not idealize their Spanish heritage in the same way. In his drama *Vejigantes* (1959), which debuted in the same year as *Los soles truncos*, Francisco Arriví offers a divergent perspective through the vindication of African heritage. Ana Lydia Vega and Rosario Ferré, both of later generations, challenge paternalism in their works. Marqués, however, looks back towards Spain as a legacy interrupted traumatically by U.S. occupation. That the Burkhart sisters do not wish to belong stems from

this trauma and also reflects Marqués's own pessimism toward U.S. colonialism.

To understand the societal transformations taking place in *Los soles truncos*, one must look at the initial goals of the U.S. regime. In the 1930s, a period that saw the early stages of movement for reform, the educational system in U.S.-controlled Puerto Rico was characterized by three objectives: to Americanize the masses, to impose English, and to make education widespread. The Americans used these objectives to acculturate new colonial subjects, and that era saw an increase of students from previously ineligible sectors of the small- and medium-sized land owners (Rodríguez 88-91). Additionally, life for Afro-Puerto Ricans improved: they were able to influence Puerto Rican life in the twentieth century due to the new democratic and social freedoms that went hand in hand with the political break from Spain, ending a colonial relation which they viewed as synonymous with the plantation society that oppressed and underappreciated them (González 35). Politically, Pedro Albizu Campos, Ernesto Ramos Antonini and José Celso Barbosa, three notable Afro-Puerto Ricans, occupied a variety of posts, ranging from representative of sugar cane workers and pro-independence movements (Albizu Campos) and President of the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico (Ramos Antonini) to U.S. Senator and annexationist (Celso Barbosa). Culturally, Afro-Puerto Rican music genres such as the *plena*, *danza* and *bomba* were more accepted among citizens, though not without detractors (Zenon Cruz 118-121, 295-7). By 1958, the moment of the drama's setting, Puerto Rico had undergone significant industrialization and urbanization. In order to stimulate economic development beginning in the mid-1940s, *Operación Manos a la Obra* encouraged industrialization dependent on privatized U.S. capital (Baldrich 250). As the U.S. took over the island, the privileges that the plantocracy enjoyed and the divisions that Spanish colonialism maintained had ended, but other sectors benefited from improved standards of living. It is because of these developments that one is able to posit that the *criollo* trauma was not universal on the island.

#### THE RACIAL TRAUMA OF EUROPEANNESS

In *Los soles truncos* the protagonists are characterized by what Curaçaoan writer Frank Martinus Arion terms Europeanness, that is, the tendency of those of European descent to see themselves as

superior members of Caribbean society (450). For the Burkhart sisters, the realization that their Europeanness is no longer relevant, whether due to U.S. occupation or rising Afro-Antillean sectors, yields a traumatic experience of loss, rejection and the anxiety of not belonging to either an imperial White or Afro-Antillean world.<sup>8</sup> The first traumatic moment in *Los soles truncos* is a failed romance between Hortensia and a nameless Spanish lieutenant, which ends when he fathers a mulatto baby with an Afro-Puerto Rican *yerbatera* (42).<sup>9</sup> Marqués reverses power differentials through the use of the *yerbatera* to produce a victimization of *criollos*. The result creates disjuncture between the *criollo* and Afro-Puerto Rican sectors because the *yerbatera* transgresses racial hierarchies and blocks matrimony. She is the voiceless home wrecker without a side to the story; Hortensia is the traumatized victim unable to overcome the event with whom the spectator empathizes. Were their engagement to come to fruition, the union between Hortensia and the Spanish lieutenant would represent a reinforced link between the Burkhart family and Spain. Their status as elites would also be reaffirmed, as the marriage would be the ideal culmination to her privileged lifestyle that kept her separated from the Afro-Puerto Rican masses (save for the family servant) and provided her a European education. Of German and Spanish descent, Hortensia Burkhart would only add to her European legacy through marriage with a European, as opposed to a *criollo*. That the *yerbatera* interrupts this seemingly destined union makes her the scapegoat for Hortensia's downward spiral. That she is Afro-Puerto Rican generates racial hatred in the drama because Marqués creates her as an antagonist—a foil to Hortensia that the spectator will disdain because she ruins an inevitable relationship.

In fact, racial background is of such importance to the family that prior to their engagement, Papá Burkhart examines the lieutenant's bloodlines to ensure his purity (40). Hortensia remarks that “Ya sé que somos celtíberos por la rama de Málaga. Mas aún, ahora, al yo casarme, tendremos entre nosotros . . .” (39). The rest of the thought, like the lieutenant's specific genealogical background, is never given, however Hortensia's reaction indicates that it is desirable. The first part of the quote focuses on a Celtiberian lineage that subdues any idea that the family might have North African blood. The need to explicitly discern both sides' lineages comes from a colonial fear of non-European genealogies and miscegenation, but in *Los soles*

*truncos*, only the lieutenant's bloodline, ironically, is questioned. While the Burkhart family investigates the lieutenant's lineage, the sisters apply extra makeup to cover "blackish stains" on their cheeks ("Purificación" 12). The lieutenant, the imperial White in this situation, obviously does not seem as concerned with genealogy because he fathers a mulatto baby. This fact suggests two changes: racial purity has become more important to *criollos* than to imperial Whites, which signifies that colonial models remain firmly in place even as their precedents change. Therefore, the *criollos* need to reaffirm their lineage as they constantly try to prove themselves hierarchically equal to imperial Whites, which they are not. Secondly, *criollo* women of the plantocracy are no longer considered superior partners to Afro-Puerto Ricans.<sup>10</sup> Hortensia was originally courted for her racial and social status, neither of which holds value at the end of the play. In fact, the Spanish lieutenant equates Hortensia, who throughout her life distinguishes herself from the popular classes, with the Afro-Puerto Rican *yerbatera*. This process of "indifferentiation" in which "social hierarchies are first transgressed, then abolished" (Girard 136), produces feelings of displacement and dispossession for the *criollo* class. While Afro-Puerto Ricans reconfigure social hierarchies alongside imperial Whites, the sisters adhere to a colonial ethos as they segregate themselves from Afro-Puerto Rican sectors. As racial and economic change envelops the island, their reclusion becomes more pronounced; the sisters do not want an egalitarian society at their own expense.

The Burkhart sisters are so characterized by their Europeanness that it is difficult to align them with Puerto Rico. Their German last name distinguishes them as foreigners on their native island, as does their schooling abroad that alienated them from islanders. As José Luis González points out:

presentar ese mundo como el mundo de la 'puertorriqueñidad' enfrentado a la 'adulteración' norteamericana, constituye no sólo una tergiversación flagrante de la realidad histórica, sino además, y ello es lo verdaderamente grave, una agresión a la puertorriqueñidad de la masa popular cuyos antepasados (en muchos casos cercanos) vivieron en ese mundo como esclavos, como arrimados o como peones. (34)

To legitimate the crumbling bourgeoisie's trauma, Marqués singles out this individual family, so apart from the rest of society, and makes it seem like the U.S. occupation afflicts all Puerto Ricans in the same way. This enables him to divert the effects that widespread education, political participation, and improved living conditions have on other societal sectors at the same time. The sisters further betray their insular family by privileging their parents' European heritage over their own Caribbeanness. Even as orphans, with the attempt to connect to their native island and with no familial obligations to Europe, they still choose their Europeanness. Therefore, when Hortensia is betrayed by the Spanish lieutenant, it marks a traumatic recognition that White *criolla* and imperial White have two different meanings. As Susan Burrows puts it, the Burkhart sisters are "white but not quite" (29). In addition to the aforementioned reconfiguration of insular social hierarchies, *criollo* trauma becomes doubly reinforced by the betrayal of imperial White Iberians who have stranded the *hacendado* class, a "white-on-white desertion" (Burrows 29). In post-1898 Puerto Rico, where Afro-Puerto Ricans outnumbered *criollos* and connections to Spain were broken, the Burkharts' racial identity is now a sign of past exploitation. The abandonment that takes place reflects an orphaning that leaves the sisters displaced on their own island. U.S. occupation disconnects the Burkharts from family, European culture, and most importantly, financial security now that their place within the imperialist endeavor has ceased to exist. Yet rather than blame the Spanish lieutenant, the Burkhart sisters continue their allegiance to Spain. Therefore, the blame falls largely on the Afro-Puerto Rican *yerbera* as the sisters forego an opportunity for solidarity, or at the very least, communication between women. They want to be European and thus they cannot reject the Spaniard, but they can no longer attain that ideal, especially if marriage is not an option. Loss, anxiety, resentment and fear of change lead the sisters to remove themselves from society, unwilling to take part in the U.S. occupation.

#### FEMALE PLACELESSNESS<sup>11</sup>

Up until now I have considered the traumatic wounding that takes place at social and racial levels, but both of these are of course intertwined with the way Marqués's protagonists experience trauma as a matter of gender. Not one of the Burkhart sisters can imagine her life outside the hegemonic norms that deny her subjectivity. This reasserts

that they uphold a paternalistic master-text. What is more, societal conventions demand that women of the privileged class “suppress their will, agency, and sexuality to maintain the power and privilege of the men of their families” (O’Connell 175). Here I evoke Joanna O’Connell’s study on Rosario Castellanos because Castellanos’ bourgeois protagonists are socially comparable to the Burkhart sisters in their gendered experience that comes as a result of their status in society. For the sake of maintaining their upper class appearance, the Burkhart sisters must act according to a prescribed gender performance that is particular to their class, and what is more, constructed by men. That is to say, their desires and realities must be in line with the patriarchal legacy that their (colonial) father left behind—racial segregation, political and financial authority, and a lack of promiscuity—or such desires must be suppressed or concealed. That is why the sisters never engage in new romances so as not to be perceived as promiscuous. What is more, maintaining this appearance is why they continue to wear expensive jewelry despite their economic decline and why they remain isolated from other racial sectors despite a creolizing society. Because they cling to a paternalistic society, the orphan characters fail to articulate an alternative narrative and instead adhere to the master-text. Indeed, by maintaining racial and sexual differences of the plantocracy, the women participate in their own oppression. This oppression manifests itself economically in their orphanage. Since there are no masculine heirs, it is no longer possible to connect the family’s genealogy to a time or place. In other words, the root is lost and there is a disappearance of authority that articulates the sisters’ vulnerabilities as women. The death of the father, the sole earner in the family, in conjunction with the end of Spanish colonialism, halts the family’s prosperity. The lack of financial security displaces *criolla* women from their long-standing class power and Europeaness and leaving them as outcasts on their native island. Armanda Lewis points out that Latin American authors who use female orphans “depict the economic vulnerability of women without husbands, fathers or patrons. Also directly implicated is the nation’s lack of preparing all of its citizens for life without a patron” (18).

Though her focus is on nineteenth-century authors and nation, Lewis’s insight is applicable to *Los soles truncos*. Doubly orphaned and abruptly cut off from Europe and their father, these women are also unprepared to survive outside of the imperial endeavor. This is



because, as Françoise Vergès states, “in the colonial family romance, children remained children forever” (6). That is to say that the Spanish colonial system’s longevity was in large part a result of their ability to keep its colonial populace dependent upon the metropole as its *patria*. When Spain left Puerto Rico, it abandoned its role as *patria*. Additionally, the use of female orphans functions as a further critique against U.S. occupation and the rise of Afro-Antillean sectors. The former is responsible for their loss because it ruptures the bourgeoisie’s hegemonic power and the latter usurps it. However, their abandonment also reveals a dependency that is gendered in the text. They are vulnerable because they lost their male patrons, characterizing them as dependent female orphans and perpetuating myths of women’s inferiority upheld by Marqués. Luce Irigaray notes that “a single subject, traditionally the masculine subject, had constructed the world according to a single perspective” (Hirsch 145), specifically through dichotomous oppositions of Masculine/Feminine, Truth/Error, Independent/Dependent, Being/Nothingness, Self/Other that has allowed masculine discourse to render women subordinate to and dependent on men (Felman 22; Irigaray 197). The result is a patriarchal privileging, or to borrow Derrida’s term, phallogocentrism (xxv). Indeed, in the phallogocentric setting of Marqués’s drama, these dichotomous hierarchies of inequality play out through the orphaned sisters and the absent male patrons; the (colonial) father.

Once Spanish colonialism ends in *Los soles truncos*, the sisters are left with no parental directive and nothing ever comes to fill in for that paternal absence, neither a husband nor the United States. Since the engagement to the Spanish lieutenant ends abruptly, the sisters have no manner of income save for Inés who begs for money. The death of the father, then, becomes the moment of displacement for the Burkharts. In agreement, Juan Gelpí states:

De manera significativa, en el Segundo acto de *Los soles truncos* Inés narra cómo se coloca el cadáver de su padre ‘en el centro de la sala’. Ese espacio central del escenario se halla, entonces, habitado por la pérdida irrecuperable de la figura paterna y de todo lo que ella representa: el mundo de los hacendados, la estabilidad, y una cierta armonía que, según esta obra, caracterizaba el pasado patriarcal . . . la muerte de Papá Burkhart figura además como un *trauma*

que lleva a las hermanas Burkhart a una época signada por la inestabilidad y la crisis. (124)

The overall trauma here is the rupture of time, and with it the lifestyle the daughters have always enjoyed. “Y el tiempo entonces se partió en dos: atrás quedóse el mundo de la vida segura. Y el presente tornóse en el comienzo de un futuro preñado de desastres. Como si la muerte esta vez hubiese sido el filo atroz de un cuchillo que cercenara el tiempo, y dejase escapar por su herida un torbellino de cosas jamás soñadas” (70). Though they desire to return to what they once had, death and U.S. occupation makes such a return impossible. Thus they inherit a melancholic and pessimistic present whose uncertainty manifests anxiety in the sisters. But the trauma of class is intersected with gender because as power is fought for and negotiated among the United States, the Afro-Puerto Rican and *criollo* sectors, the *criolla* woman fails to gain a stronghold on any meaningful social power (Handley 153). Once wealthy *criollas*, the three women have no manner to financially sustain themselves. They are not prepared to work because their entire lives were provided for. No longer are they among the select few to receive an education and what is more, their education pertains to a domestic space. The sisters are left without a place in the public sector—they are ultimately supposed to marry Spaniards and perpetuate their dependence as housewives,—which is why so much of their melancholia also has to do with Hortensia’s failed engagement. Were one of them a man, or were they a family of a lower class, such as the *yerbera*’s, a similar problem would not occur because a job is customary. The first part of that scenario demonstrates gender differences in a colonial society whereas the second part speaks to racial and class differences. Upper-class *criolla* women are not raised to work outside of the house; they are raised to be homemakers. However, those that do not marry suffer from their portrayal as “old maids” or “spinsters,” characterized as resentful, celibate, and apart. The reality is that the sisters no longer have value now that their class status is insignificant. Their inheritance has been squandered which provides little motivation for someone to marry one of them so that without husbands and without means to earn a living, the sisters are displaced in society. They are traumatically abandoned by all forms of patriarchy to fend for themselves and yet they are so shrouded in patriarchy that they do not know how to survive without

it. Portraying the women so economically vulnerable further increases the spectator's empathy towards the *criollo* class while highlighting the U.S.'s destructive manner towards them. In the end, however, the Burkharts choose their past relevance over their present means of survival. When the sisters decide to burn themselves inside their house, they adorn themselves with lavish jewels that could have ostensibly been used to pay bills (81). The jewels, like their house, are their link to the past—a time when they had a place in society. Rather than shed that link and forge ahead in a new society, the orphans cling to their colonial dominance through their material possessions.

This experienced loss, coupled with *criolla* placelessness manifests as fatal breast cancer in Hortensia. Certainly the location of the cancer, the breast, which lies above the heart, figuratively speaks to the trauma of her failed romance. Breast cancer also speaks to her gender identity, since, though prevalent in men, it is commonly associated with women. Indeed, the cancer that occupies Hortensia's body evokes ideas of inertia which recall Susan Sontag's argument that ". . . cancer is a disease of insufficient passion, afflicting those who are sexually repressed, *inhibited*, unspontaneous, incapable of expressing anger" (21, my emphasis). I point to inhibited because Hortensia is restrained by the limitations of colonial society that are imposed on *criolla* women. Under the new regime, Hortensia has few choices without renouncing her background. Financially, she is no longer desirable to suitors and therefore, no one ever tries to coerce her out of the house. Indeed, as a woman, Hortensia is preoccupied with the notion of "honor," a societal convention from which men are excused, but which weighs heavily on a woman's reputation particularly in a small insular society. Hortensia's removal from society for fear of shame leads her to a life of sexual repression since she never dates again. Therefore, Hortensia lacks the mores to be a part of the new society since the possibility of public humiliation has been curtailed due to the U.S. occupation's restructuring of classes. On the contrary, U.S. occupation could be seen as a *tabula rasa* for Hortensia's love life as she is no longer bound by colonial hierarchies. Yet unable to process the loss she suffered in the breakup with the Spanish lieutenant, Hortensia remains an abandoned outsider of the new society. She opts to uphold Eurocentric ideals that have marked the *hacendado* class as obsolete. Restricted by her Europeaness, Hortensia never attempts to work or fit in within a changing society. Indeed, her "temporal

liminality—belonging to a system that is no longer what it used to be but yet not dead—evokes the unfathomable space of dying” that manifests as breast cancer (Loichot 24).<sup>12</sup> Marqués portrays tragedy among the *hacendado* elites, particularly vulnerable women, to suggest a return to the Spanish rule that he desires.

#### COPING WITH TRAUMA

“Defeatism, quietism and resignation are manifested in escape mechanisms which ultimately lead them to ‘escape’ from the requirements of society” (Merton 148-9). When coping mechanisms, such as those suggested by Merton, do not work, suicide becomes a last resort for those who cannot deal with the extreme pain—depression, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness, etc.—(Briere 61). Interestingly, Marqués points out that Puerto Rico has the highest incidence of suicide for Catholic states in the world in the 1950s. He directly attributes this stat to the island’s nationalist spirit confronting the harsh reality of occupation (“El puertorriqueño” 157). It is therefore relevant to think about the suicide that takes place in *Los soles truncos* as a response to the trauma of the U.S. occupation. Indeed, the invasion of the United States, for the sisters, is an interruption of time, in which modernity imposes itself. Therefore, “time” is constantly referenced in the drama. Emilia, for example, when talking about how their lives have endured hardship talks about “todo lo feo lo ha traído el tiempo” (54), which is an implicit reference to modernity and the U.S. invasion. After all, modernity, along with imperial invasion, weakened cultures through cross-cultural exchange. The U.S. arrival not only kills the Burkhart sisters’ parents, but also threatens their culture. Consequently, when the sisters decide to burn themselves alive in *Los soles truncos*, Inés expresses that “por esta vez el tiempo nos pertenece” (80). To view this battle with time as resistant to U.S. occupation, also shows it as resistant to the end of Spanish colonialism in which everyone else seems to be participating—emphasizing the sisters’ separation from insular society.

Yet the one remaining refuge in their spatial universe from foreign occupation is their now-dilapidated house in Old San Juan. For instance, the furniture, although deteriorated, shows an opulent past that connected the family to Spain: “una butaca Luis XV,” “un sillón de Viena,” and “una silla estilo Imperio” all speak to a relationship with Europe, while “un gran mantón de Manila” incorporates Spain’s

colony in the Pacific (26; 27). These pieces serve as metaphorical sites of both remembrance and loss. On the one hand, their presence reminds the girls of their affluent and happy childhood, constantly recalling positive memories to help them cope with a legacy now lost due to U.S. occupation. Conversely, their depreciated condition mirrors the sisters' present reality. In that sense, every time they see the furniture, the sisters unknowingly re-experience their loss. In agreement, Whitehead states that "one of the key literary strategies in trauma fiction is the device of repetition, which can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot. Repetition mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression" (86). By reliving this historic moment through theatrical performances, Marqués utilizes *Los soles truncos* to remind audiences of the U.S. invasion of the island and the grave effects it had on the *criollo* class. Thus, when the tax collectors show up at their doorstep, Emilia and the spectator cheers on Inés to defend their home and island from U.S. occupation. "Eso es, Inés. Defiende tu casa. La casa de mamá Eugenia. De papá Burkhart. La de la nana negra que nos lloraba, y nos cantaba, y nos mecía, sin oponerse al tiempo. La de Hortensia y Emilia. La casa nuestra" (75). Whether "la casa nuestra" is a metaphor for the old Spanish colony or a more literal understanding of their house, the conclusion remains the same: the sisters link "home" with the nostalgic colonial past as Emilia refers to important people and fond memories of their childhood. Therefore, to defend their house from the encroaching American tax collectors and investors who want to turn it into a luxury hotel is to defend their Spanish values and upbringing.<sup>13</sup> With dealienation impossible, the sisters choose one last act of resistance, burning themselves alive in a house that was a symbol of the past, but cannot be a part of Puerto Rico's new political present. Unable to cope any longer, they choose death over integration.

## CONCLUSION

If nations are bound together not by what they choose to remember, but by what they choose to forget as Ernest Renan suggests, then the insular society in *Los soles truncos* exposes the folly of the concept of modern nation in the Caribbean region.<sup>14</sup> Ideas of harmony, homogeneity and oneness that citizens of a nation are believed to share are noticeably absent. In response to the Francophone Creolists'

manifesto *Éloge de la créolité* [In Praise of Creoleness] (1989), Arion's "The Great Curassow or the Road to Caribbeanness" (1998) all but concludes the twentieth century with the realization that at the time of writing, Caribbeanness, let alone Creoleness has yet to come to fruition.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, making note of the segregation in which cultures exist on the Caribbean, Arion declares that "the region as a whole has not even reached the stage of Caribbeanness or even Americanness yet" (448). Arion points to a continued migration to the Caribbean from Europe but a lack of migration from Africa, which in turn diminishes the presence of African cultural elements, such as trickster tales. His point is that Caribbean societies are still largely fragmented and have never homogenized into a national identity. In that sense, creolization is not a workable concept in Caribbean literature because the characters in *Los soles truncos* are still searching for racial exclusivity.<sup>16</sup> The characters do not live up to the ideals proposed by creolization and remain divided by language, race, class, and gender (Malena 5). In the aforementioned article, I have demonstrated that part of this splintering has to do with the plantocracy's consequential trauma from a loss of power (whether due to industrialization and/or foreign occupation), orphaning (loss of family/nation), and the transgression of outmoded racial hierarchies resulting in *criollo* displacement. Orphans specifically are used as metaphorical bridges between cultural and personal trauma. They are a means to engage the reader/spectator on an empathetic level that later expands to a societal level where the decaying bourgeoisie is victimized. The Burkhart sisters are counterproductive because they refuse to accept their loss of power to meet the changes of their insular society. This is emphasized by the solitude in which the Burkhart sisters live. To say nothing of Afro-Antillean trauma that stems from the Middle Passage, slavery, and post-emancipation insular race relations that engage the popular classes, the plantocracy's own traumatic conditions have revealed disjointed sectors sharing an island, but in "complete ignorance of each other's existence" (Arion 449).

## Notes

1. By “forced poetics” I refer to Édouard Glissant’s definition as a collective situation in which “a need for expression confronts an inability to achieve expression” (120).

2. *Los soles truncos* is based on a short story by Marqués, “Purificación en la Calle del Cristo” (1958). I will refer to the short story when I feel that context is missing from the drama. The term *criollo* refers to children born in the Americas but of Iberian descent.

3. Dominick LaCapra terms ‘vicarious victimhood,’ whereby one shifts empathy onto him or herself by taking the place of the victim or oppressed (47), which is what the decaying plantocracy does in this work.

4. Benedict Anderson first coined the term “Imagined Communities” in his 1983 text of the same name. Anderson defines an “imagined community” as a group of people who share a common identity united by moral, religious, cultural, and linguistic discourses despite the fact that “[the community] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). To that end, the nation, according to Anderson, is a social construct.

5. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones points out that Marqués “procedía de una familia de terratenientes, que había pasado su infancia con sus abuelos agricultores, formado por los valores y la visión de mundo de una sociedad agraria, patriarcal y paternalista” (*El almuerzo* 146).

6. Arce de Vázquez comments that Marqués “estaba muy cerca de la ideología de los escritores de la Generación del ’30 y, en ciertos aspectos, vino a ser su continuador y transmisor a su propia generación y a la siguiente. Esta situación fronteriza de su pensamiento y obra literaria—lo que acepta y lo que rechaza de sus precursores inmediatos—hay que tenerla muy en cuenta para juzgarla con justicia” (59). José Luis González echoes this sentiment: Marqués “pertenece ideológicamente a la generación del treinta” (*Conversación* 70).

7. Here I refer to a canonical work of Puerto Rican culture studies, Antonio Pedreira, *Insularismo* (1934).

8. I use the term “imperial White” to refer to the Whites native to Europe as opposed to those native to the Antilles.

9. Because of their Europeaness, the three sisters all view the nameless Spanish lieutenant as the ideal man. Although a relationship between him and Hortensia emerges, it is not without competition: the Burkhart sisters’ desire to marry a Spaniard eclipses their own loyalty to each other as betrayal is an implicit theme in the work.

10. The fact that the mulatto is public knowledge allows us to deduce that it is not a secretive relationship.

11. I borrow this term from George Handley's study on Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in which he describes the "placelessness of the Creole woman" as "a criticism of male legal power that also vacillates between a resistance to and nostalgia for empire and a concomitant attraction and repulsion toward Afro-Caribbean culture" (151).

12. Here Loichot refers to William Faulkner and Saint-John Perse. While the first part of this citation is also applicable to the Burkhart sisters, the protagonists differ from the two authors in that the characters do not share the same irreconcilable tension toward the community. According to Loichot, Faulkner and Saint-John Perse "do not politically embrace the oppressor's opinions, yet they are immersed by their social situation, in the plantocracy oppressing another race" (24); the protagonists in *Los soles truncos*, however, do embrace the oppressor's opinions.

13. Although the role of the Afro-Puerto Rican nanny within the declaration gives pause to reconsider the meaning of "our house" as a possible reconstruction of family, that she is reduced to a worker who does not question her role even as the times change speaks to a longing for colonial hierarchies as noted by the nameless, stereotypical Black Nanny persona that dehumanizes her.

14. I refer to the statement that "Forgetfulness, and I shall even say historical error, form an essential factor in the creation of a nation . . ." (166).

15. To be certain, Bernabé, Confiant, and Chamoiseau postulate the culmination of Creoleness. Americanness is the first stage when Western populations in the New World had no real interaction with other cultures. In this case original cultures are adapted to new geographical environments. "*Americanness is therefore, in many respects, a migrant culture in a splendid isolation*" (92). Secondly they define Caribbeaness as being like Americanness but on the Caribbean Archipelago and referring to isolated Asian, European and African communities. Caribbeaness is a geopolitical concept and shares a geopolitical Caribbean solidarity with all the peoples of the archipelago regardless of their cultural differences. On the other hand, Creoleness is not a geographic concept but a "brutal interaction" of culturally different populations. New cultural designs are invented to allow for cohabitation, and as a result we see a non-harmonious mix of language, religion, and culinary. Creoleness is an original entity that emerges from this process after time and encompasses and perfects Americanness, because it is the mixing of these isolated cultures, thus making them no longer isolated (90-3).

16. This statement refers to Glissant's belief that "the idea of creolization demonstrates that henceforth it is no longer valid to glorify 'unique' origins that the race safeguards and prolongs. In Western tradition, genealogical descent guarantees racial exclusivity, just as Genesis legitimizes genealogy. To assert peoples are creolized, that creolization has value, is to deconstruct



in this way the category of ‘creolized’ that is considered as halfway between the two ‘pure’ extremes” (140).

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