

## Introduction

### The Nation-Building Literary Field and Subaltern Intellectuals

"I know Puerto Rico. That is the place where many beauty queens come from." This is the response I often got when introducing myself as a Puerto Rican during an extended stay in India. This affirmation was sometimes followed by a confession of not knowing the exact political status of the island. Puerto Rico is recognized almost like an independent country, but there is always a lingering suspicion that it is not fully one. Puerto Rico is a nation founded in a colonial state, which seems abnormal to people in India, a colony that achieved independence to become the strongest nation-state in South Asia. Puerto Rico is an example of "late nationalism." The antinomy of this nationalism, writes Kevin Pask, is "on the one hand the continuing power of the concept of the nation-state as the virtually universal principle of political and cultural legitimacy; on the other, the growing sense of ideological fatigue around the issue and a wistful desire for 'nations without nationalism.'"<sup>1</sup>

Puerto Rican intellectuals definitely show signs of fatigue regarding the issue of nationalism and yet, whether to denounce it or to reshape it, it is still an unavoidable topic.<sup>2</sup> In this book I trace the early history of the dominant nationalist discourse and stress the importance of literature and subaltern intellectuals in the creation of the ideas that support it. I analyze literature written by canonical writers as well as by lesser-known women and working-class authors whose ideas were silenced or selectively appropriated by the dominant discourse. I trace the process of nation building in Puerto Rico from its early stages in the mid-nineteenth century up to the consolidation of the national-identity discourse that was institutionalized together with the redefinition of the island's colonial relationship with the United States in 1952.

Nation building is a constant process, and I do not intend to suggest any starting and ending dates. I chose to limit my study to the period of transi-

tion spanning the last decades of Spanish colonialism and the first decades of United States rule because this period remains relatively understudied in spite of its importance. Discussions of nationalism and culture in Puerto Rico tend to privilege the thirties as the decade when the most lasting national-identity discourses were developed. I demonstrate that the turn of the nineteenth century is just as important for the history of nationalism. Whereas in the 1930s there was already a move toward consensus, the previous decades witnessed an open contestation of elite national imaginings by radical women and working-class writers. This plurality of voices in the context of fast-changing social hierarchies after the 1898 United States invasion makes for a complex nation-building scenario. My analysis is an attempt to reconstruct the conversations between elite canonical writers and the subaltern intellectuals whose texts were not widely distributed and have for the most part not been reprinted but whose ideas helped to shape the discourse that became dominant. This analysis has three components: (1) “colonial nationalism” as the dominant model of nationalism in Puerto Rico, (2) the literary field as a privileged space for nation-building struggles, and (3) the participation of subaltern intellectuals in the nation-building process.

## Colonial Nationalism

In my analysis of competing ways of conceiving the nation as articulated by elite and subaltern intellectuals, I subscribe to Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as an imagined community.<sup>3</sup> I also introduce the term “colonial nationalism” because I consider that it describes the dominant kind of nationalism in Puerto Rico better than similar terms like “autonomism,” “cultural nationalism,” and “anticolonial nationalism.” Colonial nationalism is not only a nationalism that does not seek political independence or a nationalism that is content with limiting itself to a supposedly separate realm of culture, but it is a nationalism that validates colonialism and makes it stronger.

Nation building in Puerto Rico has been less the task of the frustrated independentist political project than the work of autonomism. Autonomism, the practice of some level of self-government under the authority of the colonizing state, has dominated political and cultural life for most of the last hundred and fifty years. Because it does not seek political independence, autonomism is similar to colonial nationalism. The term “autonomism” is not adequate for the purposes of my study because it is associated with the

liberal autonomist tradition in the nineteenth century and with the Popular Democratic Party in the twentieth, whereas I relate colonial nationalism to all political parties that have abandoned their ideal political projects—whether independence or joining the United States. By limiting their intentions to just administering the local colonial government, they all leave colonial authority unchallenged. While “autonomism” is a term that is often read in a celebratory fashion because it silences the compromise that lies at its base, colonial nationalism keeps the tension between the recognition of identity and the ratification of colonial rule.

The term “cultural nationalism” refers to a nationalism limited to the realm of culture, and it is conceived as compatible with all political projects. The problem with this term is that it suggests that culture can be separate from politics. It implies that culture can be a “free zone” and hides the materiality of colonialism and the materiality of culture. “Colonial nationalism” is a more precise term that does not validate the notion that culture and politics can be separated.

Anticolonial nationalism in countries like India started as a cultural nationalism and moved on to challenge and defeat colonial rule. The artificial separation between culture and politics was in this case a temporary strategy. In the case of Puerto Rico, cultural nationalism has been an end in itself, and it is so complicitous with colonialism that its power to eventually challenge colonial rule has been neutralized. “Colonial nationalism” is a term that stresses this fact instead of obscuring it as “autonomism” or “cultural nationalism” do.

While preferring the term “colonial nationalism” because it captures more precisely the contradictions of Puerto Rican nationalism, I do not want to suggest that the history of nationalism on the island is unique. I compare Puerto Rican nationalism to other cases whenever the comparison yields important insights. Benedict Anderson has identified four main models of nationalism: (1) the Creole nationalisms of the Americas, between 1760 and 1830; (2) the vernacular nationalisms of Europe, between 1820 and 1920; (3) the official nationalisms that merge nations and dynastic empires; and (4) the “last wave” of nationalisms, mostly in the colonial territories of Asia and Africa. Creole nationalism and last-wave nationalism are the more relevant models to understand Puerto Rican colonial nationalism.

The history of nation building in Puerto Rico has been studied mostly in the context of Latin American nationalism, a context in which it is usually excluded as an exception. Not only did Puerto Rico not participate in the Latin American wars of independence between 1810 and 1825, neither did it

have a strong independentist movement as Cuba did during the nineteenth century until gaining independence.<sup>4</sup> A leader of the Cuban independentist movement, José Martí, and a Puerto Rican independentist intellectual, Eugenio María de Hostos, had envisioned the simultaneous independence of Puerto Rico and Cuba and the subsequent foundation of an Antillean Confederacy. However, some different conditions in the two islands should be considered to understand why Puerto Rico did not follow Martí's and Hostos's ideals.

An oligarchy with strong political power was able to develop in Cuba because it was an important center of production and defense of the Spanish empire. Cuba was the world's largest sugar producer between 1840 and 1883, and its technological developments during the nineteenth century outpaced all other Latin American countries.<sup>5</sup> During the last three decades of the nineteenth century Cuba underwent several social transformations that bypassed Puerto Rico, a smaller colony with limited capabilities for the expansion of production. According to Puerto Rican historian Astrid Cubano, these transformations were the Ten Years' War,<sup>6</sup> fast economic growth and the resulting concentration of property, social mobility and instability, and optimistic visions about the economic possibilities of the island.<sup>7</sup> Cubano maintains that in Puerto Rico the colonial system had developed a certain stability based on a feeling of safety shared by important propertied groups.<sup>8</sup> Spain absorbed all the sugar production of Puerto Rico, and gave support against social unrest on the island. Whereas specific social and economical conditions in Cuba led to the growth of liberal ideas that favored independence, in Puerto Rico different conditions led to more conservative politics.

In 1898, as a result of the Spanish-American War, Spain gave up the Philippines, Guam, Cuba, and Puerto Rico to the United States. Cuba finally became independent, except for the U.S. interventions of 1898–1902 and 1906–8. In Puerto Rico the United States did not establish the same neocolonial relationship it already had with the rest of Latin America. Instead, it assumed complete and direct control of Puerto Rican government, production, and commerce, and the island became the grounds on which the United States rehearsed its new role as imperial power.

Before 1898 Puerto Rican nationalism was roughly following the strategies of Latin American Creole nationalism insofar as it used cultural differences with the metropolis to validate Creole aspirations to establish and govern new republics. Puerto Rican nationalism followed the same strategies of Creole self-authorization but ruled out independence as impractical.

Colonial nationalism was already taking shape in the nineteenth century, but it was after 1898 that it developed in all its complexity. The United States was a rising imperial power whose strength made independence even more unimaginable than before, and this led Creoles to identify and create strategies to collaborate and to use the colonial authority of the United States to strengthen their power over a heterogeneous and rebellious Puerto Rican society.

Indian anticolonial nationalism provides some helpful insights for the study of how Puerto Rican colonial nationalism developed. Partha Chatterjee has argued that anticolonial nationalism's main feature is the creation of its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society, and the division of the world of social institutions and practices into a material domain, in which the West is imitated, and a spiritual domain, which bears the marks of cultural identity.<sup>9</sup> This distinction between an inner or spiritual domain and an outer or material domain is fundamental for Puerto Rican colonial nationalism. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, that division is what facilitated the simultaneous foundation of the nation in the inner domain and the ratification of colonial rule in the outer. The all-important difference is that whereas for anticolonial nationalism the creation of an inner domain was a first step before beginning the political battle with the imperial power, for colonial nationalism it was an end in itself. Throughout the book I show specific instances of the intricate compromises and negotiations that characterize colonial nationalism as it developed.

### A Literary Battlefield

The important role of narration in nation building has been stressed in many studies of nationalism.<sup>10</sup> If novels rehearse models of the unity of nations, then the literary field in a nation in formation is a space in which different models of national unity compete for legitimacy. This book explores the literary field in Puerto Rico as a nation-building battlefield in which working-class intellectuals and intellectual women posed challenges to Creole male hegemony by imagining and proposing different models for the nation under construction.

During the period studied, the literary field in Puerto Rico had not yet gained a relative autonomy in relation to the field of power. According to Bourdieu, until the autonomization of the literary field in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, the subordination of cultural producers to the dominant class was characterized by a direct dependence on a fi-

nancial backer, or an allegiance to a patron or an official protector of the arts.<sup>11</sup> In Latin America, where there is a long tradition of statesman-writers, the lack of autonomy of the literary field had another character. The relationship between letters and politics was, beyond one of subordination, one of identity. According to Julio Ramos, during the period of early independence and the autonomization of national states “letters *equaled* politics. Letters provided the ‘code’ by which to distinguish ‘civilization’ from ‘barbarism,’ ‘modernity’ from ‘tradition,’ thus demarcating the limits of the desired *res publica* as opposed to the ‘anarchy’ and ‘chaos’ of America.”<sup>12</sup> Many important Latin American writers were in fact also presidents of their republics. In Puerto Rico, letters equaled politics only in the inner domain; in the outer domain politician-writers were subordinated to the colonial state. In this case literature was not just one space available for nation building, it was the only space.

In spite of the close relationship between the literary field and the field of power in Latin America and in Puerto Rico at the national level, at a global level the literary field in the region had been subordinated to the cultural authority of Europe. That colonial legacy in the context of Puerto Rico, where the colonizers directed the educational system and the Creole elite did not control the circulation of ideas, enabled subaltern intellectuals to invoke European ideas to empower themselves and challenge the Creole national project.

Naturalism and positivism had a strong influence on the nation-building literary field in Puerto Rico. Convinced that society was an organism, intellectuals became preoccupied with the historical development of the continent and the need to diagnose its illnesses.<sup>13</sup> It was in this spirit that the foundation of the Puerto Rican colonial nation was launched. In the 1880s there was a great deal of discussion about naturalism in the small Puerto Rican literary circle. Emile Zola’s idea of applying the scientific method of experimental medicine to the novel was extremely attractive to Puerto Rican intellectuals. Literary critic Sebastián González García claimed that “the naturalist novel is the one that fits Puerto Rican reality,” and D. V. Tejera argued that “for there to be a Puerto Rican novel, it must be a naturalist one.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, González García declared Manuel Zeno Gandía’s naturalist novel *La charca* “the first Puerto Rican novel.”<sup>15</sup> Because naturalism stressed the observation of society as opposed to the idealizations of romanticism, they saw in it the opportunity for the creation of a national literature. Even though many texts do not belong strictly in the literary tradition of naturalism, what most Puerto Rican nation-building texts have

in common is that they propose themselves as an objective study of Puerto Rican society. They are analyzed in this book as critical and interested interventions in the nation-building process.

Puerto Rican nation-building fictions follow the general pattern of Latin American national novels, but with significant differences. Doris Sommer has analyzed Latin American foundational fictions as romances or boldly allegorical love stories in which Eros and Polis construct one another.<sup>16</sup> Romances advocate a wide range of political positions, and the plots may or may not have a happy ending, but they are coherent as a narrative form through the common project to build through reconciliations and amalgamations of national constituencies cast as lovers.<sup>17</sup> Puerto Rico does not have any single novel that can be labeled a national novel; instead it has a number of failed romances in which heterosexual passion is used to dramatize the difficulties rather than the possibility of national unity. "Impossible romance" is the dominant allegory, articulating the incapacity to satisfactorily define the relationship between different sectors of Puerto Rican society and the colonizers as lovers who cannot agree on the terms of their love relationship in spite of mutual attraction. Seduction, rape, and humiliated manhood—instead of romantic love—are used to articulate the relationship between different groups in the nation.

### Nation Building and Subaltern Intellectuals

This book is based on the premise that a nation cannot be constructed by a dominant group in a unilateral way. The direct challenges and alternative discourses presented by other groups are forces that need to be faced, controlled, incorporated, assimilated, and/or silenced before a national-identity discourse can become dominant. A successful national-identity discourse bears the marks of all the groups in a given society; it is built not so much on exclusion as on hierarchization and conditional inclusion. I seek to demonstrate how the national-identity discourse that became official and widely recognized in the 1950s absorbed the challenges posed by subaltern groups during the previous decades. The discourse that became official *contained* subaltern group discourses and demands, in the double sense of including and restraining. My interest here is to analyze the compromises, negotiations, and double binds that were involved in the construction of the contemporary hierarchy of national integration.

While trying to give a more complete vision of the polyglossia of the stage on which the colonial nation was founded, I remain aware that such a

goal can only partially be achieved, for there is no unmediated access to the history of subaltern agency and whatever can be recovered from the silenced voices of resistance does not speak in a transparent and unproblematic manner. This difficulty is constitutive of all subalternist analyses, as the trajectory of the Subaltern Studies Group has demonstrated.

The Subaltern Studies Group, an interdisciplinary organization of South Asia scholars who work on issues of history and colonialism, started out with a project to recover subaltern history and agency.<sup>18</sup> After some time, the group shifted its emphasis from the notion of the subaltern as a subject and agent to developing the emergence of subalternity as a discursive effect. They do not claim access to subalterns prior to discourse; subalterns and subalternity emerge in its silences and blindness. Building on this idea, the subaltern has emerged as a position from which the discipline of history can be rethought, and Subaltern Studies has turned into a critique of discourses authorized by Western domination.<sup>19</sup>

The failed attempt to form a Latin American subaltern studies group was severely criticized as academic self-colonialism because of its dependence on theories articulated in English to deal with problems already theorized in a similar way by Latin American intellectuals.<sup>20</sup> While agreeing with such criticism, I still find in Subaltern Studies some valuable insights for the analysis of Puerto Rican nation building. What sets subaltern studies apart from other "history from below" approaches, and what makes it particularly useful in the case of Puerto Rico, is the special attention they give to colonialism and to how it affects the meaning of all social practices. Even though there are important differences between British and U.S. colonialism, the comparison between the two is useful to understand how the relationship between nationalism and the women's and workers' movements is articulated in colonial contexts.

Inspired by Subaltern Studies, I have given extra attention to relatively unknown texts written by subaltern intellectuals. Subalternity has been defined as the general attribute of subordination whether expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, or office or in any other way.<sup>21</sup> By subaltern intellectual I mean a member of a subaltern group of whatever kind who is literate and has a level of education superior to the standard of his or her group, and who may or may not have a leadership position inside the group. Because subalternity is a relational rather than an ontological category,<sup>22</sup> the focus of my analysis is on the intermediary position of subaltern intellectuals as subaltern in the literary field and dominant in their groups, and on the

role of subaltern intellectuals in the reconciliation of subaltern groups' demands and discourses with colonial nationalism.

My analysis traces the conflictive conversation between the Creole national project and the challenges posed by subaltern intellectuals. I have chosen authors and texts that had an important role in the construction of national imaginings. The first three chapters discuss texts produced between 1849 and 1930, classified by the specific social group that produced them: Creole men, Creole women, and working-class men and women. These texts were produced by the lettered elite within each group, so the analysis pays attention to how the writers simultaneously resisted and were constituted by the powers to which they were subaltern, and to how the writers appropriated and domesticated those subaltern to them. Of particular importance in this context is how peasants were constituted by the different groups, for they had no access to lettered culture and their voice can be found only in reading other groups' discourses against the grain.<sup>23</sup>

The purpose of the first three chapters is to contrast how these distinct social groups imagined and constructed themselves as well as the others and the nation in the context of the transition to a new colonial situation that provoked a restructuring of social hierarchies. The years 1900–1930 in Puerto Rico were characterized by social unrest and a strong and challenging participation of women and workers in national life. The first chapters explain those social struggles, their relationship to nation building, and the particular and often ambivalent meaning of their diverse actions in the colonial context.

By 1930 the strength of alternative social movements was waning. The activism of women was appeased by the concession of the vote to literate women. The working class was facing a situation of increasing unemployment, the economy was producing marginalized people instead of proletarians, and liberalism was starting to take over the socialist movement.<sup>24</sup> The illusion of a new order of democracy and modernity under United States rule was vanishing to the point that even the pro-U.S. rule Republican Party included independence as an alternative in its program. The 1930s were characterized by a crisis in alternative political ideologies as well as by a national identity crisis, which was the ideological expression of the downfall of the previously dominant classes.<sup>25</sup> The crises of the 1930s also mark the point at which politicians and intellectuals assumed the definition of national identity as a priority. The last chapter of this book is thus devoted to canonical writings from the 1930s to the early 1960s that codified a concilia-

tory national-identity discourse that absorbed the challenges posed by subaltern groups during the previous decades and consolidated the power of a Creole sector as the colonial intermediary class.

As a part of the ongoing debate about the crisis of colonialism and nationalism in Puerto Rico, this book maintains that colonial nationalism, made dominant under the *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA),<sup>26</sup> stripped nationalism in Puerto Rico of any anticolonial power and nurtured itself with the reorientation of the energy of socialist, independentist, women's, and workers' movements. Colonial nationalism has been an ally of United States colonialism and hemispheric hegemony. I have chosen to expose the contradictions, double binds, and fault lines of the Puerto Rican nation-building process because I believe it is indispensable to acknowledge the complexity of reality before hoping to transform it.