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**The Twilight Zone:  
Puerto Rico's Cultural Identity in the Work of José Luis González<sup>1</sup>**

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*For the value of a thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar.*  
-Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*<sup>2</sup>

*Relation is learning more and more to go beyond judgements into the unexpected dark of art's upsurgings.*

- Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*<sup>3</sup>

*For Eva Benesova*

This essay deals with the rhetoric of intellectual discourse in Puerto Rico. More specifically, I examine the work of José Luis González (1926-1996), considering the role exile played in his intellectual life: exile not just in the sense of an absence from the native country, but as an epistemological ostracism. I contend that González's work reveals the articulation of a particular ethical positioning that stems from a nonconformist and sceptical ideological stance at odds with that of the cultural establishment in Puerto Rico. In relation to this volume of essays his work is of particular value, since it emphasises Puerto Rico's "Caribbeanness," inserting it into a regional outlook.

During his lifetime, González was well known for his polemical views on literature and politics. He spent more than half of his life in exile, in New York, Prague and finally in Mexico City. For him, exile provided a privileged perspective from which

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the scholars and staff of the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies at the University of London, where, as a Visiting Research Fellow, I began my explorations on José Luis González's oeuvre in the summer months of 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno. *Minima Moralia*. Tr. E. F. N. Jephcott. London: New Left Books, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Édouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. Tr. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992.

to observe more accurately what he defined as “el bosque de la realidad nacional” [the forest of national reality] (“Writer in Exile” 106). Commenting on González’s life and work, Puerto Rican literary scholar Arcadio Díaz Quiñones thus explains:

Se puede sostener que la ausencia y los desplazamientos —forzados o voluntarios— fueron para González un modo de hacer literatura, y un tipo de mirada sobre el mundo. Descubrió que la distancia podía ser un gran lugar para la construcción histórica de identidades.

[It could be said that the absence and displacements –forced or voluntary– were for González both a way of making literature and a particular kind of looking at the world. He discovered that distance could be a good place for the historical construction of identities.] (Díaz Quiñones 2000: 183)

From this marginal, exilic position, González was able to offer a controversial view of Puerto Rican cultural identity that he developed in both his fiction and non-fiction.

Yet, before moving on to a detailed examination, one must here first evoke the historical context that shaped González’s life and work. González was born in the Dominican Republic, but moved with his family to the neighbouring island of Puerto Rico as a direct result of the rise to power of the dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1930. During the 1940s when González was growing up and reaching intellectual maturity, Puerto Rico’s economy was being transformed from an agrarian model to one marked by American-based industrial production. The economic overhaul would prove to be the first step of a more comprehensive change in Puerto Rican society, politics and culture, a change that was based on a “reinterpretation” of the colonial bond between the island and

the United States. In 1952, the *Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico* (“Free Associated State” - or Commonwealth - of Puerto Rico) was created by the Puerto Rican Governor Luis Muñoz Marín, a former advocate of independence. The creation of the ELA fostered a rapid development in education, health services as well as in the economic field. In the latter, the new status served to attract capital from a number of American companies that established branches in the island under tax-exempt conditions; development was further marked by an increasing dependency on US federal grants, a fact that has severely impacted on the political options available to Puerto Rico. On the political level, one might also observe that while providing the island’s elites with more autonomy than was granted under colonial rule, the new status translated into the island’s subordination as a “territory” to the United States Congress’s institutional agenda. In a suggestive description of the political “Twilight Zone” as conceived by Muñoz Marín and Puerto Rico’s technocrats in the 1950s, Ramón Soto-Crespo describes the ELA as a “borderland state-form that actively erodes a nationalist logic while using this strategy to retain national distinctiveness and proliferate postnational narratives” (2). Similarly, the anthropologist Jorge Duany highlights the contradictions of the Free Associated State, following Juan Flores’s conceptualization of Puerto Rico as a “postcolonial colony”:

Commonwealth was originally supposed to be a transitory, intermediate status between full independence and complete annexation as a state of the Union [...] the federal government retained jurisdiction over most state affairs, including citizenship, immigration, customs, defense, currency, transportation, communications, and foreign trade. Although Puerto Ricans elect a resident commissioner to Congress, they do not have their

own voting representatives or senators in Washington. Even though Puerto Ricans cannot vote for the president of the United States, they are bound to serve in the U.S. armed forces like any other citizens. While Island residents do not pay federal taxes, they qualify for most federally funded programs, including nutritional assistance and welfare benefits. Such contradictory elements may well warrant the term “postcolonial colony” to describe Puerto Rico’s problematic relationship with the United States.

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Given González’s political convictions and his choice to live in exile in Mexico, it is indispensable to keep in mind the historical and political background. González witnessed the dramatic transformation that Puerto Rico was undergoing during the mid-century and in his early fiction—*En la sombra* [*In the Shade*] (1943), *Cinco cuentos de sangre* [*Five Blood Stories*] (1945), *El hombre en la calle* [*Man in the Street*] (1948)—sought to portray the new urban landscape produced by these industrial and economic changes through his realist style. He was virtually alone in this experimental artistic endeavour, since his contemporaries (René Marqués and Abelardo Díaz Alfaro, among others) were reluctant to abandon the traditional depiction of Puerto Rico as a rural society. Furthermore, after his move to New York in 1947, his fiction – which underwent further changes and became more avant-garde – often focussed on the harsh reality experienced by thousands of newly arrived Puerto Rican immigrants who had fled to the United States to pursue the promise of better jobs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> González spent three years in New York City while attending the New School for Social Research. His stay coincided with that of other important Puerto Rican writers such as Juan Antonio Corretjer and Julia de Burgos.

The discovery of a rapidly growing Puerto Rican diaspora concentrated in the area of East Harlem or “El Barrio” struck González so deeply that he was not only inspired as a writer, but also moved to spend the rest of his life defending the diaspora as “un aspecto importante de la experiencia nacional puertorriqueña” [an important aspect of the Puerto Rican national experience]” (Díaz-Quñones 1976: 43). Some of González’s most widely studied short stories deal with Puerto Rican immigrants trying to cope in a hostile society that does not offer easy routes to social integration. Ethnic, linguistic, and racial prejudice, the lack of well-remunerated job opportunities and violence are common themes in his short stories, which include “En Nueva York” [In New York], “Paisa” [Compatriot] “La carta” [The Letter], “En este lado” [On This Side], and “La noche que volvimos a ser gente” [The Night We Were People Again]. To take an example, in “The Letter” a *jíbaro*, or Puerto Rican peasant, who has recently emigrated to New York writes home to his mother, who lives in a poor village on the island. Seeking to convey the impression that he is enjoying a prosperous life in New York, Juan’s letter embellishes and invents the details of his living conditions. In the end, however, the third-person narrator reveals the truth that Juan has tried to hide: life in New York was so difficult that Juan had to crouch in front of the post office faking a crippled arm in order to gather enough money to pay for a stamp and an envelope to mail the letter. For González, the fate of this fictional character in the US – marked as it is by unemployment, humiliation and poverty - is not to be separated from the fate of Puerto Rico and speaks to his critique of the island’s dependency.

González further developed his controversial view of Puerto Rican cultural identity in his non-fictional publications. In his most acclaimed work in this genre, *El*

*país de cuatro pisos* (*The Four-Storeyed Country*), published in Mexico City in 1979 and the following year in a longer version in San Juan in Puerto Rico, González enters a long-standing tradition in Latin American literature, a tradition that starts with Andrés Bello in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and continues with D. F. Sarmiento, José Vasconcelos, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, José Carlos Mariátegui, Mariano Picón Salas, Jorge Mañach, Octavio Paz and Brazilian Antonio Candido, among many others. In the essay “The Four-Storeyed Country” – included in the book of the same name – González proposes a cultural self-definition of Puerto Rico and thus participates in the rhetorical tradition that seeks to articulate the specificity of Latin America in cultural terms. One might here refer to the influential *El laberinto de la soledad* [*The Labyrinth of Solitude*] (1950), in which Octavio Paz seeks to explain Mexican cultural identity in terms of a superposition of masks that has jeopardized the development of a national subject.<sup>5</sup> González argues that Puerto Rico’s existence as a nation is the product of four historical floors that have shaped its cultural individuality under the colonial rule of Spain and the United States. Each floor corresponds to a particular cultural component, beginning with its African heritage, passing through the immigration of Mediterranean farmers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the US invasion of 1898, and ending with the contemporary floor that dates from the 1940’s and is still under construction. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, the experience of the diaspora does not play a significant role in González’s theoretical appraisal of Puerto Rican culture. As critic Juan Flores suggests in “El Puerto Rico de José Luis González” [“José Luis González’s Puerto Rico”], one has to turn to González’s literary production in order to grasp his understanding of the significance of the diaspora in Puerto Rican

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<sup>5</sup> Octavio Paz. *El laberinto de la soledad*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992.

culture (61). Indeed, one might take Flores's view one step further and argue that it is virtually impossible to understand Puerto Rican culture as a whole without resorting to González's prolific oeuvre in its entirety. González proposes a way of theorizing Puerto Ricanness that is completely different from the cultural model institutionalized by the Hispanocentric ideology that dominated Puerto Rico's debate on nationality since the 1930s. This intellectual distancing is rooted in González's defense of the African heritage and the diaspora to describe the multicultural character of the Puerto Rican subject.

Time has played its part in attenuating the forcefulness of González's remarks on Puerto Rican culture, which is now much less dominated by Hispano-centrism. However, the magnitude of his critical siege of Puerto Rico's lettered city and its Eurocentric model of culture has been so powerful that well over two decades after its original publication this essay is still compulsory reading material in school and university curricula. How can we explain the continuing significance of González's vision of Puerto Rican culture? My contention is that its visibility has to do with the fact that González was able to insert his understanding of the emergence and development of the diverse cultures that shape Puerto Ricanness into the broader context of the Americas, building on the intellectual legacy of "regionalist" thinkers like Eugenio María de Hostos. In an interview with Josean Ramos, González speaks about his debt to this important 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectual and, in particular, to the "Latin American view" that characterized his socio-political thought:

No pretendo darle lecciones a nadie, pero sí me parece importante que los puertorriqueños conozcan una visión que está determinada en gran medida por una larga experiencia latinoamericana. Nadie me saca de la cabeza que el

“fracaso” de Hostos en Puerto Rico se debió sobre todo a que él era entonces (1898-1900) el único intelectual puertorriqueño cuya formación le debía más a América Latina que a Europa o a los Estados Unidos. Vio a Puerto Rico con ojos latinoamericanos y por eso nadie lo entendió. Y el hecho es que lo vio mejor que nadie. Yo no soy Hostos, sobra decirlo, pero creo que mi visión latinoamericana de Puerto Rico puede aportar algo a la mejor comprensión del país. (11)

[I do not aspire lecture anybody, but I believe that it is important that Puerto Ricans know a perspective that is largely determined by a long Latin American experience. There is no doubt in my mind that Hostos’ “failure” in Puerto Rico was due above all to the fact that he was at the time (1899-1900) the only Puerto Rican intellectual, whose formation was indebted more to Latin America than to Europe or the United States. He saw Puerto Rico with Latin American eyes and that is why nobody understood him. Needless to say, I am not Hostos, but I believe that my Latin American perspective on Puerto Rico may contribute to a better understanding of the country.]

To understand the importance of his comments, one here needs to emphasise that González’s contribution to the debate on nationality came at a moment in Puerto Rican history when the dominant political ideologies both inside the island and in the metropolis were inclining the balance towards a socio-cultural assimilation to the United States.

González’s hermeneutical enterprise presents itself in frank opposition to the Hispanocentric cultural ethos predominant in Puerto Rico since the 1930s, especially

since the publication of *Insularismo* [*Insularity*] by Antonio S. Pedreira in 1934. Pedreira was not the only intellectual of the time to theorize Puerto Rican cultural identity in this way. *Prontuario histórico de Puerto Rico* [*Puerto Rican Historical Index*] (1935) by Tomás Blanco and the essays of Emilio S. Belaval collected in *Problemas de la cultura puertorriqueña* [*Problems of Puerto Rican Culture*] (1977) were also instrumental in molding the Eurocentric vision of Puerto Ricanness that would be institutionalized two decades later by Muñoz Marín's collaborationist intelligentsia. Like Pedreira but from the opposite ideological position, González legitimizes his enunciatory standpoint through the theorization of both the particularities of a specific cultural domain and the subject that allegorizes that space. In Pedreira's project, the national subject is represented by the *jíbaro* – the white peasant – as “la raíz central de nuestra cultura” [central root of [Puerto Rican] culture] (133). The trope of the *jíbaro* here functions as an Iberian-based cultural matrix that consumes the indigenous and Afro-Caribbean components of Puerto Rico's cultural identity, an identity that Pedreira understands as a “conjunto provisional de ademanes que operan convulsos en el fondo de nuestra sociedad” [set of provisional gestures that operate convulsively at the base of our society] (142). Four decades later, González would resort to the Afro-Caribbean “gesture” to explain Puerto Rican culture,<sup>6</sup> distancing himself from the “jibarista” model envisioned by Pedreira. González points out the centrality of a Puerto Rican “popular culture” at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in

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<sup>6</sup> Another Hispanic Caribbean intellectual, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, appeals to the same rhetorical move to define the cultural specificity of the Cuban nation. In *The Repeating Island: the Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Benítez-Rojo identifies the variable that condenses Cubanness in the way two black women walk: ‘...two old black women passed “in a certain kind of way”; I will say only that there was a kind of ancient and golden powder between their gnarled legs, a scent of basil and mint in their dress, a symbolic, ritual wisdom in their gesture and their gay chatter (10).’

which the white peasant is a minor component in relation to the larger “Afro-Caribbean” sector:

La cultura popular puertorriqueña primeriza fue, pues, fundamentalmente afroantillana. El campesinado blanco que se constituyó más tarde, sobre todo el de la región montañosa, produjo una variante de la cultura popular que se desarrolló de manera relativamente autónoma hasta que el auge de la industria azucarera de la costa y la decadencia de la economía cafetalera de la montaña determinaron el desplazamiento de un considerable sector de la población de la “altura” a la “bajura”. Lo que se dio de entonces en adelante fue la interacción de las dos vertientes de la cultura popular, pero con claro predominio de la vertiente afroantillana por razones demográficas, económicas y sociales. (37)

[The Puerto Rican popular culture of the beginning was fundamentally Afro-Caribbean. The white peasantry that established itself later on, particularly in the mountain region, produced a variant of the popular culture that developed in a relatively autonomous way until the heyday of the sugar industry of the coast and the decadence of the coffee economy determined the displacement from the “heights” to the “lowland?”. What happened from then on was the interaction of these two aspects of popular culture, but with the clear predominance of the Afro-Caribbean one for demographic, economic and social reasons.]

In other words, González displaces the tradition of the white peasant as the structural matrix of Puerto Rican culture, and replaces it with the Afro-Caribbean component. While Pedreira focuses on the manners and traditions of the white peasant of the mountain region, González emphasises Afro-Caribbean culture. One might observe here that by seeing the Afro-Caribbean component as definitive of Puerto Rican culture, González is resorting to a rhetorical move that in form resembles that of Rodó in *Ariel*<sup>7</sup> (1900), Henríquez Ureña in “La utopía de América”<sup>8</sup> [“(Latin) American Utopia”] (1922) and Vasconcelos in *La raza cósmica*<sup>9</sup> [*The Cosmic Race*] (1925), who set up the European component as fulcrum to any definition of Latin American cultural identity. Significantly, their formulations/definitions of Latin American culture had arisen in the post-Spanish-American War context, when the United States had consolidated their regional dominance. The Latin American intelligentsia responded by emphasising Latin America’s link to a tradition that could be traced back to the Roman Empire and Ancient Greece, seen as the core of Western culture. These theories reproduce what Martinican Édouard Glissant understands - with Hegelian undertones - as the mode of “filiation”: “The retelling (certifying) of a ‘creation of the world’ in a filiation guarantees that this same filiation--or legitimacy--rigorously ensues simply by describing in reverse the trajectory of the community, from its present to this act of creation” (47). In the case of González, it is evident that by identifying the Afro-Caribbean component as origin and structuring center of Puerto Rico’s cultural identity, his argument repeats the discursive

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<sup>7</sup> José Enrique Rodó. *Ariel; Motivos de Proteo*. 1900. Ed. Ángel Rama. Caracas: Ayacucho, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Pedro Henríquez Ureña. *La utopía de América*. Ed. Ángel Rama and Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot. Caracas: Ayacucho, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> José Vasconcelos. *La raza cósmica: misión de la raza Iberoamericana: Argentina y Brasil*. 1925. Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe, 1948.

maneuvers of the cultural model defended by Latin American intellectuals at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and in particular by the Hispanocentric Puerto Rican intelligentsia in the 1930s.

Despite the importance of his work, González was not the first thinker to propose an Afro-Caribbean Puerto Ricanness. In the early 70s, Isabelo Zenón Cruz had undermined the idea of culture as defended by the Hispanocentric intelligentsia with *Narciso descubre su trasero* (1974) [*Narcissus discovers his bottom*]<sup>10</sup> published a year after the centennial commemoration of the abolition of slavery in the island. Based on the theoretical views of the Martinican intellectual Frantz Fanon, this pioneering denunciation of racial and cultural obscurantism in Puerto Rico is, still today, waiting to be given the attention it deserves by scholarly criticism. Without a doubt, *The Four-Storeyed Country* builds on this new cultural epistemology inaugurated by Zenón Cruz's work. Furthermore, González's project expands on it by claiming a larger Pan-Caribbean identity for Puerto Rico:

Creo en reconstruir hacia adelante, hacia un futuro como el que definían los mejores socialistas proletarios puertorriqueños de principios de siglo cuando postulaban una independencia nacional capaz de organizar el país en “una democracia industrial gobernada por los trabajadores”; hacia un futuro que, apoyándose en la tradición cultural de las masas populares, redescubra y rescate la caribeñidad esencial de nuestra identidad colectiva y comprenda de una vez por todas que el destino natural de Puerto Rico es

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<sup>10</sup> Isabelo Zenón Cruz. *Narciso descubre su trasero*. Humacao, Puerto Rico: Furidi, 1974.

el mismo de todos los demás pueblos, insulares y continentales, del Caribe.

[I believe in reconstructing forward, towards a future like the one defined by the best Puerto Rican proletarian socialists from the beginning of the century, when they postulated a national independence capable of organizing the country as an ‘industrial democracy led by workers’; towards a future that, basing itself on the cultural tradition of the popular masses, would rediscover and rescue the essential Caribbeanness of our collective identity, and would understand once and for all that Puerto Rico’s natural destiny is the same as that of the other peoples of the – insular and continental - Caribbean]. (40)

Politics and culture, that is, a socialist future and an emphasis on Puerto Rican’s Caribbeanness, go hand in hand for González. That “Caribbeanness” towards which any discussion on Puerto Rican culture must be oriented is anchored in the African “historical root” (19). However, the way in which the continuity of the Afro-Caribbean tradition in Puerto Rico and the rest of the Hispanic Caribbean has been treated in intellectual discourse is somewhat problematic on a historical level. For instance, in an insightful presentation at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in 1981 (later published in *Casa de las Américas*), sociologist Manuel Maldonado Denis questions González’s view of Puerto Ricanness, arguing that it minimizes the impact of the *jornalero* [white peasant] heritage in the development of Puerto Rican culture by presenting it merely as an ancillary element. This critique is echoed by both the literary scholar José Emilio

González in 1981 and the historian Juan Manuel Carrión in 1986. In Maldonado Denis' words:

Mi impresión como lector es que el cuadro histórico presentado por González da muestras de un desequilibrio en el aquilatamiento de la formación social y nacional puertorriqueña que le hace cargar la mano en favor del ingrediente africano de nuestra cultura nacional -con el propósito, sin duda, de deshacer un entuerto histórico- pero que en el proceso se termina convirtiendo al campesino blanco puertorriqueño en un factor secundario de nuestra formación como pueblo.

[My impression as a reader is that the historical picture presented by Gonzalez evidences a disequilibrium in the assessment of the Puerto Rican social and national formation, which makes him favor the African component of our national culture - without a doubt with the intention of correcting a historical injustice - but in the process ends up transforming the white Puerto Rican peasant into a secondary element of our development as a people.] (152)

It might be helpful here to read this “intention” to “correct a historical injustice” within the larger historical context of the Caribbean. In the case of Cuba, the African component was not claimed as part of the national culture until the time of the avant-garde movements of the 1920s, to which Nicolás Guillén, Emilio Ballagas and the *Revista de Avance* magazine contributed. In the context of the Francophone Caribbean, one might refer to the *négritude* movements of the 1930s (one of whose most famous contributors

was Aimé Césaire), which sought to undo Eurocentric models of identity. In the context of the Dominican Republic, the critique voiced by the avant-garde echoed that of Cuba (one might here think of the poetry of Rubén Suro, Tomás Hernández Franco and Manuel del Cabral), but overall the African heritage is still systematically denied in hegemonic political culture today, despite the extensive work that has been done by many Dominican intellectuals since the 1960s to denounce the reductive official model of cultural identity.

There is another aspect one might criticise in González's oeuvre, which becomes more visible if we refer to Edward W. Said's notions of "origin" and "beginning". In *Beginnings: Intentions and Method*, the latter theorizes knowledge as paradoxical in nature since it depends on the "necessary contingency" of a beginning to legitimize itself (39-50). Yet, contrary to the idea of "origin," the notion of a "beginning" implies an intentional act of exercising authority, the moment when the critic tames the text. In Said words: "The beginning is an effort made on behalf of discursive continuity; thus a term converted into reconstructed history, a unit into a synthesis" (69). In González's scheme of Puerto Rican cultural history, the Afro-Caribbean component is identified as point of "origin" rather than "beginning," and will thus evolve like a living organism or, to follow the metaphor of *The Four-Storeyed Country*, with the precision of a work scientifically designed and built. In relation to this metaphor, the critic Flores questions whether it is theoretically useful to evoke an architectonic principle in a discussion of the cultural history of a people:

¿Se parece el proceso, por no decir progreso, de la cultura de un pueblo a la construcción, camada por camada, de un edificio de muchos pisos? Ni más ni menos, insisto yo, de lo que se parecería a las raíces, tronco y

ramas de un árbol, o a las estaciones del año. La metáfora mecánica de la estructura arquitectónica de José Luis González no es más adecuada para explicar el desarrollo dinámico de la historia cultural que aquellas metáforas más familiares, cíclicas u orgánicas. Ciertamente la imagen metafórica es válida y útil para hacer más comprensibles, desde la óptica de nuestro tiempo, aspectos de la experiencia histórica. Pero no cuando se utiliza como el principio rector de la conceptualización histórica.

[Does the progress of the culture of a people resemble the construction – generation by generation - of a multi-level building? Not more nor less than it would resemble the roots, trunk and branches of a tree or even the seasons, I would insist. The mechanical metaphor of the architectonic structure of José Luis González is not more adequate to explain the dynamic development of cultural history than those more familiar - cyclic or organic - metaphors. Certainly, the metaphoric image is valid and useful to render aspects of historical experience more intelligible from the perspective of our present times. But not when such an image becomes the governing principle of historical conceptualization.] (63-64)

Flores is correct in pointing out the problems that attach to the metaphor of the building under construction for the purposes of explaining the dynamism of a particular social space and its cultural manifestations. However, one must also acknowledge González's sagacity in gesturing towards the possible conceptual limitations of his project in advance. An auto-critical wink is found in the very subtitle of his work: "Notas para una

definición de la cultura puertorriqueña” [Notes on the definition of Puerto Rican culture]. By referring to his inquiry as simple “notes,” González appeals to the sympathy of the reader to judge the validity and depth of his work with generosity, and indicates its provisional nature. Moreover, González seeks to justify his reasoning contextually, by evoking his desire give answers to the urgent questions posed by a “group of young Puerto Rican scholars”:

Un grupo de jóvenes estudiosos puertorriqueños [...] me dirigieron hace poco (escribo en septiembre de 1979) la siguiente pregunta: *¿Cómo crees que ha sido afectada la cultura puertorriqueña por la intervención colonialista norteamericana y cómo ves su desarrollo actual?* Las líneas que siguen constituyen un intento de respuesta a esa pregunta. Las he subtítulo “Notas...” porque sólo aspiro a enunciar el núcleo de un ensayo de interpretación de la realidad histórico-cultural puertorriqueña que indudablemente requeriría un análisis mucho más detenido y unas conclusiones mucho más razonadas. (in italics in the original, 11-12)

[Not long ago (I am writing in September 1979), a group of young Puerto Rican scholars asked me the following question: “How do you think the colonialist intervention of the United States has affected Puerto Rican culture and how do you see the current development of that culture?” The lines that follow are an attempt to answer that question. I have titled them “Notes” because I only aim to formulate the core of an attempt to interpret

Puerto Rico's socio-cultural reality, something that would undoubtedly require a more thorough analysis and more fully thought out conclusions.]

González addresses the youth in the manner Martí, Rodó, Vasconcelos, Henríquez Ureña, Pedreira and the Che Guevara of "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba" ["Socialism and the Man in Cuba"] (1965) once did.<sup>11</sup> The authorial figure presents himself as an educator focused on the task of molding the next generation of intellectuals.<sup>12</sup>

With his authoritative role legitimized, González goes on to personify Puerto Rican culture in order to be able to diagnose its illness more successfully: this illness is, of course, "colonial intervention." This pathological image is employed in González's theory to describe an interruption in the natural course of Puerto Rican culture due to colonial clash:

La cultura popular puertorriqueña, de carácter esencialmente afroantillano, nos hizo, durante los tres primeros siglos de nuestra historia pos-colombina, un pueblo caribeño más... Si la sociedad puertorriqueña hubiera evolucionado de entonces en adelante de la misma manera que las de otras islas del Caribe, nuestra actual "cultura nacional" sería esa cultura mestiza, primordialmente afroantillana. (22)

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<sup>11</sup> Ernesto "Che" Guevara. "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba." *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba*. New York: Pathfinder, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> In one of the first reviews of *The Four-Storeyed Building* published in Puerto Rico, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones describes González as a "founding teacher": "...González es un maestro fundador: estimula la curiosidad y la imaginación, pone sobre el tapete la necesidad de nuevas búsquedas, socava los cómodos lugares comunes, impulsa la pesquisa de nuevos datos, y, sobre todo, de nuevas significaciones" (18). [González is a founding teacher: he stimulates curiosity and imagination, brings to the fore the necessity of new searches, undermines comfortable common places, promotes the research of new data and, above all, new significations.]

[Puerto Rican popular culture, fundamentally Afro-Caribbean in character, made us into one of the Caribbean peoples. If Puerto Rican society from that time onwards had evolved in the same manner as the other Caribbean islands, our 'national culture' would be a mestizo one, fundamentally Afro-Caribbean.]

According to González, European (Corsicans, Majorcans and Catalonians) and South American immigration throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the transferring of the island to United States Navy authorities in 1898 are the two events that mark this radical change in the evolution of Puerto Rican national consciousness. Thus, one must understand “The Four-Storeyed Country” from the corrective perspective defended by the author in his effort to describe the existence of a tangible Puerto Ricanness characterized by its diversity. In González’s words: “En Puerto Rico se nos ha ‘vendido’ durante más de medio siglo el mito de una homogeneidad social, racial y cultural que ya es tiempo de empezar a desmontar para entenderlo correctamente en su objetiva y real diversidad.” [In Puerto Rico we have been presented with the myth of a social, racial and cultural homogeneity for more than half a century; it is time to dismantle this myth through reference to objective and real diversity] (24).

Yet despite his critique of the reductive conceptualisation of culture imagined by the Hispanocentric intelligentsia, one might observe that González seems to be a victim of his own conceptual apparatus. In proposing as a corrective alternative the idea that Puerto Ricanness in its “objective and real diversity” includes an African component, González reinforces the vision of Puerto Rican culture as monument; in other words, even if Puerto Rico’s cultural identity in “The Four-Storeyed Country” implicates a

broader spectrum of variables that subverts the “official history” of the Puerto Rican nation, González ends up legitimizing another cultural dolmen in need of being worshipped as archive. Certainly, for González there is the historical data that serves as evidence to be interpreted by the researcher. But, in assuming this, he is ignoring what Michel de Certeau theorises in *The Writing of History* as the “social space,” that is, the fact that any given historical analysis is mediated both by the idiosyncrasy of the historian and the social networks that intersect him/her unfailingly (21).

Despite González’s insistence on the scientific rigor of his analysis of Puerto Rico’s cultural history, in the final moments of his study, the argument loses in forcefulness. The description of the “fourth floor,” which the author locates in the 1940s (the decade characterised by the rapid industrial development of the island), remains very sketchy. This contrasts strongly with the detailed depiction of the other three historical floors. One of the most striking omissions in González’s portrait of this “fourth floor” is the fluid communication with the Puerto Rican diaspora, prominent especially towards the end of the 1950s, when Governor Muñoz Marín encouraged the massive emigration of Puerto Ricans to the United States as a means of controlling overpopulation. As Flores puts it: “Es especialmente sorprendente que González haga caso omiso de la experiencia nuyorrican y emigratoria como un nivel distinto de la historia cultural puertorriqueña, ya que fue él uno de los primeros escritores en introducir esa realidad como tema en la literatura nacional.” [It is particularly surprising that González omitted the ‘Newyorican’ and migratory experience as a different level of Puerto Rican cultural history, since he was one of the first writers to introduce the this reality as a theme of national literature] (61). As another omission, one might here also point to the history of Hispanic Caribbean

immigration to Puerto Rico, which began in the early 1960s with the first big flow of Cuban and Dominican exiles, followed by an even greater displacement of economic refugees from the Dominican Republic in the 1970s until today.<sup>13</sup> Since then, Cuban and Dominican communities in Puerto Rico constitute strong and influential ethnic minorities. Mentioning these other components of Puerto Rico's socio-cultural spectrum could have contributed to the "fundamentally Caribbean" features González wishes to emphasize in his description of Puerto Rican cultural identity. However, it seems that González is unable to restrain himself from the modern temptation - common to the Latin American essay of cultural definition - of seeking legitimizing genealogies and fixed historical identities.

At a time when Puerto Ricanness has become a very lucrative commodity for multinational merchants (e.g. Think of the slogan of the Pepsi brand "PR es Pepsi") as well as for ideologists from all political persuasions in the island (independence, US statehood and commonwealth status), González's anti-racist, non-Eurocentric and profoundly regionalist theorization of Puerto Rican culture continues to shed light on the contradictions that stem from the island's ambivalent political status as a Spanish-speaking US territory with a fundamentally Latin American cultural history and undoubted links to, and similarities with, the "insular and continental" Caribbean.

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<sup>13</sup> Until now, the most comprehensive study of the Dominican immigration to Puerto Rico is *El Barrio Gandul: economía subterránea y migración indocumentada* (1995) by Jorge Duany, Luisa Hernández and César A. Rey. In this study, the social scientists analyze the everyday life practices of an area of Santurce, a historically working-class neighborhood in San Juan, inhabited almost entirely by Dominican immigrants. Among their important remarks is 1) the political and economic nature of the flux of migrants to Puerto Rico and 2) the estimate of about 60,000 Dominicans, legal and undocumented, living in Puerto Rico for 1990, a number that contradicts the official cipher of 250,000 offered by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (105-108).

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