

## The Drama of *Yola* Migration and the Biopolitics of Disposability

Puerto Rico queda cerca  
Pero móntate en avión  
Y si consigues la visa  
No hay problemas en Inmigración

Pero no te vayas en yola,  
No te llenes de ilusiones  
Porque en el Canal de la Mona  
Te comen los tiburones

—Wilfrido Vargas

A pervasive image of the Dominican migrant is the stereotypic Dominican-york dressed in fashionable jeans, gold jewelry, and trendy athletic shoes. Further accessorized by the ubiquitous giant suitcases that mark their status as a person on the move, this migrant crisscrosses the Caribbean Sea by airplane, aptly described by the Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez as a *guagua aérea* (flying bus) to capture the easy mobility of Puerto Ricans between the island and New York City. Sanchez's homonymous essay depicts the cultural disconnect between the gringo flight crew and the Puerto Rican passengers and the conversations and camaraderie that arise among the commuters during a festive night flight from San Juan to New York City, underscoring a bicultural Puerto Rican identity and the tensions that characterize Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States. Due to mass migration since the 1960s, frequent air travel between Hispaniola and the United States has added another flying bus route over the Caribbean Sea, making Dominicans similarly "at home" in the interstitial space of transnational migration. Unlike Puerto Ricans, however, they cannot count on possessing US citizenship to ease their arrival and integration. Lured by the dream of economic security and expelled by a state that has failed to provide the majority of its population with social and economic stability, Dominican migrants carry a great deal of "baggage" with them, as Silvio Torres-Saillant incisively explains:

La sobrecarga en el equipaje de los dominicanos de Nueva York que viajan de regreso a su tierra natal podría verse como el peso social que ha caído en los hombros de los emigrados, quienes se han visto obligados a suplir las insuficiencias de su país. Además del envío en dólares de remesa multimillonarias cada año, la comunidad dominicana residente en el exterior ha debido echarse literalmente a costas los enseres, aparatos y productos requeridos por sus familiares y allegados en el país para satisfacer necesidades materiales. (“Retorno” 30)

*The excessiveness of the luggage of New York Dominicans who travel back to their homeland could be seen as the social weight that has fallen on the shoulders of emigrants, who have been forced to compensate for the deficiencies of their country. In addition to sending remittances in dollars each year, the Dominican community living abroad has had to literally carry on their backs the belongings, appliances, and products required by their relatives and friends in the country to satisfy material needs.*

In addition to the onus of supporting family back home through economic remittances and return visit gifts, Dominican migrants bear the weight of the uncertainty of their citizenship status, their new identity as an ethnic minority in the United States, and the disdain of middle-class nonmigrant Dominicans who displace their own socioeconomic precariousness and inferiority complexes by marginalizing migrant Dominicans with distorted images of delinquency and subalternity (Torres-Saillant, “Retorno” 18–20).

From the image of migrants arriving and departing on airplanes with overstuffed suitcases, however, I would like to shift the focus in this chapter to migrants in the predawn darkness, with only a small plastic bag in hand, rapidly wading toward handmade wooden boats called *yolas*. This is a scene that has been repeated unabated since the first recorded illegal boat trip from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico in 1972. In open vessels ranging from twenty-five to fifty feet in size, illegal migrants pay, on average, \$500–\$4,000 to attempt to cross the Mona Passage, a strait that separates the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico and connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. The trip, which usually takes a little over twenty-four hours, depending on the route and weather conditions, is known to be one of the trickiest passages in the Caribbean due to tidal currents and long sand banks on the coasts of both islands. The *yolas*, overloaded and considered unfit for the high seas by navy and Coast Guard standards, easily capsize in the large waves, leaving passengers to drown or be devoured by sharks. While these migrants are forced to travel light, their willingness to risk their lives to leave their homeland reveals that they carry the heaviest burden of

the Dominican state's failure to support its citizenry on a most basic level by protecting human life. Nobody knows exactly how many Dominicans have migrated by yola, but US Coast Guard statistics indicate that between 1982 and 2009, over seventy thousand undocumented Dominicans have been intercepted at sea (Duany, *Blurred Borders* 59, 193).<sup>1</sup> Nor does anybody know how many have died en route, though media chronicles of the retrieval of dozens of corpses from the sea after each shipwreck would suggest that hundreds of Dominicans die annually in search of a better life. Yet, despite the perilousness of the journey, tightening state border control, and increasing criminal prosecution of illegal migrants, poor Dominicans repeatedly make death-defying attempts to arrive at Puerto Rican shores.

It goes without saying that migration by yola is dramatic—it is an extreme response to the economic inequities of global capitalism and it often has a tragic outcome. My interest here is to explore how theater intervenes in the constant stream of disturbing narratives and images of yola migration circulated in the Dominican Republic by the news media, public awareness campaigns, film, and music. In many ways, the stories performed in plays such as *Miches: Ponle Esperanza* (*Miches: Name it Hope*) by the island-based playwright Julissa Rivera Céspedes (2005) and *Yoleros* (*Boatpeople*) by the New York City-based playwright Álex Vásquez Escaño (2008) stage the same tragedies that have been countless depicted in the media.<sup>2</sup> A legitimate question is: Why repeat these real-life “ripped from the headlines” stories in the theater? I suggest that when audiences are invited to negotiate between the representations of the problem of illegal migration onstage and the representation of the same stories in the mass media, they engage with a thinking-through of relations of power, which, for the theater theorist Joe Kelleher, defines the relationship between theater and politics (3). The inherent political qualities of the theater, “its liveness and sociality, the simple fact that it happens and that it gathers people, who may well be strangers to each other around issues of disagreement but of common concern” (Kelleher 10) contrast with the passive, often solitary, and distant consumption of images of human suffering displayed in the global media. I submit that the fictions created in *Miches* and *Yoleros* have the potential to make a more profound political impact on spectators than the real-life tragedies depicted in the media because, through the live bodies of actors: “The theatre ‘represents’ us, both in the sense of showing us images of ourselves and in the sense of standing in and standing up for us, like a delegate or a substitute or—indeed—a political representative. Theatre represents our lives to us in ways that can persuade us to make judgments on the quality and fidelity of those representations and to make critical judgments too on the lives that are so

represented” (Kelleher 10). Ephemeral theater events reach a far smaller number of citizens than the mass media, but the efficaciousness of the theater has significantly less to do with sending direct political messages than the thinking and feeling that is activated by encountering representations of ourselves. While *Miches* and *Yoleros* seem to simply echo narratives of tragedy with which Dominicans are already familiar, they bring into sharp relief that poor women of color bear the brunt of what Henry Giroux calls a “biopolitics of disposability” in which neoliberal states do away with the “baggage” of embarrassingly vulnerable populations.

### Nation Castaways: Flotsam on a Sea of Global Capital

Pleasure cruisers beware—the beautiful Caribbean and Mediterranean seascapes have become dotted with the flotsam of shipwrecked yolas, *balsas*, and *pateras* built by migrants seeking to escape political oppression, human rights violations, and economic insecurity through clandestine sea crossings. This mainly northward sea migration has occurred throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in waves. In the Mediterranean, 2.1 million African and western Asian migrants arrived in Europe between 2009 and 2018 via Morocco-to-Spain, Africa-to-Italy, and Turkey-to-Greece sea routes (Connor). This migration peaked around 2015, when tragic shipwrecks routinely made headlines, making evident an international humanitarian crisis. In the Caribbean, migratory flows are inextricably bound to US economic and political policies. “Rather than well-reasoned, proactive policies developed through consideration of the complexities—such as US labor demand and the global effects of neoliberalism—” Frank Graziano writes, “The United States has taken a simplified approach: to repel maritime migrants as far from the U.S. shores as possible and, that failing, to expedite their removal from the country” (*Undocumented* 171). The different treatment of Haitian, Cuban, and Dominican migrants has created “inconsistencies and even absurdities. Dominicans who enter the United States are detained and reported, for example, but Cubans who do the same are paroled and eventually granted lawful permanent residency” (171). Moreover, Haitian migration has been reductively understood an economic migration. In the 1970s, 1990s, and after the 2010 earthquake, hundreds of thousands of Haitians sought to escape political persecution, violence, and environmental and natural disasters (all of which have contributed to unrelenting poverty) by crossing the border to the Dominican Republic or undertaking a treacherous seven-hundred-mile sea journey in makeshift rafts to reach the southern shores of the United States.<sup>3</sup> The 1980 Mariel boatlift and the

mid-1990s crisis of the “Special Period” in Cuba also motivated mass migration in small boats and homemade rafts. In the Cuban case, however, the *balseiros* (rafters) were more likely to succeed in navigating the approximately ninety-mile sea route to Florida, and, until recently, were treated as political refugees and given asylum if they were interdicted at sea or reached land, whereas Haitian migrants have always been subject to immediate deportation.<sup>4</sup> Whether in the Mediterranean or the Caribbean Sea, images of floating debris—pieces of wood boats, plastic gasoline containers, clothing, and even corpses—are jarring reminders that for thousands of migrants never complete their journey and that the sea becomes their final resting place.

I argue, however, that perhaps even more worrisome to the sending and receiving states are the live bodies that comprise a floating population of migrant human flotsam. Mass migration from the Dominican Republic has long been caught up in the tides of globalization of the world economy. According to the sociologist Ramona Hernández, the Dominican exodus “developed in response to the socioeconomic policies implemented in the Dominican Republic after 1966” (“On the Age” 91). These policies, which mobilized the integration of the Dominican Republic into the global economy, were instituted when the US-backed strongman president Joaquín Balaguer shifted the agro-export economy, sustained by traditional products such as sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cocoa, to an import substitution model in the 1970s, an export model in the 1980s, and a neoliberal “new economic program” in the 1990s. By the time the nation’s next caudillo, Leonel Fernández, arrived on the political scene as president in 1996, the Dominican Republic had become a service economy dominated by assembly export free-trade zones and tourism and was dependent on foreign investments and remittances from Dominicans living abroad. Over the years, neoliberal economic strategies have produced, intermittently, very strong economic periods of growth, but the price has been a gaping social deficit and an enormous foreign debt that allows the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international lenders to dictate national fiscal reforms. Reforms such as the implementation of fiscal austerity packages reducing social welfare spending and eliminating subsidies for electricity, propane, and food; the privatization of state-owned industries such as sugar, electrical power, and mining; and trade liberalizations have been the hallmarks of Fernández’s neoliberal economic policies. These policies have maintained macroeconomic stability by serving the interests of the domestic oligarchy, the US government, and other foreign investors. At the same time, neoliberal economic strategies have weakened public institutions, social welfare,

and civil society. Over half of all Dominicans live in poverty, 40 percent of the nation's wealth is concentrated in the hands of 10 percent of the population, and the country ranked third lowest in Latin America in social spending, which includes "health, education, drinking water provision, housing, sports and culture, sanitation, social security and welfare" ("Millennium").

In response to the chronic social immobility and pervasive poverty of the past fifty years, over a million Dominicans have emigrated—chiefly to the United States and Puerto Rico—but also to Curaçao, Venezuela, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands. Torres-Saillant minces no words in characterizing the exodus as a forced economic emigration: "Sébase que la gente normalmente no abandona su tierra de manera voluntaria. Se desgaja de su cálido terruño, sus paisajes familiares, su lengua, su cultura y sus amores compelida por la urgencia material. Emigra quien no puede quedarse. Se van aquellos a quienes la economía nacional les ha cerrado las puertas" ("Know that people don't normally abandon their country voluntarily. They break away from their warm homeland, familiar landscapes, language, culture, and loved ones compelled by material urgency. Those who emigrate can't stay. Those who go are those for whom the doors of the national economy have closed"; "Retorno" 18). Similarly, Graziano explains, "Dominicans do not migrate because they are starving; they migrate to escape dead-end destitution that is maintained by forces—global economic structures, U.S. foreign policy, Dominican government indifference, incompetence, and corruption—beyond their control" ("Why" 2). Paradoxically, in their attempt to overcome poverty and to gain some control over the precariousness of their daily lives, the most vulnerable Dominicans are forced to embark on a journey that risks everything. *Yola* migration is a perilous undertaking that requires relinquishing one's fate to the elements and to the smugglers and *yola* captains who organize and pilot the trips. There are various outcomes to this gamble. A good number of Dominicans arrive safely and are able to integrate successfully into Puerto Rican, and, in some cases, US society; others drown when boats capsize or die by dehydration when outboard motors fail and the boats go adrift; some *yolas* are interdicted at sea and passengers are deported by the US Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection or the Dominican navy; and, lastly, others survive an unsuccessful journey (perhaps engineered by the dishonest smuggler who set up the trip) and return home, only to attempt the journey again. Most narratives surrounding the *yola* experience, including the two plays analyzed in this chapter, highlight failure and death. It is this population that has died or is caught in an unproductive cycle of repeating attempts to illegally migrate that has become the flotsam, the human wreckage of global capitalism.

Dominican boat people adrift in the Caribbean Sea represent an unequivocal image of migrants as nation castaways expelled from the body politic. The reliance on the escape valve of migration—the alleviation of social and political pressures and the benefits of economic remittances from Dominicans abroad—makes patent the Dominican government’s renegeing of its social contract with its citizens and its willingness to set an impoverished underclass afloat to fend for themselves. I read this situation as an example of what Henry Giroux calls a “biopolitics of disposability.” Although theorists such as Michel Foucault, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Giorgio Agamben work through the idea of biopolitics differently, they share, according to Giroux, a reformulation of “the meaning of politics and how it functions within the contemporary moment to regulate matters of life and death, and, in turn, how such issues are intimately related to both the articulation of community and the social, and the regulation, care and development of human life” (*Stormy Weather* 12). For Giroux, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina exposed a biopolitics of disposability in the United States that has “largely given up on the sanctity of human life for those populations rendered ‘at risk’ by global neoliberal economies, and, instead, have embraced an emergent security state founded on cultural homogeneity” (11). The shocking images of dead bodies and reports of people left to die in the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina evinced the confluence of race and poverty in the communities most devastated by the disaster, and it made visible entire populations that have been excluded from a neoliberal agenda lacking in social obligation and civic responsibility. Moreover, in the era of globalization, as nation-states such as the Dominican Republic increasingly surrender “control of their economies and public policies to transnational structures of political and economic power, they have been faced with crises of governance that are by no means new—that of repressing populations *whose lives have become unsustainable*” (Gregory 244; emphasis mine). Social unrest and protest against the social exclusions and inequalities created by neoliberal restructuring of the Dominican economy, for example, have been “typically greeted with violent repression from Dominican security authorities” (244). In my view, the failure to deter undocumented maritime migration represents another form of violent repression and an exercise in biopower in which some of the most vulnerable citizens of the nation—those whose lives are no longer deemed sustainable by the state—are allowed to subsist on the margins of society or disappear into the sea.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the brutal conditions that push people to migrate and the aggression exercised to stop them, migrants are also subject to the violence of the dangerous journey itself, which, as we will see, is orchestrated by human

traffickers. In *Gore Capitalism*, Sayak Valencia examines how violence as paid work has become a strategy for operating within extreme neoliberal capitalism. In the US-Mexican border, and, as I argue, in the Caribbean maritime borderlands as well, Valencia identifies how new, monstrous, *en-driago* subjects find agency in the neoliberal project “by means of *necroempowerment* and the fugitive, dystopian *necro-practices* of gore, as they . . . attempt to *legitimate* the processes of underground economies (black market, drug trafficking, weapons, bodies, etc.) through their reign of violence” (27; emphasis in original). On a smaller scale, this episteme of violence has also made its way to the Dominican Republic. In the industry of illegal boat migration, in which death is always a risk, men marginalized by low wages, poverty, and inequality in the hegemonic global economy become empowered by not only managing the lives of people (biopolitics) but also commodifying death (necropolitics). That is, they achieve a foothold in society via the potential death of others.

The state response to crack down on illegal migration is mostly an empty gesture that avoids the root causes of the problem; this response signals the growing tendency of governments operating in what Agamben calls “states of emergency” that suspend democratic principles and permit extra-judicial state violence to “protect” their populations. Similar to the post-9/11 focus on the War on Terror and border protection in the United States, in the Dominican Republic, rising drug-related violence and human rights violations against Haitians can be justified by a “state of exception” invoked in border wars against narcotrafficking and illegal Haitian migration. Not only does biopower function within global neoliberalism, it goes hand in hand with the rise of security states structured around cultural and racial homogeneity. Just as Dominican migrants in Puerto Rico and the United States, Haitians in the Dominican Republic, driven from their country by poverty, find a place in the labor market doing exploitative work rejected by many nationals. In both cases, in spite of the push-pull factors at play—that is, the inevitability of masses of people moving across borders in sync with global labor demands—the receiving societies’ rejection and resultant persecution of the migrants is motivated in great part by racism and xenophobia. In line with Giroux’s understanding of biopolitics, borders, for Joseph Nevins, whether they be the long frontier between Mexico and the United States or the liminal space of the sea between North Africa and Europe or the Caribbean and the United States, represent “the connections and divisions between those granted life and those assigned to the realm of death—and all the stations in between the extremes of injustice” (“A Tale”). Those relegated to the realm of death are obviously most likely to be poor and of color. Invoking W. E. B. Du



Bois, Nevins cites an example of the global color line in parallel shipwrecks that took place in the winter of 2012. On the one hand, the *Costa Concordia* luxury cruise ship wreck off the coast of Italy on January 13, 2012, in which thirty-two people were confirmed to have died, had intense international media coverage, whereas the sinking of a *yola* and the loss of fifty-two lives off the coast of the Dominican Republic appeared in only one brief report on CNN. Nevins claims that “the attention afforded to the deaths of almost exclusively luxury tourists from Western Europe dwarfs that paid to the drowning of dozens of unauthorized Dominican migrants reproduces a world of profound inequality and injustice” (“A Tale”).

Therefore, undocumented Dominican and Haitian migrants are victims of racialized state violence, whether through biopolitics, a strategy of marginalization and neglect, the necropolitical violence of the criminal underworld, or detention and deportation carried out by state authorities.<sup>6</sup> When *yola* migrants are intercepted at sea they are caught between two sovereignties, threatening each in different ways. On the one hand, Puerto Rico/the United States wishes to close its borders to illegal migrants, even though supporting “authoritarian regimes, labor exploitation, or the political and economic hegemony of a small elite, U.S. foreign policy is an indirect cause of the same migration U.S. border enforcement attempts to curtail” (Graziano, “Why” 6). On the other hand, if the stability of Dominican society depends on the safety valve of migration, then the reintegration of deportees with even fewer resources than when they left exacerbates the same social and economic problems that prompted them to leave.<sup>7</sup> Trapped between the two sovereignties, unwanted *yola* migrants futilely circulate in a militarized global frontier land managed by biopolitical states more invested in securing borders than in sustaining democratic values, social investment, and life itself.

While the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina was a sudden and shocking spotlight on poor and mainly black communities relegated to the margins and written out of the neoliberal agenda, the smaller catastrophes of *yola* migration are continually displayed in the Dominican media. On the radio, lively songs warning of the dangers of illegal migration play; on television, famous entertainers such as Juan Luis Guerra participate in public awareness campaigns such as “Los viajes ilegales son viajes a la muerte” (“Illegal Journeys are Trips to Death”), and in movie theaters films about dangerous boat migration such as *Paisaje de ida* (1988), *Viajeros* (2006), and *60 millas al este* (2008) have reached large audiences. Taking a different tack, the conceptual artists Ángel Rosario, Maurice Sánchez, and Miguel Canaán of the multidisciplinary creative design group Colectivo Shampoo

have drawn attention to yola migration in a ludic fashion with their *D' La Mona Plaza* print and video project.<sup>8</sup> They imagine a giant commercial rest stop in the middle of the Mona Passage for weary yola travelers. Elegantly titled and supposedly built by the apocryphal Puerto Rican construction group Constructora Intranáutica del Caribe, the print and video show *yole-ros* (boat people) envisioned as plump tourists in Lycra outfits strolling an ultramodern rest stop complete with a dry dock and marina for yolas, first aid, showers, internet access, fountains, grass, and trinket and snack sellers. Ironically, news of the floating rest stop/mall was picked up in the Dominican media and thought by some to be a real construction project. More savvy interpreters realized that the project was a satirical meditation on the American dream of modernity that lures Dominicans from the dire economic realities of their country.

In the news media, both national and international coverage tends to report on the tragic outcomes and exceptional stories, and it contains little analysis addressing the causes of the problem or the solutions that might help a disposable population become indispensable to the creation of a healthier economy.<sup>9</sup> For example, the danger of sharks referenced in the Wilfrido Vargas merengue lyrics in the epigraph recalls the 1987 Death's Head Beach incident in which as many as 70 of approximately 150 passengers packed on a yola were drowned or eaten by sharks when, just four miles out to sea, the boat's two outboard motors exploded. Military authorities failed to send rescue helicopters, and Eugenio Cabral, the director of civil defense, recounts watching in horror from a plane as the aquamarine sea turned red from the blood of over a dozen capsized boat people being devoured by sharks (Doerner).<sup>10</sup> The stories of shark-infested waters are no tall tales, nor are the survival stories involving the taboos such as adults breast-feeding and cannibalism. In 2001 Faustina Mercedes Mauricio was lauded as a national hero (and was compensated by the state) for nourishing seven women and nine men with her breast milk as their boat drifted at sea for nearly two weeks ("Faustina, la mujer"). In a less uplifting story, in 2004, after five days adrift, passengers attacked two lactating women and reportedly threw a third overboard who refused to cooperate ("Dominicans Saved"). One of the two women who helped over a dozen people later died, covered in bruises from being attacked by fellow passengers trying to access her body. In other stories of yolas gone adrift, survivors resorted to cannibalism.<sup>11</sup> Suspicions arise when survivors tell conflicting accounts of what happened on the high seas. In one instance, animosity between communities developed when families discovered that seventeen of eighteen passengers from Villa Altigracia were among the dead, whereas a good number of survivors hailed

from Villa Riva. The sole survivor from Villa Altagracia, who had lied on the boat about where he was from, fled his village for fear he would be hunted down by survivors from Villa Riva if he disclosed what happened while the boat drifted at sea (Romero). Unlikely as it might seem, warring sea villages, Roman Charity, and cannibalism, tropes more common in classical literature, become the stuff of mainstream contemporary newscasts.

Less extreme and more common are the stories with headlines that detail the fluctuating number of injured, dead, and disappeared that dominate newspapers for weeks at a time as rescue efforts unfold. For example, in a film about *yola* migration I later discuss, radio news reports similarly enumerating these statistics are constantly heard in the background. The presence of death among the living has become disturbing quality of destitute beach towns impacted the greatest by *yola* migration. Death becomes a part of everyday life of these small coastal villages since shipwrecks impact what residents hear, see, smell, and feel for extended periods of time. In the Bahía de Samaná tragedy in February 2012, thirteen travelers were rescued, fifty-four were found dead, and at least a dozen were never found. As one news report shows, at times residents literally could not escape the stench of death: “Debido a la demanda, las mascarillas se agotaron en farmacias, el hospital y clínicas, porque todo el pueblo corrió a la playa y quería taparse las narices ante el hedor que expedían los cuerpos en descomposición” (“Due to high demand, face masks were sold out in pharmacies, the hospital, and clinics, because everyone in town ran to the beach and wanted to cover their noses from the stench emitted by the decomposing bodies”; Vega). Local medical facilities were overwhelmed, medical examiners lacked basic supplies such as rubber gloves, and photographs show bodies wrapped in blue plastic being hauled to be buried in mass graves. In what looks like a postmortem newspaper photograph, we see at least six semiclothed bodies are crammed together on the floor of a small building, but the caption—“Dos de los cadáveres”—may very well give the viewer pause, since it is impossible to discern which are live bodies and which are corpses (“Pocas”). Equally disturbing is not knowing the whereabouts of the deceased. In one photograph, a *yola* sits on the beach with photographs of the missing posted on the stern (G. Pérez). This gesture recalls the images of the disappeared in Argentina during military rule and the walls of photographs of the missing posted in New York City after the 9/11 attacks and places the tragedies of *yola* migration at the level of a national trauma that resists closure. However, the continual loss of life recounted in the media does not seem to constitute a national crisis that would join Dominicans in protesting the problem of illegal migration. In fact, the call for a national day of mourning after the Bahía de Samaná

tragedy made by the newspaper *Diario Libre* was greeted with just as many blogger responses calling the migrants ignorant, suicidal, and unwilling to solve their financial problems as there were responses expressing empathy and anger toward the government's reluctance to confront the issue of illegal maritime migration ("Diario"). There is, in sum, the sense that the migrants lost at sea form an underclass already expelled from Dominican society and are, therefore, not worthy of being mourned. Thus, not only does the media depict the victims of violence as occupying "spaces considered *outside of* and therefore unworthy of attention," (Valencia 287; emphasis in original), it "contributes to venerating violence through spectacularization and endless coverage, while simultaneously neglecting to report on its real consequences" (291).

The US-based Dominican filmmaker Jorge Lendeborg's 2008 film, *60 millas al este*, by contrast, focuses on the living and tells the far more ordinary story of yola migrants who return home alive after failing in their attempt to reach Puerto Rico. Touted as the Dominican Republic's first "reality film," Lendeborg states that his intention was not to film a movie; rather, he sought to film reality as events unfold during a yola journey. The unscripted story played out by nonactors was praised by Dominican critics for the veracity with which it portrays the lives and emotions of Dominicans who see no other option than to risk everything to leave their country.<sup>12</sup> Since the trip is set up by Lendeborg—he locates a yola trip coordinator who is willing to be filmed—the claim "it's all real" is doubtful, but my interest here in briefly analyzing the film is not to untangle fact from fiction. In my view, *60 millas al este* stands out for capturing the routine, quotidian qualities of the yola smuggling trade, thereby offering a different perspective from the more sensational controversies and deviancies in the media reports discussed earlier.

Yola migration in *60 millas al este* is not portrayed as an exceptional tragedy; rather, it has come to form an ethnoscape, what Arjun Appadurai calls a "landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree" (33). At the beginning of the film, Lendeborg inserts himself in this ethnoscape of mobility and films his arrival at the Aeropuerto de las Américas in Santo Domingo, making evident that he, too, is a Dominican migrant, though the legal means by which Lendeborg moves between countries makes him clearly more fortunate than the compatriots he has come to film. Juxtaposed with the scene of Lendeborg advancing through an orderly modern airport, we also see in the film's opening sequence a chaotic scene

of a group of men carrying a casket surrounded by overwrought mourners through a bustling village. This less felicitous return and the failed trip that constitutes the main narrative in *60 millas al este* serve as cautionary tales about the dangers of the industry of illegal smuggling of people across national borders.

*60 millas al este* examines both the motivations for migrating and the operations that make it possible. One narrative shows the complete cast of characters involved in the yola trade: the *organizadores* who plan the trips, the *buscones* who recruit passengers, the *maestro constructores* who clandestinely build the yolas, and the fishermen who become the *capitanes* who pilot the trips, all of whom play a part in the informal economy of yola migration. The film's narratives foreground the passengers and their reasons for attempting undocumented entry into Puerto Rico and the sixty nautical miles of the boat journey itself. From the hustle of planning the trip, the story shifts to a drummed countdown from three hours to the final moments in which, under the cover of darkness, the twenty-eight travelers move through a mangrove and wade into the sea to board the small boat. All the activity and movement of the earlier scenes ceases, and the gravity of the uncertainties of being crammed in a small open vessel on the high seas settles in. With the exception of a few tense moments when tempers flare, such as when the captain announces to the suspicious passengers that the motor is damaged and that they must return home, much of the journey takes place in a numb silence. Lendeborg trains the camera on the expressionless faces of the travelers lulled by wind, sun, and waves. He shows extreme close-ups of seasick men and women vomiting overboard, and repeats shots of the Sisyphean effort of bailing the water that the newly constructed boat began to take on the moment the passengers boarded it. Despite the many individual close-up shots of the faces of the yoleros shown in *60 millas al este*, one gets the sense of the collective "being in the same boat"—that is to say, at the mercy of both the elements and the global economy.

Lendeborg uses brief flashback interviews to break up the slow journey and maintain the viewer's interest, and, more importantly, to give a voice and identity to the nameless and mainly silent passengers. Each flashback is titled with the interviewees name, occupation, and number of yola migration attempts. We see, for example, the impoverished environments in which Noelia, Fior, Chacha, María, all single mothers, live and struggle to feed their children, a beautiful Boca Chica beach where a *Sanky Panky* (male sex worker) lives off tourists, and a field where Molino, a Haitian *jornalero* (day laborer), cuts sugarcane. We learn that one mother cannot support her children with the wages she earns in a free-trade zone, and that Molino and

his community of cane cutters had to work years to raise enough money to pay for a single *yola* passage that was to set off a chain of migration once he arrived in Puerto Rico and sent for the others. In all cases, the interviewees perceive their situation as sufficiently dire to risk death (and orphaning their children) in search of a better income. Furthermore, the vast majority have attempted to reach Puerto Rico on multiple occasions, this trip being the twelfth attempt for one young man.

Perhaps the “reality” Lendeborg best captures is the anxious monotony of sixteen hours at sea and the anticlimactic failure of a trip. The tragedy in this story is the vicious cycle of poverty in which poor Dominicans, motivated to feed themselves and their families, invest what little they have in repeat attempts to reach this goal. Also fueling this desire to reach Puerto Rican shores are the workings of global media, which “foster awareness of deprivation, propagate illusions of American opulence, fuel the fantasy of easy access to wealth, provide fictional role models, and enhance the desire—particularly among youth—for unaffordable name-brand products that an emerging identity requires” (Graziano, “Why” 8–9). The logos of American professional baseball, basketball, and football teams and the high-fashion English brand Burberry plaid seen decorating the travelers’ baseball caps and T-shirts highlight the disjunctures produced by the ethnoscapings of moving culture and capital described by Appadurai. This apparel is suggestive of the idealized expectations that are soon frustrated by the realities of racial discrimination, unfamiliar and unwelcoming new laws, and limited opportunities the migrants confront upon arrival. The easily recognizable logos bobbing on the waves make a striking image of the human wreckage adrift in a sea of neoliberal global capitalism. Ironically, considered superfluous and disposable for their inability to be productive consumers, the boat people bear the very symbols that suggest the consumerist desires encouraged by globalization. The migrant bodies complicating today’s seascapes signal what Iain Chambers would call an “interrogative presence” that forces us to question “conclusive framings of existing political, cultural, and historical narratives” (678). For example, bodies that have experienced modernity in different ways wash up on northern shores and interrupt “the facile evaluations of a linear mapping disciplined by landlocked desires of unilateral progress and a homogeneous modernity” (681). While from the north, the sea may be seen as a border, a barrier not to be crossed, for migrants from the south pulled by the forces of globalization, the sea is a passage that inevitably connects histories and cultures in a more fluid cartography of transnational belonging. In the following section, I argue that theater performances of the very same narratives of *yola* migration represented in the media offer a more

productive space in which to develop an oppositional politics that counters the civic indifference that dominates the political economy of neoliberalism and gore capitalism.

### **The Drama of *Yola* Migration: *Miches: Ponle Esperanza* and *Yoleros***

During the same period Lendeborg filmed and screened *60 millas al este*, *Miches: Ponle Esperanza* by Julissa Céspedes Rivera and *Yoleros* by Álex Vásquez Escaño were performed in Santo Domingo and New York City.<sup>13</sup> Like Lendeborg's film, the yola boat journey comprises the central narrative of the plays, and nearly all the same topics in the media coverage on yola migration reappear not only in these two plays but also in several Dominican migration dramas I will include as precursors to the plays by Céspedes Rivera and Vásquez Escaño. What, then, do the fictions created by these plays contribute to the narratives that have long circulated about yola migration? What kind of relationship do the plays create with their audiences and what are their politics? Obviously, center staging the plight of poor Dominican migrants in the public institutional spaces of the theater is a political gesture. For Joe Kelleher, though, the efficacy of the theater has less to do with a play's message than the uniqueness and repeatability that define play performances. Theater is inherently repetitious, for a play performance is a representation of a script (which in turn is a representation of the reality of the world the play represents), actors bring characters alive through repeatedly rehearsing their lines, and productions play to audiences night after night. However, each theater event is unpredictable because of the many different variables that inform audience response before and after the performance—we cannot know what viewers will think and feel during the show, or what thoughts and emotions will remain with them after the performance (Kelleher 22). What happens when the yola migration story, which has been repeatedly played out in the mass media (music, film, newspapers) and in everyday life (oral traditions such as survivor tales and rumors) enters the representing machine of the theater? Important tension is derived in witnessing how the play repeats the story and represents onstage the world outside the theater. The thinking and feeling that is triggered from watching the performance obviously will not touch us in the same way as a real-life tragedy would, but it impacts our consciousness, "in that complex way the theatre specialises in, which has to do with the ones who are here, who are on the spot, standing in for the others who are not. The ones standing in are the actors and spectators, for example, who turned up this evening to participate in the show, but they are also the characters themselves, whose

lives have been ruined, who are standing in for, or representing, all the other people whose lives have been changed in this way” (Kelleher 26). There is the immediacy of those “on the spot,” as audience or performer in the event, who metonymically represent a wider population, a larger public sphere. Even though a small group is convened for only a brief period of time, there is awareness that the potential impact of the event transcends these limitations. Joining people together to awaken a sense of social responsibility about the issue of yola migration, by judging the characters and stories that are represented onstage and comparing them to real-life stories may change how people perceive and respond to the problem in the world outside of the theater. There are abundant images in the Dominican media of the rescue of moribund migrants and of the body bags of even less fortunate travelers. Valencia calls for the extrication of “the body from media discourses that spectralize it” (292). In my estimation, the embodied suffering in the plays about yola migration studied here constitute one way “to make sure that the death and the pain of an Other cause a shudder in all our bodies” (Valencia 292). For audiences accustomed to seeing images of bodies pulled from the sea, the theater offers a space where these bodies are brought back to life and given subjectivities that force viewers to engage, critically and ethically, in the role of witness rather than passive voyeurs to spectacles of suffering. Engaging in theatrical performance as a producer or a viewer, then, can be a powerful activity “to dismantle the illusion created by news media that artificially naturalizes the exercise of violence, rendering it invisible through the protective distance of the screen, which tells us that extreme non-consensual pain only happens to the bodies of Others” (Valencia 292–93). The narratives performed in the plays discussed shortly, in sum, are already familiar to Dominican audiences, but they are repeated with a difference because they not only resurrect a sector of society that the nation would prefer to forget, ironically, they present a much fuller and more nuanced story that official discourses would prefer to silence.

Since the 1990s Dominican theater has become an important site for engaging with, and often countering, negative representations of Dominican migrant identity. Many plays about Dominican migration center on the experience of transnationalism and explore stories of migrant characters adapting to life in the United States while remaining connected in various ways with their home country and, in some cases, moving back and forth between them. The journey itself to another country, however, does surface as a theme in several plays. In three wildly different pieces, brief mentions of yola migration preview some of the themes and techniques used in *Miches* and *Yoleros*. One of the most curious prizewinning plays anthologized in



the Casa de Teatro volumes, Otto Caro's "RR" *Tragedia Musical* (1983), tells the story of a campesino who goes from laboring in the sugarcane fields to working as a prostitute in Puerto Rico and later as a drug dealer in New York City.<sup>14</sup> Caro's play stands out for its unusual diagrammatic script that presents speech and movement, sound effects and soundtrack, and lighting in three columns. "RR" *Tragedia Musical* is also memorable because it presents the outcome of illegal migration as tragic and highlights the vulnerability of migrants ensnared in criminal smuggling organizations. To my knowledge, the elaborate musical play was never produced, but the fact that it was awarded a prize and published tells us that the arts were not exempt from circulating negative representations of migration during a period in which the Dominican Republic was reeling from intense social and economic changes brought on by a sharp increase in migration. The downward spiral for the protagonist, identified as RR, begins when he is approached at a bar by men who tell him that they organize safe boat trips to Puerto Rico and that "con ochocientos pesos me llevaban sin tener documentos y que allá nos estarían esperando otros señores para darnos trabajo bien pagado" ("for eight hundred pesos they would take me without documents and that over there men would be waiting for us there to give us a well-paid job"; 354–55). According to stage directions, the journey by yola is reenacted with stormy audiovisual effects and a *danza trágica* with dancers surrounding the yola that later transforms into a *danza de búsqueda* in which sea officers search the coast for illegal migrants. Three well-dressed men emerge from the shadows to take RR to his new job, which, he soon learns, is selling his body. In this over-the-top spectacle, migration becomes a grotesque nightmare that can only lead to death.<sup>15</sup>

As we will see in chapter 4, the characters in Elizabeth Ovalle's realist social drama *Por hora y a Piece-Work* (1993), by contrast, have a certain degree of success in securing jobs in the exploitative New York City garment industry and in finding pathways toward gaining citizenship and receiving social services support. Ovalle does not stage the actual yola journey in her play, but in mentioning the physical and legal risks yoleros take to improve their station in life, *Por hora y a Piece-Work* echoes Caro's melodramatic musical. For example, the character Juana, a new worker at the factory, reveals that it was fortunate that the yola in which she travelled was interdicted by the authorities, since the high winds were about to capsize the vessel in the middle of the Canal de la Mona (250). After being picked up, she was incarcerated in the *preventiva* for six months, which evidently did not deter her from later reaching the United States. Ovalle's play also injects the theme of stigma that is attached to yola migration. The following factors—how long

migrants have been in the United States, how they arrived, their regional origins, and whether they have papers—all contribute to creating social hierarchies among the factory workers. Juana, a campesina who has recently arrived and is undocumented, resorts to a derogatory phrase Dominicans use to refer to yola migration and lies about her mode of arrival when she feels threatened by her more experienced coworker from Santo Domingo nicknamed Capitaleña: “¿Y tú?, de seguro fuiste la que viniste en doble A, (agua por delante y agua por detrás), yo vine por Méjico, mi hija, en avión y tren” (“And you? Surely you were the one that came in first class double W, [water in front and water behind], I came from Mexico, my dear, by plane and train”; 253). The central characters in *Por hora y a* Piece-Work do not die tragically, but the narrative arc, which ends with Juana ultimately rejecting New York City and returning to the Dominican Republic, situates the play within the negative representations of migration that abounded in the 1980s and 1990s.

*Paradise* by Pedro Antonio Valdez (1997) is also a cautionary tale that depicts Dominican migrants caught up in the drug trade and ends with the protagonists, none other than Adán and Eva, returning to Santo Domingo, their *verdadero paraíso* (true paradise) (29). Using humor, however, the play presents a much more balanced view of migration. For instance, in the telenovela-esque final scene in which the protagonists are seated on a park bench cooing over their happy return, a striking mob comes upon them, demanding fair salaries, food, and electricity, suggesting that neither the Dominican Republic nor the United States constitute a paradise. Valdez, who writes each scene using a distinct theatrical style, titles Adán and Eva’s yola journey “La yola de los locos” and labels the scene *teatro grotesco*. In keeping with the deformations that operate in the aesthetics of the grotesque, Valdez subverts the terror of being at the mercy of the elements on the high seas and turns the shipwreck scene into a comedy:

ADÁN: (Achicando con una lata.) ¡Si esta vaina se hunde, nos va a llevar el diablo!

EVA: (Maquillándose, usando de espejo el fondo de una lata.) El diablo es el capitán de la yola. ¿No ves, Adán?

DEMONIO: ¡Achiquen! ¡Achiquen! ¡Dejen de hablar mierda y achiquen!

ADÁN: Achica tú, buen maricón. Te pagué veinte mil pesos para que nos llesves a Puerto Rico, no para que nos pongas a botar agua. (14)

ADAM: (Bailing out water with a can.) *If this thing sinks, we are going to hell!*

EVA: (Putting makeup on using the bottom of a can as a mirror.) *The captain of the yola is the devil. Don't you see, Adam?*

THE DEVIL: *Bail! Bail! Stop talking shit and bail!*

ADAM: *You bail, faggot. I paid you twenty thousand pesos to take us to Puerto Rico, not for us to bail out water.*

Desperate to escape poverty, Dominicans are willing to put their lives in the hands of the devil, cast here as unsavory trip organizers and boat captains. In both *Paradise* and “RR” *Tragedia Musical*, agreeing to the terms set by these characters is akin to making a pact with the devil.<sup>16</sup> Even though in this scene Adán jokingly insults the devil-captain, in return for safe passage, little does he know that he has relinquished his autonomy and will become a puppet in the drug trade, just as in “RR” *Tragedia Musical*. The yola capsizes, not because of the stormy sea, but due to a tempestuous battle of the sexes that develops between Adán, Eva, and the Demonio. In the end, Eva, feeling insulted by both men, sinks the ship by ripping off its rudder. There is no tragic death, however, because in the next scene we find Adán being interviewed by a bureaucrat from the American consulate, which is amusingly and aptly played out in the style of theater of the absurd. While the theme of yola migration appears only briefly in these three plays, it is useful to include them in this analysis since, in addition to showing the dangers and stigma attached to yola migration and documenting artistic responses to the transformation of Dominican society at the end of the twentieth century, they help establish a yola “scenario” with certain narrative structures and assigned roles that are repeated and further developed in *Miches* and *Yoleros*.

The shipwreck, like Diana Taylor’s example of the scenario of conquest, contains narrative and plot, milieu, and the embodied behaviors of social actors that are already known to us by the force of their repetition in cultural representations (28). From the Greeks, to the early modern European discovery and conquest of the New World, to today’s desperate crossings across the Caribbean and Mediterranean Seas, the shipwreck scenario plays out within a set of conventions: the scene takes place on a boat or on a beach; the outcomes include reaching the coast, rescue, or death at sea; and the social actors include a captain and passengers often cast as archetypal characters. These familiar narratives are just as much a part of the repertoire as they are the archive, and reading them as a performance scenario “places spectators within its frame, implicating us in its ethics and politics” (Taylor 33), a positioning that differs from the voyeurism assigned to viewers in much contemporary media.<sup>17</sup> In the plays analyzed here, the bulk of the action takes place mainly in the intimate confines of a yola at sea, which casts the sun, waves, and sharks as enemies, and limits the action to passengers anxiously discussing how they found themselves in their present calamitous situation;

jumping ship or being thrown overboard; divvying up sources of nourishment and hydration; and slipping into delirium or death.

All of the aforementioned occurs in *Miches*, a tragedy on the high seas in which a yola with nine passengers from Miches, a fishing village in the province El Seibo on the northeast coast of the Dominican Republic, loses its motor, goes adrift, and capsizes. The yola scenes, which make up the greater part of the action, are framed by an auditory prologue in which the audience, in complete darkness, hears the sounds of nocturnal animals, lapping water, and the prayers and conversations of the travelers attempting to steal away in a yola, as well as two monologues by nontravelers. In the first monologue, Muchacha regrets being afflicted by seasickness and, consequently, her inability to commit to a yola journey. As she recounts the many reasons why the townspeople of Miches attempt to migrate, the monologue acquires an omniscient quality through the repetition of the phrase “los veo” (I see them) at the beginning of neighboring sentences describing her compatriots’ migration experiences (197). By employing anaphora, Rivera Céspedes emphasizes themes and creates rhythm and a poetic tone to the numerous monologues that structure the play. In the second on-land monologue, Madre-Miches laments the slow death of a town so hypnotized by the sea that lures them to a new life that the town’s *raison d’être* is defined only by “los que se van y los que están en la lista de espera” (“those who leave and those who are on the waiting list”; 199). As I discuss in the final section of this chapter, figuring the town as a mother in turn anthropomorphizes the nation, posing questions about how illegal migration impacts the *madre patria* (motherland).

In *Yoleros* Máximo, Demecio, and Dinorah set off by yola in search of better opportunities from the coastal town Boca de Yuma; they fail to reach Puerto Rico, and only one of the three returns alive. Act 1 takes place on land and serves to introduce the three characters—the captain, a lottery ticket seller named Máximo; Demecio, a newspaper vendor; and Dinorah, a young mother—and to show the tense operations that set up the illegal trips. When act 2 opens with the question *¿Dónde estamos?* (Where are we?), the characters have already been lost at sea for three days.

In comparison to *Miches*, apart from three brief metatheatrical scenes, *Yoleros* downplays lyricism and theatricality and relies instead upon spare dialogue to drive the action and develop the themes. One metaphorical twist that defines the play, however, is the notion of life as a game of lottery that very few people win. In contrast to Demecio, who sells newspapers filled with stories based on reality, Máximo’s lottery tickets sell dreams. Defending his other occupation, his “nueva rifa” (“new raffle”; 78), Máximo tells



1.1. The cast of *Yoleros*. Photo credit: Gustavo Mirabile.

Demecio that he will hit the jackpot because, “no lo hago por dinero sino para el nuevo comienzo,” (“I don’t do it for money but for the new beginning”; 78). The numbers Máximo sells are lottery tickets for a space on his yola and the new beginnings he refers to is migration. In spite of his doubts, “¿Y qué tú quieres? ¿Qué dé dinero pa’ una rifa sin saber si voy a ganar?” (“And what do you want? That I spend money on a raffle without knowing if I’ll win?” 80), Demecio is desperate enough to take the risk. In both plays, it turns out that the only “winners” in the migration gamble are the male boat captains, because they survive the ill-fated trips. Nevertheless, each dread having to respond to the questions they will face upon return. *Yoleros* ends with Máximo asking himself: “¿Qué van a decir cuando me encuentren? ¿Van ellos a creer que viajé solo? ¿Me harán preguntas?” (“What will they say when they find me? Will they believe that I traveled alone? Will they ask questions?” 119), while the boat captain in *Miches* wishes he had died, because by returning “tiene que contar, tiene que explicar, tiene que responder. Tiene que recordar, aunque no quiera y sentirse culpable . . .” (“he has to tell, he has to explain, he has to answer. He has to remember, even if he does not want to and feel guilty . . .”; 237).

The representation of yola migration—what is said and what is left unsaid—not only becomes a theme in these plays, their very function is to show and to tell, to encourage the audience to question, and to remember. Both

the oral tradition and the newspaper motifs in *Yoleros* remind us that the subject of yola migration is controversial. Demecio frets about the gossip that will circulate when the townspeople discover that he has gone; he fears gossip that will suggest that he has fled because he is hiding something or being judged for risking his life and seeking an “easy” route out of poverty. He is painfully aware of the perception that those who migrate by boat “son de la clase más baja del país” (“are from the lowest class in the country”; 93). Dinora is less preoccupied by *el qué dirán* (what people may say), and her doubts about joining the trip stem from the constant stream of media stories of sharks devouring yoleros. She asks Máximo: “¿Qué tú quieres si eso es todo lo que se lee? ‘Se los comen los tiburones,’ ‘Yoleros son devorados,’ y quién sabe qué más que yo no he leído” (“What do you expect if that’s all you read? ‘Eaten by sharks,’ ‘Yoleros are devoured,’ and who knows what else I haven’t read”; 86). Máximo points out that sensationalist narratives serve to sell newspapers, and that “los periódicos tienen un lindo juego: publicar una lista de los nombres de aquellos que no llegan. Siempre he querido que escriban una de esos que llegan” (“newspapers play a nice game: they publish a list of the names of those who don’t arrive. I have always wanted them to write one of those who do arrive”; 102).<sup>18</sup> According to Máximo, the story of yola migration depicted in the media is always incomplete because it never highlights the success stories which might encourage more Dominicans to attempt illegal migration. The tales of yola migration circulated by the travelers themselves are also necessarily incomplete. In the midst of their suffering as the yola goes adrift, Demecio asks his travel companions if they have heard unpleasant stories from anyone who has returned from a yola trip (109). Nobody speaks of the traumas they face on the high seas, Máximo points out, “Ellos se guardan sus desgracias para ellos mismos” (“They keep their misfortunes to themselves”; 109). Thus, while the media seems to depict too much of the horror, the people themselves who lived the experience divulge too little. Revealing too much might have the effect of dissuading some would-be migrants whereas telling too little might encourage others to take their chances. The plays show that Dominicans, like the characters Demecio and Dinora, even when caught between knowing too much and wanting to know more, are willing to invest in the dream of a winning lottery ticket—safe passage to Puerto Rico and the chance to achieve economic stability.

One reason the stories imagined by Rivera Céspedes and Vásquez Escaño are so valuable is precisely that they help fill this knowledge gap. They serve the important function of telling a more complete story, one that is undoubtedly “ripped from the headlines,” but through the development of



1.2. Cast members from *Al garete*, a stage version of *Miches: Ponle Esperanza*. Photo credit: La Cuarta Espacio Teatral. Courtesy of José Rafael Sosa.

character psychology and the communicative modes of monologue and dialogue, they exceed the one-note tenor of tragedy to include both humor and the grotesque. They offer audiences a compact yet nuanced analysis of a social problem that plagues their nation, inviting an emotional and intellectual engagement that differs greatly from a news report. Firstly, through the boat conversations of the characters, and especially a number of monologues that foreground how everyone has a voice and a story to tell, it becomes evident that the desire to escape from a situation experienced as unlivable is motivated not only by poverty but by other factors as well. Whereas *60 millas al este* captures the anxious silence of a yola journey and relies upon pre-trip interviews to offer minimalist backstories, in *Miches* the characters are engaged in constant conversation and storytelling. Rivera Céspedes uses archetype characters—Embarazada, La Rebelde, Loquita, Deportado, Maestro, Estudiante, Boricua, Capitán, and Ayudante—who, rather than conveying a sense of anonymity or generic simplification, present a far fuller array of motivations for wanting to leave the Dominican Republic.<sup>19</sup>

In the scene “historias de alta mar,” (stories on the high seas) for example, we hear life stories, rather than stories of yola migration. Consequently, we gain insight into an existential awareness of an absurd lack of opportunities, and how identity categories such as sexuality and gender come into play in the decisions of Estudiante, Loquita, and Rebelde to migrate. In his monologue, Estudiante recounts how he came from a poor rural family to

study architecture in Santo Domingo. However, once immersed in his studies in the capital, he realizes that rural to urban migration and education will not increase his chances for social and economic mobility. Observing engineers and lawyers who sacrificed greatly to earn their academic degrees *motoconchando* (working as motorcycle taxi drivers), Estudiante comes to understand “el sinsentido de estudiar, el sinsentido de existir en este último rincón del planeta” (“the absurdity of studying, the absurdity of living in the furthest corner of the planet”; 207). Instead of fomenting aspirations and providing a pathway to a productive career, going through the motions of being a student became a farce:

Empecé sentirme ridículo con mi regla T prestada, de otro a quien se la prestó otro, quien también había dejado la carrera porque no daba . . . otros que no comprendieron que no eran ellos los que no daban, sino la carrera, la universidad, el país, el mundo. Otros que como yo no estaban dispuestos a dejar su sangre detrás de un título para bailar la bachata de la miseria. (208)

*I started to feel ridiculous with my borrowed T square, borrowed from someone who borrowed it from someone else, who had also dropped out because it wasn't worth it . . . others who didn't understand that it wasn't they who weren't worth it, but the major, the university, the country, the world. Others like me weren't willing to give their blood for a degree to dance the bachata of poverty.*

Estudiante's existential crisis leads him to make the abrupt decision to abandon everything and to go to Puerto Rico by yola. By becoming a labor migrant and taking the risk of dangerous and illegal migration, Estudiante assumes he will be able to participate in the global economy in a way that his country—“este último rincón del planeta”—cannot offer. Loquita's desire to migrate, by contrast, is unrelated to material aspirations. Loquita, who contributes humor, camaraderie, and compassion to the mix of people on the boat, ventures on the yola journey because she lacks the relationships that would emotionally sustain her: “El caso es que estoy aquí porque . . . no tengo nada . . . Mis hermanos todos viven afuera, no vendiendo droga, porque todo el que está afuera no está vendiendo droga, pero están afuera. Más bien la que está fuera soy yo. Fuera de sus planes, fuera de sus vidas. Y aunque no me falta nada, comencé a sentirme muy sola” (“The fact is that I am here because . . . I have nothing . . . My siblings all live abroad, not selling drugs, because not everyone who lives abroad is selling drugs, but they are out. Rather, the one who is out is me. Out of their plans, out of their lives. And although I don't lack anything, I started to feel very lonely”; 227). Unlike most yola migrants, material reasons do not motivate Loquita's desire to leave the Dominican Re-



public. Loquita leaves because she is lonely. We might surmise that her loneliness stems in part as a consequence from the reconfigured households with transnational families living in separate locations. However, that Loquita is “out” of her brother’s lives may very well also relate to her sexual orientation as an “outed” gay man. Rejected by her family and Dominican society, Loquita hopes living as a sexual minority in New York City can bring her some fulfillment. By Manuel Guzmán’s terms, Loquita’s migration could be viewed as a “sexile”—“the exile of those who have had to leave their nations of origin on account of their sexual orientation” (227).<sup>20</sup> Lastly, the character Rebelde constitutes an example of how gender intersects with migration. As the name would suggest, Rebelde stands out among her fellow travelers as a voice of social critique and a strong leader. She is painfully aware of the inequalities she faces due to her gender: “Ser mujer es como ser zurdo. El mundo está hecho para manejarlo con la otra mano” (“Being a woman is like being left-handed. The world is made to be handled with the other hand”; 231). Like so many other women around the world who migrate, Rebelde is a single parent forced to leave her children because she cannot adequately support them. She works in the globalized spaces of Dominican free-trade zones, where she suffers human rights abuses and earns a salary insufficient to feed and educate her children: “Maltratos, humillaciones, abusos, frío, de todo. El infierno tiene que ser como de zona” (“Mistreatment, humiliation, abuse, cold, everything. Hell must be like the free-trade zone”; 231). Yet, as she clings to the capsized yola, Rebelde tragically concludes that the terror of the silence and darkness of the sea far exceeds the suffering on land.

By comparison, in *Yoleros* the characters reveal much less about themselves and their motivations for migrating. While they all purport to be seeking new opportunities and a better life, Máximo pointedly asks, “¿Y por qué le huyes a tu realidad?” (“And why do you run away from your reality?” 110). Without divulging the characters’ secrets other than discovering that Máximo’s mother is dead and thus his performance of the role of a dutiful son is a sham, the play permits us to intuit that the lure of a new life might be motivated by a complex set of reasons, not solely the desire to escape poverty. Though *Yoleros* does not dwell on the character’s life stories, Máximo transforms into a storyteller and ironically narrates the very ordeal many yola travelers keep to themselves that and that he and his fellow passengers are beginning to experience after spending six days lost at sea. Máximo is reluctant to speak of his previously unsuccessful yola outing, but Demecio insists: “Pero dinos . . . Por algo estás vivo . . . ¿Cómo lo hiciste?” (“But tell us . . . There must be a reason why you’re alive . . . How did you do it?” 112), and Dinora adds “No pares por mí. Si quieres contar tu historia, pues

cuéntala . . . ¡Como si yo nunca hubiera oído historias de yoleros!” (“Don’t stop because of me. If you want to tell your story, go ahead . . . As if I had never heard stories of yoleros!” 112). Nevertheless, as Máximo narrates his story, Demecio and Dinora become overwhelmed with the knowledge that they will soon be facing whatever measures he and the handful of survivors took to survive for thirteen days at sea; in fact, the two narratives intersect when Máximo proposes that they might survive if Dinora would be as generous as the *comadres* (godmothers) on his previous trip and allowed them to breastfeed. This survival strategy is something that has been reported on in the press. Here, however, the intimate and collective space of the theater will certainly impact how spectators receive a story that undoubtedly makes people uncomfortable; moreover *Yoleros* shows how a woman grapples with the ugly realities of what this situation implies for her, which is quite a different than the whitewashed story of the mother-heroine that tends to appear in the media.

In the context of the theater, audiences desensitized by hyperbolic journalism might respond differently to actors performing live scenarios. Here, bodies lost at sea and stories silenced come back from the dead and confront audiences with the human wreckage of yola migration history. These stories, though often told, seem to fall on deaf ears, as Madre-Miches expresses in frustration: “Y yo sin saliva de repetir las historias que nadie quiere oír que nadie escucha” (“My mouth is dry from repeating stories that no one wants to hear, that nobody listens to”; 240). It is difficult not to listen, however, when the terrifying reality of taking to the sea in a small open vessel is depicted poetically. Muchacha, for example, muses, “Sólo de pensar en ese solazo, que se refleja en el agua, en la arena, en tus ojos, que se te mete como si fueran abejas calientes una por cada poro. Ese sol, ese sol que te deja ciego, que te pone loco, que te hace hablar disparates, llamar muertos, ver visiones” (“Just thinking about that scorching sun, reflected in the water, in the sand, in your eyes, that gets inside you pore by pore like hot bees. That sun, that sun that blinds you, that makes you crazy, that make you talk nonsense, call the dead, have visions”; 196). The stinging, blinding pain of the sun literally roasts the travelers alive, as Demecio complains in *Yoleros*:

DEMECIO: (Con miedo). Puedo oler mi piel quemándose . . .

MÁXIMO: ¡Piel quemada . . . Por un segundo oí que dijiste carne ahumada.

DEMECIO: Dije quemada.

DINORA: Yo aguanto las quemadas, lo que no aguanto es esta sed. (102)

DEMECIO: (*Fearfully*). *I can smell my skin burning . . .*

MÁXIMO: *Burned skin? . . . For a second, I thought you said smoked meat.*

DEMECIO: *I said burned.*

DINORA: *I can endure the sunburns, what I can't bear is this thirst.*

The macabre notion of a human burning alive takes a grotesque turn when Máximo's misinterpretation of Demecio's complaint indirectly introduces the theme of cannibalism. It is likely that Máximo's hunger leads him to hear "smoked meat" rather than "burning skin," and that the reality of perceiving fellow passengers as eventual sustenance is not out of the question. In performance, this conversation likely comes off as laughably grotesque, as does the following reference to a different sort of cannibalism made by Madre-Miches, "Yo no como nada que venga del mar, nada, que en el Caribe deberían prohibir la pesca. Qué sabe uno a qué primo se está comiendo" ("I don't eat anything from the sea, nothing; in the Caribbean fishing should be forbidden. Who knows which cousin you could be eating"; 203). Certainly, Madre-Miches's colorful declaration gives spectators more pause than the continual lists of drowning victims reported in the newspapers.

Indeed, the use of dark humor in *Yoleros* and *Miches* is an important strategy in performing stories of yola migration that audiences will not only hear, but also listen to. In the theater, a passive response to the trauma of yola migration disasters is challenged through infectious and cathartic humor. In *Yoleros*, for instance, Máximo displays a dry sense of humor when they come upon an orange floating in the sea and Demecio wonders if compassionate cruise ship passengers threw it overboard. Máximo retorts that tourists have no interest in the plight of the poor in the Caribbean and sarcastically voices the perspective of a tourist: "Vamos a tirar unas cuantas naranjas al mar para darle a esos yoleros una ayudita para no sentirnos tan culpables de estar aquí arriba" ("Let's throw a few oranges into the sea to give those yoleros a little help so we don't feel so guilty about being up here"; 98). Similarly, when later Demecio notices a shirt floating in the water and wonders whether it came from a luxury ship, Máximo responds: "Sí, claro. No quiero ser el infeliz que está llorando porque perdió su camisa favorita" ("Yeah, right. I don't want to be the poor guy crying because he lost his favorite shirt"; 103). These comments might make audiences chuckle, but the unspoken thoughts about the human wreckage floating in the Caribbean Sea is unsettling. No one on the yola dares to point out that the debris they encounter is from another ill-fated yola. Suffering from dehydration, sunburn, and hunger, their hidden fears are made manifest in a series of delirious metatheatrical scenes in which Máximo plays multiple roles. As Richard Hornby has noted, in metatheater, when a character takes on another role,

ironically, the role is often “closer to the character’s true self than his every day, ‘real’ personality” (67). This is indeed the case with Máximo, who is cast in authoritarian and even menacing roles in the metatheatrical scenes: first as a Coast Guard officer, then a smooth-talking shark, and, finally, as a captain defending his cruise ship from attacking yoleros. Demecio’s dream shows that Máximo has lied about his mother, Dinora’s dream underscores her fear of sharks, and Máximo’s dream shows his anxious desire to control Dinora and Demecio. These absurd scenes add psychological depth to the characters, and they contribute an uneasy mix of humor in a plot inexorably headed towards tragedy. By shifting tenors, the playwrights complicate and activate the role of the spectator in responding to the events unfolding onstage.

In *Miches* Boricua adds comic relief to the tragic story line, though it bears noting that his is the first monologue of the yola journey, a moment marked by hope and incipient camaraderie that soon fades as the catastrophic trip advances. Boricua’s relentless optimism and naiveté is evocative of Balbuena, the humorously charming Dominican protagonist of Ángel Muñiz’s film *Nueva Yol*. Unlike Balbuena, though, who confronts many hardships in New York City, Boricua’s utopian migration fantasy is never debunked because the journey fails. Boricua has acquired his nickname for his repeat attempts to reach New York City via Puerto Rico, and for his mindless devotion to what he deems as superior American (and Puerto Rican, by virtue of its colonized status) culture. His opening declaration is amusing because it is one of his many categorical remarks that reflect popular attitudes carried to the extreme, and because we discover he has never even been to Puerto Rico or the United States: “El que muere sin ir a Nueva York se murió ciego. El norte es el norte y lo demás es parking, como dicen los boricuas, es decir, parqueo” (“He who dies without going to New York died blind. The north is the north, everything else is parking, as the Boricuas say, that is, a parking lot”; 204). According to Boricua, in the Dominican Republic, “uno no es nadie” (“you are nobody”; 204), “nada sirve” (“everything is worthless”; 204), and there are “tantos brutos” (“so many ignorant people”; 204) due to a diet heavy in plantains as opposed to the ostensibly superior corn flakes and turkey consumed by North Americans. Being Puerto Rican is desirable because “es como si fuera americano, es muy gente, en cierta forma son más gentes que uno” (“it’s as if one were American, classy, somehow better than us”; 206). Boricua embraces and imitates the cultural codes of the United States and even racializes his inferiority complex when he insists that when Dominicans migrate, “se le ve el progreso, uno empieza a blanquear, se le ponen los cabellos buenos y uno como que coge un feeling” (“you can see

progress, you start to get lighter, your hair gets straightened, and it's like you get a feeling"; 205). True to Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytical interpretation of the colonized black man adopting a white mask in order to become a colonial subject with some social mobility, Boricua understands that achieving social progress is predicated on racial disavowal and embracing white supremacy. Boricua's attempt to masquerade as a Puerto Rican, nevertheless, undermines him as an authority on the cultural codes of the United States and Puerto Rico. He takes great pride in his "costume," a faded hand-me-down American flag T-shirt he believes will help him pass as Puerto Rican. This is comic, first, because Boricua insists on the authenticity of the shirt, when in reality it appears to be a cheap knock-off with faulty graphics, "tenía sus cincuenta y dos estrellitas, yo se las conté . . . son cincuenta y dos por los cincuenta y dos estados" ("it had its fifty-two little stars, I counted them . . . they are fifty-two for the fifty-two states"; 205). Second, if Boricua does not know that there are fifty American states, it would follow that his knowledge of Puerto Rican culture may also be lacking. His assumption that Puerto Ricans are a US flag-loving people is humorous when one takes into account the ubiquity of the Puerto Rican flag on the island and in the diaspora as a key marker of Puerto Rican ethnonationalism that evokes an alternative to US colonialism. Finally, Boricua's tale reaches a comic climax when he admits that the one time he thought he had made it to Puerto Rico, he was swindled by the trip organizers and delivered to an unfamiliar area in the Dominican Republic that he mistook for Puerto Rico, even though everything looked very familiar. Boricua laughs at his humiliating mistake, and so will spectators, who undoubtedly will question his authority and become suspicious of overly Manichean cultural representations.

If we are to follow Lendeborg's example of a *yola* trip in which the motor, wind, and waves seem to numb the passengers and drown out most communication, the constant dialogue in the *yola* dramas seems unrealistic. However, we have seen that the artistic rendering of *yola* migration also allows for shifting between humor and the grotesque in search of connecting with audiences. In *Miches* in particular, the author uses dialogue to explore different views of migration and the changing nature of Dominican national culture. The constant stream of out-migration, legal and illegal, by airplane and by boat, represents a stress on the national psyche (and, at the same time, an economic relief). Rivera Céspedes includes these conversations not because they are likely to take place on the high seas in a small boat, but because they stage for the audience a sort of talking cure in which the characters reveal the personal and collective trauma of migration. Overall, *Yoleros* and *Miches* present a critical view of the impact mi-

gration has had on Dominican society. The character who covets American culture, Boricua, is parodied, and characters such as Muchacha mock the hybrid cultural forms they see evolving through their island's transnational relationship with the United States. Observing the townspeople of Miches, Muchacha says, "Veo a los que desde aquí se van dominiyorkan . . . Con sus pantalones exagerados, sus tenis horrorosos y las mentadas cadenas, que no les cabría otro nombre, que no podrían llamarse de mejor manera" ("I see those who leave becoming Dominicanyorks . . . With their exaggerated pants, horrendous sneakers, and famous gold chains, that's the only name for them, there's no better way to call them"; 197). As Muchacha observes, the fashion tastes of the youth of Miches who have gone nowhere at all are impacted by migration. The bidirectional transnational linkages between a tiny village and New York City allow for Dominicans to imitate Dominicanyork fashions even though they have never been there. Interestingly, of the many variations of the term *Dominicanyork* we see referenced in the plays and performances throughout this book, this one invents a verb form that spelled out completely would be *se van dominiyorkando* (they are becoming Dominicanyork). Muchacha thus emphasizes the inevitable and processual quality of becoming a hybrid subject; to the discomfort of some, Dominican culture is changing regardless of whether one migrates. Madre-Miches does not use strong adjectives denigrating Dominicanyorks, but one can sense her frustration in seeing well-made new clothes, nice shoes, and candy from the United States influence "los muchachos, y hasta gente vieja, dispuesta a todo por alcanzar el paraíso" ("kids and even old people willing to do anything to reach paradise"; 240) even though migration to "paradise" results in orphans and broken marriages. The characters project the nation's anxieties about the cultural changes brought about by migration onto the figure of the Dominicanyork. Unlike migration dramas that portray stories of migrant identities undergoing transculturation—with all the cultural exchange, loss, and adaptation that this experience implies—these plays show the starting point of the journey that precedes these experiences. Focusing on this moment of liminality allows the playwright to show the contradictory positions of characters whose desire for personal fulfillment and a better material future outweigh their present distaste and perhaps misunderstanding of a subject position they, too, may soon embody.

### Staying Afloat, or the Survival of the Fittest

In this section, I shift my analysis to focus on how gender, family, and nation are enfolded in a politics of disposability in which women and the margin-

alized classes lose in the neoliberal game of the survival of the fittest. In each play, only the male figure of the captain survives the yola journey. This might not seem surprising given their familiarity with the sea; as the captain in *Miches* boasts, “Sé de agua y con una hebra de hilo, mirando el cielo, yo llego, ¡sin brújula!” (“I know about water and with a strand of thread, looking at the sky, I arrive, without a compass!” 235). All macho bravura fades, however, when both men dread having to account for the ill-fated outcome of their trips. Specifically, they fear having to respond to their mothers.<sup>21</sup> The mother and son relationships in both plays, as well as the pseudo familial relationships developed on the yolas, serve as an entrée for envisioning the yola dramas as metaphors for the nation. Indeed, *Yoleros* and *Miches* fit Nadine Holdsworth’s definition of the state-of-the-nation play, which “deploys representations of personal events, family structures and social or political organisations as a microcosm of the nation-state to comment directly or indirectly on the ills befalling society, on key narratives of nationhood or on the state of the nation as it wrestles with changing circumstances” (39). As this book argues, the Dominican diaspora is rewriting narratives of Dominican nationhood, and the theater not only has the potential to reflect the state of the nation “but, via its discursive, imaginative and communal realm, to contribute to the creation of the nation through the cultural discourses it ignites, the representations it offers and the stories it chooses to tell” (Holdsworth 79–80).

In both plays, surviving the journey is met with the anxiety of having to explain to the mother(land) why the captains were the only survivors. In *Yoleros* Máximo’s mother is dead, but he gives the impression that she is alive to support his illegal migration enterprise: potential travelers are more likely to entrust their lives with Máximo if they believe he is working to support his mother. Although the mother is never seen onstage, Máximo converses with her as though she were there or perhaps in another room. In these one-sided conversations, we intuit that Máximo feels guilty about something that happened to his brother and defends his decision to sell his brother’s belongings. Responding to his absent mother Máximo says, “Si ya sé lo que me va decir ahora ‘Y qué clase de hermano eres tú?’” (“I already know what you’re going to say now ‘What kind of brother are you?’” 75). *Yoleros* seems to posit this very question: what kind of brothers and sisters have Dominican citizens become? Máximo’s admissions of guilt, shame, and desperation suggest that the sea survival story he must narrate to his mother will uncover an unflattering portrait of the national family.

The mother in *Miches* is more obviously figured as the motherland or the nation. In addition to her hyphenated name, Madre-Miches, the omniscient



1.3. Madre-Miches in *Al garete*, a stage version of *Miches: Ponle Esperanza*. Photo credit: La Cuarta Espacio Teatral. Courtesy of José Rafael Sosa.

quality of the opening monologues in *Yoleros*, in which she and Muchacha make observations about the impact of migration on the lives of the townspeople, serves as an important clue that Madre-Miches represents the *madre patria*. “Mamá piensa en todo, y en todos . . . piensa mucho, por eso sufre” (“Mom thinks about everything, and everyone . . . she thinks a lot, that’s why she suffers”; 237) remarks the captain, aptly named Moisés. On a personal level, Madre is terrified of the sea since it threatens to rob her of what she loves most, her son. She waits anxiously at a window on terra firma for his return, ever convinced that each trip out to sea will be his last. At the same time she is Madre-Miches, the collective mother, aggrieved by the social and economic crisis that fuels illegal migration and the slow death of her town. *Miches* registers a strong critique of Dominican society through the mother’s characterization of Miches as a dead ghost town. The failure of a community like Miches is symptomatic of a much larger collective decline in civic responsibility and democratic ideals:



Antes quería que en Miches pusieran escuelas, que los comerciantes pusieran negocios, que algo le diera vida a este cementerio, pero ya no pido más. No quiero nada. El cura pidiendo la madera de la yola para unas puertas de la iglesia, el director de la escuela pidiéndola para hacer unos cursos. Al final, la guardia quemándola en escarmiento público. ¡Qué graciosos! ¿Por qué no queman los buenos miles que se embolsillan? (201)

*I used to wish that in Miches they opened schools, that merchants would set up businesses, that something would give life to this cemetery, but I don't ask anymore. I don't want anything. The priest is asking for the wood from yolas for some church doors, the school principal is asking for it for some courses. In the end, the police burning it as a public warning. How funny! Why don't they burn the few thousands that they pocket?*

For Madre-Miches, it is too late to revive a town in which the very institutions which are to guide it have been contaminated by the illegal migration industry. The former “pillars” of society—the education system, the church, and law enforcement—are now physically and economically supported by the materials and cash generated by informal yola migration economy.

Thus, while the poor in Miches are surely attracted to the consumer lifestyles they have been exposed to through the globalized media and transnational networks of migrants, it is equally important to consider the “push” factor in abandoning the homeland. The corruption described by Madre-Miches is one sign of the disaffection and apathy that has been bred in the marginalized sectors. Deportado’s explanation to his teacher as to why he never attended to the school flag ceremony also exemplifies this alienation:

¿Yo tengo patria?, le dije un día . . . que la respeten sus dueños, los dueños de todo. Qué graciosos, el país para ellos y la patria para nosotros. Así sí es bueno, yo, que respete la bandera. Y a mí, ¿quién me respeta? ¿Y mi hambre? Y mis sueños, y mis esperanzas . . . ¿quién me las respeta? Se cogen el país y a mí me dejan un trapo. Le dije a la maestra yo no tengo patria. (234)

*Do I have a homeland? I told her one day . . . that its owners should respect it, the owners of everything. How funny, the country for them, the homeland for us. So yes, that's right, I should respect the flag. But, who respects me? How about my hunger? And my dreams and hopes . . . who respects them? They take the country and leave me with a rag. I told the teacher I don't have a homeland.*

Deportado has no allegiance to his flag because his nation has not honored the promise of providing rights, protection, and good government for all.

The powerful oligarchy owns the land and operates the economy while the marginalized sectors are handed empty patriotism. Deportado does not imagine himself part of the nation because he, and by extension, the poor population, has been effectively designated as “collateral damage in the construction of a neoliberal order” (Giroux, *Stormy Weather* 11). Deportado, like many of his compatriots, is thus pushed to fix his gaze outward to search for the economic and social security he is not afforded in his homeland.

The search for solutions abroad empties towns of productivity because everyday life becomes overtaken by desiring to leave, preparing to leave, and waiting for loved ones to return (who will likely leave again). Consequently, citizens cease to be engaged in productive activities: “En este pueblo nadie sabe hacer nada . . . Un oficio, costura, zapatero . . . la gente aquí . . . nadie se casa, nadie consigue un buen trabajo, no hace un negocio . . .” (“In this town nobody knows how to do anything . . . A trade, sewing, shoemaker . . . people here . . . nobody gets married, nobody gets a good job, nobody does business”; 199). While out-migration represents a passive antidote to the nation’s social and economic woes, the fruitless circular migration that brings return migrants back to the Dominican Republic serves as a continual reminder that the same conditions that provoked their migration persist. *Miches*’s ending is ultimately very pessimistic, as Madre-Miches acknowledges that the nation has gone adrift in a sea of hunger and corruption: “Al garete va la tierra girando sin agua, sin comida. Convertida en tierra de nadie, en pastel de ocho o nueve mafiosos . . . que se las han arreglado para agarrar su salvavidas desde que la cosa se ponga fea, sin importarles que en este mar picado nos metieron ellos, despojándonos de todo, arrebatándonos todo” (“Adrift goes the land, spinning with no water or food. Converted in no-man’s-land, in a prize for eight or nine gangsters . . . who have managed to grab their life jackets when things get ugly, not caring that they got us in this choppy water, stripping us of everything, snatching everything from us”; 241).

In the marginalized sectors set adrift, *Yoleros* and *Miches* show women as the most vulnerable participants in the collectivity of the *yola*, and, by extension, the nation. Just as Deportado articulated his lack of allegiance to the homeland, Maestro confirms that the survivors of the informal economy are not envisioned as full members of the nation: “Pero nosotros no vivimos en su mundo. Nos han dejado uno de tercera categoría para que nos acomodemos como podamos. Y en eso estamos, matándonos por el último poquito de comida y de agua. Acaparando, empujándonos unos a otros, a codazos como animales salvajes, echando a los tiburones a los más débiles para ganar algo de tiempo” (“But we don’t live in their world. They have left us a space in third class to fit in it the best we can. And we are trying, killing each

other for the last bit of food and water. Hoarding, pushing, elbowing each other like wild animals, throwing the weakest to the sharks to buy some time"; 226). In this dehumanizing drama of survival, only the male captains endure. The male-headed boat echoes the structure of a patriarchal family, complete with a mother figure since one of the passengers is a pregnant woman. Figuring the collectivity of the boat as a domestic, familial space, however, is contested. When Loquita, in an effort to build camaraderie, references the group as a family, in line with his earlier declarations of disassociation, Deportado retorts: "Yo no soy familia de nadie, así es que suspende la confianza" ("I'm not anyone's family, so cut the familiarity"; 214). Deportado, in turn, is put in his place by the Capitán-Father of the vessel: "¿Qué es lo que pasa? Así es que empiezan los problemas y los fracasos. Quiero que todo el mundo esté callado" ("What's going on? This is how problems and failures begin. I want everybody to be quiet"; 214). The captain maintains order on the boat, but he is unable to play the traditional part of the morally minded nineteenth-century maritime leader who followed the ethical code of attending to women and children first in life-threatening situations.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, in this context, women and children are the first to be thrown overboard when the *yola* goes adrift. Embarazada gives birth, aided by her fellow passengers who optimistically name the baby Esperanza (Hope). The small boat is covered in blood, however, and sharks circle. To the horror of Capitán, who frantically struggles to wash away the blood, Ayudante and Deportado take charge and toss both mother and baby overboard alive. Rebelde, who helped with the birth, is stripped of her blood-stained clothes and left naked. Ayudante confirms: "Parece cruel, pero ésta es la ley aquí. No hay amigo, no hay nada, cuando estás frente a un tiburón le das cualquier cosa menos tu pellejo . . ." ("It seems cruel, but this is the law here. There is no friend, there is nothing, when you face a shark you give it anything but your skin"; 224–25). In Giorgio Agamben's view of biopower, the raw image of women and children naked, bloodied, and tossed overboard captures the barest life reduced to *homo sacer*.<sup>23</sup>

The entire population of *yola* migrants might be envisioned as an underclass expunged from society, no longer valued as citizens, and tacitly sanctioned for sacrifice. For Foucault, "racism justifies the death-function in the economy of biopower" (258), while Giroux emphasizes the confluence of race and class inequalities with neoliberalism and state violence in "a new and dangerous version of biopolitics" (*Stormy Weather* 21). In *Yoleros* and *Miches* we see both forms of biopower operate, but the denouement of the shipwreck dramas draws special attention the gendered vulnerability of female *yola* migrants in the dehumanizing acts of survival. As I have

previously noted, in illegal trafficking, the male boat captains have found a space for belonging and dissidence in extreme times of neoliberalism and have become “endriago subjects” empowered by the deaths of others. Given the outcomes of the stories, however, it would be difficult to interpret the actions of gore capitalism’s endriago subjectivities as an effective form of resistance since they “preserve masculinist hierarchies” (Valencia 284) and their actions are “tied to a program that has been previously defined by a violent, hegemonic, capitalist, masculinist framework” (284). Valencia argues that these dystopian dissident subjectivities, however, point to the need for transfeminism, envisioned as “a social movement made up of women, but also as an epistemological category for the conception and creation of new, non-dystopian—feminine and masculine—identities” (273). The gender disobedience generated by transfeminism would most certainly reimagine the social construct of the family.

The boat passengers in Vásquez Escaño’s *Yoleros* are also imagined as a family of sorts. Here, Dinora is forced to adopt a “familial” role when Máximo tells her “nuestra salvación está tus manos” (“our salvation is in your hands”; 116) and recounts how a lactating woman helped nine people survive on a previous journey. The audience realizes now that the captain selected Dinora for the trip precisely because he knew she was nursing; in their first onstage interaction, she had confessed that she was motivated to take the risky trip because of the powerful maternal love she feels while nursing her son (83). However, Dinora resists playing the role of mother as savior of the nation and pays for it with her life. By contrast, in a real-life case, Faustina Mercedes Mauricio, nicknamed Ángelita del mar (Little Angel of the Sea), saved sixteen passengers while their boat drifted at sea for nearly two weeks. As reported in the media, Faustina comforted her fellow passengers: “No tengan vergüenza, no nos vamos a morir, le dijo a sus compañeros. Y cada uno de ellos pasó entre dos o tres veces al día a tomar leche de su pecho. Fue un ritual desesperado que se extendió por cinco días hasta que los equipos de rescate de la Marina dominicana los encontró en las costas de Nisibón” (“Don’t be ashamed, we’re not going to die, she told her fellow travelers. And each one of them drank milk from her breast two or three times a day. It was a desperate ritual that lasted for five days until the Dominican navy rescue team found them on the shores of Nisibón”; “Faustina, la mujer”). To reward Faustina’s extraordinary act of generosity, the Dominican government provided her a home and a job. Faustina’s experience presents nursing as an instinct and ethical urge that fulfills her role as a mother of the nation.<sup>24</sup> This maternal representation helps society elide the unbearable reality of what takes place in desperate situations on yolas and it naturalizes

women's subaltern status. Breast milk is a female resource, but Faustina and her fictional counterpart are forced, with no compensation from their fellow passengers, to become wet nurses for the boat. That is, not only are Dominican migrant women nourishing the nation through the remittances they send from abroad to support their own families, in the patriarchal space of the boat they are literally compelled to feed the nation. Máximo exerts his authority by telling Dinora that the women who refused to nurse the other travelers were thrown overboard, and after Demecio refuses to take advantage of her—he states that she reminds him of his sister—Máximo pushes him overboard (46). In desperation, Dinora appeals for Máximo to think of his own mother:

MÁXIMO: ¡Mi mamá? Nada. ¡Ella está muerta!

DINORA: ¿Ella no estaba enferma?

MÁXIMO: Sí, lo estaba. Sólo quería tener un poco de compasión en este viaje . . .

DINORA: Eres un animal.

MÁXIMO: . . . que sabe sobrevivir . . . (Máximo trata de agarrarla)

(Dinora se tira al mar). (119)

MÁXIMO: *My mom? Nothing. She's dead!*

DINORA: *Wasn't she sick?*

MÁXIMO: *Yes, she was. I just wanted a little compassion on this trip . . .*

DINORA: *You're an animal.*

MAXIMO: . . . *Who knows how to survive . . . (Máximo tries to grab her)*

*(Dinora throws herself into the sea).*

This scene imagines the terrible stories trip survivors rarely recount, and the stage serves as a laboratory for exploring a hypothetical scenario in which a group is stranded at sea in a small fishing boat. In the *Ángelita del mar* narrative, nursing an adult evokes Roman Charity, the iconic image of the selfless act of easing the suffering of hunger; in *Yoleros*, on the contrary, the idea of adults feeding on the mother is one taboo that evokes even more troubling ones: cannibalism and incest. In both plays, those with unsustainable lives in the neoliberal order are left to feed on each other, with only the strongest male surviving.

The *yola* scenarios imagined by Vásquez Escaño and Rivera Céspedes situate spectators in the middle of a (failed) journey of migration, while the following plays and performances explored in this book grapple with the transnational identities that develop in different stages of arrival, adaptation, and return. The impact of the *yola* migration plays is achieved by enabling theatergoers to witness what they already know, but that has not been

brought into appearance in quite the same way the theatrical performance does. Although the stories of yola migration recounted in the press or dramatized onstage may be similar, in line with Kelleher's stance on theater and politics, staging the stories implicitly stands up for migrants by standing in for them. These plays raise consciousness of how some lives in the Dominican national family are valued more than others; Dominican boat people form a disposable population, which according to Giroux, "are already seen as dead within the global economic/political framework" (*Stormy Weather* 22). The theater event makes visible the subjectivities of migrants that have been relegated to spaces of invisibility and disposability and challenges the civic indifference to their plight. While both the media and the plays depict the dismemberment of the national family through illegal migration as tragic, representation in the theater event serves to re-member this collectivity. In an epoch in which "Democratic values, identities, and social relations along with public spaces, the common good, and the obligations of civic responsibility are slowly being overtaken by a market-based notion of freedom and civic indifference," writes Giroux, "it becomes more difficult to translate private woes into social issues and collective action or to insist on a language of the public good" ("Reading Hurricane Katrina" 186). Plays like *Miches: Ponle Esperanza* and *Yoleros* underscore the political relevancy of the theater in carrying out the urgent task of animating audiences to reconnect feelings and actions with the values of social obligation and civic responsibility.