

# PERENNIAL EMPIRES

Postcolonial, Transnational,  
and Literary Perspectives



EDITED BY

Chantal Zabus AND Silvia Nagy-Zekmi

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## CHAPTER 10

# EXHIBITING PUERTO RICO'S COLONIAL STATUS THROUGH THE FICTION OF RENÉ MARQUÉS AND LUIS LÓPEZ NIEVES

*Asima F. X. Saad Maura*

La literatura es una de las expresiones más exhibicionistas del mundo. Esto es así porque es un flujo de textos, y pocas cosas hay que sean tan exhibicionistas como un texto.

—Antonio Benítez Rojo (1989)

Throughout the onslaught of time, writers have consistently memorialized and lifted the veil that covers up the sociopolitical trajectory of a people. Creative writers elaborate history into works of fiction that help readers understand and cope with realities that are often repulsive and beyond

reason. Puerto Ricans have been shrouded in clouds of make-believe and stories of deception that appear in history books, the commercial press, or in radio and television broadcasts. It has been the task of writers to dispel those misty representations of events and awaken the conscience of the readers to all that has been hidden and forgotten for generations. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones labels the phenomenon of forgetfulness "the broken memory" (70), the act of eliminating all residue of the collective memory that is obtained with every colonial enterprise.

It is at this point that a new type of literature becomes essential, one that does not allow people to sleep peacefully. Ana Lydia Vega's name for the writer of such literature—for a sort of rescuer of truth—is *historicida*, literally meaning a *killer of history*, where history is understood as a rendering of manipulated facts (101). *History* is an official story made public and diffused by the powers that control the media in order to "manufacture consensus" among the population, as Herman and Chomsky attest. According to Vega, even though the facts of history cannot be rectified, they deserve to be reevaluated through fiction, which is the only clear and honest way of telling the truth. In "El oro de Colón," Rosario Ferré brings to the fore the controversy surrounding the five hundredth anniversary of the "discovery" of the land now called Puerto Rico by the Iberians. Ferré simultaneously addresses the failure of the authorities who have established the celebration, as well as of the population who have accepted it, to recall the decimation of indigenous populations and the destruction of a civilization, as well as the tenacious debate of legitimacy that surrounds this yearly celebration. Díaz Quiñones, on the other hand, traces the citizen's ability to choose between remembering and forgetting back to Socrates, for whom memory was the mother of the muses.

Puerto Rican writers have been telling the other side of the story by recreating a history that is deemed by the authorities to be too harsh for public consumption. The only way in which the people of Puerto Rico can be reminded of their roots is via literature, a medium that allows for endless variations on a historical theme. Because it is unacceptable to denounce cultural and geopolitical crimes through the mass media, the



fictional crimes set forth in a poem, short story, drama, or novel, though they represent real illegal and immoral acts, are usually met with a silent nod and the general agreement of the intellectual few and even, in some cases, of the masses. Should one consent, then, to Pablo Neruda's eloquent, if not apologetic, explanation that the Spaniards took all the material wealth during their conquest of the New World, but that they left behind much more—namely, the Spanish language (77–78)? At first glance, one might be led to believe that writers have been using the same rich, precious, beautiful language for hundreds of years in order to revisit the historical past. However, a closer look leads to a recognition of the linguistic process of hybridization that has taken place as the colonizers' language has been transformed through the incorporation and use of the indigenous lexicon. Examples of these phenomena can be found in the various chronicles of the Indies written by the Spaniards, and the same extends to contemporary writers who want to pay homage to that indigenous subaltern voice.

Puerto Rico is the quintessential example of an externally owned territory. Not once but twice, Puerto Rico's colonial history has repeated itself. In the Caribbean, Puerto Rico is *the repeating island*, to use the term coined by Antonio Benítez Rojo. In the context of the Cold War, the island became a symbol of unprecedented prosperity and modernity through private accumulation of capital investment and through tax shelters and perks for the transnational corporate establishment. The secret variable for Puerto Rico was the constant flow of revenue coming from the United States, revenue that was used to create a military and industrial infrastructure and to execute massive public works, such as roads, sewage and electrical systems, housing, schools, and hospitals. The miracle of the Puerto Rican boom was not a result of private initiatives, for there was strict state control of the economy at both the federal and local levels. Yet the Puerto Rican model of development was to be emulated by other emerging nation-states in the postcolonial world, particularly vis-à-vis the social-democratic or soviet aspects of the model that were in vogue at the time.<sup>101</sup> Puerto Rico came to be known as *La vitrina del Caribe* (the display case of the Caribbean), an appellation used with

deep pride by the true believers of the official story. Taking into consideration the disparity between the political reality, viewed as negative by those against the military presence of the United States, and the different ways in which it was "softened" to make it look beneficial to the people of Puerto Rico, it is not uncommon for Puerto Rican writers to resort to storytelling in order to stir citizens from their political slumber by assembling a coherent narrative from the shards and fragments of a broken memory.

Through their fiction, René Marqués (1919–1979) and Luis López Nieves (1950–) address the importance of a critical reading of history by unveiling both the embellished memories of Puerto Rico's Hispano-Catholic past—a sort of phantom empire, seemingly forgotten—and the constant reminder of the Anglo-Protestant presence of the United States. Since 1898, there has been a division between advocates of independence (*independendistas*) and those who would like to see Puerto Rico as the fifty-first state of the North American union (*unionistas*). The arguments of either group seem to lack credibility inasmuch as the future status of Puerto Rico is an issue that lies squarely with the Congress of the United States, to which neither *independendistas* nor *unionistas* appear to grant any validity whatsoever. On this point, Ramón Grosfoguel notes

[t]he unequal power relationships between Puerto Rico and the United States despite the fact that Puerto Rico is still under the territorial clause of the United States. Although the United States selectively confronts the lack of democratic and human rights around the world, it maintains a colonial administration in its "backyard" and refuses to organize a democratic referendum on Puerto Rico's status. (5)

On the other hand, Puerto Ricans seem to be content with the formal trappings of a liberal democracy and a market economy that drives a wild, senseless consumer society, regardless of soaring socioeconomic disparities, high unemployment, and rampant criminality. It could thus be said that the people of the island are fragmented not only politically but also in their innermost selves: psychologically, geographically,

historically, linguistically, and existentially. The building blocks of the national identity have jagged edges that do not fit seamlessly into the superstructure. There is a feeling of anomie, confusion, and denial among the general populace. To this day, the Puerto Rican case represents that of a people who have struggled to retain their language, cultural identity, and national dignity when the island was passed as spoils of war from one empire to another at the end of the nineteenth century. Colonial administrations have attempted to erase any desire in Puerto Rican citizens to ponder the past and so discover the reasons behind historical events. Governed for roughly four hundred years by Spain and for well over a century by the United States of America, Puerto Ricans are today divided into those who wish to remember and those who prefer to live in oblivion. Contemporary Puerto Rican literature describes the island's transition from an agrarian society to a postindustrial wasteland, a shift that took place in less than fifty years. In the wake of such rapid change, generations of Puerto Rican islanders and immigrants to the United States alike attempt to hold on to traditional mores and language by remaining faithful to their Hispanic heritage.

The array of historical accounts produced in literary writings since the early days of the nineteenth century, which contributed to the formation of Puerto Rico's national identity, is substantial. René Marqués and Luis López Nieves are only two writers who have managed to retell history, each imbuing invasion, colonization, and empire formation with distinct meaning. The works of both authors set forth a profound sense of abandonment and tragedy at the moment of each particular occupation. In Marqués, the critical plot stays within the literary fictional realm, while López Nieves tears asunder the barrier between fiction and reality. With the publication of López Nieves' work, readers actively demanded an investigation into a reality that was nothing other than fiction or, at best, wishful thinking.

It all began within twenty-five years of the Spanish colonization of Puerto Rico, when Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478–1557), the official chronicler of the crown, was already busy writing his *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1526). The work comprises numerous

books, the sixteenth volume of which Fernández de Oviedo dedicated entirely to Puerto Rico: he described in detail what to his foreign eyes appeared extraordinarily new—everything from flora and fauna to the inhabitants, their eating and working habits, their religious beliefs and rituals. Perhaps the most intriguing account is found in the eighth chapter, which records the 1510 drowning of a young Spanish soldier named Diego Salcedo, the man who unwittingly became proof of the invaders' (that is, his own people's) mortality. Decades later Juan de Castellanos (1522–1607), in his famous eulogies in praise of the European men who first set foot on the Indies,<sup>102</sup> included a poetized version of Salcedo's drowning in the eulogy dedicated to Puerto Rico's conquistador, Juan Ponce de León—who had been appointed governor (*adelantado*) of the island by Charles V in 1508. This anecdote served as the core inspiration of the short story "Tres hombres junto al río" (Three men by the riverside), written by René Marqués.<sup>103</sup> Thus, two seventeenth-century texts triggered Marqués' imagination, and he recreated the account from the point of view of one of the natives of the island. The author gives voice to those who, under Spanish rule, never got a chance to speak, those who were never heard and who eventually perished.<sup>104</sup>

In all three versions of the event, the historicity of which is not in doubt, the inexperienced young Spanish adventurer roams unaccompanied through the lands ruled by Cacique Urayoan. Salcedo happens to be good bait for Urayoan, who has already made plans to test the immortality of the Spaniards by capturing one of the invaders and who therefore welcomes Salcedo into his village. After his visit comes to an end, the Cacique orders some of his men to guide the young soldier back home. Aware that the naïve Spaniard trusts them, Urayoan's men offer to carry him on their shoulders when they reach the Guaorabo River (today Gurabo), lest his clothes get wet. As they cross the deepest part, the men hold Salcedo under the water and drown him: this action marks the first rebellion by indigenous people against their European oppressors.

Marqués uses Fernández de Oviedo's chronicle to create his story, which is told by an omniscient narrator who penetrates the mind of one of the native men. The author manipulates the incident so that Salcedo's

death simultaneously represents the natives' revolt against the Spaniards and the dream of many Puerto Rican *unionistas* and *independentistas* to end the present-day colonial status of the island. By juxtaposing two different invasions and colonial governments, Marqués creates a hybrid text. He combines chronicle and epic poetry so as to present the sameness of two empires at the respective moments of conquering and colonizing—first of the Tainos by the Spaniards and second of the Puerto Ricans by the United States of America. In doing this, Marqués creates in a single story a double critique both of the Spanish crown and of later US hegemony in Puerto Rico in particular, as well as in the Caribbean in general. In other words, the sixteenth-century chronicle helps the twentieth-century author to elaborate a storyline in which two discrete periods coexist within a text: the Iberian-colonial era of the fifteenth century and the Anglo-American colonization of the present day. Furthermore, the story presents metaphorically the changes that took place in terms of the names given to Puerto Rico, *the repeating island*. In spite of the chronological distance, Marqués vividly evokes the historical drowning of yore. For instance, his story represents the Taino people's fight for survival during the violent metamorphosis of their original Boriken into the island of San Juan Bautista,<sup>105</sup> later called Puerto Rico.<sup>106</sup> In addition, Marqués sets the stage for the collapse and deformation of that last island, Puerto Rico, when in 1898 it would endure yet another transformation though it kept the same name. Marqués' tale serves as a warning to the island's population that they should ward off the culture and political influences of the new US overlords.

René Marqués' short story describes the Spanish and North American invasions by means of a metaphor: billions of ants marching into the corpse of the young Spanish soldier as his body rapidly decomposes under the tropical sun. In the meantime, the Tainos stare at him, patiently waiting until they can prove his mortality (and thus that of all the colonizers). Marqués' epigraph—"Mataréis al Dios del Miedo y sólo entonces seréis libres" (Thou shall kill the God of Fear, and only then shall you be free)—connects the two invasions and gives meaning to the end of the story. "Tres hombres junto al río" closes when a Taino triumphantly

blows the *fotuto* (Taino for *trumpet* or *horn*) to announce the good news that the White man is not immortal, thinking that his “people shall be free.” The fact that the Taino never says those words out loud perhaps hints at Marqués’ political position, namely, the idea that the thought is not translated into action: Puerto Ricans have yet to set themselves free by rising above their own fears and insecurities—by taking responsibility in order to liberate themselves from their colonial existence. Unless and until self-assurance is achieved, political independence cannot and will not be attained. This thought goes hand in hand with Marqués’ view of Puerto Ricans as “docile,” as he argues in what is probably his most controversial essay.<sup>107</sup>

In Benítez Rojo’s *La isla que se repite*, the conquering agenda of the young Anglo-American nation is quite similar to that of Spain: “authoritarian, monopolistic, intolerant, proslavery, belligerent, racist” (2; my translation). Salcedo’s drowning, therefore, is parallel to Puerto Rico’s weakening: the island succumbs to the megapower exerted by US political and militaristic design. It is not surprising that López Nieves’ *Seva*, first published in the weekly newspaper *Claridad* (23–29 December 1983), caused great furor, for he presented it as the *true* version of the 1898 invasion of Puerto Rico by US forces.<sup>108</sup> Like René Marqués’ “Tres hombres junto al río,” *Seva* is a hybrid work; both incorporate elements of preexisting texts. López Nieves juxtaposes real and fictional documents—letters, recordings of conversations, newspaper clippings, maps, and photographs—in such a way as to blur the lines between reality and invention. When it was first published, *Seva* toyed with Puerto Rican nationalistic sentiment, on the one hand, and the island population’s ingrained apprehension toward independence, on the other.<sup>109</sup> López Nieves’ invented account, presented as historical fact, produced an upheaval, especially since he cited both real and forged letters from Nelson A. Miles, the most skillful US general and commander-in-chief of the US forces during the fateful month of July 1898.

Among the many who have addressed the US invasion is Rosario Ferré, who recounts three different points of view in his essay “Tres versiones del desembarco.” The first version, being the official one, reports

how the US military, led by the fifty-nine-year-old Miles, executed the most successful military incursion in history. Most historical documents report very few deaths during the attack. The second account details the generosity and hospitality of the Puerto Ricans (praising them for it), describing their eager welcoming party—including reports of the traditional flavorful *arroz con pollo* (rice and beans) and of the female Puerto Rican beauties openly displaying “Old Glory” with excitement and gratitude as the incoming soldiers approached. The third and last adaptation of the event, however, has an unusual and intriguing background: it is based on a document by writer Carl Sandburg (1878–1967), who had enlisted to fight in the Spanish-American War in Company C, also known as the Sixth Illinois Infantry.<sup>110</sup> Ferré notes the writer’s different angle, his discontent with the invasion and with the reports that it had happened in a happy-go-lucky way. According to Sandburg, reality was quite different: misery reigned in various forms, for the incoming troops were tormented by mosquitoes, torrential rains, and mudslides, as well as by the unbearable tropical heat. Tasteless canned food, dried meat, and cheap whisky were all that was available—instead of savory Puerto Rican delicacies and the much-desired beautiful women. It is amidst this confusion about what really occurred that López Nieves’ *Seva* purports to transcend all the truths and lies ever told and presents yet a fourth scenario—which, to readers’ chagrin, is merely an invention.

Historical facts indicate that the United States armada invaded Puerto Rico on 25 July 1898, entering through the bay off the shores of Guánica, a coastal town on the southern Caribbean side of the island. In his fictional version of events, López Nieves asserts that the real invasion took place two months earlier, at ten o’clock on the morning of 5 May, by way of Seva, the name López Nieves uses to designate the town on the easternmost part of the island. The settlement, he writes, was entirely wiped out and renamed Ceiba, which is, indeed, its true name. López Nieves’ novella has the citizens of Seva fighting fiercely against the intruders, winning back their land, and keeping their pride. To those who read the story in the newspaper in 1983, this “news” was healing evidence that Puerto Ricans had indeed put up a fight to defend

their country from the troops under General Miles' command. With this piece of writing, López Nieves exploded the idea (perpetuated by René Marqués) that Puerto Ricans are weak, submissive, and docile; he proposed instead that the islanders had fought and won in 1898 but were soon repressed and massacred by the attacker's armed forces; the town of Seva was razed and hidden, buried under Roosevelt Roads, the largest US naval base in the Caribbean until it was abandoned by the Southern Command in 2004.<sup>111</sup> As stated previously, in López Nieves' version, the original name of Seva was replaced with Ceiba. A boy, ten years old at the time, was the only survivor of the alleged slaughter. In his nineties at the time of *Seva's* publication, Mr. Ignacio Martínez was supposedly still hiding in fright of those who had assassinated his family and the entire community.

López Nieves sent his text—consisting of an introductory letter and six attached documents—to *Claridad's* chief editor, Luis Fernando Coss, requesting that it be published. It is important to understand that the author's farcical text is nothing other than a ploy; consequently, a distinction must be made between López Nieves the author and López Nieves the fictional character in the author's novelistic plot: the writer thus acts out two separate personae. He wrote and organized his story as if he were merely narrating what his (fictitious) friend Dr. Víctor Cabañas had told him. The documents accompanying López Nieves' invented memo are (1) "original" letters from Cabañas' personal journal, (2) "original" entries from general Nelson Miles' diary, (3) a real map of Puerto Rico printed in 1896, (4) an "original" affidavit signed by Mr. Ignacio Martínez, (5) photos of Mr. Martínez and his shack,<sup>112</sup> and (6) Mr. Martínez's recorded testimony. Whether *Claridad's* editor knew about López Nieves' literary scam beforehand remains unclear; certainly, when the story went to print in December 1983, no mention was made of the fact that López Nieves had meticulously created and planned the whole story.

The timeline of this story's publication is another element to take into consideration. The manuscript was not published until 23 December 1983, although López Nieves had sent it to Coss on 15 October,



stating that he had been keeping all the data. According to him, he had received Cabañas' letters between 27 June 1978 and 17 January 1981. López Nieves explained that he had waited two years before going public because he had been hoping to hear again from Cabañas, who had now (López Nieves said) disappeared. Through the use of specific dates, López Nieves adds credibility to his fantastic chronicle; the interim of all those years are part of his playful creativity. In her introduction to the 2006 edition of *Seva*, Estelle Irizarry describes the author's technique as a sort of "Chinese box" since the dates he gives serve to "hide" other historical facts (12). For instance, 1978 marks the tragic death of two youngsters who were framed and killed in cold blood by undercover agents in Cerro Maravilla, Puerto Rico's highest mountain. Thus, the dates used by López Nieves in his novella are representative of the times during which intense investigations about this massacre were taking place.

One change presented in *Seva* that contradicts the official story is the information reported in Miles' (fictitious) "personal diary," which López Nieves claimed to have been obtained by Víctor Cabañas during an interview with the general's granddaughter, Peggy Ann Miles, whom López Nieves portrays as an old maid. This fabricated granddaughter was said to live alone, according to López Nieves' account, on 8803 Edison Street in Alexandria, Virginia, barely twenty minutes away from Washington, DC, where Cabañas had been carrying out his research. This presumed finding is accompanied by authentic original photos of Miles and of various battleships of the time, including one of the *USS Gloucester* firing at the village of Guánica on 25 July 1898, the very day of the real invasion. To make his invented documents more believable, López Nieves added a fake handwritten (in English) portion of a page from the general's fictional journal in which Miles confesses "the truth" about the massacre at *Seva*:

Mission accomplished! Four days ago we took the enemy by surprise. Each and every one of the inhabitants of *Seva*. We took quick action but the extermination was not [very]<sup>113</sup> easy, even

though it was 4,000 of us against 721.... I must admit that they presented a ferocious, organized and heroic resistance, worthy of our own war of Independence against the British. (35)

Having given such "proof" of the events at Seva, López Nieves goes on to relate that he had received from his friend eighteen cassettes containing the recorded testimony of the only survivor—the now ninety-two-year-old Ignacio Martínez—about that fatal day. López Nieves then specifies that those recordings came accompanied by an affidavit executed before an official notary and lawyer named Antonio Conde (51). At the end of Cabañas' pursuit of the "truth," and as he explains in his last letter to López Nieves, he was heading to the Roosevelt Roads Naval Base to dig up the buried ruins of the original town of Seva. Subsequently, Cabañas warns the author that his (Cabañas') own life is at risk. Therefore López Nieves ends his account by demanding an official response: "Ahora le corresponde al gobierno explicar: ¿Dónde está el doctor Víctor Cabañas?" (55).<sup>114</sup> Indeed, López Nieves the character is so frantic about his friend's disappearance that the same reaction was triggered among the readers of *Claridad*. His pseudo-chronicle stirred up sentiments of indignation at the alleged deception and evoked feelings of patriotism and nationalism among Puerto Ricans from all political quarters. The commotion experienced throughout the island lasted weeks before the truth of the tale was made available to the public. The seamless blend of reality and fiction was unprecedented: lists of historical and invented facts mixed together; names of numerous persons real and fictitious, dead and alive; specific dates and names—every aspect of the work imparted amazing credibility to López Nieves' invented report. Therefore the author, together with *Claridad*'s editor, had to appease the masses; it took months to placate the provocations in the wake of López Nieves' canny literary swindle. Radio and television shows, newspaper articles, meetings at the University of Puerto Rico and other educational institutions were held to discuss the supposedly real events created by López Nieves. Fearing a violent outbreak, Coss wrote an editorial in which he clarified that *Seva* was nothing more than

“un cuento,”<sup>115</sup> a mere lie. But the revelation of the truth of the matter failed to pacify the people.

How, then, is it possible to distinguish reality from fiction? Can such a distinction even be achieved? Is one to believe what one reads, hears, or even sees? In this day and age imagination is the limit inasmuch as fact and falsehood become but two sides of the same coin. For Hayden White, for instance, the difference between history and fiction “resides in the fact that the historian ‘finds’ his stories, whereas the fiction writer ‘invents’ his” (6). To the disappointment of many, the invented story of *Seva* and its aftershock can be traced to something as banal as wishful thinking. Nonetheless, for some Puerto Ricans, coming to terms with reality was difficult, and they preferred to conduct investigations about the supposedly massacred people of *Seva* and to continue writing about what they insisted were new discoveries. The impact of the piece was powerful: political marches and demonstrations took place; slogans and graffiti appeared all over the island extolling the militant and epic spirit of *Seva* and its people. *Seva* inspired poets and songwriters alike. No conversation was complete without a mention of *Seva*. In short, López Nieves’ *Seva* is one of the best examples of fiction that sparked a historical awakening.<sup>116</sup>

The allegory of the Spanish soldier, created from a historical account by Marqués as a symbol of empire’s vulnerability, continues to beckon the Puerto Rican psyche: that allegory is reflected in López Nieves’ *Seva*, a metaphor that represents the repressed desire of the island’s people for national sovereignty. Yet, reality strikes hard: there is no modern drowning of Salcedo nor any actual *Seva* cover-up to expose. In order to prevent history from repeating itself, conscientious development must take place; otherwise, Puerto Rico is destined to disappear, just as the Tainos vanished and *Seva* was figuratively destroyed. Puerto Rican society finds itself at an impasse. It must either become fully assimilated as part of the United States—the hope of *estadistas*—by giving up its Hispanic heritage and language, or it must assert its right to become a separate political entity, seek to survive in the global economy as a haven of cheap labor, and agree on a new geopolitical arrangement with

the Congress that would allow for trade with the United States. The good intentions of many *independentistas*, who in their attempt to maintain a national identity tout the popular slogan *¡Despierta, boricua!* (Wake up, Boricua!),<sup>117</sup> could backfire. The only remains of *boricua* origin are mere memories preserved in archeological parks and museum exhibits, a nostalgic past captioned in history books and literary works, in folk tales, legends, and songs of struggle.<sup>118</sup> As Fernández de Oviedo, Juan de Castellanos, René Marqués, López Nieves, and others toy with the words inherited from Spain, they exemplify the literary, historical, and historiographical elements in the constant flux of official lies and hidden truths perpetuated by the most powerful empire of current times. “Tres hombres junto al río” represents the circularity of time inasmuch as it attempts to make sense of Puerto Rico’s struggle to end its colonial status. Without knowing it, Fernández de Oviedo had planted the seed that centuries later would be sown by Marqués in order to obliterate the thin line between time and literary genres: two different epochs of the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries—along with history and story, reality and fiction—merged as a unified whole.

The historical past—covered up, ignored, manipulated, and to some extent forgotten—ignited the imagination of both Marqués and López Nieves, moving them to convey a poignant political message and, in so doing, to put an end to its “silencing,” after the title of Trouillot’s 1995 book. Both authors, adopting the subaltern’s voice, reveal, criticize, and make public Puerto Rico’s mindset enslaved by the mighty dollar. Since its formation under Spain and its re-formation later under the United States of America, the dead by sword and fire have been the Tainos and their Puerto Rican descendants in all the wars of empire. The young Spanish soldier Salcedo stands not just as an invader but as a victim in the hands of the invaded. And, although his drowning may be representative of the choking of the island since its beginning, the fictional town of Seva embodies an already drowned Puerto Rico, buried in its own territory under a blanket of asphalt and lies. Fernández de Oviedo’s historical account serves as a metaphorical link for the repeated conquest and colonization of the same space.

Puerto Rico is at a crossroads, and the people are not allowed to decide their own political destiny through transparent democratic processes. In the meantime, United States–led massacres, raids, incarceration, and assassinations of Puerto Rican leaders and militants of the independence movement have not ceased.<sup>119</sup> The motions filed with the US Congress on behalf of the people of Puerto Rico requesting a plebiscite or referendum are usually annulled by the United States. The referenda of 1991 and 1998 were postponed indefinitely. Grosfoguel explains:

Puerto Ricans are aware of the political and economic implications of becoming a neocolonial “independent” or “autonomous” territory, and fewer than 10 percent of the voters support either of these options. The neocolonial domination and exploitation of the so-called independent Caribbean islands by the United States symbolizes for many Puerto Ricans what the future may hold if the island becomes a republic. After [more than] one hundred years of colonialism, neocolonialism represents for Puerto Ricans an expropriation of social and civil rights achieved only through painful struggle under U.S. citizenship. (8)<sup>120</sup>

The only recourse left to Puerto Ricans consists in staying attentive to writers whose literary creations serve to exhibit realities that otherwise would not see the light of day. René Marqués and Luis López Nieves succeed in their representations of Puerto Rico—of its ecological blighted territory and the erosion of its consciousness—as the island straddles a colonial legacy of five centuries. However, unlike Marqués, whose Taino only thinks (and does not speak) and is therefore contemplative and passive, López Nieves portrays the people of Seva acting more closely to the description given by Oviedo: everyone together and fully determined to either kill the Spaniards or die in their attempt. At present, though, Puerto Rico is without a convenient culprit like Salcedo, just as the island is without a Seva that might awaken the *boricuas* to their own strengths and liabilities.

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