



Patterns of Dominance in Puerto Rican Literature: A Historical Overview

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The response to a dominant “other” is the central theme in Puerto Rican literature. Its importance in our literary tradition can be readily understood through an examination of Puerto Rico’s history of colonial relationships and an analysis of the cultural, linguistic, and racial implications of the island’s socio-political development within structures where “dominance” has always rested in the hands of a foreign power, an imperial “other.” Forced into submissive relationships with the representatives of colonial powers, Puerto Rican intellectuals have responded with a defensive stance against dominance from abroad; this response has been one of the central tenets of our intellectual and literary expression.

Of all the former Spanish possessions in the New World, Puerto Rico was the only one to have entered the twentieth century still a colony. In the roughly four centuries it remained under Spanish control, the island lagged behind other imperial colonies: economically, it languished until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when sugar and coffee production opened links to the worldwide economic system (at the expense, however, of an increased dependence on slave labor and the exploitation of the free labor force). Politically, it suffered from the

repressive backlash prompted by the Latin American wars of independence, which awakened Spain to the need for repressive measures in order to hold on to what remained of its crumbling empire. Culturally, it suffered from lack of educational opportunities for the majority of the population, dependence on foreign cultural models, and deplorable internal communications. On the eve of the 1898 American invasion, after over four hundred years under Spanish control, roughly ninety three percent of the population was illiterate, only fifteen percent of Puerto Rican families owned land, medical care was unavailable to an overwhelming percentage of the population, and travel from the interior of the island to the capital could take days of laborious effort.

The 1898 U.S. invasion had a considerable impact on material conditions in the island, for it brought better educational opportunities for the masses, improved health care and communications, and a democratic system of political participation with extensive but not universal franchise. It did not, however, change the structures within which political development took place, and the island's social and economic problems were exacerbated. One immediate result of the American takeover was the collapse of the island's coffee industry (already ailing in the 1890s and rapidly moving towards foreign control) and its replacement with large, highly technological sugar mills controlled by foreign consortia. The development of a system of agricultural monoculture in absentee hands was accompanied by the amassing of large extensions of fertile lands under American corporate control, precluding the continuing growth of most local capital investments and leading to the bankruptcy of a large number of Puerto Rican planters and businessmen. The collapse of the local economy intensified the formation of an impoverished proletariat subsisting on low wages, and plunged the island into a vicious cycle of dependence on foreign capital, with the concomitant result of profits being drained out of the island.

Economic control was accompanied by attempts at imposing American cultural values on the Puerto Rican population, beginning with English being made compulsory in island schools in 1905 (an imposition that lasted into the late 1940s and that succeeded in making the Spanish language the centerpiece of anti-American resistance). Conscious efforts were made to stifle all important cultural manifestations in the belief that only the adoption of American values would

make loyal American citizens of the Puerto Rican population. These efforts included a virtual invasion of the island by Protestant missionaries in an attempt to eradicate Catholicism, the virtual elimination of the teaching of Puerto Rican history and literature in local schools, the discouragement of traditional cultural practices and their replacement of these with American rituals that had no roots in Puerto Rican culture.¹

As the Puerto Rican example shows, the most damaging result of colonial relationships lies in the subordination of local cultural, political, and socio-economic development to the colonizer's interests, precluding internal development and resulting in the discouragement or interdiction of everything that is deemed threatening to continuing control over the colonized territory. The essence of colonial relationships is precisely the defining of everything belonging to the dominant culture as superior and everything belonging to the dominated culture as inferior. Relations thus defined, it becomes the self-imposed "duty" of the dominant group to use its power to impose its values onto the colonized country as the means of forestalling any effort at gaining independence.

After almost a century under American domination, the issue of Puerto Rico's political status continues to thwart and obscure all other local political concerns. Throughout the twentieth century, political debate on the island has centered around the question of sovereignty, with any consideration of national autonomy placed in abeyance until it can be determined whether the island will become a state of the United States or an independent nation. The Commonwealth option—called in Spanish "Estado Libre Asociado" or "Free Associated State"—resolving nothing, left the country in a political limbo that perpetuated colonial irresolution. In the meantime, Puerto Rico's political life remained in a state of arrested development, and democratic growth was static and inapplicable to other issues and concerns.

Not surprisingly, the problems posed by the island's unresolved political situation became the central topics of Puerto Rican literature. Thus, the recurring themes in our literary history converged on the following issues: the island's unresolved political status and its resulting unresolved sense of national selfhood; alienation from the self arising from the subordination of a predominantly mulatto population to a white and fundamentally racist colonial power; the concomitant

struggle to preserve local traditions in the face of the onslaught from the powerful American media and its cultural message; the conflict between American values and traditional Puerto Rican mores; and the struggle to uphold the Spanish language as the vehicle of national communication and identity. As a consequence, language became synonymous with nationality for Puerto Ricans.

Literature began to be written and published in Puerto Rico in the mid-nineteenth century, a crucial time in the development of our national identity. The emergence of Puerto Rican literature coincided with the Creole planter class's attempts to consolidate its economic strength in the struggle against Spanish expatriates who controlled commerce and banking on the island. Because it is so closely linked to the articulation of the Creole upper-class ideology as it defined itself in opposition to foreign (i.e. colonial) interests and concerns, Puerto Rican literature was identified with factors related to our search for a national identity: regionalism, the struggle against colonial rule and extraneous cultural influences, the Puerto Rican vernacular, and the affirmation of the culture's profound roots in the land. Literature quickly became (for the literate middle and upper-middle classes at least) the vehicle to illustrate the socio-political problems of the island and to counteract foreign dominance.

By some accounts, the signal publication in the emergence of Puerto Rican literature was Manuel Alonso's *El gíbaro*, an 1849 collection of vignettes about peasant customs and traditions in the Puerto Rican countryside. *El gíbaro* was a seminal work in that it attempted to define Puerto Rican culture in its own terms, separating it from the traditions and customs of the Spanish metropolis. It showed Puerto Rican literature as attempting, from its very inception, to delineate the essence of Puerto Rican nationality and character against that of the colonizer. As with any other attempt to catch the essence of something as elusive as identity or nationality, *El gíbaro* embodied a concept of *Puerto Rican-ness* that was limited by Alonso's planter-class ideology. Politically, *El gíbaro* was not a revolutionary book in as much as it did not call for a rejection of the colonizing power. Socially, it rooted national identity in the customs and traditions of the idealized, light-skinned, mountain-based peasant of Spanish descent, ignoring the culture and contributions of the large coastal-based population of African descent. These limitations aside, Alonso's stance was "progressive" in

that he brought "the spirit of the island to a literary work" that he recreated from the "nonofficial language." He, therefore, gave "literary status to the marginalized," and he exposed and revealed "the country's [ambiguous] reality."² Thus, with Alonso's *El gíbaro*, our literary tradition opened with a question that would dominate it throughout the first century of development: *How can Puerto Rico, without independence, define itself against domination from the outside?*

Puerto Rico's *engagée* literary tradition spawned an analogous critical discourse wherein rewards and "punishments" were correlated to the writer's degree of commitment to the evolution of the national identity movement. The towering figures of Puerto Rican literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century—Eugenio María de Hostos, Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, Salvador Brau, José de Diego, Lola Rodríguez de Tió, and others—articulated the vision of an island in a ceaseless struggle to assert itself culturally and politically. This tradition, in its zeal, frequently lost sight of other literary causes—protofeminism, aestheticism, Africanism. These causes were not directly bound with the nation-building agenda of the island's intellectual elite, therefore, they were relegated to the margins of our cultural history. The publication of two major works in 1895, a key year in Puerto Rico's struggle for political autonomy from Spain, is a case in point. Carmela Eulate Sanjurjo's realistic masterpiece, *La muñeca*, the story of a selfish young woman whose greed ruins and destroys her husband, quickly faded into an oblivion. It was not rescued until almost one hundred years later, despite an enthusiastic endorsement by Sanjurjo's fellow writer Manuel Zeno Gandía. Meanwhile Zeno Gandía's own *La charca*, an analysis of Puerto Rico as a nation undermined by disease and powerlessness, was immediately heralded as a Puerto Rican classic.

La charca, a naturalistic novel modeled on the works of Emile Zola, chronicles life in of a small village in the interior of the island, showing peasants overcome by disease, hunger, violence, illiteracy, and miscegenation. The author intended that work to be the first in a series of chronicles depicting the ills of colonization that left Puerto Rico a morally weakened and aimless society. Through disease, the central metaphor of *La charca*, Zeno Gandía portrayed his country "as a great organism beset by innumerable ills."³

In subsequent volumes of the series, Zeno Gandía's message, one typical of the liberal-progressive intellectuals of early twentieth-century

Puerto Rico, was that "U.S. racism and contempt shackled the Island's spirit and culture."⁴ In his 1922 novel *El negocio*, he focused on the sale of the country to foreign businesses and monopolies, and chastised Puerto Ricans for the greed that had led them into connivance with the enemy. His analysis of colonial exploitation prompted him to conclude that Puerto Rico was "a nation of hostages."⁵

Zeno Gandía's conclusions were supported by his younger colleague Antonio S. Pedreira, author of *Insularismo*. Published in 1934, influential islanders considered this work to have articulated the official frame of reference for any evaluation of Puerto Rican culture. In his analysis of the island's cultural development, Pedreira echoed Gandía's pessimistic outlook on Puerto Rico's prospects for cultural autonomy in a colonial situation. Referring to imperial dominance as "one of the most repressive signs of our culture . . . and the factor that explains our carbonized personality," Pedreira concluded:

Puerto Rico has lived a fictitious historical life, foreign to its ethnic nature, having to react by reflex action to stimuli and events not born in the depths of our collective conscience. . . . The constant disciplinary watch over us has conditioned our identifying character, . . . and we have had to focus our sights on ourselves, completely abandoning the contemplation of the peoples surrounding us. . . . Puerto Rico's history has developed in a defensive attitude, unfolding upon itself, looking only within in order to avoid strategic surprises. . . . The duty of Puerto Rico's youth is to break the walls of this isolation, to be able to look around us.⁶

Pedreira's analysis of Puerto Rican culture was prompted by his desire to outline the defining characteristics of Puerto Rican identity and lay to rest the notion that the American cultural onslaught had been successful in destroying the island's national character. His conclusions, therefore, pointed to the need to bring an end to the colonial relationships threatening Puerto Rican culture and sense of self. Only the end of colonial dominance, he reminded readers, could prevent the dissolution of the national character.

For all their efforts at depicting the ills of colonialism and the need to oppose the submissive stance that colonial relationships forced on Puerto Rico, both Pedreira and Zeno Gandía seem to have internalized colonial racial attitudes. Zeno Gandía blamed what he saw as the country's lack of determination to revolt against miscegenation

Racial mixture, he argued, had weakened the population, diluted the moral and physical strength characteristic of the white race, "contaminating" it with the black race's propensity to ethical and biological decay. Pedreira presented a similar argument, working from a notion of biological determinism or the assignment of specific moral characteristics to specific races. Pedreira declared that racial "fusion" was responsible for Puerto Rico's "con-fusion."⁷ Their views on race can be likened to a phenomenon explored in detail by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins, White Masks*:

The Antilleans have no inherent values of their own; they are always contingent on the presence of The Other.⁸ The question is always whether he is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, less respectable than I. Every position of one's own, every effort at security, is based on relations of dependence, with the diminution of The Other. It is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation of my virility. . . . The Antillean is characterized by his desire to dominate The Other. . . . Therefore, in any given group, . . . one finds the man on top, the court that surrounds him—the in-betweens (who are waiting for something better)—and the losers. The last are slaughtered without mercy. One can imagine the temperature that prevails in the jungle. There is no way out of it.⁹

This theme of domination prevailed in Pedro Juan Soto's *Usmaíl*, a Fanonian exploration of the Puerto Rican as "an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor."¹⁰ *Usmaíl*, the main character, is named after the U.S. Mail system in a poignant illustration of colonial misunderstanding. He is the mulatto son of a black woman and the colonial official who seduced and abandoned her; he is a character straddling two worlds, alienated from both. Victim of an alienation so intense that he cannot readily identify himself in a mirror, *Usmaíl* surrenders to the cycles of oppression that are characteristic of colonial society, where everyone is in a constant struggle to master somebody, anybody. Built on the concept of "trickle-down" oppression, relationships between the characters in *Usmaíl* cannot escape the patterns of personal violence and abuse that are intrinsic to a dominant/submissive colonial relationship.¹¹ Always on the lookout for someone to dominate because s/he is dominated from above, the colonized one is doomed to reproduce the patterns of oppression that characterized his society. *Usmaíl's* final act—the murder of a U.S.

Marine that follows his sudden awakening from his deep alienation—is futile in that it becomes a self-destructive, individual act incapable of changing the established colonial patterns.

A different perspective on the effects of colonization was offered by René Marqués, whom critics described as “a militant nostalgia.”¹² Actually he is remembered as Puerto Rico’s most distinguished twentieth-century dramatist and leader of a generation of writers whose work came to full fruition in the fifties and early sixties. In his work, Marqués, repudiates the rapid process of industrialization that took place on the island after the collapse of the sugar industry in the 1940s, arguing in turn for a return to the old nineteenth-century patriarchal agrarian society he idealizes in his plays, short stories, and one novel. He insisted on the need to reestablish the benevolent patriarchy of the *hacienda* if Puerto Rican culture was to be saved from the Anglo-Saxon matriarchy threatening it. In his famous essay “The Docile Puerto Rican,” Marqués pointed to the influence of U.S.-styled “Anglo-Saxon matriarchal patterns” as a principal cause of the island’s cultural disintegration. He also saw those matriarchal influences as being an obstacle to the masculine energy necessary for salvaging the “existential integrity” of the Puerto Rican nationality.¹³ Marqués’ ideas come to life in a story titled “En la popa hay un cuerpo reclinado,” translating in English to “there is a body leaning against the stern.” It was at the stern that the protagonist saw himself as a victim of a domineering mother, a materialistic wife, and a host of other women in positions of power granted by the American system. The protagonist found a solution to his plight by poisoning his wife and castrating himself in front of her dead body. The symbolic act, as in *Usmatl*, is that of a self-destructive one who symbolizes the dire effects of colonial castration and the destruction of traditional Puerto Rican *machismo*.

Although he denounced American imperialism in its political and cultural aspects, Marqués embraced the Hispano-Christian heritage. That led him to an idealization of the nineteenth-century *hacienda* system with its patriarchal and racist attitudes, class rigidity, and dependence on slave labor or the poor rural proletariat. Marqués’ lot was to be nostalgic for an idyllic world that never truly existed, that could only be idealized if seen from the masters’ position, that was economically and socially untenable positions in its rejection of the need for industrialization, and that was classist, racist, and sexist. His works

offered the paradigm against which a new generation of writers would react.

The salient symbols of the Puerto Rican national identity were taken from literature written prior to the 1960s; it was an essentially conservative articulation that intended to conserve and/or restore values of the Spanish, planter-bourgeois pastoral past. Until the mid to late fifties, to the degree that Puerto Rican literature reflected other experiences or themes, those of women, the proletariat, the urban population, the mulatto, and the African were relegated to the margins of literary discourse. That marginality was coordinate with the social marginality of these groups.

The island-brand of 1960s and 1970s social upheavals brought to the center topics and issues that previously were considered marginal to intellectual discourse in Puerto Rico. The 1950s had set the backdrop against which these upheavals would be played out, for in that earlier decade, the island had rapidly industrialized under the force of Operation Bootstrap, a program designed to attract light manufacturing industries. Industrialization forced the transformation of Puerto Rico from a plantation-based economy to one dominated by technological production. This process naturally affected traditional values and institutions associated with the patriarchal, agrarian society of the past. Combined with an expansion in the educational system, it also opened new employment possibilities for both men and women and contributed to the growing urbanization of Puerto Rican society. These socio-economic shifts were reflected in Puerto Rican literature.

The publication in 1966 of Luis Rafael Sánchez’ pioneering work—*En cuerpo de camisa* (*In Shirtsleeve*, a collection of short stories)—ushered in an era of literary criticism that even Sanchez referred to as “an oppressive paradigm.” The characteristic elements of the new Puerto Rican literature were the literary agency that previously marginalized groups acquired and the reinterpretation of colonial dominance from the perspectives of the newly emerging literati, leading to the re-writing and re-interpreting of Puerto Rican history. It was protest literature that targeted what the writers perceived to be a decaying patriarchal, middle and upper classes. It lauded the feministic, anti-patriarchal brand of social protest, and identified with the language and experiences of the Puerto Rican proletariat, and infused the protest literature

with a Puerto Rican reality that was manifest in the Antillean and Latin-American context.

These new writers were products of Puerto Rican disillusionment with the ideologies and programs generated by the Commonwealth status that the United States Congress had granted the island in 1952. These writers exorcised their disillusionment with the U.S. experiment that had intended to transform Puerto Rico into the showcase society which Latin American and Caribbean nations would seek to emulate. Observing that the experiment had failed, the new breed of writers launched into a profound re-evaluation of Puerto Rico's cultural and political values, drawing upon the feministic, socio-linguistic, Marxist ideologies for their discourse, considerably broadening the themes and perspectives in their literary works.

The short stories of Rosario Ferré, collected in the 1976 volume *Papeles de Pandora*, exemplify this literary school. Ferré channeled the rage provoked by colonial and patriarchal limitations into "eclosions of fury" which destroyed her heroines but also brought the established order crashing down. A member of one of Puerto Rico's wealthiest families and daughter of a former pro-statehood governor, Ferré paradoxically mirrored in her fictional world that of René Marqués, offering the horrifying exploitative side of Marqués' idealized agrarian society. Her fictional goal is the unmasking and destruction of the very class she belonged to but came to view as having connived with the colonizers in order to maintain its power and privileges.

Ferré's works shifted the balance of the dominant/submissive dichotomy towards the class and gender struggles of Puerto Rican society. They brought to the issue of political status the added responsibility of dealing with gender problems that have been exacerbated by colonial domination. In her work, feminism becomes a colonial issue, and solutions to the status question must deal with the position of women. Nowhere were these themes and intent clearer than in her short story, "Pico Rico Mandorico," a work based on Christina Rosetti's *Goblin Market*.¹⁴ "Pico Rico Mandorico" responds to Marqués' view of Puerto Rican docility through the retelling of the story of the two sisters in Rosetti's tale. The sisters live in a Puerto Rican town of zombie-like workers driven to a desire for constant physical labor by the poisoned fruit fed to them by an evil sugar planter. When one of the sisters is tricked into eating the fruit, the other goes to her

rescue, cutting the evil planter's nose—a symbolic castration that unveils his true identity to the town's people and unmask his true intentions. The castration of the evil planter makes it possible for the working masses to shed their "masochistic passivity."

A similar response to the theme of dominance was found in Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's 1976 novel—*La renuncia del héroe Baltasar*. The novel is the fictional account of a bloody rebellion by Blacks in eighteenth-century Puerto Rico. The rebels were motivated by the arrest and imprisonment of Baltasar Montañez, a fictional character in which Rodríguez Juliá merges two legendary figures—Miguel Henríquez, an eighteenth-century mulatto of enormous wealth and prestige, and Baltasar Montañez, a young man believed (mistakenly) to have miraculously survived a riding accident in 1753. Baltasar's imprisonment by the authorities unleashes a ferocious massacre that Juliá described in excruciatingly graphic detail, never losing sight, nonetheless, of the social and racial injustices that serve as justification for the mob's uncontrollable rage. The novel presents a vivid picture of Black revenge and murder against the white planter class in a Fanonian attempt to return society to a *tabula rasa* upon which a new society can be built. In this work, Rodríguez Juliá rewrites eighteenth-century Puerto Rican history, making it as it would have been if colonial rule had given way to the rebellious passions of a Black and mulatto population tired of colonial racial policies. His history, responding to a Fanonian insistence on the annihilation of the colonial past, tries to bring us closer to an understanding of the historical processes through which revolution and renewal are accomplished.

If Ferré and Rodríguez Juliá appear to respond to Marqués' concept of Puerto Rican docility and his idealization of the planter class, Luis Rafael Sánchez seems to react to Zeno Gandía's presentation of a weakened and alienated peasantry in his comic depiction of a media-obsessed urban proletariat in his 1976 novel—*La guaracha del Macho Camacho*. This novel is a disk jockey's hilariously long-winded introduction to Macho Camacho's phenomenal hit song, "Life is a Phenomenal Thing." Alternating with the voices of characters caught in a horrendous traffic jam of the sort that plague San Juan, the snarled traffic becomes a metaphor for the effects of colonialism on Puerto Rican society. Sanchez comments:

Here in Puerto Rico, the successive colony of two empires and an island in the archipelago of the Antilles, . . . today Wednesday five post meridian, . . . Senator Vicente Reinoso . . . is tied up, held up, caught up in a traffic jam as phenomenal as life Made in Puerto Rico. The jam is an active example of the Creole capacity for getting bogged down.¹⁵

In *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, Sánchez has re-created Puerto Rico's social reality through its multiplicity of languages: the language of the disk jockey, that of advertisements, the language of the media-besieged slum dwellers, the language of radio, television, film and comic strips, the language of conspicuous consumerism, the language of popular magazines, that of the Americanized bourgeoisie, and the language of political groups. The resulting linguistic melange appears to negate the paralysis implicit in the traffic jam that frames the novel. It is a language full of rhythm, whose pulsating qualities match the beat of the "guaracha":

It was said by a respectable man: the country doesn't work, the country doesn't work, the country doesn't work; repeated to the point of provocation, repeated like the zéjel at the end of a guaracha; facing a red light that was black because the traffic signal wasn't working, the respectable man indignant, his stomach contracted with indignation, his jaw rigid: the country doesn't work. The passengers signed up in two opposing parties: one a minority of timorous citizens in agreement, and the other a vociferous majority who proceeded to intone with a zest usually reserved for national anthems Macho Camacho's irrepressible guaracha, "Life is a Phenomenal Thing."¹⁶

And indeed the country portrayed by Sánchez "doesn't work." There is nothing at all phenomenal about Puerto Rico as portrayed in the novel. It is a contradictory, paradoxical, absurd, erratic, mercurial society where injustice, abuse, and lack of communication prevail, so that nothing is resolved in a conciliatory synthesis, but in the violent confrontation of opposite forces.¹⁷ It is a society of separations and difference where the disparity and isolation of the characters are taken to grotesque extremes. Thus the text allows no communication between the characters, except for the link provided by their listening to the same radio station. Their isolation in space emphasizes their social isolation: that of the senator's mistress, impatiently awaiting her delayed

laboris fornicatio, fearful that she may miss her idol Iris Chacón's TV show once again; that of Benny, apologizing to his car because Puerto Rico "hasn't got the autostrada that was built for the smooth flow of Ferraris by the immortal Benito Mussolini";¹⁸ that of Graciela Alcántara de Montefrío, "most ladylike lady" perusing a life-style-of-the-rich-and-famous magazine that reminds her of her youthful flight to a Swiss finishing school to escape the insular vulgarity "which it was, is, and will be a Christian duty to flee."¹⁹ The language privileged by Sánchez in the novel, the language of the people, is the Rabelaisian language of the marketplace—that of unofficial culture, the language of the have-nots. Although parodied (sometimes mercilessly) by the narrator, this language offers, in its subversion of official Spanish and textbook English, an example of the Puerto Rican people's capacity to carnivalize official culture and the foreign models it imposes. It is characterized chiefly by its protean quality, its capacity for constant renewal, its ability to continuously parody itself. It is a language with an unrealized potential to be an agent of change, unrealized here because it is at the service of an alienating mass-media message that the novel counsels to reject.

The language of the upper classes, on the other hand, is founded on the principle of an immovable and unchanging hierarchy in which the higher and the lower never merge. These upper classes reject the guaracha, its language and its proletarian perspective. The senator, catching himself in the act of singing its refrain, feels the guaracha on him like a taint: "Macho Camacho's guaracha, its vulgar furor, has tainted him, contaminated him, laid him waste: high or low, a little or a lot, the guaracha: a tiara of vulgarity, a headdress of trash, a banner of the rabble, has alighted on his lips."²⁰

This linguistic polarization in the novel is used by Sánchez to emphasize the economic and social polarization of the world of the novel and is linked to patterns of class exploitation addressed in the novel through the labyrinthine aspects of Puerto Rican sexual mores. The characters' very sense of being seems bound up in their erotic personas. The senator is overly concerned with his "established credentials as a tempestuous lover and (his) widespread fame as a meticulous wooer."²¹ His mistress draws her assurance from having "more than enough studs who want to mount me for myself and five other women,"²² while his wife Graciela is not "the kind of lady who

considers *that* important,” pronouncing the pronoun with moral repugnance, tying it up with “knots of sacred disgust.”²³ These highly stereotypical characterizations of the Latin lover, the tempestuous mulatto woman, and the frigid white wife are used by Sánchez to explore the forces that have led the poor to regard their sexuality as one of their few marketable commodities.

Colonialism, the patriarchy, the media’s sex-obsessed messages, all coalesce into a singular stage where traditional and revolutionary sexual mores wage a battle for supremacy. In the carnivalesque twists of sexual exploitation in the novel, it is no longer clear who exploits whom since, while the senator seems bound to obsolete notions of macho performance, his mistress appears secure in the infinite marketability of her charms: “Sucking the juice out of his pocket is what I love. Plucking him like chicken is what I love. Hypnotizing him in the wallet is what I love. . . . Sucking out his last penny is what I love. . . . That’s it, that’s it: make something out of her dirty work: dollars, dollars, dollars: hot coals in her eyes: dollars, dollars, dollars: malefic and hair-raising: dollars, dollars, dollars. . . .”²⁴ Sánchez allows the senator’s mistress a carnivalesque sexual freedom in her erotic liaisons (particularly with her three cousins Hugo, Paco, and Luis—named after the Spanish renditions of the names of Donald Duck’s nephew)—all of whom seem paralyzed by Puerto Rico’s stultifying gender roles. As the representative of the people’s perspective in the text, her erotic openness mirrors the openness of the people’s language, stressing the people’s role in challenging obsolete and class-bound cultural patterns. By turning the erotic tables, and thus implying a carnivalesque reversal of the officially-accepted patterns of sexual behavior, the mistress joins the parodic spirit at the heart of the Puerto Rican people’s carnivalization of official language to reveal the glimmer of the possibility of transforming Puerto Rico into a country that works.

Perhaps the most telling evidence that “the country doesn’t work” is offered by the devastating by-product of Puerto Rico’s economic dependence: the massive exportation of workers to the United States, an exportation that served through the nineteen fifties and sixties as a safety-valve to forestall political unrest in the island. Puerto Rico exported an average of fifty-five thousand of its people a year during the fifties and sixties, and an estimated half million Puerto Ricans

(about thirty-five percent of the total Puerto Rican population) now live in the United States.

The impact of this massive migration was explored for the first time by Pedro Juan Soto (the author of *Usmaíl*) in a collection of short stories titled *Spiks*, published in the early 1950s. *Spiks* offers a bleak assessment of Puerto Rican life in Spanish Harlem in short narratives, some of them vignettes, of characters facing discrimination, poverty, disillusionment, drugs, and death. It portrays lives shattered by alienation from their natural surroundings, of people finding the gates to their American dream blocked by racial discrimination, lack of marketable skills, and the violence of the urban American ghetto. In Soto’s short stories, the ghetto is seen as recreating the destructive aspects of colonial life while exacerbating its impact by the sheer uprootedness of a population forced to emigrate to survive. The traits that give Soto’s stories their impact—brutality, privation, death, disaffection—form the core of the literature written by Puerto Ricans in New York. It is a literature about people displaced in an environment of cultural and racial discrimination and economic exploitation—a literature written by authors living in the midst of the dominant “other.”

Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets*, published almost a decade after *Spiks*, brings that thematic legacy to full fruition. A classic of Latino anguish and despair, it is the first in a tradition of heart-wrenching memoirs depicting the destruction of Puerto Rican souls in the American ghetto. The aspects of Nuyorican (or Neorican) life that Thomas dissects in harsh detail—pointing to the drug-peddling culture, the horrors of heroin addiction, the brutality of prison life, the loss of the saving power of faith and family, the constant struggle against the diminishing value of life—are the very factors that have contributed to the many crises the Puerto Rican community in the United States has faced. The crises are evident in the deplorable statistics that stand as representative of the Nuyorican experience, i.e., the high incidence of drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, welfare dependence, child and spousal abuse, crime and incarceration, suicide, low scoring on standardized tests, and dropping out of school. The exploration of the despair of Puerto Rican life in New York in the fifties and sixties gave Nuyorican literature its early themes, creating a “tradition” as *engaged* with socio-political reality as that of the island and Black-American literatures that served as its models. Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets*,

Miguel Piñero's brilliantly-bleak play *Short Eyes*, and Pedro Pietri's *Puerto Rican Obituary* form the core of a literary tradition growing out of a need to portray the infinite complexity of the relationships of dominance and submission emerging out of the encounter between a racist America and the essential mulatto-ness of the Puerto Rican people.

The literature that emerged from the bleak experiences of the fifties and sixties also grappled with the role of language in the dominance/submission dichotomy emerging from the colonizer/colonized encounter in a new and more violent environment. Every Puerto Rican writer in the United States must first of all face the barrier of language, since the choice of a language as the vehicle of literary expression—be it Spanish or English—comes laden with enormous cultural and political significance. Do they write in Spanish and attempt to fit their work into the Puerto Rican literary tradition despite the marked differences in themes and experiences between island and mainland Puerto Ricans? Do they write in English and become minority voices, footnotes in mainstream American literature? Can they write in English and still remain Puerto Rican writers? For all its importance, it is a choice not always open to the writer, especially to second and third generation Puerto Ricans in the United States whose only language is English. Miguel Algarín, a Puerto Rican-born poet raised in the United States, has made language one of the central themes in his poetry.²⁵

For Puerto Rican authors writing in English, whether labeled Neoricans or Nuyoricans, relationships of dominance have become more complex. They find themselves exiled from two worlds: that of the dominant culture which labels their work substandard and irrelevant to the mainstream American literary tradition, and that of their own cultural background, where they are often denied their right to belong because their language and themes are not those of the tradition. This theme is explored by Pedro Juan Soto in *Hot Land, Cold Season*. His is a tale of a young man returning to the island after many years in New York to face distrust and discrimination from island Puerto Ricans. As a result of this rejection, and because their work stems from the same oppression, Neoricans authors tend to identify their literature with that of other minority groups in the United States—African-Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, the American “third world.”²⁶ Neoricans works share most of their essential characteristics with the literatures of these groups: a similar use of the

spoken language, a similar exploration of the impact of racial and cultural discrimination, and the need to recreate a primeval, utopic world where the roots of their literature and culture can be found.²⁷

Puerto Rican literature in the United States, nonetheless, shares a common basis with the literature written in the island: that of responding to the dominance inherent in American power structures. But Nuyoricans authors add a new level to that response, since they write from within the world of the American dispossessed classes and speak particularly to them. Their direct daily contact with America—a contact most island Puerto Ricans do not experience—makes more patently clear the negative definitions of themselves they confront at every turn. Julio Marzán's poem “Nutshell” offers a subtle expression of this reality.²⁸ In Puerto Rican poetry written in English, we find an urgency imposed on the text by the immediate presence of the dominant culture and by the consciousness of the destructive elements that surround the poet, aspects of dominance not often experienced by the island writer. Miguel Piñero's “A Lower East Side Poem” reveals the immediacy of that dominance.²⁹

Nuyoricans writing of the seventies and eighties is more complex and harder to categorize, since it has partly transcended the sociopolitical commitment of works like Piñero's “A Lower East Side Poem” to embrace a multiplicity of themes and approaches. Ed Vega's work is representative of recent Nuyoricans writing; his fiction, parodic and highly satirical, incorporates multiple linguistic registers and many popular genres such as police procedurals and science fiction, political thrillers, fantasy literature and folklore. Vega is a Puerto Rican-born novelist and short-story writer who has lived for many years in New York City's El Barrio. He has published two volumes of short stories, *Mendoza's Dreams* (1987) and *Casualty Report* (1992), and a novel—*The Comeback* (1985).

In *The Comeback*, Vega chisels out a hybrid of the dominant popular narrative forms of his times in his quest for a suitable novelistic form that draws as much on traditional Puerto Rican culture and literature (and on their Spanish models) as on American cultural and ethnic experiences. The result is a Latino picaresque tale with a very unlikely hero, a Puerto Rican hockey player and economics professor seeking integration into the American system who believes himself to be part-Eskimo. Through his politically committed Puerto Rican girl-

friend, this character gets involved with a pro-independence revolutionary group which attempts a daring para-military rescue mission, at which time our character suffers a nervous breakdown and is given over to the care of a loony psychiatric establishment. The tale is a zany melange of the strange adventures told with a broad satiric eye, but its focus remains always clearly on the character's confused identity and on his attempts at finding his true self through activities which always end up being political, whether he wants them to be or not.

Vega explores, in *The Comeback*, the foundations of personal identity in ethnic identification and cultural symbols. However, he counsels against an identity that is solely ethnically and politically driven, finding in such a narrow sense of self a denial of the potential richness of human experience. The possible extremes are represented by Frank Garboil, the hero, and his girlfriend, Maritza Soto. Whereas Frank is floundering in a sea of confusion about his true self, needing to explore aspects of his personality which appear to have been buried under his "nondescript, anonymous, turned-off, white intellectual" life, Maritza is too dependent on her identity as a "Puerto Rican through and through," suffering from "too much identity," acting "like a walking Puerto Rican day parade 365 days out of the year." The juxtaposition of these two extremes in a couple that wants to remain together allows Vega to explore the foundations of identity and to seek a compromise that makes possible an ethnic identity that is enriching rather than limiting.

Thus, the end of *The Comeback* finds our now avowedly Puerto Rican hero and heroine caught in the trap of politically-driven ethnicity, seeking from the author a re-write that, while not denying their ethnicity and political goals, broadens their possibilities of personal fulfillment in an American society in which they must find a niche since a return to Puerto Rico is not feasible. A character identified as the author/narrator appears at the end of the text as a *deus ex machina* that can resolve a seemingly unresolvable situation. Counseling against total absorption in island politics, he advocates a focus on strengthening the economic basis of the mainland Puerto Rican community as the best weapon in the protracted war against oppression. He advises Maritza to forget the romantic notion of an armed struggle against the United States for Puerto Rican independence and to go to law school instead, since independence will more likely be achieved through a

legal battle. The character, named Vega like the author, finds that: "Even little skirmishes and bombings in order to draw attention to our plight and raise the consciousness of the people are a waste of human resources and part of the martyr mentality and very romantic. Except it's outmoded."³⁰

Vega's *The Comeback* offers a complex assessment of the political options open to the mainland Puerto Rican. Rejecting a commitment to the armed struggle for Puerto Rican independence as a viable option, and repudiating total assimilation and its concomitant cultural suicide as well, this novel promotes instead something akin to a cultural guerrilla movement, an "underground," surreptitious struggle from within the system. A Vega character says: "The better the cover you create, the more invisible you become. Study what this country is about and then beat its brains out at its own game."³¹

Vega's admonition is based on his belief that the only viable route to achieving Puerto Rican independence is a political route. Since the struggle for independence must be fought within the context of world opinion, Vega urges Puerto Rican leaders to play-down color and ethnic-specificity so the notable issues can be heard and impact peoples around the world. He cautions, moreover, that leaders will have to put their egos aside in order to effectively think and fight that which keeps Puerto Ricans from being free.³² This encouragement of covert war is consistent with Vega's description of his novel as a "mickey" to slip onto the unsuspecting reader. The novel argues that successful, politically-conscious Latinos, like cultural and political "mickeys," can undermine the system's foundations from within, appropriating and transforming them to make the system more responsive to the needs of the masses.

Puerto Rican critic Efraín Barradas calls the Nuyorican literature writings of transition, attempting to bridge the gap between an island literature written in Spanish and a mainland literature written in English. They are literatures which differ in many ways: one working within a century-long tradition, the other trying to carve a tradition within the country into which they migrated. Both have developed around the need to respond to the dominance imposed by history. Both share an ethnic experience and a cultural background which transcend language differences and which demand a militant definition of self in the face of the dominant "other." Puerto Rican literature, whether written in Puerto Rico or the United States and whether

written in English or Spanish, continues to respond to the concerns articulated by Manuel Alonso in 1849: How can Puerto Ricans—colonials in the island and oppressed minority in the mainland—most effectively define themselves amidst colonial dominance?

¹ A case in point was the gradual replacement of the traditional exchange of Christmas-season presents on January 6th, the Feast of the Epiphany (known popularly as Three Kings' Day) by the American custom of exchanging gifts delivered by Santa Claus on Christmas Day. The process was accomplished primarily through clever promotional campaigns by American-owned department store chains promoting the "convenience" of the earlier date, which allowed children a longer period of vacation days to play with presents before returning to school.

² Iris M. Zavala, "Introduction," *The Intellectual Roots of Independence: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Political Essays*, ed. Iris M. Zavala and Rafael Rodríguez (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), 15.

³ Zavala and Rodríguez, eds., *The Intellectual Roots of Independence: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Political Essays*, 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Manuel Zeno Gandía, "What Are We? How Are We?" in *The Intellectual Roots of Independence: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Political Essays*, 160.

⁶ Antonio S. Pedreira, *Insularismo* (Río Piedras: Editorial Edil, 1973), 115-117. All translations are mine.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸ Frantz Fanon's analysis of the impact of colonialism on the individual and social psyche, built on a model combining Muslim, African, and French-Antillean elements, is not universally applicable to the Puerto Rican situation, where different forces are at work. His evaluation of the "trickling-down" effect of the patterns of dominance in colonial societies, however, offers useful insights for the understanding of power structures in Puerto Rico.

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (London: Paladin, 1970), 144-151.

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1969), 41.

¹¹ These patterns of violence have been linked to the high incidence of wife- and child-abuse in Puerto Rico. Domestic violence is said to have reached epidemic proportions in Puerto Rico.

¹² José Luis González, *El país de cuatro pisos* (Río Piedras: Huracán, 1982), 90.

¹³ See Margarite Fernández Olmos' "Repuestas antipatriarcales en la narrativa puertorriqueña contemporánea" for a detailed critique of Marqués' position. The article is included in her *La narrativa puertorriqueña de aquí y de allá: aproximaciones feministas* (Santo Domingo: Taller, 1991).

¹⁴ Refer to Fernández Olmos for a detailed discussion on the themes in Marqués' works.

¹⁵ Luis Rafael Sánchez, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (Buenos Aires: Editorial de la Flor, 1976), 5, 6, 17 (my translation). Except when noted, passages quoted in English are from Gregory Rabassa's translation, published as *Macho Camacho's Beat* (New York: Avon, 1980).

¹⁶ Sánchez, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, 21; Based translation by the author.

¹⁷ María Teresa Gozo, "Algunos aspectos de la carnavalización en *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* de Luis Rafael Sánchez." *Revista Iberoamericana* 26 (1985), 125.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 8.

²³ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

²⁵ "Inside Control: My Tongue," *Nuyo-rican Poetry*, 58.

²⁶ Efraín Barradas, "Introducción," in *Herejes y mitificadores: muestra de poesía puertorriqueña en Estados Unidos*, ed. Efraín Barradas and Rafael Rodríguez (Río Piedras: Huracán, 1980), 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁹ Piñero, an accomplished poet and playwright whose triumphs included *Short Eyes* and many of the powerful scripts of the first seasons of *Miami Vice*, died recently of AIDS. He was one of the many victims of a disease that has taken a particularly deadly toll among island and mainland Puerto Ricans.

³⁰ On Vega's *Comeback*, see Barradas and Rodríguez, ed., *Herejes y mitificadores: muestra de poesía puertorriqueña en Estados Unidos*, 98.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 475-476.

³² *Ibid.*, 473-474.]