

## **Forging a National Symbol: The Representation of the Jíbaro in the Narrative of Ana Roqué**

The image of the Puerto Rican peasant (jíbaro) and his symbolic value was intensively discussed during the twentieth century. Scholars agree that at the end of the nineteenth century the Puerto Rican intelligentsia had an unfavorable attitude toward the inhabitants of the countryside (Torres-Robles 245; Moro 310). Concerned with the incorporation of the jíbaro into the modern world, some members of the elite stressed the practices that condemned the peasants to a life of backwardness. Following a positivist impulse, the literature based on this ideology focused on behaviors that needed to be modified in order to guarantee the progress of the people and, by default, the country. Nonetheless, during the first decades of the twentieth century those representations acquired a nostalgic tone that distorted the impoverished situation previously recorded. By the third decade of the century, most intellectuals were eager to underscore the jíbaro's representativeness. This discursive shift was connected to Puerto Rico's political situation and the intents of the ruling class. As Lillian Guerra points out, this new perspective was the response to the ambivalent situation of the Puerto Rican elite under the United States' colonial regime that began in 1898 (48). After having acquired an autonomous government under Spanish rule, in 1898 Puerto Ricans faced the imposition of an administration controlled by United States officials that made local leaders aware of their lack of political power. In the search for a national identity that could be opposed to United States' increasing interference, intellectuals resorted to an icon that could symbolize Puerto Ricans' rebellious



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spirit as well as their authentic customs (Guerra 67). As a result, they refabricated the earlier image of the peasant, proposing it as the essence of Puerto Rican nationhood.

Nineteenth century discussions about the place of the jíbaro within the nation coincided with an incipient feminist movement that sought to create a space for women in the nation-building project. As part of this process, women writers produced texts that uncovered their respective political, social, and education philosophies. Their aspiration was to contribute to the formation of the collective imaginary that was being forged. Intellectual debates on the participation of the jíbaro in a modern country generated an interest that women writers couldn't overlook. Curiously, the scholarship on the subject consistently links the development of this national symbol to literature written by men. The presence of this character in women's literature is seldom considered and, when acknowledged, it is usually dismissed as tangential to the feminist discourse (Paravisini-Gebert 11; Martínez San-Miguel 131). In view of that, this essay examines the representation of the peasant in Ana Roqué's *Sara la obrera* (1895) and *Luz y sombra* (1903). My aim is to show that Roqué's jíbaros present her readers a vision of the nation that makes her approach a unique contribution to *jibarista* discourse. I start my analysis contextualizing Roqué's work as a nineteenth century woman writer. I then address the evolution of the term jíbaro, its relationship with Puerto Rico's political status, and its repercussions on Roqué's narrative. Tracing the variations of the nationalist rhetoric will facilitate contrasting Roqué's version with that of her contemporaries as well as with members of the next generation of writers.<sup>1</sup> The comparison will reveal that her treatment of this national symbol constitutes a departure from the perspective that prevailed in her time. It will also expose the ways in which Roqué employs



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the countryside imagery to conjoin her feminist and political beliefs, positioning her narrative at the forefront of the discourses about the nation.

Born in 1853, Roqué took part in the intellectual production of her time through the publication of texts on geography, botany, and grammar as well as newspaper articles, short stories, essays, and novels. In 1893, she launched the newspaper *La Mujer*, the first periodical directed by a woman. This initial enterprise was followed by the foundation of *La Evolución* (1902), *La mujer del siglo XX* (1917), *Álbum Puertorriqueño* (1918) and *Heraldo de la mujer* (1920).<sup>2</sup> As part of her feminist campaign and her quest for women's right to vote, she organized the Liga Femínea (1917) and the Asociación Puertorriqueña de Mujeres Sufragistas (1924). In 1909, Roqué became a member of the Ateneo Puertorriqueño, the most important cultural institution of the period; and in 1918 she was admitted into the French Astronomical Society due to her knowledge of the subject. Roqué's achievements also extend to the political arena. Deeply worried about the future of the nation, she collaborated with the leaders of the Partido Autonomista (later Partido Unión) since its inception in 1887. Her lifelong commitment to Puerto Rican politics was recognized in 1930 when the Union Party Assembly awarded her the position of honorary president (Gelpí, "Carta" n.p.).

Along with her political activism, Roqué's legacy as a writer evidences a conscious effort to influence "los imaginarios que tejen los sistemas de representación cultural de las naciones" (Fernández 17). Her prioritization of Puerto Rican landscape suggests a national project based on rural life and corresponds with a discourse that perceives the countryside as the setting in which the future of the country resides (Martínez-San Miguel 131, Saldivia-Berglund 193). This agreement, however, should not be regarded as an uncritical reception of



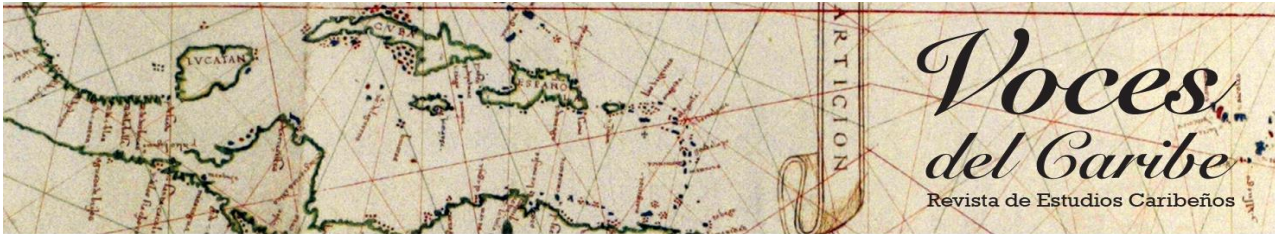
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the dominant ideology. Feminists studies have shown that all literary feminism “share the double commitment to place women at the center of their literary-critical discourses and to do so as part of a wider political process” (Robbins 14). This twofold goal demanded from nineteenth century women writers a sagacious handling of the discursive elements provided by the patriarchal system. Mimesis or employment of male-conceived images and thoughts became one of the most frequent strategies in pursuing an influential space from which to express their opinion as citizens and as women. Women’s engagement in prevailing historical and literary conventions located them, though, within and against the narrative structures they reproduced (Abel 2; Lanser 18). Revisions or resignifications of traditional imagery should be understood, thus, as an attempt to shape the dominant discourse.

Equally important to understanding the implications of an act of mimesis is locating women’s writing in a political and cultural framework (Reisz 237). Recent scholarship on Latin American women writers has repeatedly illustrated how their cultural production was “firmemente asentada en el devenir histórico” of their countries (Martin and Goswitz 11). To understand Roqué’s specific situation it is indispensable to bear in mind that her fictions coincided with the development of feminist and nationalist ideals despite Puerto Rico’s colonial status. Traditionally, independence has been considered a precondition for the development of nationalism. As Benedict Anderson posits, nations are political communities imagined by their members as inherently limited and sovereign (6). But the case of Puerto Rico reveals that national identities can be forged without the existence of a nation-state. Puerto Ricans constitute a community with a shared history, language, and culture, elements that foment the sense of belonging and comradeship that Anderson also identifies as





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constitutive of a nation (25). This characteristic has led Jorge Duany to label Puerto Rico a “postcolonial colony,” that is, a group of “people with a strong national identity but little desire for a nation-state” (4). Puerto Rico’s nationalism, Duany adds, is cultural rather than political (5). With the aim of constructing and consolidating this particular collective consciousness, Puerto Rican intellectuals relied on the same cultural products used by other Latin American countries: the novel and the newspaper (Anderson 25). During the nineteenth century, print culture was probably the main vehicle to communicate the nation-building project, a task that was later assumed by the state institutions.

Roqué’s productive career as a writer and journalist demonstrates that she was aware of the importance of the novel and the newspaper for the advancement of feminist and nationalist initiatives. Her writings contend widespread notions of womanhood and argue for women’s right to fulfill their sexual desires (Martínez-San Miguel 131), but also display her attentiveness to issues that exceeded the limits of the domestic space. Comparably to what María Cristina Arambel-Guiñazú has seen in the work of the Argentinean Eduarda Mansilla, Roqué devoted her fictions to the creation of a literary world that responded to her own vision of the nation (93); and the jíbaro was an integral part of it. Therefore, examining the discourses that circulated about the peasantry and its attractiveness for Puerto Rican writers helps to explain the meaning this figure acquires in her work.

According to Salvador Brau, the term jíbaro was recorded for the first time in official documents of the eighteenth century to refer to the Puerto Rican peasantry (*Historia* 18). This early usage was generalized by the end of the century, and in the nineteenth century the label started to appear more often in local newspapers and in the literary production of the period



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(Girón 53; Scarano 1407). Despite its frequency, the meaning of the expression did not remain stable during the course of the centuries. In a study on the politics of creole identity, Francisco Scarano asserts that in the first half of the eighteenth century the word bore negative connotations that highlighted the population's itinerancy, seminomadic existence, and indomitability (1414). Toward the end of the century this unfavorable image coexisted with a more positive view that fostered the identification of the liberal elite with the peasant rebellious but genuine Puerto Rican soul, a practice that facilitated the adoption of the term in their writings. This "masquerade," as Scarano calls it, allowed educated creoles to appropriate the label *jíbaro* in their writings to criticize the colonial government while unwittingly launching a key metaphor of Puerto Rican identity (1430-1431). As a result of this process, at the height of the nineteenth century the name became a Puerto Rican synonym for a sector of the intelligentsia (Girón 61).

The elite's assumption of the peasant's identity for political purposes did not eradicate its negative undertones. The persistence of the prior dual conception was still manifest, for example, in the works of Ramón Méndez Quiñones and Manuel Zeno Gandía, both published during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Ramón Méndez Quiñones's drama *Los jíbaros progresistas* (1882) links progress to the organizers of a fair in the city of Ponce, where natural products and man-made merchandise are exhibited. In applying the designation to the fair coordinators, Quiñones continues associating it with the elite (Girón 30). Conversely, in Manuel Zeno Gandía's narrative the *jíbaros* from the countryside are presented in a less favorable fashion. Zeno Gandía's *La charca* (1894) is probably the best example of the discontent intellectuals felt toward the peasant's lifestyle. In his novel, the



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jíbaro is consistently described as rowdy, indolent, superstitious, promiscuous, and prone to suffer from vices such as gambling and drinking. Zeno Gandía's interpretation, surely, was not his alone. The turn of the century saw the proliferation of sociological studies that attempted to examine the peasants' moral conditions to suggest possible solutions to their situation. These works, inspired by positivist ideology, defended the need of a new system of ideas that could improve the population's standard of living in order to promote the nation's economic and social advancement. The debate prompted Puerto Rican intellectuals to identify habits that were unsuited for the nation-building project. While the intention was to promote a feeling of empathy toward subaltern groups, the inclusion of the expressions "mísero hogar," "costumbres selváticas," and "grosera superstición" in essays such as Salvador Brau's "La campesina" (1886) perpetuated the notion of primitiveness and backwardness. Nineteenth century readers were, thus, exposed to descriptions that reinforced the negative image of the jíbaros (Torres-Robles 245).

The discourse on the peasantry and its association with a nationalist sentiment strengthened during the twentieth century. After the occupation of the country by the United States in 1898, the assertion of a separate culture became an imperative for a local elite that was losing its economic, political, and social influence. During this period, the need to answer the questions "¿qué somos?" and "¿cómo somos? los puertorriqueños" remained a main concern (Pedreira, *Insularismo* 25). In their search for answers, intellectuals found in the countryside and its inhabitants the imagery needed to reaffirm a sense of nationhood that had to be safeguarded: "Y en esta búsqueda de lo que típicamente es nuestro, tropezamos de nuevo, ineludiblemente, con . . . el tema jíbaro" (Pedreira, "La actualidad" 13). Being a



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peasant was being an authentic Puerto Rican. Yet, as Duany explains, Puerto Rican nationalist thinking and practice “have tended to embrace an essentialist and homogenizing image of collective identity that silences the multiple voices of the nation . . .” (20). For twentieth century writers, the jíbaro was a white country-dweller associated to the coffee production industry whose lifestyle and strong Hispanic heritage was being dangerously threatened by the United States capitalists’ interests.<sup>3</sup> This portrayal, which has become dominant within the Puerto Rican imagination, has been contested by intellectuals such as José Luis González. In his seminal essay *Puerto Rico: The Four-Storeyed Country*, González questions the centrality of the jíbaro and proposes an alternative Afro-Puerto Rican identity. Pointing out that the first white *campesinos* had to adopt many of the life-habits of the slaves and free people of color (10), González declares that the literary *jibarismo* of the elite is a misrepresentation of the Puerto Rican reality. Puerto Rico’s popular culture, he adds, is mostly black (25-26).

It is important to note, however, that by the time Roqué wrote her novels the jibarista discourse was still developing. The two visions of the jíbaro that were common at the time must then be considered when analyzing her short novel *Sara la obrera*. Published at the heart of the nation-building project, *Sara la obrera* emphasizes the constraints suffered by women and censures the social conventions that allow the reproduction of women’s subordination. The novel narrates the misfortune of Sara, a schooled and hard-working woman, who was raped by her best friend’s husband and who died as a consequence of the shame she felt. Even though *Sara la obrera* centers on women’s sexual exploitation (Bird-





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Soto19), Roqué begins the novel with a description of a group of jíbaros on their way

downtown:

La población rural diseminada en la campiña levantóse [*sic*] diligente al alborear, ansiosa de gozar de los placeres del domingo, día de expansiones y peripecias que rompía con la uniformidad monótona de la ruda labor de la semana. . . . Allá iba la familia de Siño Andrés compuesta de sus dos hijas, y un muchacho de doce años. El padre iba delante con su saco lleno de viandas para realizar en el mercado . . . . Con ésta iban también otras familias de campesinos, todos cargados con sus comestibles para el mercado, y llenos de júbilo, cambiando impresiones con sus compadres y conocidos que encontraban al paso. (7-8)

Compared to the prevalent discourse, Roqué's version does not evince the negative connotations reproduced by her male counterparts. The peasants wake up early on a Sunday to sell in the market the product of their hard work and to enjoy the day in the city. This healthy balance between work and pleasure differs, for instance, from the perspective espoused in Zeno Gandía's canonical novel *La charca*. When addressing the peasantry's attitude toward laboring in the fields, Juan del Salto, protagonist of *La charca*, mentions their indifference and laziness as salient characteristics: "dilo a tus compañeros; a los que no trabajan los lunes, cansados con las huelgas del domingo; [. . .] a los que pasan la semana mascando tabaco y tendidos en la hamaca . . ." (43). Too weary after a weekend of gaming and drinking, *La charca*'s jíbaros are a "contingente de inútiles" that do not contribute to the country's economy (44).



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The divergence between the images is even more significant if we take into account the influence of *La charca* in Puerto Rican literature. Issued a year before *Sara la obrera*, Zeno Gandía's novel establishes a benchmark for Puerto Rican writers (Paravisini-Gebert 2). Roqué was familiar with Zeno Gandía's fiction, as the list of writers included in *Luz y sombra* reveals (61).<sup>4</sup> Her departure from the customary representation must not be deemed, therefore, accidental but the result of a different political project. As I mentioned, nineteenth-century women writers did not abandon the narrative procedures developed by men. In their quest for discursive power and pressed by social and textual conventions, women writers tended to reproduce the same structures they were trying reformulate (Lanser 7-8). Narrative voice, plot, and images were appropriated and revised in order to introduce concerns and perspectives that diverged from the ideas posed by the dominant discourse. Given the pervasiveness of the jíbaro image in nineteenth-century cultural production, I suggest that Roqué's characterization gives her the opportunity to present a familiar figure while shifting the reader's attention toward locations and social groups that were being ignored by male writers.

With some exceptions, nineteenth-century essays and fictions that reflected on the lower classes' condition focused on the countryside and its inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> Presented in literary circles and cultural institutions like the Ateneo Puertorriqueño, the works that approached the "peasantry problem" quickly acquired authoritative standard. By including the *cuadro de costumbres*, Roqué seeks both to attract the reader and to claim an authoritative voice. After all, Roqué's story specifically addresses women and men of her own socio-economic class, the same group that were producing and consuming literature about the jíbaro. Nevertheless,



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the peasants that introduce her narration quickly vanish from the novel's plot. Having arrived at the city, they meet with Sara, the central character of the novel. From that point onward, the narration turns into a story of broken dreams, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation. This extreme move is possible because the sympathetic depiction relieves Roqué from the need to analyze the subject. Instead, she opts to direct the readers' attention to the experience of women living within the municipal limits of Humacao, "cabeza de partido y población importante del Este" (*Sara* 7).

To be sure, Roqué was not the only writer pondering over women's subordination. Both nineteenth-century female and male authors wrote extensively on the theme. Zeno Gandía's *La charca* voices this generalized preoccupation through its characterization of Silvina, a young jíbara who is forced into a marriage without love and to accept the sexual advances of her mother's lover. Nancy Bird-Soto has studied this thematic connection, portraying Sara and Silvina as "dos jóvenes que se ven truncadas por acuerdos que las violentan como mujeres y por ser mujeres" (40). However, the differences in space (countryside vs. urban area) and in the social origin of Roqué's characters manifest a desire to surpass Zeno Gandía's project. In Roqué's novel, Sara is an honorable working-class woman, and Nicolás Marrero, her rapist, is a "comerciante detallista hijo de estanciero" characterized as "déspota; malhumorado, amigo de faldas; [que] entre días solía tomar sus *turquitas*, maltratando entonces sin compasión a [su esposa] Luisa . . ." (75). In describing Nicolás as a retailer, the narration locates him within the petit bourgeoisie. Furthermore, the novel associates Nicolás as son of a landowner with the sector that was forging the discourse about the nation. Nicolás's alcoholism and promiscuous behavior constitute a break with the



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assumption that moral evils are exclusive to the jíbaro population. Through Nicolás, Roqué highlights the analogous behavior exhibited by middle-class men in the city, a sector that was not being taken into account, while condemning women's physical and sexual abuse.<sup>6</sup>

Due to its implications, Roqué's argument required an appealing image suitable to be manipulated so that she could guide her readers beyond the limits of a traditional plot. The employment of words such as "pálidos" and "enclenques" does not hinder the displacement from the national topic to the feminist issue (7). Such expressions belong to a catalog of adjectives that are linked to nineteenth-century liberal discourse on the anemic body.

Espousing a scientific perspective, men of letters who were hygienists or physicians such as Francisco del Valle Atilas and Zeno Gandía considered the tropics a source of illness. For them, there was a direct relationship between peasants' health, living conditions, and attitude toward work. Improving people's health and way of life were the means to increase their productiveness and to assure their definite integration into the nation. Roqué's language could be the product of a positivist ideology that she, as an intellectual, shared with her contemporaries, but it could also respond to the dominant practices of the genre. If, as Maryellen Bieder has proposed for nineteenth century Spanish women writers, "the more a woman author resists the conventional plotting of gender in her fictions, the more she requires a familiar voice of narrative authority . . ." (139), Roqué certainly could not disregard the terminology commonly applied to depict the jíbaro.

Even with the adoption of the previous designations, in *Sara la obrera* any negative connotation seems to lose effect when juxtaposed with the peasants' commitment to work and apparent satisfaction with their lifestyle. Dominated by the optimism that stems from





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words such as “hermosa,” “espléndido,” “gozar,” and “júbilo” (7-8), the scene not only varies from the male-produced discourse of the period but is closer to the representations that will become dominant in the twentieth century. Comparing *Sara la obrera* with Virgilio Dávila’s poem “La jibarita” (1916) reveals how the terms cited are outshined by the narrative voice’s tone. In *Sara la obrera*, the narration describes Andrés’ daughters as “dos jibaritas no mal parecidas, sobre todo Juanita que tenía unos ojos que le bailaban en la cara . . . aunque su color quebrado por el paludismo y la anemia que la minaba . . . le arrebatase parte de su belleza.” (10). A similar wording is used in Dávila’s poem:

Por la vereda angosta que baja de la sierra  
y con el calabazo terciado en el cuadril,  
poblando viene el aire de rústicas canciones  
la jibarita anémica, la jibarita triste,  
como una flor escuálida de malogrado abril.  
¡Y es bella! Son sus ojos humedecidos murtas  
prendidas en jirones de cielo tropical  
.....  
la bella adolescente de talle y pie menudos  
que alberga en sus montañas la pobre Borinquen. (1-7, 24-25)

Dávila does not abandon the typical descriptions of the jíbaro either, but the oscillation between physical qualities and health problems neutralizes any criticism. Both works show a process of resemantization in which former undesirable characteristics metamorphose into positive attributes. This practice will reach its pinnacle with Luis Lloréns Torres, for whom



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the *campesina criolla* “de audaz ojera tropical” and “pálida tez” is the paradigm of womanhood; delicate, seductive, and exceptionally beautiful (“Campesina criolla” 97).

In addition to the physical attributes, *Sara la obrera* challenges the portrayal of the peasants as a segregated group. Puerto Rican intellectuals argued constantly that the isolation of rural settlements contributed to the neglect of Catholic dogma and civil law, the high rate of informal unions being one of the most detrimental consequences of their seclusion (Brau, “Las clases jornaleras” 143, 145). Living too far from the city and lacking the money to pay for a wedding ceremony, often they could not find a priest willing to perform the rite. The settings and plots of novels that deal with the jíbaro issue confirm this belief. Zeno Gandía’s *La charca* and Salvador Brau’s *Pecadora*, for instance, take place in remote locations and the characters are not officially married. In contrast, in *Sara la obrera* country and city residents interact with each other. The peasantry visits downtown’s market weekly and establishes friendships with people like Sara, who will make Juanita’s marriage possible by serving as her maid of honor. Here, contrary to Zeno Gandía and Brau, the contact with the city ensures their participation in what the intelligentsia promotes as appropriate economic and cultural practices.

Roqué’s interpretation grows more nostalgic in *Luz y sombra*, a novel that also concentrates on women’s subordinate status. In it, Roqué recounts the dilemma faced by women trapped in arranged marriages and the consequences of a social discourse that does not recognize women’s sexuality. The novel details the effect that marriage choices have in the lives of two friends, Matilde and Julia. Julia, who opts for a marriage of convenience, experiences a life of frustration while Matilde enjoys the happiness and sexual fulfillment



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associated with a marriage based on love. Their contrasting stories, Martínez San-Miguel avers, redefine “the frontiers of the female body to include desires and needs that transcend the sexual economy of mainstream nationalist discourses” (Martínez-San Miguel 131). More importantly, the novel’s feminist claim cannot be disassociated from the character’s location. Julia’s and Matilde’s fates are dictated, in part, by their place of residence since Julia lives in the city and Matilde in the countryside.

The spatial dichotomy is part of Roqué’s reformulation of the nationalist discourse. As in *Sara la obrera*, in *Luz y sombra* Roqué takes advantage of the feminist plot to insert a vision of the nation that includes an enhanced image of the countryside and its population. A cuadro de costumbres presents Roqué’s distinctive vision. The scene appears after Julia confesses in a letter to Matilde her feelings toward Rafael, her husband’s friend, and the anguish that passion produces in her. In the message, Julia underscores the difference between her suffering and Matilde’s satisfaction, linking both geographical spaces to their personal situations:

Todo el lujo que me rodea, todo el arte y la belleza exterior de mi casa palacio, me parece un mudo cementerio donde mi alma agoniza. . . . Mientras que tú más sabia, mi Matilde, has fabricado tu nido de pajitas silvestres a las orillas de un pintoresco río que reflejará en su mansa corriente tu felicidad, que nadie vendrá a turbar, pues vivís solos con la Naturaleza . . . . (68)

Matilde has been wise to choose the countryside, for its unspoiled environment provides the perfect place to implement a nation building model that foment rural economy and, at the same time, takes into account women’s aspirations. Indeed, Matilde and her husband live in a



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small farmstead where wild fruits grow alongside tobacco and sugar cane. The farm size and diverse products reveal the preference for a project that privileges agriculture as developed in the interior of the island at the end of the nineteenth century (Martínez San-Miguel 131). This distinction differentiates creole aspirations from both Spanish focus on the city and the single-crop farming expansion endorsed by the United States.

In extolling the countryside, Roqué also points to the city as the place where vices proliferate. Similar to *Sara la obrera*, in *Luz y sombra* the city: “[es] donde se hallan como suspendidos en la atmósfera los miasmas deletéreos de todos los vicios, de todas las concupiscencias . . .” (83). Different from *Sara la obrera*, the jíbaros described in *Luz y sombra* have no regular contact with the city. Nevertheless, locating the scene in Comerío, a town in the central region of the island, does not change the narrative mood:

Era una tarde de esas en que la zafra está para terminar y el movimiento era extraordinario. Todos se esforzaban por adelantar su labor para gozar de unos días de quietud . . . así es que son días de alborozo para esas pobres gentes, que cobran el sábado el precio de la ruda labor de la semana, y se retiran a sus bohíos a bailar y cantar el domingo en compañía de sus compadres y conocidos. (86-88)

The jíbaros depicted in Roqué’s novel appear once more as devoted to work. They are not stuck in Zeno Gandía’s sick world, where moral afflictions predominate. Far away from the metropolitan area, most of the inhabitants of the countryside remain foreign to the contaminating influence of a materialist society. Singing and dancing are rendered legitimate and well-deserved leisure activities while their seclusion situates them at the margin of





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unauthentic European-fashioned cultural practices. Here, as Juan Otero Garabís explains in his study about Lloréns Torres' poetry, the peasants' natural isolation puts them outside the coastal plantation economic system that was starting to be dominated by United States corporations (29).

Akin to *Sara la obrera*, the idealized image that Roqué forges in *Luz y sombra* resembles the cultural production of the next generation. Virgilio Dávila's poetry is, again, a case in point. In his poem "El jíbaro," Dávila portrays an industrious peasant who lives in a humble hut in the mountains and rejects the epithet of lazy. Proud of his labor and content with the beauty of the natural surroundings, the poetic voice reclaims traits formerly considered as a negative aspect of his identity—fondness for cockfights, dancing, etc. (44-47). This non-judgmental view and the sympathetic sentiment that emanates from it constitute a modification of the discourse that used to condemn the same conducts that are now considered typical. The improved image of the jíbaro as well as its intimate connection with the land is, as Lillian Guerra demonstrates, a perspective that would be developed later by other intellectuals in order to explain the role of this figure in the formation of Puerto Rico's national identity (96). Yet, Roqué's novel was published more than ten years before Dávila's poems, and her descriptions precede Antonio S. Pedreira's essay on the cultural significance of the jíbaro by three decades. In pondering Roqué's possible reasons for including the countryside passage, it is necessary to consider Puerto Rico's political situation at the turn-of-the-century.

As I remarked in the introduction, in 1897 Spain granted to Puerto Rico a form of self-government that, among other things, made official the participation of local leaders in



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the territory's administration. The new constitutional system paved the way for the triumph of the Partido Autonomista, a party associated with the landowning sector (Quintero 41).

Nonetheless, the elite's political achievements came to a halt in 1898 with the United States invasion of Puerto Rico and the implementation of a military rule that lasted until 1900. After the military period, a sector of the privileged class remained outside the positions of power since the civilian regime established allowed for legislative, judicial and executive institutions to remain under United States control. In terms of economic development, the United States invasion brought an accelerated industrialization that bolstered both foreign-owned sugar cane industry and worker's proletarianization. These events affected the elite's expectations of sovereignty and socio-economic hegemony. Perceiving United States presence as a cultural and political threat, Puerto Rican intellectuals rejected their current reality by exalting the former way of life under Spanish rule and fixating on the jíbaro as the primary locus of their identity (Guerra 68). It was under these circumstances that the peasant's supposedly autochthonous manners and resistance to change became synonymous with the elites' own struggles.

The dynamic described above is manifested in *Luz y sombra* through the cuadro de costumbres but also by means of a footnote Roqué included in the novel. According to Paravisini-Gebert, the narration takes place during the last years of the 1880s and the beginning of the 1890s. Roqué's annotation, however, refers to the period following the United States occupation:

En el año 1900 en que Puerto Rico ya era americano, no tenían zafra las haciendas, ni se trabajaban apenas los campos, porque los frutos no tenían



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mercados. Después del temporal San Ciriaco que tuvo lugar en 1899, los campesinos ya no cantaban los domingos, porque, muertos de hambre y sin trabajo, concurrían a las poblaciones a mendigar, y muchos morían de hambre hasta en las calles. En el año 1903 va reponiéndose un poco la Isla, aunque la mayor parte de las haciendas están arruinadas. (89)

The note is a deliberate attempt to update the scene in order to highlight the contrast between a previous period of prosperity, harmony, and happiness and the existing economic debacle. The enthusiastic depiction of sugar production, technological advances, and the benefits they provide to native landowners and peasants alike is eclipsed by the acknowledgment of a crumbling industry under United States rule and its devastating consequences.

Certainly, the statement mentions a natural disaster as one of the reasons for the present situation, but for Roqué's readers it is clear that the note denounces the manner in which the American government has managed the situation. Four years had passed since the hurricane San Ciriaco hit the island and, even under the powerful tutelage of the United States, the economy had not improved, placing the noble jíbaro on the verge of extinction. Thus, by signaling the impoverished condition of the peasants and hacendados, Roqué ultimately calls for the rescue of both figures and their lifestyle as the driving force of Puerto Rican economy and identity. Interestingly enough, Roqué is not the only intellectual to interpret both events as a turning point in Puerto Rico's history. Luis Muñoz Marín, founder of the Popular Democratic Party and one of the most prominent ideologists of the nationalist discourse centered on the jíbaro, distinguished the two forces that dramatically altered the quality of life for Puerto Ricans as the cyclone San Ciriaco and the Americans (Guerra 93).



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As a result of these incidents, the longing for the peasants and, by default, the hacendados' world increased over the course of the next decades.

In stressing the urgency of recover “the good life” linked to the previous colonial period, Roqué transforms the jíbaros into the symbol of cultural practices threatened by the United States domination and, at the same time, makes a statement that corresponds to her yearning for political independence. Although Roqué’s political position did not remain constant over the years, at the beginning of twentieth century she openly supported Puerto Rico’s independence.<sup>7</sup> A letter addressed to the Democratic Party National Convention detailing the economic situation mentioned in the footnote and demanding the country’s independence remains as evidence of her nationalist sentiment. In the missive, Roqué lists recent damage to crops, fallen prices, the financial ruin of small landowners, excessive taxation, and the increment of productive lands controlled by foreign corporations as sources of the country’s problems. Adding the note to *Luz y sombra* functions as a political platform that connects her feminist and nationalist preoccupations. What is more, as in *Sara la obrera*, in *Luz y sombra* Roqué employs the jibarista scene to appeal to the reader through a familiar image, claiming an authoritative voice and inviting them to reflect on what is being lost under the new political regime. In so doing, Roqué fosters a wistful picture of the peasant that will become strong among the party adherents by 1908, when the newspaper *La Democracia* starts defending the Spanish legacy as well as the jíbaro and the countryside as the soul of Puerto Rican identity (Negrón Portillo 79).

Roqué’s *Sara la obrera* and *Luz y sombra* unveil women writers’ management of the ideology that dominated nineteenth century Puerto Rican literature in their effort to create a





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voice and a place for themselves within the discourses of the nation. Cognizant of the importance of print culture, Roqué uses her works to promote an image that intertwines her feminist and nationalist concerns while transcending the prejudiced vision of her contemporaries. She contributes to the nationalist discourse by introducing in *Sara la obrera* a peasantry whose physical condition is not seen as the source of a supposed primitiveness and indifference. This enhanced picture comes to fruition in *Luz y sombra*. Celebrated for their loyalty, commitment to work, and attachment to purportedly genuine cultural practices, her jíbaros portend a discourse that will be fundamental for a nationalist project that attempts to resist the influence of the United States. Furthermore, by romanticizing the countryside population Roqué brings her characters closer to the “genuine jíbaro” Pedreira describes in his 1935 essay *La actualidad del jíbaro*. That is, a peasant with a machete under his belt who is kind, friendly, at times superstitious, has an innate enthusiasm for music, and is authentically Puerto Rican (23-24). The outcome is a narrative that denotes a desire to introduce a “voz correctora” by becoming a “divulgadora de [una] historia nacional y promotora de un plan político” that privilege rural life as the perfect place to reconcile national identity and women’s emancipation (Matin and Goswitz 17). It is an invitation to appreciate the countryside as essential to the nation-building project.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The category next generation of writers refers to authors whose literary careers gelled in the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed list of Roqué’s publications consult Paravisini-Gebert’s edition of *Luz y sombra* (155-156).



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<sup>3</sup> Miguel Meléndez Muñoz's "La tristeza campesina" is one of the best examples of this conceptualization of the jíbaro.

<sup>4</sup> In *Luz y sombra*, Matilde mentions that she owns the works of José Gautier Benítez, José Gualberto Padilla (El Caribe), Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, Francisco del Valle Atilés, and Manuel Zeno Gandía (61).

<sup>5</sup> Francisco del Valle Atilés' *Inocencia* (1884) is an instance of a novel about city life.

<sup>6</sup> Another novel dealing with the rape of a lower-class woman is Salvador Brau's *Pecadora* (1887). However, the narration takes place in the countryside. It is also interesting to note that Brau is not included among the Puerto Rican authors whose works Matilde owns.

<sup>7</sup> Her thoughts shifted from local autonomy to total independence on various occasions, following the path set up by the Partido Autonomista whose idea of the United States as savior changed after the exclusion of its members from national affairs.

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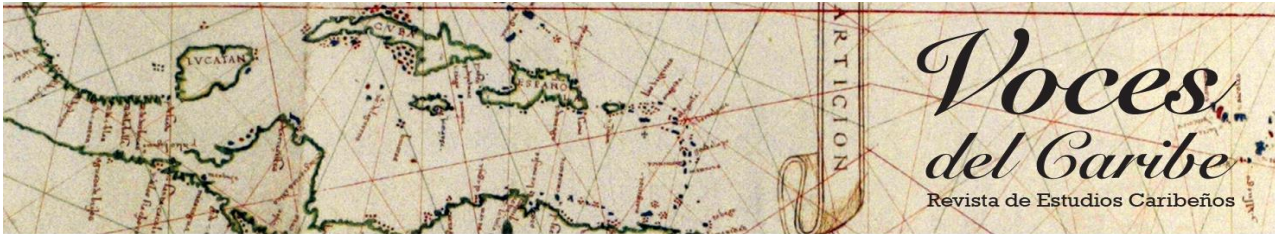
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