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Citation to Publisher Stevens, Camilla. (2016). Hispanic Caribbean Theatre on the Move: Crossing Borders, Redefining Boundaries. *Latin American Theatre Review* 50(1), 205-221. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tr.2016.0069>.

Citation to this Version: Stevens, Camilla. (2016). Hispanic Caribbean Theatre on the Move: Crossing Borders, Redefining Boundaries. *Latin American Theatre Review* 50(1), 205-221. Retrieved from [doi:10.7282/T34B33HW](https://doi.org/10.7282/T34B33HW).

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Hispanic Caribbean Theatre on the Move: Crossing Borders, Redefining Boundaries

Camilla Stevens

As theatre and performance scholar Shannon Jackson has noted, “[t]o the extent that the discernment and dissemination of knowledge requires boundedness and containment, performance has fared unevenly in the academy” (6). Neither drama as literature nor production-focused dramatic theatre has occupied a central space in humanistic studies as both defy the boundaries that define academic disciplines. Whether a scholar performs exegeses of dramatic texts or produces a play, questions of embodiment, kinesthetics, affect, images, words, sound, and space inform the analysis of theatre and drama, making it variously align with “theories of embodiment, at times with studies of emotion, at times with architectural analysis, at times with studies of visual culture, and at times with critiques of linguistic exchange” (Jackson 13). Moreover, the historical contingency of a play in performance makes it difficult to neatly delimit the object of study. The inevitably interdisciplinary scope of theatre and performance studies thus makes its institutional location awkward. In spite of the intrepid efforts of faculty in departments of Spanish and Portuguese in the 1970s to create a space for research and teaching on Latin American drama and the institutional consolidation of performance studies in the 1980s, today’s cohort of scholars who focus on Latin American theatre and performance is still relatively small in both foreign languages and literatures and theatre and performance departments.¹

My current research program has centered on contemporary Dominican theatre and migration, a project that requires me to use theoretical lenses from theatre and performance studies, as well as ethnic studies and migration studies. My research on the Dominican diaspora and my administrative and pedagogical engagement with multiple disciplines—revising the structure of academic majors, developing curriculum and program learning goals, and

teaching courses that are cross-listed in Spanish-language literary studies, area studies, and ethnic studies—has developed my interest in exploring Latin American theatre and performance from an interdisciplinary perspective with a broad student audience.² This essay reflects on the disciplinary trajectory of a course that I have taught both in ethnic studies and in foreign languages and literatures on the theme of migration in the theatre of the Hispanic Caribbean. The course uses theatrical performance as a springboard for developing a nuanced understanding of Hispanic Caribbean migration as a diaspora composed of men and women from various nations, regions, and social backgrounds who have migrated for different reasons at discrete historical junctures and who have lived the diaspora in diverse ways, forming ethnic enclaves in the US, returning to the island, and continuing to circulate. The reconfigured version of the course included readings that incorporate social sciences methods from ethnic studies and migration studies along with humanities approaches from literature and theatre studies. The analysis of migration in a dozen texts and performances by Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican authors and performers illuminated a longstanding transnational mode of collective belonging, leading the class to question whether the one-way narrative of assimilation has ever truly captured the experiences of migration from the Hispanic Caribbean to the United States. The crossing of disciplinary borders sharpened my understanding of how theatrical performance has registered the multistranded social, economic, and political networks that connect the Hispanic Caribbean to the United States. Moreover, the viewing of Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican theatre through a diasporic and transnational lens helps explain in part its marginalization in Latin American theatre studies, a field still dominated by national frames of reference. In sum, the theatre of the Hispanic Caribbean complicates the national and ethnic categories that have traditionally defined Latin(o) American theatre.

In both iterations of my course, “Theatre of the Hispanic Caribbean: Migration and Memory,” students perform close readings of a dozen play texts ranging from realist dramas to experimental solo performance pieces. For the purposes of this essay, I limit my discussion to three domestic dramas that span from the 1950s to today and that dramatize contrasting migration experiences in strikingly similar aesthetic ways: *La carreta* [*The Oxcart*] (1953) by Puerto Rican author René Marqués; *Sanguivin en Union City* [*Union City Thanksgiving*] (1982) by Cuban dramatist Manuel Martín Jr.; and *La luz de un cigarillo* [*Ashes of Light*] (2011) by Dominican playwright and actor Marco Antonio Rodríguez.³ In the original course, I focused on

critical analysis skills that enable students to do original close readings of plays and performances and train students to be attentive to form, structure, content, and ideology and how they combine to create meaning for readers and spectators. For Spanish-language learners, the close reading of texts enriches their vocabulary and exposes them to regional dialects. For all students, regardless of language fluency, the course seeks to improve written and oral communication. To reinforce an awareness of theatre as a place where live events joining artists and audiences unfold, students attended Carmen Rivera's *La gringa* at Teatro Repertorio. This experience enabled them to compare the experience of reading a play with that of seeing it performed. At the same time, the play in performance offered a sustained opportunity to engage foreign-language listening skills. It also primed students for a group project in which they produced a dramatized reading of a scene from one of the dramatic texts read during the semester.⁴ From the perspective of a foreign-language instructor, this activity represents an excellent opportunity to hone oral communication skills in the target language. From the perspective of a theatre instructor, the project engages students with the notion of making theatre and suggests how they might integrate theory and practice, research and production. Ideas that seem difficult and abstract on the page become intelligible in the dramatized readings. Furthermore, the embodiment of fictional characters highlights the construction of identity and the performativity of social roles, especially when student groups have no choice but to cast classmates in gender, racial and ethnicity-crossing roles.

In the version of the course designed for the Latino and Caribbean Studies curriculum, many of the goals remained the same.⁵ The students from the Department of Latino and Caribbean Studies in general did not have as much experience with literary methods, but they were more likely to have taken previous courses on the histories and identities of the Hispanic Caribbean diaspora. Having been exposed to the study of race and ethnicity from a variety of methodologies in an interdisciplinary ethnic studies department, these students were well prepared to situate the narratives performed in the plays in context. While we did see a play and we paid attention to the formal structures of the texts in our close readings of them, in lieu of theatre criticism and historiography I assigned readings written by migration and Latino studies scholars. We read Juan González's *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (2000), for example, to situate Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican migration in the wider context of the Latinization of the United States. The book traces "the seamless bond between Anglo dominance of

Latin America [...] and the modern flood of the region's people to the United States" (xviii). In other words, the largest wave of immigration the United States has ever experienced is the "harvest" of what its imperialist practices have sown. González's history of the major US Latino groups includes case studies that put a human face on the socioeconomic and political processes that have placed vast groups of people on the move. The strategy of recounting the history of migration through the stories of families serves well to prepare students as they shift their focus from historical context to the literary and performative representations of the experience of migration, which is often told in the form of a family drama.

Another useful text, *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (2011) by anthropologist Jorge Duany, offers terminology for basic types of migration and a thesis on the transnational character of migration in this region. His study helps students understand why the Hispanic Caribbean diaspora is a productive site for the reexamination of relationships between homeland and residence, identity and citizenship, borders and state boundaries.⁶ As Duany's book demonstrates, the analysis of Hispanic Caribbean migration through a transnational lens elucidates the long history of connections between the Caribbean sending and US receiving communities. Duany highlights the bifocality that develops from the experience of occupying at least two interconnected cultural, social, economic, and political spaces. At the same time, his study situates human migration within the global flow of capital, labor, goods, and technology and prompts us to question the categories of statehood, nationality, and citizenship (33). Transnationalism marks a powerful shift away from the unidirectional narrative of assimilation that characterized migration studies during much of the 20th century. Duany uses ethnography as well as archival and survey research in his comparative study of Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican migration and offers organizational tables that present his conclusions and typologies of transnational migration in a clear fashion.

The collection of essays in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (1997) in turn helps students think about how cultural practices such as theatre contribute to the building of political and social consciousness and citizenry movements. Finally, studies by theatre scholars Jon Rossini and Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez underscore the intersections of theatre and ethnic studies by looking at how performance both contests and abets in the construction of Latino ethnic identities. These examples of scholarship arm students with strategies for understanding the context that

frames the tales of migration staged in the plays, although, as we will see, the literary texts complicate the paradigms established by methods drawn from the social sciences. While it is certainly possible to incorporate a few of these texts in the Spanish-language version of the course, the learning goals do not allow enough time for a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach to the topic, as the main goals of this iteration are to acquaint students with the Hispanic Caribbean theatre canon, identify literary movements, and improve textual analysis skills and oral and written fluency in the Spanish language.

The Oxcart

An indisputable member of the canon is René Marqués, who established his reputation as a playwright with *The Oxcart* (1953), a drama that responded to Puerto Rico's newly consolidated colonial relationship with the United States and condemned the advent of mass Puerto Rican migration characterized by scholars as "revolving-door, commuter, circular, or swallow migration" (Duany 232).⁷ During his lifetime, Marqués was Puerto Rico's most renowned nationalist literary figure. He wrote *The Oxcart* just as Puerto Rico was to become what Duany labels a "transnational colonial state" characterized by migrants who maintain broad ties with their country of origin (7). The dramatic action of the play disavows such a relationship by advocating for a permanent return migration that re-roots Puerto Ricans on the island and reconnects them with their putatively authentic national culture. The play's production history, however, assumed a transnational life that undermines the very nationalism espoused by its author.

The Oxcart documents the plight of a rural family who, unable to pay the mortgage on its land, migrates from the countryside to a slum in San Juan and then to New York, where its dreams of a better economic future are destroyed by the degradation of traditional Puerto Rican values in the mechanized, industrial world of the city. The play constructs a series of binaries that overwhelmingly favor the agrarian world over the urban one. While Marqués associates the country with the stability of the past, physical and spiritual freedom, moral decency, and pride in manual labor, he associates the city with the insecure present, asphyxiating spaces and imposed values, materialism, sexual promiscuity, and mechanized labor. The climax of the play, the tragic death of Luis at the hands of the very machines that he had hoped would bring him prosperity, prompts the matriarch, Doña Gabriela, to return to Puerto Rico with her family to bury her son and cultivate the land:

The land is sacred. The land can not be abandoned. We must go back to what we left behind so that the curse of the land won't pursue us any more. And I'll return with my son to the land from where we came. And I'll sink my hands in the red earth of my village just as my father sunk his to plant the seeds. And my hands will be strong again. (153-54)

The Oxcart's representation of regional language, customs, and values, its use of melodrama and stereotypes, and the sympathetic stage presence of the mother figure have helped to capture the imagination of its public. Premiered as *La carreta* in San Juan in 1953 at the Teatro Experimental del Ateneo, *The Oxcart's* success soon brought the production to the larger Teatro Tapia y Rivera, which later became the home of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña's annual national theatre festival. Revivals of the play were produced in the context of the festival throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in smaller venues, and a televised version was aired in 1972 (González 61-63). *The Oxcart* was also produced internationally in Europe and in New York, in Spanish and in translation.

The universality of the city/country conflict explains the play's appeal to international audiences. As John Antush points out, one reason for the play's resonance with Anglo, Nuyorican, and island audiences is that the story of a nation's transformation from an agrarian economy to an industrial one constitutes a basic American historical experience, as, I would add, do the displacements and diasporas that accompany this process (230). The play traveled to New York soon after its premiere in Puerto Rico, but it was the English-language production in 1966 starring Miriam Colón, Lucy Boscana, and Raul Julia that achieved success with a run of 89 performances (Pilditch vi). To reach an even wider audience, Colón sought funding from New York City Mayor John Lindsay and in the summer of 1967 she presented the play free of charge in all five boroughs of the city in both Spanish and English. These performances of Marqués' play served to give birth to Teatro Rodante Puertorriqueño/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, one of the longest-standing and most productive Latino theatre companies in the United States. Paradoxically, Puerto Rico's most fervently nationalist playwright, who limited Puerto Rico's "authentic" identity to the rural culture of the island, opened up an important space for Puerto Rican self-representation in the US. The transnational production life of *The Oxcart* impacted the development of ethnic theatre on the US East Coast and enabled a new generation of theatre practitioners to explore Puerto Rican national identity, portable and free of

geographical boundaries, and to celebrate migration as a producer of hybrid border spaces where new meanings, relations, and cultural practices develop.

Union City Thanksgiving

Approximately 30 years later, Cuban playwright Manuel Martín Jr.'s family drama about Cuban exiles, *Union City Thanksgiving*, also reached audiences in both English and Spanish at different theaters in New York City.⁸ Like Marqués' play, *Union City* paints a depressing picture of the experience of migration as loss of identity. While *The Oxcart* focuses on the dislocation produced by the progressive uprooting of a family from one space to another, the Cuban play centers on a family settled in a New Jersey enclave. In a sense, it projects the various ways in which family members in *The Oxcart* might have evolved had they stayed in the United States. Members of the older generation remain unassimilated, while their children raised in the US display various levels of (mal)adaptation to American life. For well-known political reasons, Cuban migration has been a one-way flow, with limited transnational ties developing beyond official channels: As a "disinterested and denouncing state," Cuba excludes emigrés from the homeland (Duany 7). However, in thinking about the Cuban diaspora transnationally, Duany notes that despite the 1962 US embargo, "people, ideas, practices, and money have traveled, albeit irregularly, between Havana and Miami" (136). In the 1980s timeframe of Martín Jr.'s play, however, the Cuban characters are still defined by the trauma of exile and their only ties to the homeland are the cultural practices they have retained and their increasingly fleeting memories.

The Valdés family's annual Thanksgiving gathering reveals that what binds its members is the trauma of having left Cuba. At first glance, the play's title, which juxtaposes a quintessentially North American holiday with the Union City Cuban enclave, suggests that the story may explore the give and take of these two cultures. This is even better seen in the play's title in Spanish, *Sanguivin en Union City*. "Sanguivin," is a Spanglish term that linguistically renders the transculturation of Latinos in the US by creating a new word through softening and dropping consonants in the English word "Thanksgiving." The act of cooking also serves a metaphor for transculturation in the play. The family members spend most of the day preparing their Thanksgiving meal, adding Cuban dishes such as black beans and flan to the traditional American menu. Yet there is little sense of the celebration of a new, hybrid culinary tradition. The youngest daughter, who is also the most assimilated member of the family, insists that "[f]lan doesn't go with turkey"

(9), suggesting that their cultural traditions should remain distinct, whereas Aleida, the grandmother, retorts that “[f]lan goes with everything” (19). One might surmise that the grandmother is, paradoxically, more willing to blend traditions than her Cuban-born, US-raised granddaughter. However, her insistence that flan be served is more symptomatic of the ways in which the family members isolate themselves from the reality of having permanently settled in the United States, since the grandmother is interested in reproducing her traditions, not recasting them as new ones.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat outlines successive phases in the process of becoming Cuban-American. The first, in the 1960s, was nostalgic and focused on substitution. The second involved estrangement and disconnection during the 1970s. The final phase, the 1980s, is characterized as foundational, a settling into a Cuban-American identity. Pérez-Firmat notes, however, that in Miami the different temporalities and attitudes sometimes commingled, which is also true of the Valdés household in Union City. As might be expected, the grandmother and eldest member of the family has clung to her Cuban roots. She still corresponds with friends on the island, and she cries when memory escapes her. Her daughter, Catalina, is also characterized by the nostalgic attempt to reproduce their native country. She likes Union City because it represents “the closest feeling to homeland” (25), to which her eldest daughter, Nidia, responds: “I don’t like substitutes” (25). However, while we might assume that Nidia and her siblings represent the generation of younger Cubans who have established a Cuban-American identity and a sense of place in the United States, they mainly seem stuck in the intermediary stage of estrangement, located in a spatial and temporal no man’s land. Even though Nidia insists that they must live in the present—“Mama, it’s all an illusion. The family has changed, the island has changed. It probably wasn’t all that great to begin with. We can’t live from our memories” (82)—she admits that she is unable to become independent from her family: “I’m more comfortable with the family, with the ‘Do you remember’ of Union City” (5). By contrast, her younger sister, Nenita, seems more comfortable with her Cuban-American identity. She has only vague memories of Cuba, mainly associated with boredom and the *machismo* of the men in their provincial hometown, enjoys music by Donna Summers, and is married to a progressive Puerto Rican.

However, trauma marks the other family members, who escape through self-medicating, alcohol, *telenovelas*, memories, and madness. Aleida’s festering leg ulcer, Lilia’s constant migraine, and Catalina’s hypochondria all signify that the wounds of exile remain open. For most of the play, Catalina’s

mentally ill son, Tony, remains a silent observer of the others' evasive and destructive behaviors, which are exacerbated at the holiday gathering. While his demeanor does not indicate that he understands what is going on around him, he has been witness to secrets that threaten to explode at the family dinner. The main tensions stem from the two eldest siblings, whose maladaptation to life in the United States is manifested in their unresolved issues with their dead father and their inability to express their identities freely. Nidia is aware of Aurelito's ties to a right-wing terrorist organization, and Aurelio knows that Nidia is a closeted lesbian. Thanksgiving dinner turns into an uncomfortable discussion of politics, racism, and migration. All the while, Nidia and Aurelito play a cat-and-mouse game of trying to betray the other's secret. It is no wonder, then, that the play ends abruptly with Tony breaking into the conversation and asking to be returned to the hospital. Ironically, the "crazy" family member has the lucidity to sense that the madness of his home environment is sufficiently toxic for him to prefer the company of his fellow mentally ill patients. Ultimately, the feelings of nostalgia and disorientation are not convincingly "tempered by a sense of emplacement" (Pérez-Firmat 11) that bodes the maturation of a distinct and productive Cuban-American identity; rather, the majority of the immigrant characters in the play are, in varying degrees, alienated from their country of residence.

Ashes of Light

While *The Oxcart* and *Union City Thanksgiving* focus on the journey of migration and the (failed) experience of adaptation, the Dominican characters in Marco Antonio Rodríguez's *Ashes of Light* (2011) have long been settled in New York and have already established a transcultural identity.⁹ Social scientists have noted that the Dominican Republic's sizeable migration within a relatively short period of time makes it a paradigmatic case of contemporary transnationalism (Itzigsohn et al. 318). Duany characterizes the Dominican Republic's relationship to the United States as "neocolonial," a relationship of intervention and dependence that has created social, economic, and political links between the two nations (6). That is, Dominicans are attached to both places in their daily lives even though they may never actually cross the national boundaries between the island and their current places of residence. In *Ashes of Light*, the characters definitively live "here," in Dallas and New York City, but "there," the Dominican Republic, still weighs heavily on their lives, partly because of unresolved family conflicts.

In this play, the death of a father reunites a mother and son for a tense visit that explores unconditional love. Luz is a complex portrait of a Latina mother. On the one hand, she fits a stereotype, beaming with pride over Julio César, her handsome, grown son, and endlessly preparing food for him. On the other hand, she never depended on her son to negotiate the complexities of immigrant life in New York City. She came to the United States with little education, learned English, worked in factories to raise her son, and earned her US citizenship while raising him on her own. She smokes cigarettes, speaks Dominican-York Spanish, swears like a sailor, and in one humorous and raunchy scene, discusses middle-aged sexuality with her sister. She also makes deeply homophobic statements and nags her son to get married, have a family, and find a “real” job. She cannot understand his passion for the theatre or truly appreciate his ability to perform Shakespeare. Thus, from her son’s perspective, Luz is close-minded, ignorant, and provincial. They are ultimately estranged; this is Julio César’s first return in five years, and when he offers to help her during his next visit, she retorts: “By the time you come back I’ll be six feet under. It’s okay. I can take care of my own things. Got everything I need right here within these four walls” (35).

Within the four walls that comprise her home, a pink Upper West Side efficiency with barred windows, we see a giant portrait of Pope John Paul II dominating one wall, an oven/cupboard stuffed with clean dishes, stacks of LP records, and non-functional electronics. This space creates a sense of ordered disorder, which, while comforting for Luz, is asphyxiating for her son. In different ways, both mother and son are locked in certain comfort zones, unwilling to venture out. They both harbor secrets; Luz has hidden from Julio César that his father never legally acknowledged him, while Julio César conceals that he is gay. While listening to *boleros* and eating the Dominican national stew, *sancocho*, the characters recall the music, movies, and *telenovelas* of Julio César’s childhood. The recollections invoke artists and cuisine from all over the Hispanic Caribbean and Mexico, reminding us that the largest waves of Dominican migrants entered the US when major urban centers were already global Latino spaces. Accordingly, Luz’s domestic space is not the retreat into nationalism of *The Oxcart* nor the time warp of the Valdés family in Union City. But now that Julio César has grown up and left and her Latino neighbors are being pushed out by gentrification, Luz is increasingly isolated and vulnerable.

Nevertheless, Luz has opted not to fly out and visit her son in Texas, and unlike many Dominicans on a transnational circuit, she has not returned to the

island in 15 years. While her free and bohemian sister, Divina, makes return visits home and cherishes her connection with the Dominican countryside, Luz rejects any attachment to the homeland. For Luz, the island represents a dirty *campo* with burdensome relatives who expect her financial help. For a time, Julio César lived with Divina in the Dominican Republic while Luz struggled to get her financial affairs in order in New York. Thus, part of Luz's rejection of her birthplace stems from her envy of the close relationship that developed between her sister and her son. Just as Luz feels cut off from Julio César, Divina points out that the family back home feels disconnected from Luz. It takes Divina's insights and her son's return visit for Luz to face the reality that her stifling apartment and the daily grind of her work routine have become part of a system of self-defense that has protected her from facing certain truths, such as the sexuality and illegitimacy of her son.

While Luz's implicit knowledge of Julio César's sexual orientation creates much of the tension of the drama, it represents only one facet of the mother-and-son relationship examined in the play. Growing up with a single mother and knowing the sacrifices she made during his childhood have weighed heavily on Julio César. His dutiful return for his father's funeral ironically dispels a family myth. When Luz lets slip that it was the father who refused to sign the legal documents that would give his son his surname, Julio César's vision of his mother changes: "This whole time I thought it was you who didn't let him sign. I respected that. Christ, even admired it. But it was just lies" (50). She lied by omission to protect her pride and to shield her son from the hurt of knowing that his father never legally acknowledged him. Now, as a young adult, Julio César fully understands the rejection that bound him so tightly to his mother. Consequently, at the end of the play, when he finds a photograph of his parents as a happy couple, he weeps, comforted by knowing that love did bring him into the world. In response to Luz's earlier accusation that he may as well be dead to her given how much she knows about his life, Julio César insists, "I'm not dead, Mami." She responds: "I know. I know everything, mijo" (90), tacitly recognizing his secret. She gives him her blessing, and just as when he was a child, Julio César drifts off, watching the fading light of the final cigarette his mother smokes before bedtime. By acknowledging the resistance to non-normative sexualities in Dominican culture, confronting family conflicts, and highlighting contrasting views of the homeland, *Ashes of Light* leaves open multiple possibilities of the changing ways the characters might define their relationship with their home country.

Theatre and Ethnic Studies

Social science research provided my students tools for close examination of the varieties of transnationalism depicted in these plays as well as in the other course-related texts and performances. Nevertheless, they learned that the dramatic representations of human lives complicate sociological paradigms. None of the stories tell a straightforward tale of migration, adaptation, and assimilation, and, to varying degrees, the dramatic action, the construction of scenic space, and the use of motifs force audiences to maintain a bifocal transnational view of the historical and contemporary factors that link the Hispanic Caribbean to the US. The most nationalistic of these plays, *The Oxcart*, has had a diasporic and transnational transcendence. *Union City Thanksgiving*, a play seemingly about assimilation, in reality displays degrees of exilic nostalgia and lack of integration. In *Ashes of Light*, transnational ties bind the characters to the United States and the Dominican Republic in spite of the fact that the characters are US citizens. The fictitious stories complicate any attempt to neatly categorize the plays, thereby making it difficult for students to simply apply social science research to a dramatic text. Instead, they are invited to compare the social science research with the artistic renderings of migration in the plays and to think about theatre as not merely a reflection of reality but rather a representation that influences our cognition of reality.

The use of interdisciplinary methodologies from ethnic studies in the analysis of theatre texts and performances generated new pedagogical goals for my course on theatre and migration, insight on the particularities of migration of the Hispanic Caribbean, and impetus for rethinking the field of Latin American theatre studies. As Jon Rossini affirms, the field of theatre studies “attends to the semiotics of text and presentation and provides a complex understanding of the construction of identity through deliberate staging practices,” while “[t]he field of ethnic studies focuses detailed and careful attention on the material conditions of Latina/o lives” (1). Although students and some colleagues may be skeptical of using class time to “play” with dramatic texts, the dramatized reading exercise in my course exemplifies the effectiveness of combining approaches from theatre and ethnic studies. The small group discussions of the scenes selected for presentation shift the exercise from the solitary acquisition of knowledge yielded by a close reading of a text to a collaborative and hands-on experience of cultural “work,” which may afford a richer understanding of the text and a stronger connection with marginalized communities within and beyond the university. The focus of ethnic studies on the racialization of minorities and the struggle for

citizenship across borders in the plays, in combination with the dramatic presentation of scenes, has potentially transformative results. The liveness and the emotion of theatre, argues Jill Dolan, can lead to feelings of utopia and “move people to political action, to desire reconfigured social relations, to want to interact intimately with a local and a global community” (90).¹⁰

In this course, the intersection of ethnic studies and theatre foregrounds the stage as an ideal space for rehearsing modes of collective belonging, an increasingly urgent task across the globe. The performance event enables the constitution of a transnational public sphere, one that spans both “here,” one’s place of residence, and “there,” one’s place of birth and likely citizenship, by structuring a forum of collective address in which people interact through speech and gesture in the active roles of actors and observers. In performance, stories of Hispanic Caribbean migration are given form and witnesses, thereby activating discussions, remembrances, and future imaginings crucial for claiming identity, space, and a political voice for communities that live across borders, often without the full rights of citizenship. As my teaching experience has shown, concepts from the social sciences are helpful in framing our approach to migration in the Hispanic Caribbean, but as William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor observe in *Latino Cultural Citizenship*, these theories miss “the point of the dynamic processes taking place within Latino and other ‘minoritized’ communities, which were sites not only of contestation, but also of affirmation and cultural production” (9). The essays in their collection advocate looking at cultural phenomena that “cross the political realm and contribute to the process of affirming and building an emerging Latino identity and political and social consciousness” (6). “Cultural citizenship” represents a claim of belonging and engagement with society, irrespective of formal citizenship status, and, in my view, the historically grounded, embodied, and collective endeavor of theatrical performance is an ideal site in which to forge claims of belonging.

The travels of my course, “Theatre of the Hispanic Caribbean: Migration and Memory,” from the emphasis on formal literary analysis and language acquisition in the foreign language literature curriculum to the interdisciplinarity of the ethnic studies curriculum, offer insight on how we might situate Latin American theatre studies as a field on the move. The focus on the topic of migration, the crossing of disciplinary boundaries, and the use of diverse analytical methods show how Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican theatre engage with multiple cultures and dramatic traditions. This shift echoes the transnational processes developing across the Americas (and beyond) that

have led scholars to engage in more integrated and broader approaches to the study of the cultural, political, and socioeconomic interconnections among peoples and nations. Area and ethnic studies have different origins, academic missions, and research objects, as do foreign languages and literatures and theatre and performance studies. In all these fields, though, globalization has shifted our focus from national frames to diasporic, postcolonial, and transnational theoretical paradigms. Shirley Hune writes that these approaches “seek to better interpret these global changes than do national frameworks. These areas of inquiry invoke disciplinary border crossings that are energizing fields of study and expanding, bridging and occasionally blurring intellectual boundaries between and among fields” (223). Such crossings have the fruitful effect of reaffirming one’s disciplinary identity, which as Shannon Jackson notes, “occurs, like any other identity formation, when one is in the presence of an Other” (31). It has been the continuous encounter with disciplinary Others that has heightened my awareness of my approach to teaching and research as “a unique and contingent method of analysis” (Jackson 31). However, it is important to be mindful that as faculty seek to develop interdisciplinary and comparative scholarship, they remain accountable to the disciplinary structures of higher education as they are currently configured and that crossing borders will inevitably invoke questions “about the criteria for scholarship, pedagogy, and even the parameters of disciplines” (Butler 22). The study of languages and literatures has a long disciplinary history and a stable location in the academy, whereas ethnic studies and theatre and performance studies occupy a newer and more contested space within the university. This has an impact on hiring and tenure decisions.¹¹ In brief, there can be much more at stake in a course redesign than a simple move of the course from one curricular home to another.

My generation of scholars of Latin American theatre has been fortunate to count on a body of research that established the major figures, artistic movements, and national traditions in the field. We have the privilege to build on those hard-fought foundations but also the burden to knock them down in order to view the field anew and to move it in new directions. There is still a tendency to think about Latin American theatre in regional terms, but in today’s context of globalization, this frame is limiting. We have witnessed how legacies of colonialism and imperialism have generated enormous migratory flows. “By becoming mobile and making narratives out of this mobility,” suggests literary scholar Andrew Smith, “people escape the control of states and national borders and the limited, linear ways of understanding themselves

which states promote in their citizens” (245). Correspondingly, scholars who explore interdisciplinary approaches to teaching Latin American theatre might resist the “border control” exerted by institutional units and academic disciplines and discover that crossing borders helps to redefine the field and to spotlight its unique contributions to social scientific and humanistic inquiry.

Rutgers University

Notes

¹ Located in foreign languages and literatures departments, Frank Dauster, Leon Lyday, and George Woodyard published their groundbreaking anthology, *9 dramaturgos hispanoamericanos*, in 1979. Scholars such as Diana Taylor and Jean Graham-Jones, who began their careers in foreign languages and literatures departments, now work in performance studies and theatre studies programs, respectively. Other scholars of Latin American theatre and performance, such as Adam Versenyi, Tamara Underiner, and Patricia Ybarra, have always been situated in theatre and performance studies departments. I want to draw attention to these different institutional locations and acknowledge the sometimes difficult conversations among them. In particular, with the advent of performance studies, some have posited dramatic theatre as supposedly dominant, canonical, and disciplinary in relation to the marginal, anti-canonical, and interdisciplinary field of performance, but as Shannon Jackson argues, the institutional genealogy of the fields shows that drama and oral performance have always occupied a peripheral location in academia and have always crossed disciplinary boundaries (24).

² As a PhD in Spanish, I was hired by the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Rutgers University-New Brunswick as a Latin Americanist with a specialization in theatre. While theatre and performance studies are generally marginalized in such units, this has not been the case at Rutgers, where I was fortunate to join a department that values scholarship on theatre. My role in the department has been to teach introductory-level literary analysis courses and surveys on Hispanic Caribbean literature, as well as upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses on Latin American and Caribbean theatre. Though I follow with great interest the curriculum and programming activities in theatre and performance studies departments, my own research program and multiple administrative positions have oriented me toward area and ethnic studies programs, fomenting my desire to teach interdisciplinary courses.

³ The course syllabus might include artists such as Roberto Ramos-Perea, Carmen Rivera, Migdalia Cruz, José Rivera, Miguel Piñero, Nilo Cruz, Carmelita Tropicana, Eduardo Machado, Josefina Baez, Javier Cardona, and Claudio Mir.

⁴ The dramatized readings are in-class performances that stimulate student-led class discussions. Often the presentations are scheduled before exam days and serve to review course content. The presentation grades are not based on acting talent; rather, I consider creativity and originality, collaborative effort, communication with the audience, and comprehension of the scene.

⁵ Obviously, many students in both Spanish and Latino and Caribbean studies courses bring with them their own experiences as racialized minorities in the US. In addition, while the native and heritage speakers of Spanish may struggle less with expression in the foreign language class relative to the non-native speakers, some students in the English-language ethnic studies course are English-language learners. Working on written and oral communication is, therefore, paramount in either version of the course.

⁶ Duany cites Michael Kearney in his use of these terms. A boundary is the official delimitation of a state, while a border is a more fluid geographical and cultural zone between states (1).

⁷ See my article on the figure of Lucy Boscana in *The Oxcart* for a more wide-ranging analysis of the impact of the play in Puerto Rican culture.

⁸ The play debuted in English at Intar (International Arts Relations) in 1983 and in Spanish at Teatro Duo in 1986. Martín Jr. founded Teatro Duo in 1969 with Magaly Alabau.

⁹ Like *The Oxcart* and *Union City Thanksgiving*, Rodríguez's play has reached audiences in both Spanish and English. *Ashes of Light/La luz de un cigarillo* has had professional productions at Teatro LaTea (2011), Lehman College Stages (2012), Raices Theatre Company (2014), and Teatro Las Máscaras (2013-2014) in Santo Domingo. Most recently, it has played at Teatro La Mueca in Buenos Aires.

¹⁰ See Dolan's *Utopia in Performance* for an elaboration on this proposition.

¹¹ For example, departments reflecting disciplinary retrenchment may pass over candidates with interdisciplinary research programs, while others may attempt to resolve the interdisciplinary conundrum by hiring such candidates as a joint appointment with another department. Still others may hire faculty with interdisciplinary training but inadequately support the candidate in the promotion process by not taking care to educate administrators at the decanal level in selecting appropriate tenure and promotion evaluators.

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