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THE AESTHETICS OF MINOR TRANSNATIONALISM IN THE THEATER OF FRANK DISLA

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“Hi...digo hola... Hola o Hello, he ahí el dilema... ¿Qué es más importante, vivir la crisis agobiante que despedaza eternamente a mi pueblo o seguir en esta cárcel corriendo el riesgo de caer preso? O Hamlet, príncipe de Dinamarca” (Poncia from *Un búfalo de El Paso, Texas* 40-41)

In *Chicken Cordon Blue* (2000), a play by Dominican author Frank Disla, the initial stage directions warn: “el espectador acostumbrado al colorido y oropeles tendrá que irse con su música a otra parte, porque lo que veremos aquí será la imagen de cuatro emigrantes que nada tiene que ver con *The King and I* o *Cats*, triste admitirlo, pero es la verdad cruda como la vida de estos personajes” (30). Likewise, the actor characters in *Paradise* (2006), a piece by Disla’s compatriot Pedro Antonio Valdez, question the commitment of local theatergoers: “El público de esta ciudad no viene al teatro bajo la lluvia. ¡Cretinos! como si el agua los fuera a derretir” (13). Despite the absence of an audience, however, the members of the theater troupe in *Paradise* opt to stay and to hone their craft through improvisation: “¿por qué no hacemos un juego con la historia de Adán y Eva? Una versión libre... algo improvisado y atrevido” (14). The troupe then imagines an Adam and Eve story of migration to a dubious U.S. “paradise,” experimenting in each scene with different genres such as *teatro de cámara*, *novela rosa*, and *film noir*. In my view, the search for a new audience, for new stories, and for a new aesthetics in *Chicken Cordon Blue* and *Paradise* is emblematic of the dialogue transnational Dominican theater practitioners have begun with the national “script” for Dominican culture and identity. In what follows, I will argue that the insistent formal experimentation in plays about migration by Frank Disla is suggestive of the transnational artist’s pursuit of new forms of political and artistic belonging. Not only do Disla’s characters explore the ontological condition of belonging to more than one society (or perhaps none), his own dramatic oeuvre occupies an unsure space in literary history as well.

Since the 1990s, Disla, along with other Dominican theater artists, has countered homogenous and territorially bounded visions of Dominican identity through the performance of stories of Dominican transnational migration. This work coincides with a dramatic and rapid increase in migration flows from the island, a phenomenon, maintain social scientists, that has made the Dominican Republic an exemplary site for the analysis of contemporary transnationalism (Itzigsohn et al. 318).¹ Transnationalism, according to one groundbreaking

¹Itzigsohn et al, write: “the large size of the migration flows, and the relatively short period time in which they occurred caused a large transformation in Dominican society, making the Dominican case a paradigmatic one for the study of the rise of transnationalism” (318).

account, is “a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries” (Basch et al. 22). The creative practices of transnational Dominican theater artists take place in a network of relationships that simultaneously links them to two nation-states. Similar to the characters in their plays who enact the social scenarios of migration, transnational playwrights and their artistic endeavors shift from one geopolitical space to another. As a result, their work can go unnoticed, since it does not fit easily into either a minority U.S. Latino or a national Dominican theater paradigm. This essay explores the cultural orientations of what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih call “minor transnationalism” in the cosmopolitan and creolized aesthetics of Frank Disla’s work, its engagement with difference and exclusion, and its challenge to hegemonic notions of citizenship.² By reading Disla’s work as an instance of minor transnationalism, I hope to demonstrate that transnational Dominican performance offers an important site for new thinking about how twenty-first century Latin/o American theater artists intervene in a globalized cultural politics that traverses national boundaries.

The cultural work of Dominican theater artists who move between the island and the U.S. addresses a multi-sited social field, fostering the imagination of a transnational Dominican community. “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). The staging of scenarios of migration, together with other forms of cultural production, represent “cultural remittances” that pressure both the sending and receiving societies to form more inclusive notions of national identity and belonging (Flores 44-45). It is important to note, nevertheless, that “becoming mobile” for many Dominicans is neither a choice nor is inspired by a conscious desire to experience a new mode of constructing identity or legal category of citizenship; rather, it is the result of the state’s failure to provide social and economic security for the vast majority of its population.

At the same time, Dominican transnationalism is symptomatic of the increasing economic, technological, political, and cultural interconnectedness of global society. The discourses of globalization and transnationalism, however, differ importantly with respect to “the key assumptions they make about the role of the state in the production of meaning, identity and social outcomes” (M. Smith 17). Whereas globalization discourse tends to depict social processes in spaces unmoored from national territories, transnationalism, argues Michael Peter Smith, “insists on the continuing significance of borders, state policies, and national identities even as these are often transgressed by transnational communication circuits and social practices” (18). Indeed, Dominican transnationals are never free of regulatory regimes such as the state, the market, and the family, and they are exposed to “new modes of subjectification that cut across political borders” as well (Ong 18). Sociologist Luis Guarnizo asserts, for example, that the hybrid identities embodied by Dominican transnationals are minoritized by the dominant cultures in both nation-states and that they “are perceived as foreigners in both societies:

Significant numbers of Dominicans began migrating in the 1960s, with a marked increase in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time that the 1965 United States Immigration and Nationality Act increased the number of Caribbean migrants who could enter the country each year, the economic and political woes under the Balaguer regime (1966-78) pushed Dominicans to leave the island. This legacy, “coupled with new transportation and communication technologies, have turned more than one million Dominicans into transnational migrants” (Sagás and Molina 11).

²My use of the term “aesthetics” follows Édouard Glissant’s definition of aesthetics as “an art of conceiving, imagining, and acting” (155). I argue that Disla’s creative practices, dramatic themes, and styles reflect the orientations of minor transnationalism.

Dominicans in New York and dominicanyorks in Santo Domingo” (52). Analyses of Dominican transnationalism suggest a trend of transmigrants using the host nation-state as an economic resource while maintaining a psychic and cultural connection with the home country.³ Transnationals are not apt to assimilate, adopt a “North American” identity, and remain permanently in the U.S. Therefore, Dominican transnationals are in continual negotiation with models of citizenship and identity in both locations, and as uncomfortable as the struggle for inclusion in two national imaginaries may be, their real-time engagement with the discourses of citizenship and identity in different cultures impacts how they shape their concepts of self and society, opens up hegemonic notions of *dominicanidad* and, in the case of Frank Disla, adds a cosmopolitan quality to his cultural production.⁴

The works of Disla, author of more than a dozen plays, are central to my understanding of Dominican transnational theater, and they constitute a compelling case for Latin/o American theater studies to theorize a category of transnational theatrical activity. Disla is a transmigrant theater practitioner in the sense that although he has resided in the U.S. since 1987, he continues to write in Spanish and to identify himself as Dominican.⁵ His work has been consistently validated in his home country, and four of his plays have been anthologized in the Dominican Casa de Teatro series for having won prizes in its annual competition.⁶ Even more telling is the fact that Disla has twice won the Dominican Republic’s Cristóbal de Llerena national theater prize while living abroad, first in 1992 for *Desarraigados*, and more recently, in 2005, for *Un búfalo de El Paso, Texas*, which will be the main focus of my analysis. In addition to these national theater awards, he recently received the Letras de Ultramar prize for *Ascenso y caída de Andresito Reyna* (2013). This literary competition for Dominican authors residing abroad demonstrates how Dominican cultural institutions have responded to the development of a transnational society: it is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture of the Dominican Republic and is administered by the Dominican Commissioner of Culture in the United States. The winning texts are included in a series published by Editora Nacional, and the authors are celebrated in the nation’s capital at the International Book Fair. Disla’s transnational profile, his strong connection with national Dominican theater in spite of living in the United States since 1987, is nurtured by his lifetime collaboration with his brother, Reynaldo Disla (b. 1956), author and director of over

³Ana Aparicio, Jorge Duany, Ramona Hernández, Peggy Levitt, Patricia R. Pessar, Ernesto Sagás, and Silvio Torres-Saillant are among the principal scholars of the cultural and economic impacts of Dominican transnationalism.

⁴My understanding of cosmopolitanism takes its cue from Ulf Hannerz’s definition: “cosmopolitanism is first all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It entails an intellectual and esthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (103).

⁵Frank Disla was born in 1959, in Salcedo, Dominican Republic. After graduating from the Escuela Nacional de Arte Escénico de Santo Domingo, he collaborated in the creation of several theater groups, among them the Grupo Teatral Romanense, Los Teatros, and Teatro Cantera, and he co-founded his country’s first theater publication, *Boletín Teatro*. He has directed street performances, radio theater, and has adapted theater pieces for radio and television. In addition to the plays mentioned in this study, Disla has written the following pieces: *Los negros también comen helado de fresa*, *La convención*, *Último son*, *Menéame los mangos*, *La última carga al machete*, *El último*, *El velorio de Juan Díaz*, and a trilogy recently reworked and titled *Arraigados*, which includes the plays *Ramón Arepa (drama carnavalesco)*, *Este sol para estos tres (juego dramático)*, and *Aquí no se siente la lluvia*.

⁶Disla’s plays awarded prizes by the Casa de Teatro include: *Último son*, *Chicken Cordon Blue*, *El barbero de Saint Ann Street*, and *El velorio de Juan Díaz*.

35 theater pieces.⁷ Throughout childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, together and in independent projects, the Disla brothers created plays and founded theater publications and performance collectives, playing a key role in the development of Dominican popular theater in the 1970s and 1980s. Although his migration was motivated in part by a search for new artistic horizons, it is clear that Disla has maintained ties with the Dominican national theater scene partly due to his familial ties, which, in turn, are connected with the national theater establishment. He has used his home country as a resource for staging, critiquing, and publishing his work, while his residence in the United States has fed his artistic imagination, resulting in plays that bring new styles and themes to both the Dominican national stage and a much wider implicit audience.

Lionnet and Shih's notion of minor transnationalism provides a productive starting point for theorizing the theatrical activity of artists that cannot be simply located in either national or ethnic paradigms. They draw their theory of minor transnationalism from ethnic, transnational, and post-colonial cultural studies, and concepts developed by the French philosophers Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and post-colonial thinker Édouard Glissant, among others. By "minor transnationalism" they refer to minority subjectivities and discourses that create networks within and across national boundaries as well as to a cultural mood that differs from the more jubilant "major" key: "'minor transnationalism' is perhaps the mode in which the traumas of colonial, imperial, and global hegemonies as well as the affective dimensions of transcolonial solidarities continue to work themselves out and produce new possibilities" (Lionnet and Shih 21). Lionnet and Shih aim to avoid the binary framework into which much postcolonial, globalization, and transnational studies critiques often fall when they approach minority cultural formations as vertical engagements of assimilation and opposition. They write:

What is lacking in the binary model of above-and-below, the utopic and the dystopic, and the global and the local is an awareness and recognition of the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries. All too often the emphasis on the major-resistant mode of cultural practices denies the complex and multiple forms of cultural expressions of minorities and diasporic peoples and hides their micropractices of transnationality. (7)

As Guarnizo suggests, Dominican transnationals in the U.S. and on the island occupy minoritarian positions in both nation-states. Similarly, Disla's dramaturgy is made minor by its translocal space of enunciation. In the context of the U.S., his Spanish language plays form part of a minoritarian cultural discourse, while in the Spanish-dominant Dominican Republic, his works, written and conceived abroad, are deterritorialized and become minor in the context of the majoritarian culture of the nation. Therefore, in my estimation, Disla's dramatic production cannot be read exclusively in relation to either Dominican national or U.S. Latino ethnic cultures. It moves between and transcends both cultural landscapes, posing important questions about minor transnational cultures that live across borders and the possibilities of creating art that represents them.

⁷The work of the Disla brothers, who are among the most prolific and innovative Dominican *teatristas* of the past 50 years, represents a noteworthy gap in Latin American theater history and criticism. Gustavo Geirola's extensive interview with Reynaldo Disla in the Caribbean volume of his series *Arte y oficio del director teatral en América Latina* represents an important step in correcting this absence. Among Reynaldo Disla's many works, *Bolo Francisco* (1985) won the Casa de las Américas theater prize, and *Cuatro piezas de un acto* (1986) and *El afanoso escribano Baltasar López de Castro* (1999), both won the National Cristóbal de Llerena theater prize.

Disla's minor transnational sensibilities are made visible in part because his dramas about Chilean, Cuban, Mexican and Puerto Rican migrants insert Dominican migration in a wider framework of global mobility.⁸ That is, Disla's work can be read in the context of Dominican migration to the U.S. and within a specific debate on changing representations of Dominican cultural identity, but as Lionnet and Shih caution, it is important not to essentialize the cultural practices of minority diaspora cultures and limit them to a homogeneous major-resistant mode. Thus, we might view Disla's work as representative of a particular U.S.-Dominican transnational dynamic on the one hand, and, on the other, as an example of minor transnationalism in the lateral linkages his plays make with other nomadic, border crossing cultures. In other words, Disla's work can be read along with Dominican *teatristas* who have developed their theater projects transnationally—Waddys Jáquez, María Isabel Bosch, and Marco Antonio Rodríguez, for example—as well as in a wider context of Latin American playwrights in the United States whose texts and productions are in conversation with their nations of origin. One might argue, then, that Disla's inclusive approach to the theme of migration and, on a formal level, his experimentation with different genres and use of metatheatrical role-playing and intertextuality are apt strategies for creating an aesthetics of minor transnationalism useful for understanding a wide array of theater practitioners working across borders.⁹

His first work about migration, *Desarraigados*, for example, consists of four plays that range from a monologue, a compact multi-character domestic drama, a dramatic dialogue, and a one-act ensemble piece, set, tellingly, on a boat. The migrant characters in these stories are literally and figuratively adrift, lost in memory, alcoholism, urban violence, and loneliness.¹⁰ Likewise, *Chicken Cordon Blue* is composed of multiple vignettes, monologues voiced by migrants from different Latin American countries that are connected by an amusing mistress of

⁸As Reynaldo Disla and myself have similarly noted, the popular types, regional dialects, and local cultural references in Frank Disla's plays forever link him to the Dominican nation, but the *dominicanidad* of his works written while living in the United States takes on new qualities that reflect both Dominican transnationalism specifically, and multiple nationalities on the move more generally (R. Disla).

⁹In their use of intertextuality, self-referential metatheatricality, and experimentation with time and space, Disla and other playwrights with a transnational lens and reach, such as Nilo Cruz (Cuba) and Tanya Saracho (Mexico), reflect the sensibilities of postmodernism. However, even more crucial to an aesthetics of minor transnationalism is their focus on minoritized cultures produced by global mobility and the conundrum of living and working across borders. Taking into consideration play content, language, place of production, collaborative projects, and personal connections, we could place these playwrights in a spectrum ranging from Disla as the most rooted in his nation of origin and Cruz as the least, while still recognizing the strong transnational orientations of each of the three writers. To date, Disla's exclusive use of Spanish and strong links with the theater establishment in the Dominican Republic has maintained his profile at home, but it has limited his audience. In the U.S., his works have not yet been edited or staged in significant theaters. However, a number of Disla's plays have received dramatized readings and full performances in small venues, he has given workshops on dramaturgy through the Ollantay Center for the Arts, an important space for Latin/o American theater activity in New York City, and he has taught theater at a school for adults in New Jersey. While I believe that imagining audiences across borders helps theorize new, transnational publics, there is no guarantee that a transnational aesthetics will achieve the basic objective of any theater artist: acknowledgement of their art by an audience.

¹⁰The one-act plays are entitled, *Antología de recuerdo (rembranza de un acto)*, *A penas, el comienzo (monólogo)*, *El punto (pase en un acto)*, and *La vuelta de la campana (drama en un acto)*.

ceremonies, Miss Cordon, and performed on a bare stage. As the aforementioned stage directions suggest, the minimalist style and crude realism of the stories of the lives of *pollos* (chickens, or undocumented immigrants) in the U.S. depart from the typical theatrical fare offered on the main stages of Santo Domingo. In *Chicken Cordon Blue*, the pathos and nostalgia of *Desarraigados* is injected with humor resulting from the experiences migrant characters face as they consciously and unconsciously inhabit new roles in the U.S. Here, the metatheatrical trying on of different personas constitutes a translation strategy that does not result in assimilation—replacing one nationalist attachment with another—but in hybrid identities that embody multiple identifications.

In another piece that treats the theme of migration, *El barbero de St. Ann Street*, the characters also perform multiple roles, but in this case the roles are mainly provided by other texts.¹¹ In the play, confronting a betrayal brings to the forefront the disillusionments of a seventy-four-year-old Puerto Rican barber, Philip, and his longtime Dominican client and friend, Erasmo. Both live frustrated by unrealized life aspirations: Philip was lured to the U.S. long ago by the bright lights of Broadway and is tormented by his failure to make a career in show business, and the former military man Erasmo is too haunted by the Trujillo and Balaguer regimes to return home. Philip has discovered that Erasmo betrayed him with his wife, and their encounter turns out to be their last when, after a delirious series of scenes in which Philip directs Erasmo in playing different roles, Philip reveals he knows the truth and kills himself (and his wife). Astonishingly, the modes of performance and the specific texts performed by the two men range from Greek Tragedy and Henrik Ibsen, to Zarzuela, Cabaret, and Broadway musicals. Incorporating intertexts creates a constant shift in style and tone *within* the play, which marks an intensification of this same restless search for form from one piece to the next in the collection of one-acts in *Desarraigados* and the monologue pieces in *Chicken Cordon Blue*. These qualities, which might be described as textual migration—crossing textual borders—and metatheatrical migrancy—moving from one role to another—are most fully articulated as a minor transnational aesthetics in Disla's more recently published play, *Un búfalo de El Paso, Texas* (2005).

Although only one of the narrative threads in *Un búfalo* contains a specific tale of Dominican migration and El Paso (the Mexican-American border) does not figure prominently in the play, in both form and content *Un búfalo* displays myriad forms of border crossing. In the play, two actors, Pancho and Poncia, play multiple roles in ten episodic scenes involving two central storylines. In one story, Cuban-American Vietnam War veteran Emilio Ramírez laments the horrors of war and the loss of his true love, Tais Pérez, who has fallen into a seedy world of erotic dancing, drugs, and prostitution. Emilio is the play's titular buffalo, a type of heroic loner. His past relationship with Tais links him to her sordid family saga in which she was sexually abused by her uncle, Mateo Horowitz, and her cousin, Tony. Mateo Horowitz is a Jewish factory owner from Brooklyn who marries Elena, a Dominican immigrant who worked in his factory as a cleaner. The play's other narrative thread is Pancho and Poncia playing actors creating and rehearsing scenes from several plays. Throughout, Pancho and Poncia constantly switch character roles and at times the different spaces and epochs intersect, presupposing the active intellectual participation of the audience. As the editors note on the book's back cover, distancing techniques in this work paradoxically serve as “una pesquisa interior, psicológica y profunda.” In my view, of the author's rejection of straightforward psychological realism in

¹¹The title serves as a paratextual, framing reference for the play, for it evokes other famous barbers: *The Barber of Seville* and *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. The paratext cues the reader to anticipate amorous intrigue, murder, and above all, musical performances.

favor of a ludic experiment with dramatic conventions represents the culmination of the author's search for an aesthetics that conveys the complexities of transnational subjectivities.¹²

Perhaps the most striking feature of the play's structure is the repetition of buffalo stampedes that connect the fragmented narratives. In the first eight scenes, Pancho and Poncia, regardless of the story and characters they are performing, escape a buffalo stampede simulated by body movement and sound effects. In the final scenes, they join the stampede, and the play ends with Pancho and Poncia turning the buffalo away from heading over a precipice and guiding them, along with the spectators, to the auditorium exit. Earlier in the play, however, herds roaming across the plains as a collectivity evoke a less benign reading of the buffalo image. In at least two instances, the buffalos are figured as fascist hordes, first as Nazis persecuting Mateo Horowitz, who portrays himself as a wandering Jew, and second as falangist Spaniards pursuing Federico García Lorca during the Spanish Civil War. Thus the buffalo herds suggest forced migrations, or fleeing, as well as the ideological movements that give rise to such geographical dislocations. In a monologue on the equalizing effects of mortality, Pancho, playing an actor, explains, "Por eso odio las multitudes que como cuadrilla de bovinos se desplazan en movimientos colectivos sin fin, movidos por cualquier idea común y que también irremediamente desaparecerán sin rastro" (40). Although twentieth-century fascist movements may have come and gone, the play makes evident that rather than disappearing without a trace they have reappeared in new guises.

While the world economy may demand that workers cross national borders, post-9/11 security anxieties and an economic recession have fed an anti-immigration movement in the U.S. that aims to criminalize migration and close borders. This threatening mood resonates when Mateo likens being a Puerto Rican in the U.S. to being a Jew in Nazi Germany:

Tiempos éstos en que hablar de bomba es un atentado. A mi vecino de Puerto Rico se lo llevaron preso, como a un judío por la Gestapo. Le preguntaron por qué tenía la música tan alta, que era tiempo de luto y él les dijo que la Bomba y La Plena la escuchaba a ese volumen por costumbre. (21)

In the War against Terror, what formerly might have been a clash over cultural difference becomes a threat to national security meriting the beating and incarceration of the Puerto Rican neighbor. As the repeat stampedes at the end of each scene suggest, collective movements continue to thunder through humanity. The question is whether to join them, run in the opposite direction, or be trampled.

In addition to the motif of roaming buffalo herds, the characters and action of the play evoke a deterritorialized sense of belonging by constantly crossing spatial and temporal borders. The unexplained shifts in time and space give the impression of the characters existing not so much in a specific space and time as in different places and epochs all at once. Through the dialogue, the audience might surmise that the action is taking place in a go go bar in the U.S., a Spanish mesón in the Dominican Republic, or on a stage. These spaces suit a transnational dramaturgy that straddles borders, for they are public spaces through which anonymous patrons pass rather than the static, domestic spaces of nationalist drama. The characters, who are marked by their uprootedness and ethnic difference, are situated in the U.S., but their life experiences and social networks span small towns in New Jersey, mega cities like New York and Caracas, and distant locales such as Vietnam and Romania. It is difficult to situate temporally the dizzying array of episodes narrated by the characters, but two main points of reference are the present

¹²The temporal, metatheatrical, and intertextual complexity of *Un búfalo* is the result of 25 years of experimenting with what the Disla brothers call *teatro de la cuarta fase*. Reynaldo states that in this theater "el espectador vería, al mismo tiempo, al actor y a su personaje que a su vez representa a los otros personajes y además a una entidad crítica que reflexionaba sobre la interpretación que transcurría en este instante" (R. Disla).

post-9/11 era, and the 1960s. The allusions to the 1960s, the height of the Cold War—the Cuban missile Crisis and the U.S. military interventions in the Dominican Republic and Vietnam—remind us that it was a time when ideological lines divided the planet in a bipolar tension between superpowers. In the Ramírez family, raised on a diet of his Cuban father’s anti-communist rhetoric, Emilio enlists to fight in the Vietnam War, whereas his brother—an admirer of Che Guevara—stays home. The play betrays some longing for this clearly divided world when Emilio’s brother is remembered as “Un búfalo más que guarda un fragmento del muro de Berlín como recuerdo de sus sueños... se cercenó el ala izquierda” (12). The fall of socialism cut short leftist dreams, and one of the questions posed by the play is what kind of beliefs and values will form the basis of new social movements in a world drawn with more porous boundaries and divided into multiple spheres of power.

The characters frequently frame their comments with variations on the phrase “en estos tiempos,” showing an acute consciousness of new global sensibilities and disorientations.¹³ Pancho, speaking in the role of actor, observes that the characters in *Un búfalo*, “buscan como todos desesperadamente a qué asirse, aunque sea a un témpano de la guerra fría. Ay, Iván Illianov, qué falta haces” (35). The nostalgia Pancho expresses for Vladimir Lenin (Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov) comes off as humorous, as does his litany of ideologically confused cheers: “Viva Hitler, carajo, la doctrina Monroe, la Enmienda Platt, la Ley Torricelli, los campos de concentración, el despotismo, el nepotismo, el libre albedrío y la liberación de las féminas, el clonaje y el aborto” (36). According to Pancho, these are confusing times no longer governed by dualities: “hay que nadar contra la corriente y a la vez arrastrarnos con ella... retroceder y avanzar son sinónimos... la gobernabilidad... la libre empresa... el comercio internacional... el mundo una aldea global donde ya no puedo ocultarme... las dualidades no existen” (41). The roaming herds of buffalo hint that ideologies come and go, and that yesterday’s fascism looms on today’s horizon in a new embodiment, but the play’s ending also indicates hope that herds/social movements will join people in new affiliations and causes. Rather than allowing the buffalos to plummet over a precipice, the actors, who unmask and show their true faces, leave their fictional world onstage and step into the auditorium to guide the herd—spectators and buffalos—to the exits: “salgamos de nuevo al ruedo, y a empezar... No importa que sea de nuevo, a correr búfalos, a correr... Otras llanuras nos aguardan” (73).

Prior to the ending, however, *Un búfalo* crosses the invisible wall between the stage and the auditorium in numerous self-reflexive moments. In a metatheatrical fashion, *Un búfalo* frequently transgresses the border between fiction and reality, and, through intertextuality, it migrates from one text to another. In the context of Latin American theater, Gail Bulman argues, intertextuality often serves:

to establish unique definitions of nation and to depict national identities, while, at the same time, it creates a literary game that highlights both texts, thus uncovering new artistic meanings as well. Intertextuality moves these dramatic texts beyond dialogue, and establishes multiple dialogues with the past, present and future, with other cultures, with other nations, or with multiple paradigms within self and nation. (27)

Since, as Bulman points out, intertextuality helps imagine multiple models of literature, nation, and identity, I find it to be a fitting literary strategy for expressing the hybridity and cosmopolitanism of minor transnational collectivities. Again, it is important to qualify that while living across cultures may spark new creative forms, Dominican transnationals face the struggle of subaltern status in two nation-states. The intertextual reference to Shakespeare in the quote

¹³The characters describe “estos tiempos” with phrases such as: “de persecucion nazi y neo nazi” (27), “sin identidad precisa” (33), “atómicos” (37), and “postmodernos” (37).

that heads this essay exemplifies both the creativity and the plight of the transnational artist. It is voiced by a male author character played by Poncia: “Hi... digo hola.. Hola o Hello, he ahí el dilema... ¿Qué es más importante, vivir la crisis agobiante que despedaza eternamente a mi pueblo o seguir en esta cárcel corriendo el riesgo de caer preso? O Hamlet, príncipe de Dinamarca” (40-41). Here, Hamlet’s existential dilemma is coded as having to choose between living in a system that fails its people (Dominican Republic), and living in a society that increasingly criminalizes immigrants (U.S.), though I would argue that the quote’s bilingual opening offers a third option: the author character, like Disla, can opt to be located transnationally in both places.

The play’s intertextual references range from allusions to figures from Greek mythology and contemporary comic-book heroes, to the integration of the words and dramatic situations imagined in the songs of singer-songwriter Juan Luis Guerra, the works of theater practitioners such as Bertolt Brecht, Federico García Lorca, and Grupo Yuyachkani, to name a few examples.¹⁴ With its multiplicity of stories, it is easy to forget that at the heart of *Un búfalo* is the narrative of a hero, Emilio, who roams in search of his lost love, Tais Pérez. Their story is parodied by the self-reflexive awareness with which the pair plays the part of ill-fated lovers, the parallels drawn between their actions and those from classical and pop cultures, and the degradation of the standard notion of “hero” in their characterization as a damaged Vietnam War vet and an erotic dancer. If the receptor of the play did not recognize Tais’s name as an allusion to the famously destructive Greek courtesan, they will, when Tais, in an opium induced haze, announces that she will model herself on the Greek concubine: “Pisaré las huellas de Thaïs... Tendré poder, los hombres se rendirán a mis pies...” (18).¹⁵ Like Tais, Emilio and the other male characters are conscious of playing the role of a larger-than-life persona. In the scene-ending buffalo stampedes, for example, they resign themselves to the duty of saving the female character: “Si no te arrastro te barren, maldito papel de héroe” (44).

The models of heroism for the male characters, Batman (66), Speedy González (34), Superman (53), and Ulysses (52), collapse distinctions between ancient and modern, and high and low culture. Similarly, in the following quote in which the hero sweeps in to save the day, the characters allude to both the Greek mythological figures Helen of Troy and the character Elena from the popular song “Elena” by the contemporary musician, Juan Luis Guerra: “Ulises, the strong, the smart, llega. ¡Oh Elena, tu honor salvado! Móntate en el barco, ya sea en un furgón... Se te va bien escribe, Elena, la del Higüerito o de Troya, da lo mismo...” (52).¹⁶ The postmodern pastiche of intertexts has a comic effect partly due to the comic book-like exaggeration of gender stereotypes. On the one hand, the men possess unattainable super hero qualities, while the women are only known for their dangerous beauty and sexuality and thus

¹⁴Some of the other literary figures and intertexts referenced in the play include: Lazarillo de Tormes, Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, Jean Genet, Samuel Becket, Miguel Hernández, and Pedro Mir. In a longer analysis of this play, I will show how songs by Joan Manuel Serrat operate much like the Juan Luis Guerra song intertext.

¹⁵Thaïs is referenced in a number of great works of literature, but perhaps most relevant to *Un búfalo* is the figure of Thaïs portrayed in Anatole France’s nineteenth-century novel about a religious hermit’s quest to save the beautiful Thaïs from harlotry. The ironies and hypocrisies revealed by the hermit’s religious zeal and the themes of exclusion and difference ring true in today’s context of fundamentalist religious movements.

¹⁶The stage directions indicate that the Juan Luis Guerra’s song is heard at the start of the scene. Guerra is so popular in the Dominican Republic that it is very likely that any Dominican audience members automatically will begin to make connections between the song lyrics and the developments in the play. Other intertexts in the play are drawn from the universal literary canon and will be recognized, depending on its degree of obscurity, by only some audience members.

need “saving” to restore their honor. Perhaps more intriguing is the connection made between Higüerito and Troy in the phrase “da lo mismo.” By drawing attention to their sameness, Disla compares Dominican migration with one of the great heroic journeys of all time, Ulysses’ return home from the Trojan War, and implicitly places the contemporary exodus from his country in the context of universal migrations.

However, unlike Helen of Troy, who had a face so beautiful that it instigated the Trojan War, the Elena of Higüerito in Disla’s play loses face, namely, her dignity and identity. The title of Disla’s scene, “Elena, la criolla,” nevertheless, emphasizes that Elena was native to somewhere, that she had roots. In Guerra’s song, and in the play, the narrative is as follows, Elena, a Dominican immigrant, arrives in New York via Caracas with money she earned selling her body. In New York, Elena lives in the Bronx with a Jew who works in a factory. Captivated by consumer items temptingly gracing every storefront in the city, Elena takes risks and naively becomes a pawn in a drug dealing operation which results in her murder on a train. The entire content and most phrases of the song are incorporated verbatim into Disla’s play, including the song’s famous phrase “si te va bien, escribe,” to which the play character responds: “Nunca escribí, ni para el sello de correo aparecía... En Caracas era un pez nadando en su propia agua... En Nueva York, el abandono, la soledad y la incertidumbre...” (24).¹⁷ In many ways, Disla’s dramatization of the song echoes Guerra’s fatalistic message about migration, which was typical of the negative Dominican discourse on migration in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period in which the country grappled with the sudden impact of migration on so many facets of national life. A crucial difference, however, is that Guerra sings the story of Elena whereas Disla grants Elena a voice, which gives her the opportunity to explain, for example, why she never wrote. In both Guerra’s song and Disla’s scene, Elena’s migration is a tale of her progressive loss of roots, ideals, and morals. For example, the description of Elena moving through the streets of Manhattan with her “pie de arcilla” might be read as a country girl out her depth in New York’s urban jungle, or, in relation to her increasing consumerist desires, as having “feet of clay,” an idiomatic expression denoting a weakness or flaw. In *Un búfalo*, Disla expands upon these meanings by including Elena’s personal history. In this context, the reference to clay links Elena to her homeland, and to her artisan father, who made *muñecas sin rostro*, faceless clay dolls that have come to be ubiquitous representations of Dominican folk art. The poetic passage in which Elena describes her sentiments when she sees these dolls in Dominican homes in Washington Heights adds depth to her shallow characterization in the song: “me transporto al Higüerito, a mi padre lustrando el barro y pienso que nunca debimos salir de allí, la vida era como un río, simple en su discurrir, como un árbol asentado sobre sus raíces o la lluvia rauda y pertinaz en su contacto con la tierra como un eterno acto de amor sin pagos ni recompensa” (25). Elena’s New York experience diametrically opposes this depiction of a life of honest manual labor and natural harmony. Ironically, in New York and divested of her cultural roots, Elena of Higüerito comes to embody one of its famous faceless dolls when she dies anonymously on the train.

In addition to providing Elena with a back story, Disla’s play develops the character Mateo Horowitz, mentioned in the song as “el judío de la factoría.” In the song, this detail seems to be a simplistic mode of signifying that New Yorkers are ethnically and culturally different from Dominicans, whereas in the play, Mateo has a dramatic and thematic function. He serves as a Brechtian narrator who alternates between narrating and representing Elena’s story: “Vivo en

¹⁷Implicit in the phrase “Si te va bien, escribe” is the suggestion that the non migrant speaker only wishes to hear from the migrant if their experience is successful (and will help support the family back home with remittances) and a disavowal of any of the problems that migrants might face in the resident country. In other words, if things do not go well, these Dominicans are best made absent from the national imaginary.

el Bronx y vengo a contarles la historia de Elena, una emigrante como yo” (21-22). But Disla not only exploits a Brechtian style of performance, his character Mateo recalls one of Brecht’s lesser known pieces, *Round Heads and Pointed Heads* (1936). Throughout the *Un búfalo*, Mateo’s pointy shaped head is both referenced in the stage directions and mentioned in the dialogue: “(Mira la estrella. Se toca la punta en su cabeza.) No la quiero redonda... Prefiero estos cuernos de búfalo... Es lo que me distingue de un alemán o un palestino... les tengo fobia” (26). In Brecht’s satirical parable about Nazi Germany, the leaders of the fictitious land called Yahoo maintain control via the ethnic strife between the immigrant, pointy-headed Czichs, and the native, round-headed Czuchs. Dressed as a Jew from Nazi Germany and situated in a story taking place in the twenty-first century United States, Disla’s pointy-headed character Mateo highlights how persecutions and exclusions based on racism cut across cultures and epochs. His portrayal as a wandering Jew also has the effect of situating Dominican migration in a broader historical context of global diasporas. Thus, what began in Guerra’s song as a stereotype is creatively transformed in Disla’s story to support some of his play’s major themes.

The play’s focus on Federico García Lorca also dovetails with the themes of migration, difference, and the status and creative vision of the transnational artist. The inclusion of Lorca, an artist marked by difference, brings into relief that homosexuality and political affiliation, like racism and xenophobia, give rise to forces of exclusion. In citing Lorca, Disla again employs a strategy of multiplicity by integrating an intertext that in turn leads to a number of other texts, including a number of Lorca plays, poetry by Lorca and Pedro Mir, and a Greek tragedy. For example, Pancho, a puppeteer reluctantly working with an actress he repeatedly refers to as crazy, rehearse a scenes from Lorca’s play *Bodas de sangre*, “Es un unipersonal con *Bodas de Sangre*. Ella me lo propuso... Vio un grupo peruano en Nueva York y se enamoró de su técnica, de sus formas definidas” (30). Aside from the amusement of imagining how they might pull off a story about a love triangle as a solo piece, some spectators will chuckle as they make a second intertextual connection and recognize that the New York production admired by Poncia is Grupo Yuyachani’s well-known solo performance adaptation of *Antigone*. Most of the intertexts in the theater rehearsal scenes will entertain the literature aficionado and thus serve to highlight the playwright’s sophistication.¹⁸ But more crucially, I think the intertextuality is representative of the open intellectual and aesthetic orientations of cosmopolitanism described by Ulf Hannerz. Indeed, Disla appears to parody any notion of originality or genius when Poncia, speaking as an author character announces that she steals ideas and drinks from “cualquier fuente” (40).

Intertextual moves from one text to another in *Un búfalo* draws attention to the fact that two actors are constantly playing multiple roles. I call metatheatrical migrancy the moments in which the characters flow from one identity into the next so quickly that traces of previous characters peep through. For example, in a brief instance while rehearsing her new solo performance version of *Bodas de Sangre*, we are simultaneously shown the actress, the intertext, and another character from Disla’s play when the actress shifts without warning from her character as an actress reciting a line from *Bodas de Sangre* to speaking as Tais Pérez: “Con un cuchillito que apenas cabe en las manos... hubiera matado al maldito judío, ese animal, y a mi

¹⁸Disla’s recently published plays, such as *El búfalo de El Paso, Texas* (2005), *La degradación de los agujeros negros* (2011) and *Ascenso y caída de Andresito Reyna* (2013), are quite dense. To varying degrees they retain notes of Dominican popular culture, but they are sophisticated, demanding texts not likely to appeal easily to mass audiences. This lack of accessibility might be considered as another quality that makes his works “minor.” I speculate that the solitary transnational space from which he writes and the scant opportunities for the production of his plays have added “writerly” nuances to his works. That is, a director might critique his texts for favoring verbal expression over other dramatic signs that are central to plays in performance.

primo también, heme ahora aquí, víctima de mi misma, sin identidad precisa, hija de esos tiempos modernos...” (33). Similarly, Pancho, speaking simultaneously as Emilio Ramírez, Mateo Horowitz, and the puppeteer, exclaims “no sé quien soy” (32-33). The characters are creolized like the fluid identities of migrants in the sense that the multiple layers of their identities show through in different contexts in ever changing combinations. This metatheatrical overload and subsequent identity confusion supports the play’s characterization of today’s modern times as a confused morass of peoples and ideologies roaming about the globe. But as the end of the play suggests in the hopeful act of herding the buffalo away from the cliff and onto new plains for exploration, in this globalized world of unprecedented mobility, some individual identities will be lost only to form new, hybrid ones, and new ideologies and collective affiliations will join people in new “herds,” or social movements. It would follow that art, too, reconfigures itself into new movements and styles. Following Brecht’s comments on changing aesthetics, one element of Disla’s “newness” is the hybrid text that results from intense metatheatrical and intertextual migrations: “Methods wear out, stimuli fail. New problems loom up and demand new techniques. Reality alters; to represent it means of representation must alter too. Nothing arises from nothing; the new springs from the old, but that is just what makes it new” (110).

The stories, themes, and aesthetics performed in *Un búfalo* reject the sensibilities of monolingualism, root, and territory in favor of errantry, relation, rhizome, and creolization. Glissant uses these terms to describe a “poetics of relation... in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). Cultures and identities are always already mixed, and they continually enter into contact zones in which processes of relation further creolize them.¹⁹ For Lionnet and Shih, “the transnational is our language to designate this originary multiplicity or creolization, which foregrounds the formative experiences of minorities within and beyond nation-states” (9). The strategy of intertextuality in *Un búfalo* illustrates how, in the cultural orientations of minor transnationalism, “[T]he idea of a self-contained national literary tradition seems anomalous, time-bound, and hopelessly nostalgic” (A. Smith 245). Instead, Disla’s textual migrancy exposes transnational cultural works as drawing from multiple traditions and constructing audiences with cosmopolitan rather than national outlooks. Unlike the pedagogical imperative of constituting an imagined nation that characterizes much of the Latin American nineteenth and twentieth century dramatic canons, Disla’s dramaturgy speaks to an unbounded audience, the transnational community of mainland *and* insular Dominican audiences, as well as other minoritarian collectivities that live across borders.

While the generous borrowing of texts and exuberant experimentation with interpretive styles provide some of the play’s most entertaining moments, they also stage Disla’s claim for a space in world theater history. The authorial voice is filtered through Poncia, who plays a male character called “the author.” In this self-ironic portrait of an artist, the author is presented as a starving artist who admits that he has sold his soul to a “Globalized Faustus” and that he is dependent on stolen imported products, Holland cheese and Argentine sausages, for his sustenance (39), just as the authors/actor characters in the play “steal” from texts from the universal theater canon to sustain their artistic creativity. Among the texts mentioned by the fictitious author, however, is a play that sounds suspiciously like Disla’s own text: “Últimamente

¹⁹For Glissant, relation is a process that requires distancing from one’s subject position. Paraphrasing Glissant, the “thought of the Other” is a principle of alterity, that is, not conceiving the world according to one’s own truth, while the “the other of Thought” is an act by which one transforms one’s thought: “Each change is changed by and changes the other” (154). By these terms, relation is cosmopolitan in orientation since it demonstrates a concern and willingness to engage with the Other (Hannerz 103).

he estado bregando en el submundo de los aplastados, mi objetivo es hacer una sinopsis de la miseria humana de estos tiempos, en la que se refleje todo, la mezquinidad de los héroes cotidianos, sus luchas y sus triunfos, sus derrotas y frustraciones... Pero nadie invierte en proyecto semejante” (43). On more than one occasion a character in *Un búfalo* mentions the lack of funding for the arts in current times. Ironically, while the fictitious author has been commissioned to produce a hackneyed melodrama called *Te regalo mis sueños*, he is aware that an experimental and intellectually challenging text in a “minor key” like *Un búfalo* will struggle to find backing.²⁰ Part of the politics of cosmopolitanism is its demand for “recognition of the legitimacy of plural loyalties to different communities and political bodies” (Gilbert and Lo 8). The creative works of Frank Disla and other transnational Dominican artists speak to communities and political bodies that straddle national borders, and implicit in the play is a call for imagining how to support these cultural practices. A minor transnational theater imagines new styles, new audiences, and it calls for new critical approaches and new practices in arts subsidy. Just as real life transmigrants labor to be recognized as full citizens and exert pressure to form new understandings of political and personal belonging, the creative projects of transnational theater artists oblige us to complicate the national and ethnic categories that have defined much artistic production.

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²⁰*Un búfalo* exemplifies the precarious life of a transnational play. As the winner of a national literature prize, it received support for publication, but the play has never premiered. In his interview with Geirola, Reynaldo Disla names *El búfalo* as one of the pieces he most desires to direct and that he once began the project and worked for a time with the actors Wallis Uribe and Arturo López (296-97). In the U.S., the play received a dramatized reading at the Barco de Papel bookstore in Queens, New York.

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