DIVIDED LOYALTIES: LATINA FAMILY SAGAS AND NATIONAL ROMANCES

By

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Para Papi y Mami, quienes inspiraron este proyecto con sus esfuerzos y sacrificios.
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This project examines the national narratives of U.S. Latinas as they negotiate their position(s) between home and homeland. By examining the works of Julia Alvarez, Cristina García, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer and Rosario Ferré, I identify the motivations and the representations implicit in constructing national romances of Latin American countries from positions within the U.S. In a sense their novels become textual homelands which bridge the spatial and temporal disparities between imagined homelands and the homes which they have made in the U.S. Not surprisingly, many of these authors write about dislocation, alienation, exile, and migration in re-imagining national histories of Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. This interest in history as a vehicle for narrating a specifically female identity reflects negotiations Latinas have had to make both with the U.S.’s history of economic and cultural imperialism, as well as with the seemingly more patriarchal cultures of ‘home.’ These national narratives attempt to recover histories at the historical and geographical margins of the U.S., namely in Latin America, while at the same time positing women as legitimate producers and agents of those histories.

This project proceeds primarily through analysis of Julia Alvarez’s historiographic novels, In the Time of the Butterflies and In the Name of Salomé; Cristina García’s Dreaming in
Cuban, The Agüero Sisters, and Monkey Hunting; Sandra Cisneros’ Caramelo or Puro Cuento; Rosario Ferré’s The House on the Lagoon; and Judith Ortiz Cofer’s The Line of the Sun. These novels are critical in their questioning of the silences of the historical record and complicit in their often inadvertent reproductions of the hegemonies characteristic of U.S.-Latin American relations. As this study demonstrates, adopting a genre with a long tradition in Latin American literature confers a certain amount of cultural legitimacy onto these projects, yet at the same time often hinders their ability to fully challenge the patriarchal structures of nationness.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: WRITING NATION, IMAGINING HOME

Since the 1990s, a decade that marked an increasing interest in Latina narratives on the part of large publishing houses, there has been a shift from the 1970s and 80s popular coming-of-age novels such as Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me Ultima* and Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was a Puerto Rican* to the more recent publication by large presses of historical narratives like Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995), Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo* (2002), Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon* (1998), and Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun* (1989), among others. While the coming-of-age narrative remains a popular one in Latino/a fiction, the recent interest in history as a vehicle for narrating a specifically female ethnic-national identity reflects the negotiations that Latinas have had to make both with the U.S.’s history of economic and cultural imperialism, as well as with the more patriarchal cultures of ethnic ‘origin.’ These narratives attempt to recover histories at the historical and geographical margins of the United States—namely in Latin America—while at the same time positing women as legitimate producers and agents of those histories. The shift from the individual, semi-autobiographical “I” to the historically constituted collective is also, in part, the result of the increased migrations from Latin America in the last fifty years, as well as of the growing U.S. Latino populations.

The turn to history in more recent Latina fiction also calls attention to the positions from which historians, intellectuals and writers produce discourses. What we write about the past has been and continues to be a product of our positioning within and between societies, cultures and discourses. As Stuart Hall explains, representation necessarily “implicate[s] the positions from which we speak or write—the positions of enunciation” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 237). In other words, “[w]e all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history
and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context,’ *positioned*” (Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 234). Alvarez, Garcia, Cisneros, Ferré and Ortiz Cofer call attention to those positions of power which have tended to reinforce myths about U.S. ‘good neighbor’ policies and about women’s roles in national and global histories. Moreover, their novels reveal the varied historical, national, cultural, and class positions from which they emerge. The specificity of national imaginings in these texts suggests that despite (pan-)ethnic labels or increased globalization, Latinas continue to think in national terms.

This project undertakes an examination of the historical impulse in Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé*; Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban, The Agüero Sisters*, and *Monkey Hunting*; Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*; Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon*; and Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun*. Each of these novels recovers the national history of a Latin American country in an effort to evaluate the circumstances of exile and/or emigration, the effects of dislocation and discrimination, and the identities to which Latina subjects may lay claim. Yet this movement toward reclaiming the past as a way of reconstructing an historicized identity is also paradoxical. While these novels search for pasts different and/or separate from the United States, they also move toward the realization that they cannot locate a Latin America divorced of colonial and imperial—Spanish and U.S.—influence. And although many of these texts engage critiques of U.S. policy in Latin America, they are often unable to avoid reproducing the same relations of power. In other words, while these novels remain critical of U.S. hegemony, they often (perhaps inadvertently) reiterate hegemonic ideas about class and race. As a result, my analysis of these historical romances considers the ways in which these texts resist and revise imperial and/or state ideas about
national belonging, as well as the ways in which they conform to imperial and/or national stereotypes about Latin American countries.

**Ethno-National Histories and Globalization**

The movement into the past within each of the novels under consideration accompanies a look at the present which reveals a tension between the ways we construct national history and the economic and political realities that have forced us to rethink and rewrite histories on a global scale. The narratives themselves attempt to resolve the tension inherent in thinking nationally in an increasingly globalized environment by opening a dialogue between U.S. and Latin American history. The return to national history as a literary performance is particularly revealing during a climate in which critics continue to insist on the demise of the nation as a viable means of cultural/social identity. In “The Question of Cultural Identity,” Stuart Hall, however, argues that localism in the form of nationalism, ethnicity and religious fundamentalism appear to be on the rise in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (310-314). In the U.S., in particular, examples of ethnic nationalism have been increasing, especially within diasporic communities that have retained close ties with a homeland. At the same time, however, as we have seen an increase in the specificity of national identifications within particular communities, we have also seen political and popular appeals to pan-ethnicity in an effort to subvert historically constituted national identities. The ‘Latino/a’ and ‘Hispanic’ labels often subsume continental, national, cultural, class, linguistic, and racial differences into a politically ‘manageable’ framework. Yet despite this neat ethnicity, many within minority communities resist homogenization and reassert historical and national identities through history, art, literature and other mediums.

As a result of this new global climate, Arjun Appadurai explains, the nation-state is giving way to a post-national period which necessitates new forms of (often deterritorialized)
allegiances and identities (169). Yet these deterritorialized nationalist productions suggest not the demise of the nation-state, but rather, its transformation into a much larger field of negotiations. While the national continues to include the nation-state, the national has also gone beyond the scope of territorial boundaries. Although national territory often remains necessary for nationalist movements, nationalist longings and productions no longer require that national community be limited to the nation-state. In fact, nationalist productions about nations other than the U.S. have been increasing among ethnic minorities living in the United States. The shift from coming-of-age and/or migrant narratives to national histories within Latina literature, for instance, suggests not homogenization or the demise of the national, but a resurgence of nationalist sentiment/longing as a response to the effects of dislocation and globalization. Novels like Cisneros’ *Caramelo* demonstrate that the desire for Mexican national belonging remains powerful even among those born within the borders of the United States. As Robin Cohen explains, “[i]n contrast to the past, when nation-states were defined in terms of a people sharing a common culture within a bounded territory, this new conception of nation-state includes . . . those who live physically dispersed within the boundaries of many other states, but who remain socially, politically, culturally, and often economically part of the nation-state of their ancestors” (136).

The Latin American state’s attempts to adapt to the widespread increases in emigration and diasporic communities result in normalizing foreign negotiations or interventions to safeguard the rights of emigrants. The Mexican government has a long history of negotiating worker contracts with the U.S., but more recently we have seen increased instances of vocal condemnation and/or negotiation of the treatment of Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the U.S. (seen as recently as their condemnation of Texas’ Proposition 71, as well as in recent
debates about border violence). Thus not only is the general view of the national changing, but so is the role of the nation-state itself and its relationship to its nationals residing outside the state. The idea that some species of global culture is eroding the viability of the nation-state and/or the national seems less likely than that the migrations of the twentieth century along with globalization have spurred the expansion of (fragmented and deterritorialized) nationalist sentiments throughout the world. And although there is undoubtedly a substantial amount of cultural transference, it by no means excludes or eliminates nationalist sentiment among ethnic minorities or among the majorities with which they reside.

Given the literal and imaginative expansions of the national, it should come as no surprise that growing Latino/a populations residing in the U.S. construct alternatives to the older nation-state brand of nationalism whose territories they no longer inhabit. Novelists like Julia Alvarez, Cristina García, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer and Rosario Ferré write national novels which reproduce the historical and territorial specificity of the nation-state, but which also engage the dynamics of deterritorialization within the last century. In a sense their novels become textual homelands which bridge the spatial and temporal disparities between imagined homelands and the homes which they have made in the U.S. Not surprisingly, many of these authors write about dislocation, alienation, exile, and migration in reimagining national histories of the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Mexico and Puerto Rico. Appadurai astutely notes that “very few of the new nationalisms can be separated from the anguish of displacement, the nostalgia of exile, the repatriation of funds, or the brutalities of asylum seeking” (165). The national and historical in Latina texts seems to fulfill a need to establish a narrative—historical, political, gendered—of national longings and collective identity for dislocated people denied historical identities within mainstream/public discourses in the U.S. These novelistic histories become
necessary to a deterritorialized people unable to call their homeland a home, and unable to call their home a homeland. Consequently, many of these narratives also reconstruct national histories in order to expand the boundaries of the national community, and thus make room for the emigrant/exile as a legitimate member of the imagined nation.

**Doubled Identities: Pan-Latinos and Diasporic Nationals**

In stressing the importance of the clashes between the global and the national, as well as the increased migrations characteristic of the shifts in the labor market, I do not wish to suggest that these are the only reasons, or even the primary motivations for this new interest in historical and national novels among Latinas in the United States. Much of the success of the new global market comes from technological advances, particularly in communications and travel. Advances in communication technology in particular have helped Latino/as to remain connected to cultures and communities outside of the U.S. They also remain much closer geographically to their countries of origin, which facilitates frequent visits and interaction. Much of the communication between North and South is also a product of economic factors. In his work on Latino/as in the U.S., Juan Gonzalez notes that not counting consumer goods or products, immigrants send remittances to Latin America that approximate $7 billion a year (200). And in El Salvador, he points out, these remittances are the primary source of foreign income (Gonzalez 200). The connections between Latino/as and those still living in Latin America are economic as well as cultural. Latino/a communities are often transnational populations who “maintain multiple relations—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders” (Schiller et al. 26).

Many who have migrated North rely on family and friends, as well as on productions geared toward Latino/as, to keep them up-to-date on trends, movies, music and news. Although money tends to move largely from North to South, cultural products move in both directions.
The Spanish-language media reinforce a real or imagined sense of connection to Latin America through various programming formats. If, as Benedict Anderson claims, print facilitated the growth of nationalism by allowing people to imagine their relation to a larger community, today the Spanish-language media is responsible for encouraging and preserving a sense of national community, as well as for reproducing the image of a pan-ethnic Latino/a community within the U.S. In other words, the media today emphasize national and regional specificity in order to attract heterogeneous Latino/a viewers, yet they also use this type of marketing to promote a sense of pan-Latino unity based on a supposedly shared cultural heritage. A look at Univision’s programming and advertising demonstrates the network’s need to adapt to regional markets based on ethnic nationalisms while still promoting pan-Latinoness. As Arlene Dávila points out, “representations [of Latino/as] are in fact produced in conversation and often in complicity with—rather than as a response or challenge to—dominant hierarchies of race, culture, and nationality” (Latinos, Inc. 5). Yet Dávila also notes that viewers frequently identify representations and cultural productions as coming out of specific national contexts, rather than as simply instances of a pan-Latino culture or community. Despite its limitations, the Spanish-language media perform a vital function in reproducing Latin American national sentiment within the United States. In fact, a mainstay of Univision’s programming includes paying tribute to the national independence days of Latin American countries through brief, advertising-like segments, a move which recognizes cultural specificity within the context of pan-ethnic programming. Like these media productions or representations of national and ethnic identity, the novels in my study also underscore the importance of national identifications among Latino/a populations. However, these novels also challenge the homogenization of Latino/as which pervade U.S. discourses and Spanish-language media productions.
In using the label ‘Latino/a’ throughout my discussion of the novels of Julia Alvarez, Cristina García, Sandra Cisneros, Rosario Ferré and Judith Ortiz Cofer, I do not wish to efface the historical differences which characterize these writers, their experiences, and the experiences of their respective communities. Like ‘Hispanic,’ which emerged from government bureaucracies in the 1970s as a way of labeling peoples of Latin American origins, ‘Latino/a’ also sacrifices the accuracy of historical and national differences. My discussions of the novels and the writers themselves, however, remain grounded in the historical, cultural, racial and national specificity of the nations which they reconstruct. As such, I use ‘Latina’ as a way of organizing a broad range of political and national experiences which include but are not limited to colonial domination, emigration, exile, discrimination, racialization and gender oppression among women of Latin American descent and/or ancestry and who reside in or identify with the U.S. For Chicanos and Puerto Ricans in particular, colonialism remains necessary to discussions of Latina histories. As Ferré’s The House on the Lagoon and Ortiz Cofer’s The Line of the Sun demonstrate, colonialism is inextricable from national imaginings. Thus, as Juan Flores argues, “[f]rom the perspective of ‘Puerto Rican/Latinos,’ then, the category ‘Latino’ . . . has utility only if it can account for the colonial dimension of ‘difference’ in the U.S. setting and as an international background” (11). Likewise, the term is useful only if it can incorporate an awareness of the different class, race and emigration experiences of Cubans and Dominicans. Although the inclusion of Rosario Ferré in a study of Latina writers may raise considerable debate, given the colonial implications of including an island writer within the context of ethnic American literature, I am not suggesting that all island writers be read as U.S. Latinas. Instead, I wish to emphasize the ways in which ethnic labels like ‘Latina’ can sometimes be a matter of choice. Because Ferré chooses to identify as a Latina, she offers us an opportunity to examine
the ways in which performance, coloniality, and complicity intersect in Puerto Rican national imaginings.

At the Intersections of Gender, Race and Class: Latinas and Feminist Poetics

The novels in this study also demonstrate the overwhelming influence of feminisms in rethinking national histories. For most of these writers, imagining nation and history remains inextricable from the task of locating and legitimating women’s positions of enunciation. As Robert Holton explains, “the legitimacy of social groups depends on their ability to articulate publicly a perspective, to assert with legitimacy their view of the world and their position in it” (67). In order to legitimate their positions within specific Latin American communities and within the United States, these writers often trace literary and national ancestors. In fact, writers like Alvarez, Ortiz Cofer and Sandra Cisneros frequently draw from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* as a means of calling attention to the ways in which the absences in the historical record—both in Latin American countries and in the U.S.—have tended to reinforce the marginalization of women and Latino/as. Woolf’s quest for literary and historical ancestors, thus, takes on two parallel meanings within the writings of Latinas; it points to the need for women as historical and literary models within Latin American countries, and to the desire for Latino/a models within U.S. literary history. In fact, Ortiz Cofer explains,

I did not grow up in Puerto Rico, I did not go through a Latino Studies Program, and I was exposed to the women writers of Spanish and Latin American traditions only after I became a writer. . . . in my studies of English Literature, also male-dominated, I found few models that I could adapt. Virginia Woolf opened my eyes. Here was a woman who was defying her time by saying that a woman has to have a room of her own and an independent income to become a writer (Ocasio 732).

Likewise, Julia Alvarez’s search for literary and historical ancestors becomes manifest in her recovery of the lives of Dominican women like poet Salomé Ureña and educator Camila Henríquez Ureña. In this way she not only reclaims a literary precursor, but she also finds in
Camila Henríquez Ureña a Dominican intellectual whose life in the United States approximates her own.

Although *A Room of One’s Own* foregrounds the economic constraints which often prevent women from literary and intellectual endeavors, it nevertheless remains grounded in the class positioning of its author. In many ways, writers like Cisneros expand Woolf’s vision by making room for working-class women. For instance, the young protagonist of Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* yearns for a space of her own, free from the impositions of gender roles: “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own. . . . Nobody’s garbage to pick up after” (*House* 108). Likewise, Celaya, the primary narrator of *Caramelo*, often articulates a desire for independence and personal space that contradicts her family’s expectations of women. However, Cisneros also acknowledges the different ways class privilege informs the works of writers like Virginia Woolf. In discussing the influence of Emily Dickinson on her own writing, Cisneros notes that Dickinson enjoyed privileges which facilitated her writing, namely

1) an education, 2) a room of her own in a house of her own that she shared with her sister Lavinia, and 3) money inherited along with the house after her father died. She even had a maid, an Irish housekeeper who did, I suspect, most of the household chores. . . . I wonder if Emily Dickinson’s housekeeper wrote poetry or if she ever had the secret desire to study and be anything besides a housekeeper. (“Notes” 75)

Yet while these writers call attention to the ways in which race and/or class intersect with gender oppression in the United States, they often fail to fully engage these class/race/gender hierarchies in their re-writing of Latin American nationalisms. Instead, these hierarchies are frequently folded into critiques of gender oppression. So, for example, while Alvarez emphasizes the racism of U.S. society in her novels, she often replaces discussions of racism in the Dominican Republic with critiques of women’s oppression. Likewise, Cisneros’s novel, *Caramelo*, recounts the deprivations, racism and alienation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the United
States; however, the text offers a much less critical look at the different forms of racism in Mexico. This impulse to replace racism with women’s oppression in Latin American histories seems to come out of a desire to reconcile the relative freedoms available to women in the U.S. with the seemingly more stringent gender roles of ‘home’ countries. Their positions of enunciation heighten their awareness of the different gender expectations of multiple communities and cultures. Moreover, because Latinas write and speak from positions within the U.S., they are perhaps more keenly aware of racism in the United States than of racism in Latin America.

That the writers I will be discussing tend to construct national histories of the privileged classes reflects not only their own subject positions as ‘white women of color,’ but it also suggests that perhaps these histories are meant to reconcile the discontinuities between their social standings in the U.S. and their more privileged beginnings/roots in Latin America. After all, despite the economic, educational and/or racial privileges of these writers within Latino/a communities, they remain marginalized and racialized by mainstream society in the U.S. As a result, many of these historical romances re-imagine histories of white/whitened Latin American nations. In fact, Frances Negrón-Muntaner argues that Rosario Ferré’s English-language novels often become “non-confrontational history lesson[s] for mainland Americans while seductively whispering into their ears that the Island’s upper classes have a History and a Culture—with capital letters—just like they do” (191). The result, she argues, is a reenactment of “the traditional elites’ anxiety of always putting the best (white) cheek forward” (Negrón-Muntaner 191). The Latina writers in this study demonstrate a similar anxiety about their own race and class status within U.S. hegemony. Novels such as Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Cisneros’ *Caramelo*, and Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon*, for instance, articulate alternatives to
the stereotypes of Latino/as as poor, backward, non-white immigrants from pre-modern communities. However, their emphasis on their own (upper) class positions in Latin America tends to obviate the class and race issues which inform gender oppression and national politics in Latin America.

Although racial systems in Mexico, the Dominican Republic and other Latin American countries tend to be more flexible than they are in the United States, they are also more clearly bound to class hierarchies. In many Latin American countries, class has historically been an indicator of race, and race an indicator of class status. Although wealth and intermarriage offers non-whites in Latin America access to class mobility, this mobility remains grounded in the rhetoric of whiteness. Thus, as Julia Alvarez explains, “a rich Black is a mulatto; a rich mulatto is a white man” (“Black Behind the Ears” 43). Money, as Alvarez, suggests, can buy ‘whiteness’ in many Latin American countries. U.S. discourses, however, tend to homogenize Latino/as as an racial/ethnic category rooted in Spanish culture and/or ancestry; these practices ignore class, race, national, and historical differences. For Latino/as who identify as ‘white,’ or who identify with the upper classes of their respective Latin American countries, homogenization and racialization in the U.S. can be particularly disorienting.

Suzanne Oboler’s study of ethnic labels explains that Latino/as tend to define their identities relative to their status in countries of origin, rather than by racial dynamics in the U.S. In fact, many of Oboler’s study participants articulate their desire for equal access to the privileges they might have enjoyed as members of the privileged classes in Latin America (131-135). In both the U.S. and in Latin America, however, whiteness continues to be equated with social privilege. For those Latinos born and/or educated in the U.S., status is frequently transmitted through family and/or through acquired educational privilege. Cisneros’ young
narrator, Celaya, for instance, identifies with the middle class beginnings of her father’s Mexican family despite (or perhaps because of) her own poverty in the U.S. In this context, imagining privileged beginnings in Latin America becomes an alternative to the oppression and alienation of minority life in the United States. The privileging of gender and of the middle/upper classes in rewriting Latin American nations also underscores the ways in which national imaginings continue to be classed and raced despite efforts to rescript national romance.

**Archival Histories in the Postmodern Period**

We cannot, however, investigate this turn to the historical and the national in Latina narratives without considering the ways in which this literature responds to the postmodern crisis in epistemology. This crisis in the ways we construct, represent and understand knowledge begins to take shape at the end of World War II as the old empires begin to meet the nationalist challenges of oppressed peoples. In this country, the last forty years have exacerbated the crisis in knowledge, particularly in historical knowledges, through the growth and visibility of feminist, civil rights and other liberation movements. Enlightenment notions of objectivity, truth and universal reason found vocal opposition in those formerly silenced peoples excluded from universalizing ideals. The deconstruction of these universalizing tendencies and their supposed independence from the historical context of their origins became a central concern of postmodern productions, and the notion of objectivity as a politically and ideologically independent phenomena became increasingly suspect. Consequently, the postmodern era has been concerned with the reevaluation of history and the ways it has been represented, as well as with historical contexts which continue to determine the contours of textual representations and knowledges. While the idea of questioning the objectivity of epistemologies is certainly not a new phenomenon, the postmodern period, unlike other eras, has not succeeded in locating a widely accepted alternative to modernist modes of thinking. Instead, skepticism seems most
characteristic of the postmodern period and its productions. Jane Flax notes that “[p]ostmodern discourses are all deconstructive in that they seek to distance us from and make us skeptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture” (41).

Many postmodern productions—literary, artistic and/or theoretical—challenge long held beliefs about knowledge construction. Yet, as Nancy Hartsock points out, why at this particular moment when women and minorities seek to turn themselves from the objects of history to its subjects, are knowledge, subjectivity, and historiography suddenly problematic (163)? In large measure one grows out of the other; the voices from the margins which have contested the universalizing perspectives of Western scholarship have unleashed more complex investigations of epistemology’s relationship to power. The resulting backlash is an inclination to abandon epistemology altogether, a move which amounts to discrediting attempts at knowledge construction rather than transforming epistemological processes. Rethinking power means rethinking its epistemological grounding, a process essential to oppressed peoples. Rather than pursue another universalizing epistemology or discredit local knowledges, Hartsock suggests that we consider situated knowledges as knowledges which come from specific cultural, historical, and spatial positions, and which are capable of conveying perspectival meanings/truths (172-173).

Novels such as Alvarez’s *In the Name of Salomé*, García’s *The Agüero Sisters*, and Cisneros’ *Caramelo* unconsciously respond to what Jameson calls the ‘waning of affect’ in the postmodern period by engaging history as a means of challenging the public discourses which continue to privilege a Eurocentric conception of American history, as well as those discourses which abandon the quest for historical recovery and reconstruction altogether. For this reason,
many of these novels reproduce the generic strategies of history and historiography. In order to emphasize the ‘truth-value’ of their respective histories and experiences, these novels frequently take the form of histories, include historical marginalia, and insert authorial testimonials into narrative structures. Thus, not only do these authors engage historical subjects/topics, but they also appropriate the tools and techniques of the historian as a means of legitimating their own narratives. Rather than abandon history, these novels foreground the importance of historical reclamation within Latino/a communities. Moreover, this return to national history borrows from Latin America’s literary traditions. Although many of these writers were not formally trained in Latin American letters, writers like Cristina García, Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez often acknowledge their familiarity with Latin American literature.

**Anxiety of Origins: Migrants, Exiles and Latino/as in the National Imaginary**

For people or groups who have migrated to the United States in recent history, the turn to the past must and usually does involve a return to a country of origin. For these writers, who are first generation Americans, their histories and those of their communities begin in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Mexico and Puerto Rico. This is as close as they can come to beginnings; the stories they recount and the histories they resurrect are clearly national. In *The Agüero Sisters*, for instance, García reconstructs the natural history of Cuba as she writes the Agüero family saga. Likewise, Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* borders on historiography in reimagining the lives of national icons. These national-historical imaginings constitute what Anthony Smith calls ‘ethno-histories,’ a nation’s “distinctive cultural contribution to the worldwide fund of what Weber called ‘irreplaceable cultural values’” (181). As he goes on to explain, these ethno-histories take on the role of “assuring collective dignity (and through that some measure of dignity for the individual) for populations which have come to feel excluded, neglected or suppressed in the distribution of values and opportunities” (Smith 182). Resurrecting an ethnic
history which locates cultural uniqueness spurs a sense of community and/or simultaneity among those marginalized by the majority. It also returns those communities a sense of self-worth.

Perhaps because of this desire to revalue culture and nation, many of the novels under consideration tread very lightly on Latin American nationalisms. Despite the movement to include women and emigrants as part of the nation’s history and community, these romances frequently mimic the limited national imaginings and nostalgia of the state. In Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo*, for example, the narrator constructs a textual nation which includes those who have migrated as well as those who remained in Mexico. And despite the narrator’s success in challenging the limitations imposed on women by romance paradigms, she fails to fully question the racial hierarchies which characterize Mexico’s imagined community. Instead, the end of the novel leaves those hierarchies intact. Likewise, Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun* fails to challenge U.S. politics in Puerto Rico or the island elite’s complicity in colonial nationalism. In calling attention to instances of complicity in these narratives, however, I do not wish to minimize their efforts to re-imagine exclusionary notions of nation and identity. In fact, I argue that these instances of nostalgia or complicity with state-brand nationalisms are the result of a desire for (re)inclusion within the imagined nation. Because they write from the U.S., these writers demonstrate a certain amount of anxiety about their place in, and claims to, Latin American nations. Thus, the tendency to overlook problems that may plague Latin American nations or to reproduce those problems seems to stem from an anxiety about their relationships to those countries of ‘origin.’ After all, most migrants and children of migrants are rarely considered ‘authentic’ nationals by those residing in Latin American nations.

**Resurrecting the Romance: National Narratives and Family Sagas**

The Latinas included in this study borrow and transform the tradition of Latin American national narratives in part to authenticate their own claims to national belonging within countries
of ethnic origin. Sandra Cisneros’ adaptation of recognizably Mexican genres, for instance, becomes one of many strategies her narrator uses to authenticate her claims to Mexico/nation. Likewise, Julia Alvarez’ historical novels about the Dominican Republic have been at least partially accepted as belonging to the nation’s literary and historical tradition. As Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions* explains, Latin America’s post-independence national romances imagined national unity through lovers destined to overcome regional, religious, class and/or racial differences (20-24). Imagined classical pasts became the subject of novels like Manuel de Jesús Galván’s *Enriquillo* (1882), which centered on the rebellion of one of the last Taino royals. In many countries, indigenous pasts and/or culture became a post-colonial strategy to articulate national difference or uniqueness. Contemporary Latina national novels differ from these early romances in that they are not writing to authenticate a territorial difference, nor are they, for the most part, seeking to establish a nation-state. Instead their intent seems to involve establishing historical national identities denied by racialization and homogenization of Latino/as. Consequently, many of these texts re-produce national histories which foreground the unique conditions that lead to emigration and exile for Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.

Perhaps the most prevalent strategy for articulating cultural and national belonging in these novels is through the use of family as a metaphor for the imagined nation. Each of these national novels is also a family saga, one which narrates the nation simultaneously with the family. But rather than function as merely national allegory, these novels suggest that community and culture imagined as intrinsic to the state are, in fact, overwhelming determined by familial relations. In other words, the family, not the state, remains the most important

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1 It is my understanding that the Spanish translation of *In the Time of the Butterflies* has become a ‘national novel’ and is used in some high schools in the Dominican Republic.
transmitter of culture and community in these novels. The family retains and reproduces the
national imaginary, and it can comply with as well as resist state practices. It does not, however,
simply reflect the happenings of the nation-state. Family and nation, in fact, often become
competing forms of social identification. In Cristina García’s novels, for instance, family and
nation become contradictory forms of social identification, neither of which necessarily promises
the individual acceptance or inclusion. Likewise, Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon* and Ortiz
Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun* stage a similar tension between national belonging—in this case to
the U.S.—and familial identification.

The nation as family is a particularly powerful image in the national imagination. The
state has historically used familial metaphors to create community and to reinforce social
hierarchies. Anne McClintock explains that “the family offers a ‘natural’ figure for sanctioning
social hierarchy within a putative organic *unity* of interests” (91). In this way, states could
represent social differences as ‘natural.’ Yet “[t]he metaphoric depiction of social hierarchy as
natural and familial . . . depended on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women
and children within the domestic sphere” (91). The Latina narratives under consideration alter
the structure of familial imaginings in order to challenge the subordination of women within the
nation-state. Many of these romances attempt to restructure the patriarchal nature of both the
family and the state. They also revise those nineteenth and early twentieth century national
romances which tended to script women as inert symbols of Latin American nations. However,
as I already noted, the focus on gender inequality frequently obviates other forms of
subordination and oppression. In many cases, the writers in this study are unable to completely
rescript the terms of the family romance, an outcome which underscores patriarchy’s
pervasiveness as a complex web of social relations and processes.
Imagining Nation and History

The first part of this dissertation examines Julia Alvarez’s historiographic novels, *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé*. In this chapter I examine the strategies that Alvarez employs to situate her narratives as alternate ‘histories,’ particularly in the context of U.S. and Dominican patriarchy. By recovering and rewriting the histories of women involved in nationalist movements, Alvarez challenges the gaps in the historical record. Her use of historiography suggests that the possibilities of historical recovery remain necessary for oppressed and/or marginalized peoples. Although Alvarez effectively incorporates women into national formations, she often does so at the expense of discussions of race and class politics in the Dominican Republic. Feminine/feminist unity frequently obscures the very real racial differences between most Dominicans and Alvarez’s privileged protagonists.

Next, I look at Cristina García’s historical novels—*Dreaming in Cuban*, *The Agüero Sisters*, and *Monkey Hunting*. García’s novels trace the effects of alienation, exile and national politics on the family and the individual. Although they frequently turn on the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the novels also engage political turmoil and familial loss over the course of a much longer history. In doing so, the novels make evident that although the national and the familial function interdependently, they also operate competitively. In these novels, loyalty to the state often means alienation from family. Yet despite the polemical nature of family and state in García’s novels, they often reinforce family as the most viable means of cultural/national identity. In this chapter I argue that legacies of patriarchy in both the family and the nation fuel personal and political traumas in García’s narratives. For men and women protagonists, changes in access to privilege mean changing relationships to family and to nation.

The third chapter considers Sandra Cisneros’ nostalgic national novel, *Caramelo* or *Puro Cuento*. I discuss the strategies and generic experimentation Cisneros employs to construct an
imagined Mexico. The novel takes the form of both telenovela and bildungsroman as a means of writing the narrator into the national imaginary. I compare Caramelo to romance paradigms like the telenovela, fairy tale and national novel in order to examine Cisneros’ rescripting of women’s roles in nation. This chapter also argues that the use of popular culture—movies, music, fotonovelas or comics—and the inclusion of historical footnotes allow the narrator to ‘authenticate’ her Mexicanidad. Caramelo, in fact, demonstrates more anxiety about claiming nation than do the novels of García or Alvarez, perhaps because Cisneros was born in the United States. I argue that this anxiety results in representations of Mexico/nationness which often reproduce state-based nationalisms.

In the final chapter, I compare the works of two Puerto Rican writers—Rosario Ferré and Judith Ortiz Cofer. Although Ferré is an island writer, her decision to claim a Latina identity and her support for continued colonialism on the island position her works somewhere between mainland Puerto Rican writers and other island writers. I argue that both Ferré’s The House on the Lagoon and Ortiz Cofer’s The Line of the Sun write the nation ambivalently. The first part of the chapter examines Ferré’s The House on the Lagoon and the ways it bolsters colonialism on the island. The narrator’s history of the island attempts to represent colonialism as a ‘civilizing’ mission, yet it is often unable to resolve the contradictions inherent to conquest and domination. By writing the narrative conflict as a gendered struggle between husband and wife, Ferré also underscores the complexities Latinas face as they attempt to reconcile gender freedoms in the U.S. with the U.S.’s history of imperialism in Latin America. In the second half, I argue that Ortiz Cofer’s The Line of the Sun turns Puerto Rican-ness into culture/ethnicity vacated of a political or colonial present. As such, the novel inadvertently bolsters assimilation and colonialism. Representations of a pastoral and pre-modern Puerto Rico repeat colonialist
thinking about the island; they also allow the narrator to separate herself from the alienated and
‘Othered’ Puerto Ricans on the mainland. Her representations of Puerto Rico as edenic paradise
divorced of political context facilitate her negation of the island and her subsequent assimilation
into U.S. society. Both novels also suggest that colonialism has had some success in naturalizing
its own discourses among the colonized.
CHAPTER 2
IMAGINING DOMINICAN HISTORY: WOMEN, RACE AND PRIVILEGE IN JULIA ALVAREZ’S HISTORIOGRAPHIC NOVELS

In her historical novels, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), Julia Alvarez undertakes the recovery of women’s participation in Dominican national history. These novels reclaim periods of particular unrest in Dominican history by recreating the private lives of public figures. As such, these novels shift the historical lens from public institutions of the state to private spaces often deemed ‘domestic’ and excluded from state histories. *In the Time of the Butterflies* reimagines Rafael Leónidas Trujillo’s thirty-one year regime (1930-1961) in the Dominican Republic through the lives of the historical women—Patria, Minerva and María Teresa Mirabal—who helped overturn that regime in 1960. The novel foregrounds relationships, love, and personal experiences seemingly marginal to state politics. Likewise, *In the Name of Salomé* fictionalizes the lives of Dominican poet Salomé Ureña and her daughter, Camila Henríquez Ureña. These women’s experiences serve as a point of entry into post-Independence Dominican history, 1844, through the 1960s. Both novels fictionalize the lives of historical figures as a means of revealing the relationships between women’s agency and national movements. In doing so, Alvarez also undermines more traditional views of history which insist on representations of the nation as contiguous with representations of men and masculinity. While the limitations of traditional history have been the subject of much debate among intellectuals from many disciplines, the project of women’s history has often been practiced as separate or supplemental to history at large. Alvarez attempts a ‘history’ of the Dominican Republic which makes women central rather than supplemental to national history.

In positioning women as (universal) representatives of the national body/people, however, Alvarez merely reinscribes the notion of universality which women of color have struggled to problematize and destabilize. In “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Among Women,” bell hooks
argues that “sisterhood” has, in the past, been used as a means of unifying women under the false sense of a common enemy and a common victimization (44-46). This notion of shared victimization, however, has excluded many women from active participation and identification with feminist movements. The emphasis on gender inequalities and on patriarchy in Alvarez’s novels often forestalls any discussion of class and race politics, even in relation to gender issues. In fact, Alvarez’s foregrounding of gender effectively erases the possibility of other social conflicts which may have informed national history and nationalist discourses. Incidents like the Massacre of 1937, when Trujillo ordered the slaughter of thousands of Haitians living in the Dominican borderlands, become in these novels merely examples of the dictator’s wickedness, rather than avenues to expose negrophobia as an element of state policy.

While In the Name of Salomé attempts to re-evaluate the terms of Dominican national inclusion by recovering the histories of two women of color, the novel often winds up reproducing the whitening or blanqueamineto of Dominican society. Alvarez calls attention to the whitening of poet Salomé Ureña in both national and familial imaginings, yet she often represents race as merely a difference of skin color. As such, racial difference becomes de-Africanized and de-politicized within the context of Dominican nationalism. In fact, the novel often addresses the whitening of Salomé Ureña largely in relation to Camila’s search for a connection to her mother. Despite Camila’s reconnection with the spirit of her mother through education reform in revolutionary Cuba, Camila does not seem to resolve her own racial uncertainty. The author’s silences on race and class in relation to nineteenth century positivism, which often integrated eugenicist thinking, become glaring in light of Salomé Ureña’s mixed racial ancestry and her implementation of positivist educational reforms in late nineteenth century Dominican society. Moreover, both In the Name of Salomé and In the Time of the
*Butterflies* often subtly repeat or ignore the state’s anti-Haitian rhetoric, which began in the nineteenth century and became fixed as a marker of national difference in the twentieth century. While Alvarez’s attempts at her-story can and should be construed as counter-hegemonic, I argue that they should also be read as instances of situated knowledge.

Although Alvarez’s novels are not histories per se, they insinuate themselves as such both through their affinities to published biographies and histories of the periods she reconstructs and through the author’s inclusion of sources and research methods. *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* also follow in a Latin American tradition of historical novels which attempted to create a history for emerging nations in a ‘New’ world and consolidate heterogeneous populations within those nations. For example, novels like Miguel de Jesús Galván’s *Enriquillo* (1882) imagined a memorial indigenous past for the Dominican Republic at a time when nationals were struggling to define themselves in contrast to their Haitian neighbors. These novels, as Doris Sommer explains, often cast women as passive metaphors for land and/or nation, over which national struggles were fought by men (*One Master* xiii). Alvarez’s novels intrude upon the gendered character of these national novels. In fact, her novels recover/memorialize Dominican history while simultaneously redefining women’s roles in that history. Consequently, domestic spaces often identified with women and often outside the scope of ‘official’ history become, in her novels, politically charged spaces necessary to nationalist movements. If in the founding fictions of Latin America, women and families were often little more than inert symbols for national unity, in Alvarez’s rewriting they become agents capable of overturning corrupt regimes, poets inspiring national unity and allegiance, and activists participating in national reinvention. Alvarez’s emphasis on women’s spaces and roles in the context of constructing a nation call attention to the gendered silences of the historical record.
At the same time, her attempts at historical recovery often fall back on some of the polarities characteristic of ‘official’ histories. Her invocations of the domestic often repeat binaries which fixed representations of women and men. Thus, the symbols and meanings linked to women in these novels tend to challenge masculine-identified representations of patriarchy by polarizing masculine/feminine as destructive/creative, as well as by erasing race and class differences within nationalist movements.

Much of the appeal of Alvarez’s work among US readers comes from its non-threatening consumability. The historical dimension of *In the Time of the Butterflies* only lightly treads, if at all, on critiques of U.S. imperial policies in Latin America. *In the Name of Salomé*, which broaches U.S. foreign policy more closely, though also more ambiguously, subsumes its historicity more deeply than *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Thus, even though *In the Name of Salomé* critiques U.S. occupations throughout Latin American, it also buries its own historicity more deeply in fiction. Moreover, although the novels are often marketed as ethnic and/or cultural narratives—‘Other’ histories—they are only so in relation to the U.S. mainstream. I think it is important to qualify the position(s) from which these narratives emerge and to note that while Alvarez’s novels are marginal to more mainstream American literature, they are in the wider scope of things characterized by specific politics which reflect the author’s privileged class and racial positions. Although wealthy and white, Alvarez is marketed as a woman of color in the U.S. In the Dominican Republic, however, she is a wealthy, white woman with U.S. privilege. The marketing of her ethnicity, her Dominican-ness, elides her whiteness in the context of Dominican, and to a lesser extent, U.S., society. Even before her emigration to the U.S., Julia Alvarez belonged to a wealthy Dominican family; her uncles attended Ivy league schools, her mother attended schools in the U.S., and her grandfather served as a cultural attaché.
to the United Nations. The family traveled to and from the U.S. at a time when most
Dominicans could not afford such luxuries. Her father’s contacts with other medical doctors in
the U.S. facilitated their escape from Trujillo’s dictatorship in 1960, when her father received a
grant to study medicine in New York.

Alvarez’s commitment to the Dominican Republic and the class position which shapes that
commitment, is evident in one of her most recent projects—Café Altagracia². This coffee
company, which she began with her husband, intends to return use value to deforested
Dominican lands and to improve “the quality of life for our farm community”
(www.cafealtagracia.com). Still, as the website for the coffee company makes clear, the project
itself romanticizes farm work. The website goes so far as to explain that “coffee tastes better
when birds sing over it” and that

Our land, coffee plants and ripe cherries are cared for by workers who have grown up
tending coffee. Everything is done by hand: from picking through the delicate processes of
depulping . . . Skill, experience and loving attention to detail are essential to guarantee that
only top grade beans are bagged for export. (www.cafealtagracia.com).

While the coffee company/farm built a school and a library to educate men, women and children
in the area, the project itself presents an idyllic, if slightly paternalistic, view of life for these
workers. Certainly there is little on Café Altagracia’s website that might suggest poverty and
hardship without a pastoral representation; foreigners/tourists are even offered the opportunity to
host small gatherings on the farm. The farm, in fact, only supports four full-time employees with
the rest of the labor coming from seasonal workers. Likewise, Foundation Alta Gracia, which
funds the education program, holds that the “intermingling [of foreign students and local
farmers] can inspire a better way of life.” While Alvarez’s project is clearly meant to improve

² The name comes from the Virgin of Altagracia, patron saint of the Dominican Republic and a very powerful
religious-national symbol on the island. Julia Alvarez reconstructs the legend of the Virgin in her children’s book, A
novels also functions to reinforce Alvarez's Dominicanness despite her positioning in the U.S.
the conditions of some farm workers and well as to promote sustainability, the project itself is often couched in paternalistic rhetoric which to some extent recalls the ‘civilizing’ rhetoric of imperialism. Café Altagracia demonstrates more vividly, I think, the distance between Alvarez and most of the Dominicans she claims to speak for/about when she writes them into her novels.

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1992), Alvarez’s first novel, likewise affirms the author’s tendency to overwrite race with ethnicity as a means of positioning herself as a voice for and from the margins. *García Girls* recounts the coming of age story of four sisters who must flee the *trujillato* with their family after the regime learns of their father’s involvement in an underground movement. This is a story which in fact bears striking similarities to Alvarez’s own life. As with her historical novels, the protagonists of this story have access to privileges unavailable to most Dominicans in the 1950s and 60s. Like the author, the García sisters are white, wealthy, educated immigrants when they arrive in New York. In fact, their connections to the U.S. government and the CIA secure their escape from the island. Racism appears largely in the context of the U.S.; the girls meet with discrimination at their American schools because of their foreignness and their accents. Alvarez, in fact, aligns the wealthy García girls’ exile with that of their “blue-black” Haitian maid, Chucha, who escapes the Massacre of 1937 by finding refuge as a servant in the García-de la Torre estate. Having Chucha narrate her own story and the potential similarities between her exile and that of the girls she cares for is an attempt at minimizing the differences which exist between these women. It also points to Alvarez’s tendency to overlook class and race as essential markers of both national and immigrant experiences. While the García sisters are sent to boarding schools with wealthy American girls and take vacations in the Dominican Republic, their former maid, Chucha, remains on the abandoned estate to look after the family’s interests. The major source of conflict and turmoil
for the Garcia sisters comes not from race or class, but from the contradictions between women’s roles in the Dominican Republic and those which are available to them in the U.S. As a result, much of the novel’s focus is on resisting cultural forms of patriarchy which follow the sisters to their new country. As with her later historical novels, *García Girls* limits discussion of ‘otherness’ and resistance to gender difference.

Alvarez’s class position shapes her choice and representation of women protagonists. Like the author, the historical women Alvarez recreates also had greater access to privilege than most Dominicans. The Mirabals of *In the Time of the Butterflies* belonged, ironically, to the middle class made wealthy by Trujillo’s land reforms and modernization projects. These women were educated in the 1940s and 50s, and two went on to study at the university. Similarly, the historical Salomé Ureña (1850-1897) was a national poet during a period in which few women could read or write. Her daughter, Camila Henríquez Ureña (1894-1973), had two doctorates and was a professor in Romance Languages at Vassar and at the University of Havana. In fact, these were extraordinary women both in terms of their accomplishments and in terms of their difference from most Dominican women of the time. So while we can argue that Alvarez in fact recovers some of the silences of the historical record in her novels, we need to situate those silences relationally. She recovers silences which emerge from specific class/race/gender positions. In claiming her novels as representative of particular periods in Dominican history she repeats the errors of ‘official’ histories which claim to capture the past objectively and completely. Like these histories, her own fictionalized histories emerge from specific ideological/political positions which become manifest within the subtext of the narratives.

Despite her claims to the contrary, Julia Alvarez situates her novels, *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé*, as histories of the marginalized, and in doing so, she
inadvertently reproduces some of the exclusions and ideologically loaded binaries characteristic of traditional historiographic writing. While I am not denying that her novels recover women’s roles in nationalist movements, I am suggesting we read the novels, not as histories, but as instances of situated knowledge recounted from a position of privilege. In what follows, I will first look at the ways in which Alvarez positions these novels as alternative histories and how in doing so, the novels frequently polarize gender relations while at the same time effacing race and class in nationalist discourses.

**Historiographic Strategies and Relational Politics in In the Time of the Butterflies**

Julia Alvarez’s historical novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, explores the lives and politics of four sisters during Rafael Leónidas Trujillo’s thirty-one year regime in the Dominican Republic. Three of the four Mirabal sisters—Minerva, Patria and Maria Teresa—found an underground movement to overturn the *trujillato*. The surviving sister, Dedé, becomes Alvarez’s entry into fictionalized portrayals of these women’s lives. Trujillo, who moved up through the ranks of the military during the U.S.’s eight-year occupation of the Dominican Republic, seizes power in 1930 and manages to retain control of the island and U.S. support by alternating his own presidential terms with that of puppet presidents.³ His regime became especially successful at quelling dissent through a number of discursive, symbolic and physically oppressive maneuvers. His relationship with the Catholic Church, particularly his patronage throughout this period, guaranteed their public support; over the years, the Church often preached submission and prayer rather than active resistance to the regime. Moreover, the elaborate system of associations Trujillo instituted between himself and God, epitomized in the

³The U.S. Marines occupied the Dominican Republic from 1916 until 1924, on the pretext that the threat of WWI left weak nations vulnerable to foreign powers. The training and expanding of the Dominican military during the occupation resulted in a shift in power from civilian to military, making it much easier for Trujillo to establish his military dictatorship. See Russell Crandall’s *Gunboat Diplomacy: U.S. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006.
state slogan, *Dios en el cielo y Trujillo en la tierra*⁴, shaped the ways Dominicans perceived state power. The military intelligence service, or SIM (Servicio Inteligencia Militar), established a network of spies and informants who regularly reported on perceived enemies of the state. Families never knew if their friends, neighbors, or servants were reporting on their activities or their conversations. Dominican society throughout this period lived in what Walter Benjamin elsewhere called a perpetual state of emergency (257).

Alvarez recounts the horrors and tensions of the *trujillato* through the lives of the Mirabal sisters, who take turns narrating the novel’s chapters. In addition to the traumas of state violence, the women also record the realities of everyday life—births, weddings, birthdays, first loves, and other household activities. The depiction of historical figures who were active in the resistance movements during the *trujillato*, however, also emphasizes the tensions between imaginative writing, or fiction, and the historiographic tradition. Some critics contend that Alvarez’s novel is an instance of what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, self-referential novels which “problematic the . . . possibility of historical knowledge” (106).⁵ Hutcheon explains that “[t]he interaction of the historiographic and the metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both ‘authentic’ representation and ‘inauthentic’ copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality” (110). While *In the Time of the Butterflies* often points to the inadequacy of ‘official’ history, it does not deny the possibilities of representing history through language. In “A Postscript,” Alvarez suggests just the opposite; she asserts the primacy of the novel over

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⁴God in the heavens and Trujillo on earth.

⁵ For discussions of *In the Time of the Butterflies* as historiographic metafiction, see Isabel Z. Brown, “Historiographic Metafiction in *In the Time of the Butterflies.*” *South Atlantic Review* 64.2 (1999): 98-112. See also Trenton Hickman’s “Hagiographic Commemoration in Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé.*” *MELUS* 31.1 (2006): 99-121.
historiography in the quest to rethink women’s relationships to the past and to the nation. She writes that “a novel is not a historical document” but that this period in history “can only finally be understood by fiction” (In the Time of the Butterflies, ITB, 324). While her comments allude to the absences of the historical record, especially in writing the trujillato, they do not deny the possibilities of historical recovery. Her recourse to fiction suggests the form’s potential for resistance and revision in the reconstruction and reinterpretation of history. Rather than contesting the discourses of history, the novel presents itself as a history, or at least as a means of recovering the ‘spirit’ of history.

On the pages preceding the actual narrative, Alvarez highlights the ambiguity of her historiographic novel by referring readers to historical information about the fictionalized Mirabals. In the epigraph she explains that what follows is a “work of fiction . . . based on historical facts,” explained in “A Postscript” at the end of the novel. However, Alvarez’s own presence frames the fictionalized history, a move which suggests her role as witness, participant, and transcriber of this ‘history.’ As she explains in the postscript, the Mirabals were members of the same underground movement as her father, who escapes the regime with his family just four months before three of the sisters are murdered. Her family history attests to the validity and ‘truth’ of the narrative despite its novel form. In “Chasing the Butterflies” Alvarez again recounts her personal connection to these women as she reveals her journey to recover the history of the Mirabals. These women and the trujillato allow her to return to a personal trauma occasioned by her own family’s exile. She explains: “As I read the article [an old Time article about the Mirabals’ murder], I recovered a memory of myself as I sat in the dark living room of our New York apartment” (“Chasing the Butterflies,” “Chasing,” 197). That memory includes
her father’s involvement in the Fourteenth of June Movement\(^6\) as well as her own sadness and homesickness upon their arrival in New York. The novel then becomes as much a project of memory and personal history as it is a feminist and nationalist project to recover silenced histories. By making herself a part of the narrative and its history Alvarez lends the text a ‘truth’ value which calls attention to historical content/subject-matter rather than to form. Although she acknowledges that her text is neither a biography nor a history, she insists that the novel is “true to the spirit of the \textit{real} Mirabals” (\textit{ITB} 324, my italics).

In addition to her personal connections to the Mirabal sisters, Alvarez also appears in the opening chapters as “la gringa dominicana,” a journalist who returns to her country of birth to interview the surviving sister, Déde. Once again Alvarez becomes the transcriber or translator of this ‘history.’ Although she departs from the transparency characteristic of historiographers in recording the past, she performs a similar function in shifting narrative perspective from the journalist/herself to Dedé. Framing the narrative this way at once calls attention to the author’s role as translator of the witness’ discourse. Some critics have even noted that Alvarez uses the techniques of the 	extit{testimonio} to emphasize the communal nature of the ‘history’ which she fictionalizes in the novel. In her young adult novel about the regime, \textit{Before We Were Free} (2002), Alvarez draws attention to the parallels between her own fiction and 	extit{testimonio}: “There is a tradition in Latin American countries known as \textit{testimonio}. It is the responsibility of those who survive . . . to give testimony. To tell the story in order to keep alive the memory of those who died” (166). Her novel, she claims is a “fictional way to keep my promise. To give testimony” (\textit{Before We Were Free} 167). Because Alvarez suggests that the Mirabals’ story is a

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\(^6\)Movimiento 14 de junio was an underground movement founded in 1959 by the Mirabals and other middle class opponents of the \textit{trujillato}. The movement was named to honor those killed as a result of the invasion which took place on June 14, 1959. Cuban-trained Dominican guerillas invaded the island to overthrow the regime and were wiped out by Trujillo’s forces. The event later triggered massive arrests throughout the island.
collective one, evidenced in the inclusion of her own related story, the class, gender and race particularities of this narrative make such a position problematic at best. In addition, Alvarez’s interjections and appearances within the novel problematize a reading of the novel as fiction. Instead, the ambiguity of author, witness, and fictionalized historical personages implies that the text is in fact more personal history than fiction.

Although Alvarez distinguishes between the ‘real’ Mirabals and the women of her invention, she is reticent as to what these differences might be. Her postscript vaguely mentions collapsed names and dates, as well as condensed historical events, yet she seems to suggest that these changes do not alter the general ‘truths’ of the regime. For instance, Sinita Perozo’s character is actually a composite of two women active during the *trujillato*. Lina Lovatón, also an historical personage who became Trujillo’s mistress and was later sent to Miami with their children, is transformed in Alvarez’s rewriting into a schoolmate of the Mirabals. In the novel, she functions as a means of calling attention to the sexualized dangers of the *trujillato* for young women, particularly for Minerva. Alvarez often revises history to emphasize her own feminist politics, yet at the same time these revisions sometimes fail to avoid romanticizing women’s motivations for and participation in political movements. One of the most problematic revisions of history in Alvarez’s novel is perhaps her depiction of María Teresa’s entry into political activism. The novel stipulates that Mate, as the youngest of the Mirabal sisters was often called, awakens to the need for active resistance when she meets Leandro Guzmán, her future husband and a member of the same political cell as her sister, Minerva. When Leandro asks if she is “one of [them],” Mate realizes she wants “to be a part of whatever he was” (*ITB* 142). This desire “to be worthy of Palomino [Leandro’s alias]” (*ITB* 142) contrasts sharply with the way in which biographer Miguel Aquino García recounts Mate’s relationship with Leandro. He explains that
Leandro Guzmán courted Mate for two years before she accepted him and only after he revealed his political allegiances. According to García, a 14-year old Mate asked Leandro, “First, I need to ask you what your family thinks with respect to the regime, because the members of my family are enemies of the regime” (72). His representation of a politically conscious young woman is inconsistent with Alvarez’s depiction of a naive, young schoolgirl more preoccupied with love and romance than with the oppressive dictatorship. As her portrayal of María Teresa Mirabal reveals, Alvarez’s novel frequently resorts to a romanticized view of women, emphasizing their association with socially constructed ideas of femininity rather than challenging these preconceptions. Although her novel recounts many of the same events which biographers William Galván and Miguel Aquino García record in their own reconstructions of the Mirabals, the discrepancies in Alvarez’s novel reveal the author’s tendency to privilege a rather limited feminism while excluding other social issues which shaped nationalism at this particular period.

Additionally, Alvarez’s use of ‘real’ in reference to the Mirabals often alternates between references to their historical identities and references to her ‘realistic’ portrayal of these women. While Alvarez’s postscript claims that the novel captures “the spirit of the real Mirabals” (ITB 324 my italics), her essay about these women explains “that only by making them real, alive, could [she] make them mean anything to the rest of us” (“Chasing” 203). While she asserts that the novel’s project centers on bringing the women out of myth and legend to make them relevant for us today, her objective also includes revealing the ‘real’ (historical) women. Similarly, her goal of “deepen[ing] North Americans’ understanding” of the trujillato suggests that the novel in fact contains and conveys an accurate depiction of this period and of the Mirabals. Consequently, form becomes both necessary to her project and incidental. While
fiction offers her ‘history’ a much larger readership than biography or traditional historiography, it also becomes secondary to her historical project. She essentially avoids the commitment to facts associated with traditional historiography by taking the novel as the form for her reconstruction. Yet her foregrounding of historical materials, references and testimonies helps establish the text’s historicity. The novel’s semi-epistolary form suggests that the narrative content is more than mere fiction. Consequently, the novel form becomes incidental to Alvarez’s larger project of disseminating ‘history’ to North American readers. Her epigraph and postscript, as well as her inclusion of a dedication page in memoriam to the Mirabals and their chauffeur successfully position the narrative as an alternative ‘history.’

Narrative techniques such as the inclusion of journal entries and letters turn into historical artifacts when read along with Alvarez’s essay on researching the historical Mirabals. In “Chasing the Butterflies,” Alvarez notes that Minou, Minerva Mirabal’s daughter, allows her to read her parents’ letters, one of which Alvarez translates in her essay. Similar letters reappear in the body of the novel, suggesting their possible veracity. The results of her interviews with witnesses, friends and family members of the historical Mirabals also often reappear in her novel. One such example comes from a snippet of Alvarez’s journal, which she includes in “Chasing the Butterflies.” In it she recounts Marcelo Bermúdez’s story about the day María Teresa and Minerva were brought into the prison:

The men were already there, naked, packed in cells behind thick walls of stone . . . All of a sudden, the girls spoke out in code and the prisoners took heart. “We are the Butterflies!” (Las Mariposas, their code name). “We are here with you. If any of you would like to identify yourselves, do so now.” . . . That’s how the group found out that people believed long dead were still alive. (“Chasing” 202)

In the Time of the Butterflies fictionalizes this testimony in María Teresa’s journal entries, tuning it to her perspective: “They marched us down the corridor past some of the men’s cells. . . . The men started calling out their code names so we’d know who was still alive. (We kept our eyes
averted, for they were all naked.” (228). Although the viewpoint shifts to María Teresa, the episode remains largely the same. We might even be tempted to write off the discrepancies, such as the national anthem Alvarez has Minerva sing as they pass the imprisoned men’s cells, as typical of a ‘history’ composed from multiple perspectives and testimonies. In fact, the author explains that in the course of her fieldwork, “Everywhere we went, it seemed we could reach out and touch history. And always there were plenty of living voices around to tell us all their individual versions of that history” (“Chasing” 207). *In the Time of the Butterflies* posits its narrative as another ‘version’ of that history, one composed of collective testimonies and stories.

Despite the “living voices” which Alvarez encounters and includes in her reconstruction of Dominican history, however, her novel bears little resemblance to the testimonial literature of Latin America. *In the Time of the Butterflies* clearly reflects her own politics and personal history. *Testimonios* like Elena Poniatowska’s *Massacre at Tlatelolco* do not merely incorporate the stories of the disenfranchised, but, rather, attempt to give the oppressed an avenue through which to speak. Poniatowska’s text, for example, is a collection of eyewitness accounts, newspaper articles, graffiti, police records, and speeches by government officials about the 1968 student massacre in Mexico. The documents and accounts are fragmented and reordered so that the reader hears multiple versions of the same events. Moreover, Poniatowska distinguishes her own voice by signing the sections she writes. While the editorial process is not neutral or transparent, the author clearly incorporates multiple voices into her text. Alvarez’s version of *testimonio*, on the other hand, seems to mean merely selectively revising and incorporating testimonies and other research as objects in her own discourse; their voices do not reach us unfiltered through the text. *Butterflies* not only privileges one perspective of the *trujillato*, but also one experience—middle class—of Trujillo’s despotism. Despite Alvarez’s attempts to
align her novel with a tradition of testimonial literature in Latin America, *In the Time of the Butterflies* has more in common with novels like Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*. This historical romance recounts Chilean history, and in particular, Augusto Pinochet’s rise to power in 1973. In both novels, upper-middle class women bear witness to and record a collective Latin American past. Both novels also assume these women can and must speak for subaltern subjects, and neither Allende nor Alvarez problematizes the limitations of their speaker/protagonists.

Thus, although Alvarez captures the trauma of the *trujillato* in her novel, as we are coming to see, she does so from a position of privilege which often submerges class and racial difference within gender differences. For this reason, we should read the novel not as a collective recounting of Dominican history, but as one shaped and produced from a specific location. The author identifies women as the group particularly oppressed by the regime/nation. As her novel demonstrates, women suffer the double burden of social inequality as well as the oppression of a paternalistic regime. Yet there is a difficulty in identifying educated women of the landowning class with women and men disenfranchised by poverty and/or race. While she notes that the Mirabals’ servants were often bought off by the SIM, she pays little attention to the social and economic factors which made this network of spies possible during the *trujillato*. In this sense, the economic becomes entirely removed from the political happenings within the state. Likewise, the novel’s attempts to identify and work through the differences of race and class among women fail to move beyond forced instances of sisterhood. Instead, the women in the novel share similar problems seemingly because they are biologically different from men. The Mirabals of Alvarez’s invention, like the historical Mirabals, were not representative of the Dominican population in general or even its women. The ‘history’ which this novel fictionalizes
emanates from a particular class, racial and gender perspective which becomes increasingly apparent in Alvarez’s depictions of the Mirabals as they interact with women of other classes.

While *In the Time of the Butterflies* often uses images associated with the feminine to challenge the patriarchy of the *trujillato*, it does so in ways which only superficially touch on differences of class and/or race. Sisterhood among the fictionalized Mirabals, as well as that which they establish across class lines counters the destructiveness of the regime’s policy of turning families and friends against one another, or more specifically of men killing other men. Still, the sisterhood which Alvarez deploys in the novel often cannot overcome or erase social and economic differences between the Mirabals and the women they encounter. That the revolutionary movement is one organized by the Dominican elite becomes evident not only through Minerva’s observations that friends and faculty at the University are already becoming active in the struggle, but also through the order in which Alvarez has the Mirabals themselves join in the movement. Minerva and María Teresa, both of whom attend the University, are the first of the Mirabal women to participate in anti-Trujillo movements sprouting up throughout the country. All of the women Alvarez writes into the Fourteenth of June Movement come from privilege; most attended the university with Minerva or María Teresa.

Although Alvarez depicts Minerva as particularly conscious of class differences, in the novel Minerva has few interactions with women outside her class until she and her sister are imprisoned. María Teresa’s journal entries narrate the majority of their time in prison and their interactions with women from other social classes. Upon their entry to their assigned cell, Alvarez has Mate note, with some hesitation and discomfort, that “women politicals were locked up . . . [with] Prostitutes, thieves, murderers” (*ITB* 228). Over time Mate comes to see and appreciate the women’s generosity as well as their particular kinds of suffering. She explains
that “the more time I spend with them, the less I care what they’ve done or where they come from” (*ITB* 230). In the novel, Minerva even starts holding classes for the women in the cell, often encouraging free discussions of philosophical and political ideas, as well as of poetry and literature. Still, women like Dinorah, a nonpolitical often associated with sexual promiscuity and prostitution, continue to characterize politicals like the Mirabals as “rich women” (*ITB* 229).

Although both Minerva and Mate befriend the nonpolitical women in their cell, with Minerva depicted as the most socially aware of the two, differences in education, experience, and political awareness become more obvious in this chapter. Many of the nonpolitical women cannot read or write. Unlike the Mirabals whose family connections secure them towels, journals, chocolates, hair brushes and other small conveniences, nonpolitical women must often rely on themselves and their own labor, often sexual, for necessities or luxuries while in prison. Additionally, many of the women are imprisoned not for their political beliefs, but for their attempts to survive and/or protect their families in a system which relies on class hierarchies to maintain itself. For instance, Magdalena recounts her sexual abuse by a wealthy employer, her subsequent pregnancy and unemployment when the family finds out, and, later, her attempts to get her daughter back from this family. Not until the fictionalized María Teresa hears Magdalena’s story does she understand the extent of her own privilege: “I’ve been going around for months thinking no one has suffered like I have. Well, I’m wrong. Magdalena has taught me more about how privileged I really am than all of Minerva’s lectures about class” (*ITB* 248).

Although this story allows María Teresa to see her life from another perspective, Alvarez does not make it a part of Mate’s consciousness within the rest of the novel.

The barriers which keep Alvarez’s Mirabals from their illegitimate half-sisters again point to a social system which for Alvarez remains largely intact as these women articulate their
resistance to the regime. Of the four legitimate Mirabal daughters, only Minerva and Dedé, spurred by Minerva’s actions, take an interest in the four daughters their father has with a campesina. The two take a portion of their inheritance after their father’s death and help put the oldest, Margarita, through school. Still, after years of patronizing a local pharmacy where Margarita works, Patria wonders whether Margarita knew all along that they were related. In the novel, when Margarita first approaches her with a letter from the imprisoned sisters, Patria remarks, “I knew Minerva had stayed in touch with them over the years, but I had always kept my distance. I did not want to be associated with the issue of a campesina who had no respect for . . . the good name of Mirabal” (ITB 209). She also expresses shock to see that her half-sister also goes by the name, Mirabal. Only after Margarita offers to help smuggle supplies to Minerva and María Teresa in prison does Patria’s attitude toward her half-sisters begin to soften. The network of sisterly solidarity which Alvarez imagines here succeeds in delivering supplies to the women in prison, but other than Margarita’s role as a facilitator, there is little mention of her improved or improving relationship with Dedé, Patria, Minerva or María Teresa Mirabal. Consequently their ‘reunion’ or ‘sisterhood’ seems on the whole rather superficial. In this context, a ‘sisterhood’ grounded in shared victimization fails to acknowledge the ways in which class, race, sexuality and education position women differently (and hierarchically) within patriarchal networks. Instead, it seems to function merely as a useful tool in countering the patriarchal imagery which the novel associates with the regime.

Since biographers make no mention of the half-sisters which Alvarez writes into her novel, their addition seems motivated by a desire to expose even subtler forms of patriarchy during this period in history. Alvarez’s allegiance to a feminist politics emerges in her associations of Enrique Mirabal with Trujillo. While Enrique Mirabal’s adultery would have been common for
a man of his class during the 1940s, Alvarez parallels his relationship with a peasant woman to Trujillo’s seduction of the schoolgirl Lina Lovatón. During his regime, Trujillo was notorious for seducing and sometimes raping young women whose families he threatened or bought off to secure his whims. In the novel, Alvarez dramatizes one such relationship between the despot and Lina Lovatón, whom he eventually sends to Miami with their two children. While Enrique’s relationship with Carmen María is perhaps less overtly marked by power than Trujillo’s with Lina, both appear to take advantage of their privileged positions to secure these relationships. In fact, Alvarez has Minerva note that, “In his own way, Papa was a trujillista” (ITB 179). On a trip to deliver money to her father’s mistress, Minerva notes the economic differences which separate her from her half-sisters. Upon seeing the oldest of Carmen María’s daughters, Minerva explains, “The sight of her in her wet, raggedy dress tears my own heart to shreds. . . . a knotted rag in her free hand, a poor girl’s purse” (ITB 104). And when Minerva offers to put her sisters through school, their mother agrees, acknowledging, “I never had a chance . . . I want better for my girls” (ITB 105). Alvarez’s inclusion of Mirabal half-sisters functions both as a means of highlighting the gender inequality characteristic of patriarchy, as well as of emphasizing the class forms that these inequalities often take.

Alvarez’s exposé of the imbalances between men and women is, however, problematic because she tends to couch her critiques in terms which naturalize rather than deconstruct gender differences. When asked for an explanation for his adultery, Alvarez has Enrique respond, “Cosas de los hombres . . . Things a man does” (ITB 92). Likewise, Alvarez has Minerva explain her own interest in and kindness toward her half sisters as “Things a woman does” (ITB 92). In this scene Alvarez associates adultery and patriarchy with men while at the same time naturalizing charity and forgiveness as specifically female characteristics. Much of the imagery
linked to the Mirabals—sisterhood, maternity, (re)birth—not only counters the destructiveness of the regime, but also polarizes masculine and feminine within the novel. This polarization of male/female also functions as a means of subsuming class differences. In the exchange between Minerva and her father, gender difference overwrites the social imbalances evident in Enrique’s relationship with Carmen María. Thus father and daughter cannot engage in a discussion which moves beyond gender inequality. Similarly, Lina’s relationship with the dictator becomes problematic in the novel largely because Trujillo is married and not because the power differential amounts to statutory rape. Likewise, the novel itself remains virtually silent on the ways in which class shaped oppression and privation during the \textit{trujillato}. Instead, gender becomes the common/shared marker of difference or marginalization which resists the patriarchy of the regime.

\textit{In the Time of the Butterflies} describes Trujillo’s regime in the Dominican Republic as overtly paternalistic. Names such as \textit{Jefe}, Benefactor, \textit{Patrón}, and slogans such as \textit{Dios y Trujillo}, which were all common throughout the regime, reappear in the novel as a means of emphasizing the ways power was often represented as strictly masculine. \textit{Jefe} and \textit{Patrón} both denote boss and are associated with class division, specifically the relationship of landowner to laborer. In a Dominican Republic where Trujillo controlled more that fifty percent of the nation’s wealth and seized the assets of all “enemies of the state,” the designation was not far from the mark (Hartlyn 22-25). The repetition of the slogan \textit{Dios y Trujillo} reinforces the manufactured relationship between the dictator and God and serves as a means of establishing Trujillo’s power as a type of divine right. In the novel, Alvarez counters this view of power reiterated throughout the period of the \textit{trujillato} with one located specifically in female networks, female saints, and in female agency. Often, the Mirabals’ power to withstand the atrocities and
persecution of the regime is the result of their association with these images—namely images of
the Virgin of Altagracia, of female cycles, and of sisterhood. Likewise, their efforts to resist
patriarchy speak through these images of the feminine. However, in polarizing gender
differences, Alvarez fixes the meanings of male and female and of masculine and feminine.
While she attempts to liberate her protagonists from the constraints of gender systems, she also
often reinscribes the stereotypes of that system. Moreover, given her repetition of the dictator’s
many titles and nicknames, the novel’s failure to address the class/race dimensions of
paternalism seem all the more apparent.

*In the Time of the Butterflies* presents itself as the type of ‘her-story’ which Joan Scott
explains “seeks to illuminate the structures of ordinary women’s lives as well as those of notable
women, and to discover the nature of the feminist or female consciousness that motivated their
behavior” (19). Such an approach focuses on challenging patriarchy through female agency
examined in “personal experience, familial and domestic structures, collective (female)
reinterpretations of social definitions of women’s roles and networks of female friendship” (Scott
20). The novel in fact approximates this method of historical recovery, often relying on female
solidarity, female-oriented religious imagery, and domestic spaces and experiences to resist the
oppressiveness of Trujillo’s regime. As I already mentioned, images of sisterhood, literal and
metaphorical, abound in the novel. Transforming representations of the Virgin of Altagracia,
patron saint of the island, also challenge the male-centered nature of a Church which, in the
novel, continues to support dictatorial power. Likewise, domestic spaces such as kitchens,
bedrooms, and coffee tables often becomes safe spaces necessary for organizing a resistance
movement. Still, as Scott notes, this type of ‘her-story’ also runs the risk of reinforcing rather
than questioning the idea of separate spheres for men and women. Despite its success at
dramatizing and dispersing the history of the Mirabals, *In the Time of the Butterflies* often polarizes public/private and political/domestic.

Attributing women’s activism to their experiences as women implies an essentialist notion of women which can easily lead to the assumption that women respond in certain ways because as women they are biologically different from men. Although Álvarez re-evaluates women’s roles and their representations, she often fails to avoid polarizing gender. Her use of domestic spaces within the novel emphasizes their importance to revolutionary movements in climates where state power permeates all facets of life. In the novel, Minerva, María Teresa and Patria frequently use kitchens, bedrooms, living rooms, closets and coffee tables to construct and store weapons for the movement. Álvarez’s Mirabals often only plan their revolutionary activities in these spaces. Biographer William Galván, however, argues that the historical Minerva in fact spent much of her time in guerilla training, learning to fire weapons and preparing for a physical as well as an ideological battle. Galván explains that on many occasions the historical Minerva Mirabal participated in the testing of bombs and other explosives, as well as in coordinating the acquisition of munitions for the armed struggle ahead (273). Álvarez’s only allusion to this guerilla training takes the form of Minerva’s anguish at having to leave her children with Patria and with her mother-in-law while she travels the countryside organizing the movement. Álvarez chooses to foreground the Mirabals’ ‘woman-ness,’ in the context of domestic(ated) and female-identified spaces.

In the novel, Minerva and Mate even transfer a sense of home to the prison cell they share with other women. Upon their discharge, Mate explains that “this has become my home, these girls are like my sisters. I can’t imagine the lonely privacy of living without them” (*ITB* 253). Although *In the Time of the Butterflies* is not a history, Álvarez positions it as a ‘history’ capable
of recovering female agency in national movements. Her foregrounding of personal experience and domesticity attempts to revise the standards which determine what can and cannot enter into ‘official’ history. Her separation of these woman-identified spaces from what have traditionally been conceived of as public and national spaces, however, reinforces the notion of separate spheres for men and women. Although Alvarez’s treatment of the domestic emphasizes its potential for counter-hegemonic agency, her silence about the ways gender functioned within the ‘official’ state discourses of the time leaves little room to integrate women or gender relations into discussions of ‘official’ Dominican history.

The *trujillato* relied on representations and constructions of gender difference to inculcate a sense of nationalism after a history of internal strife, civil war, Haitian and US occupations and Spanish (re)colonization. Appellatives like Benefactor reinforced Trujillo’s role as father of the nation. Consequently, men and women were cast into the roles of children who needed protection and guidance. Trujillo’s overtures to women included legalizing female suffrage and allowing women to attend the university. Despite these concessions, however, Trujillo often used women as a means of articulating his power and his sense of masculinity. Historian Valentina Peguero explains that “Trujillo’s romantic and sexual relationships were occasionally interconnected with his political manipulation. He used his mistresses not only for personal gratification but for political purposes as well. Trujillo seduced and used women to punish enemies, to humiliate functionaries and to test and reward loyalty” (50). Although Alvarez dramatizes Trujillo’s advances on Minerva Mirabal, as well as her father’s arrest after she refuses the dictator, she does not address the ways in which the regime often used gender difference as a means of consolidating power. In the case of the Haitian massacre of 1937, which killed thousands, nationalist discourses often feminized and objectified Haitian ‘others’ as
a means of defining Dominican identity. Pequero explains that as a result of the massacre, Dominicans living along the border were integrated more fully into the nation and imbued with a sense of mission to protect national borders (525). That the majority of victims were women and children furthered Dominicans’ feminization of Haitians. This massacre receives only a brief mention in Alvarez’s novel, even though the project of nationalization and modernization which Trujillo was enacting at the time clearly relied on paternalistic constructions and representations of gender difference, which feminized men as well as women. In Alvarez’s novel gender often pertains only to specific relations between men and women rather to an historical system which permeates multiples sites and relations.

Alvarez’s emphasis on gender/women as the central subjects of her nationalist reimaginings obscures the racial and racist element of the nation-state’s history. If her novel succeeds in confronting the masculinized memory of national history, particularly in its literary form, it treads lightly, if at all, on the anti-Haitianism and negrophobia of the country’s nationalism. Some historians argue that Dominican antipathy toward African culture is perhaps the result of their atypical independence. While most of Latin America secured independence from Spain through some internal form of early nationalism, the Dominican Republic was liberated from Spain by Haiti after the latter had secured its independence from France. Haiti then unified the island and occupied the Dominican Republic from 1822 to 1844. Michiel Baud contends that “the fact that they had to wrest it [independence] from a fellow ex-colony and not from a colonial power has tainted Dominican nationalism ever since” (126). The Dominican Republic’s proximity to Haiti and their competition in the nineteenth century with a more economically advanced Haiti helped shape the nation’s, particularly the elite’s, (mis)representations of Haiti. Dominicans have essentially constructed their national identity as
the antithesis of their ideas about Haiti. If Dominicans regarded Haitians as primarily African, black, and ‘primitive,’ then Dominicans emphasized their own national identity as overwhelmingly Hispanic, white, and Catholic. David Howard explains that Dominican literature, in fact, never developed an Afro-Dominican aesthetic or political movement like other Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean. Instead, they either ignored the African cultural aspects of Dominican history or else participated in the anti-Haitianism of the nation-state by exoticizing and primitivizing the African elements of Haitian culture (150-151). Moreover, Dominican rejection of blackness rests on the myth that mulatto and black Dominicans are actually indios. Alvarez’s novel evades discussions of race while at the same time reproducing indigenizing imagery to account for racialized ‘others.’

Race as a signifying factor in national discourse becomes apparent in Alvarez’s depiction of Fela, the Mirabals’ faithful, Haitian servant. Fela is one of few characters in the novel identified specifically as black; often, the only characters identified as such are also associated with Haiti. In the novel, Dedé expels Fela from her home years after the murders, because she discovers Fela practicing—publicly—a form of voodoo/spiritualism to communicate with the deceased sisters. Fela becomes the racialized other, the feared Africanist/Hatian presence who threatens the ‘sanctity’ of the Mirabals’ martyrdom by allowing the living to communicate with them “through this ebony black sibyl” (ITB 63). While Alvarez has Dedé concede that she too has felt her sisters’ presence, she cannot allow these national icons to be associated with the Haitian other. Although María Teresa learns to cast spells from Fela in the novel—love spells as well as spells against the regime—these transpire during Mate’s childhood and early adolescence. As a result, they appear largely as a young girl’s childish attempts at resistance, which she later leaves behind as she ‘matures’ into political activism. Fela’s and Mate’s practice
of non-Catholic spiritualism repeats an opposition often used to stereotype non-Western religious practices: childish ‘primitivism’ and feared occultism. Haitian religious practices in the novel, however, become marginal to Alvarez’s depiction of a devoutly Catholic Mirabal—and national—family. The religious calling which Alvarez writes into her portrayal of Patria does not appear in either Galván’s or García’s biography, although both do stress her devout Catholicism. I am not discounting the veracity of Alvarez’s portrayal; however, I would like to point out its function as a means of countering Haitian religious practices and as a way of re-emphasizing an important element of Dominican national identity—Catholicism. In contrast to Fela’s and Mate’s ineffectual spells against the regime, Alvarez recounts the Church’s militant activism, which began in 1959, along with the Virgin of Altagracia’s role as a potent symbol for facilitating nationalism and political activism. The author’s foregrounding of Catholicism as a component of Dominican nationalism reiterates the state’s use of religion as a ‘civilizing’ marker of their difference from Haiti.

The Mirabals’ potential as symbols of a Catholic Dominican nationalism counters the novel’s depiction of Trujillo’s ‘otherness’ as located in his alleged African/Haitian ancestry. Alvarez’s Mirabals repeatedly note that the dictator’s “made-up” face conceals his dark skin. In the novel, Minerva explains that Trujillo met Manuel de Moya, the regime’s secretary of state, “on one of those shopping trips he periodically makes to the States to order . . . his skin whiteners and creams,” and that the dictator hires him to whiten his staff (ITB 96). The dictator as African ‘other’ reappears in his association with voodoo/brujeria when Minerva remarks that “he’s been drinking a special brew his brujo cooks up to keep him sexually potent” (ITB 95). Trujillo’s sexual exploits are essentialized here as a condition of his blackness/Haitian-ness. The
sexualized masculinity of blackness functions as a means of ‘othering’ Trujillo by employing a problematic racial stereotype which associates blackness with abnormal or hyper-sexuality. While Alvarez describes Trujillo’s foreignness as having African/Haitian roots, she aligns the Mirabals and their husbands with an indigenous ancestry which attempts to legitimize their claims for national change. In denying an African presence and/or associating it with the oppressive regime, while also emphasizing the indigenous character of the national body, Alvarez participates in those founding fictions which constructed indio as a racial category to replace/displace African ancestry. Minerva’s husband, Manolo, takes the name of a Taino chieftain, Enriquillo, as his code name in the movement. Likewise, much of the imagery within the novel recalls an indigenous presence or claim to the land/nation, which Alvarez appropriates to naturalize the Dominicanness of the Mirabals. Trujillo’s regime, in fact, instituted the racial category of indio to identify peoples of darker African skin color. Consequently census polls show that more Dominicans identify as indio than as black, African, or mulatto. In the Time of the Butterflies reproduces this racial-national myth, building on Manuel de Jesús Galván’s indigenization of the island in his novel, Enriquillo. In addition to indigenization, Trujillo’s regime also instituted a policy of ‘whitening’ the nation by welcoming fleeing refugees from Europe after World War II. Yet the subject of racial difference/conflict remains buried within the narrative. Instead what emerges is a Dominican history almost void of an African presence.

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7 See Doris Sommer’s discussion of Galván’s Enriquillo in One Master for Another. Examples of indigenist Dominican literature include José Joaquín Pérez’s Fantasías Indígenas (1877) and Salomé Urena’s poem “Anacaona,” among others.
“Squinting at the Dominican Crowd”: Blanqueamiento in In the Name of Salomé

If In the Time of the Butterflies forgoes any mention of class and race which might underscore the Mirabals’ (or the author’s) privileged social position, In the Name of Salomé’s ambivalent treatment of race makes the novel’s ideological perspective much more transparent. Set alternately in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, In the Name of Salomé fictionalizes the lives of Dominican national poet, Salomé Ureña, and her daughter, Camila Henríquez Ureña. Dominican civil wars, despotism, U.S. occupation and other political upheavals frame the women’s narrative search for a relationship between womanhood and nation. Once again Alvarez’s use of gender oppression, in this case women’s struggles to carve a space from which to speak/act within the nation-state, overwrites ‘other’ forms of oppression within the nation-building project. In fact, much of the novel’s discussion of race/blackness as it pertains to the Henríquez Ureña family remains relegated to U.S. contexts. For example, Camila and her brother, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, confront racism during their graduate studies in Minnesota, during Camila’s visit to N. Dakota, when Pedro becomes Norton Lecturer at Harvard, and when Camila and her brother are refused service at an ice cream shop in 1920s Washington D.C.

Although Alvarez notes Salomé’s self-consciousness, especially in relation to the much whiter Dominican elite, the author also participates in the whitening (or lightening) of Dominican national identity. In failing to address race/racism in Dominican history, Alvarez tacitly complies with the state’s policy of blurring racial distinction to create the illusion of a predominantly white and Indian population. Moreover, by ignoring the racist undertones of positivism, embodied in her fictionalization of Eugenio María de Hostos, Alvarez also ignores the ways in which race often functioned as a determinant of Dominican national belonging. Although Alvarez attempts to re-present the racial make-up of the nation by calling attention to Salomé Ureña’s African ancestry, she often writes blackness as merely a difference of skin color.
In this context, race appears to function outside of, and/or independently from, national imaginings. Consequently, the novel’s treatment of race denies the ways in which race/racism continue to delimit national identity.

The indigenization of the Dominican Republic was a project which early on attempted to reimagine blackness and African ancestry as merely the vestiges of a Taino presence. Dominican anti-Haitianism, in fact, grew out of a desire to establish a distinct national-cultural identity. In order to do so, politicians and intellectuals would attempt to dissociate the nation from the African diaspora which dominated Haiti. Jorge Duany explains that racist and xenophobic ideology in the Dominican Republic “has produced an idealized view of the indigenous elements in Dominican culture, a systematic neglect of the contributions of African slaves and their descendents, increasing animosity toward Haitians and other black immigrants . . . and a marked preference for Hispanic customs and traditions” (“Reconstructing Racial Identity” 150-151). Manuel de Jesús Galván’s novel, *Enriquillo*, and Salomé Ureña’s poem, “Anacaona,” epitomized the nation’s longing for a lost Taino ‘origin’ which would replace their African roots. Doris Sommer explains that “[b]y pushing his story so far back that blacks seem not to figure in Dominican origins, by squinting at the Dominican crowd to create the optical illusion of racial simplicity, Galván manages to write a national identity by erasing” (*Foundational Fictions* 251). While Alvarez acknowledges Salomé’s blackness, it does not become a part of her discourse on Dominican politics, gender or nationalism. Like Galván’s Enriquillo, whose manners and dress whiten (or Hispanicize) him, Salome’s privileged education, her family connections, and her association with positivism manage to once again erase African origins from Dominican nationalism.
The different racial systems at work in the U.S. and in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean give meaning to the ways Alvarez writes (or does not write) race in her novel. While the U.S. model of racial hegemony emphasizes two categories—white and non-white—the Dominican Republic tends to use three categories—white, black and mixed, or indio. Duany explains that “[w]hereas North Americans classify most Caribbean immigrants as black, Dominicans tend to perceive themselves as white, Hispanic, or other” (“Reconstructing Racial Identity” 148). Despite the racial demographics of the Dominican Republic, few Dominicans willingly identify as black; the nation instead represents itself as essentially white, Hispanic, and Catholic. The association of negritud and Africa with Haiti has prevented Dominicans from developing an identification with African culture or history. Instead, blackness has come to denote foreignness in Dominican national usage. The adoption and widespread use of indio as a racial category/identity among mulatto and black Dominicans underscores the way in which denial of African ancestry has been internalized and naturalized by the nation. Torres-Saillant contends that Dominicans possess a deracialized consciousness which prevents them from developing “a discourse of black affirmation that would serve to counterbalance intellectual negrophobia” (136). Alvarez’s familiarity with both systems of racial hegemony, however, makes her perhaps more aware of inferential racism within the Dominican Republic. In “Black Behind the Ears” (2003), she explains the seemingly innocent ways her Dominican family transmitted and valorized whiteness:

Growing up in the Dominican Republic, my cousins and I were always encouraged to stay out of the sun so we wouldn’t “look like Haitians.” . . . As we girls grew up, we had endless bedroom comparison sessions of your good hair versus my bad hair, my fine nose versus your flared one, your light shade of café con leche versus a potential boyfriend’s full-strength cafecito color. (“Black Behind the Ears” 43).

In addition to noting the valorization of whiteness in Dominican society, Alvarez points out the possibilities of racial mobility: “a rich Black is a mulatto; a rich mulatto is a white man” (“Black
Behind the Ears” 43). Despite her awareness of the naturalized forms racism can take, however, Alvarez remains virtually silent on the racial dynamics that may have shaped Salomé Ureña’s education, poetry and activism in the Dominican Republic. Instead her novel seems to reproduce, uncritically, Dominican social practices.

While Alvarez takes up the gaps and omissions of the historical record in recreating Salomé Ureña’s life and contributions, she also repeats the fallacies of In the Time of the Butterflies, and of those histories she finds lacking. In the Name of Salomé often falls prey to a limiting vision of women’s motivations, if not their place, within nationalist projects. Likewise, the author’s inability to move beyond writing women into history and to consider the relational politics of race, class and gender as they pertain to the nation results in a limited view of Dominican (women’s) history. Thus the move toward recouping women’s history, particularly of Latin American women of color, while itself counter-hegemonic, also repeats ideologies which emanate from the author’s social position as a successful “white woman of color.” In a sense, Alvarez’s brand of feminism seems unconscious of the discourses on difference which have become so important to the ways we think and write about women. In fact, it is precisely the author’s emphasis on an almost monolithic womanhood which often subsumes any attention to race or class that might reveal a more nuanced vision of women in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez’s fictionalized counter-history appears to re-envision Latin American founding fictions like Galván’s Enriquillo merely by attributing more active roles to women nationalists. As Doris Sommer explains, these founding fictions often took the form of historical novels which consolidated heterogeneous populations through romances and marriages. In bridging fictionalized differences—class, race, religion—these novels, however, also preserved existing hierarchies. In the Name of Salomé revises the inertia of roles written for national heroines,
while also preserving those hierarchies which valued specific forms of knowledge, culture and
history. Although the story of a mulatta who participated in the nation revises the indigenization
of earlier national narratives, it also ends up reinforcing privilege by effacing it.

Unlike In the Time of the Butterflies, In the Name of Salomé’s historicity does not intrude
upon the narrative. Instead, the historical nature of the story Alvarez transcribes lies buried
within the “Acknowledgments” at the end of the novel. Taking its cue from nineteenth century
Latin American historical novels, In the Name of Salomé offers a ‘history’ to those who are
already familiar with the poet and her family. Yet despite the novel’s dedication to
“Quisqueyanas valientes,” the language of the novel makes English-speaking, U.S. readers its
primary audience. The lack of authorial intervention, which was so prevalent in Butterflies, also
makes the critiques of U.S. foreign policy much more palatable. Unlike Butterflies, which
directs readers to an explanation of its historicity, In the Name of Salomé buries the historical
nature of the subject within the “Acknowledgements,” allowing readers unfamiliar with history
to read the text as merely fiction. In the Name of Salomé rescues historical women from
obscurity, yet the text also limits their potential for representation as historical subjects. On the
one hand, she refuses to include overt indicators that her subjects are historical figures, which
perhaps makes her novel more easily consumable. On the other hand, she closes the text with a
discussion of the sources she used to recreate the Henríquez Ureñas as well as of her motivations
for doing so. The author’s “Acknowledgments” disclose the sources which “enabled [her] to
recover the history and poetry and presences of the past” (INS 357). Along with Salomé Ureña’s
collections of poetry, Alvarez notes that “the two volume Epistolario containing much of the
correspondence of the Henríquez Ureña family, provided enormous insights into Salomé’s

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8The dedication to A brave Dominica n women reiterates the indigenization of the nation by utilizing the Taino
name for island, Quisqueya.
relationship with Pancho and the dynamics of this talented, complicated family” (INS 356).

Loose translations of Salomé Ureña’s poetry appear throughout the narrative, the titles serving as chapter titles for Salomé’s and Camila’s fictionalized narratives. The fictional letters which appear in the narrative itself allude to the actual family letters published in the *Epistolario* and suggest an underlying historicity.

Although Alvarez notes that “[t]he Salomé and Camila you will find in these pages are fictional characters based on historical figures,” she also explains the novel’s historical project as “an effort to understand the great silence from which these two women emerged and into which they have disappeared” (INS 357). Once again, her motivations stem at least in part from an effort to bring these women out from the obscurity of a male-centered vision of national history. In an interview after the novel’s publication, Alvarez explains that she became interested in Salomé Ureña’s story because “she was the first person ever to win a national medal in poetry in a country where machismo is STILL rampant” (Siciliano). As a result, the novel’s heroines engage with the nation-state in the context of a larger struggle with patriarchy. Yet as I noted with *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez’s representations of nation and gender often become limiting.

While Alvarez’s recreation of Salomé Ureña and her daughter Camila, frequently calls attention to the problematics of racial ambiguity for women who identify with nationalisms constructed as white, the novel often participates in the whitening of Dominican history. By whitening I do not mean the literal whitening of Salomé Ureña, but the whitening that results from her elevated class and intellectual position within the country, as well as that which results from the author’s shifts away from race in favor of gender or sexuality at crucial moments within the text. For instance, Alvarez has Salomé publish her first poem under the pen name, Herminia,
President Grant to our north was sending a commission of American senators to study the idea of buying off part of the island and shipping some of their own negro people to live here. A group calling itself the Klu Klux Klan was burning crosses in front of these negro people’s houses, so maybe they wouldn’t mind coming. (INS 61)

While Alvarez notes racism in terms of the U.S., she vacates it from her discussion of the island. Instead, the novel parallels racial violence in the U.S. with women’s oppression in the Dominican Republic. In doing so, however, the author fails to acknowledge the different yet relational ways in which race, class and gender shape oppression and violence. Rather than foreground the complexities of domination and patriarchy, the novel instead subsumes discussions of race and racism within a limited vision of feminist praxis. Consequently, the novel emphasizes writing as Salomé’s path toward gender liberation. As her political poetry finds its way to the newspapers and her father’s fears increase, Salomé explains that “Herminia worked at setting la patria free. And with every link she cracked open for la patria, she was also setting me free” (INS 62). The author raises race/racism as an issue but effectively dismisses it by diverting the reader’s attention to the social constraints which attempt to silence women—fathers and dictatorships.

Like her mother’s narrative, Camila’s chapters also displace race/racism by emphasizing gender and/or sexuality. Upon learning that her former lover, Marion, is moving to Florida with a man, Alvarez has Camila resurrect the memory of her friend’s father and of a burning cross which the family was surprised with during Camila’s first visit to North Dakota. Yet rather than address the possibility of race as a reason for her inability to commit to Marion, Alvarez’s narrative turns back to family commitments and losses, as well as to gender inequality, as Camila’s reasons for not joining herself to Marion: “All her life she has had to think first of her
words’ effect on the important roles her father and brothers and uncles and cousins were playing in the world” (INS 85). Yet as several of Camila’s later chapters make evident, the incident with the burning cross continues to play an important role in her memories of her relationship with Marion. In fact, she explains that “her outspoken friend Marion has always avoided the subject of Camila’s race. As if to mention it were to bring up the unmentionable” (INS 160). The ‘unmentionable’ becomes literally so as Camila quickly refocuses her narrative on finding her own voice in the midst of famous parents, a famous brother, and the pressures of family responsibilities.

Likewise, Alvarez notes that Camila’s relationship with Cuban sculptor, Domingo, fails because “[t]he word become flesh is not always an appealing creature” (INS 166). Her focus on Camila’s sexuality, however, is also bound to Camila’s fascination and repulsion for Domingo’s blackness. During their initial meeting, Alvarez has Camila describe Domingo as “a large mulatto with a handsome, big-featured face and a body that . . . she instantly thinks of ‘all in capital letters’” (INS 148). In a sense he represents a connection to her black mother not available to her through her father, who whitens her mother’s portrait and her memory. At one point in the novel, she shares with Domingo a picture of Salomé, “the dark oval of the face, the full-lipped mouth, and broad nose . . . the discernible kink at the hairline” (INS 160). Although she feels that with Domingo she may “be apprehended fully,” Alvarez has her resist the racial implications of being apprehended in this way. In fact, Camila frequently notes that Domingo is much darker than even her brother, Pedro, who most resembles their mother. Throughout her meetings with Domingo, who is sculpting a bust of her father, Alvarez has Camila associate him with an essentialized sexuality: “recently when her thoughts stray . . . she is thinking about Domingo, but not just the innocent replay . . . after their first meeting, but vividly sensual
thoughts that make the color rise in her face and her hands sweat inside her gloves” (INS 153).

Her turn to Domingo thus takes on two interrelated meanings—freedom epitomized in the essentialized sexuality of masculinized blackness and a return to her mother’s roots through the black Other. But as Steven Knadler notes, “[a]lthough Camila goes through with the sexual act . . . she has once again kept in play part of her father’s anti-Haitianism: the primitivist myth of black sexuality, and, as importantly, the reduction of the multi-layered Afro-Caribbean heritage . . . to a commodified male sexuality” (22). Despite Domingo’s ability to make Camila confront her own blackness, the crux of this chapter remains Camila’s struggle for women’s suffrage in Cuba, as well as her desire for liberation from the social constraints accorded the daughter of a former president and of a national icon. Alvarez writes Camila’s reasons for rejecting Domingo as sexual—given Camila’s homosexuality—and political—given Domingo’s decision to abandon the protest when Batista’s men arrive. Yet race seems as much a problem for Camila as are her sexuality and her attempts at activism.

If in the novel Domingo represents the potential acceptance of Camila’s African ancestry, Alvarez turns Scott Andrews, a Marine Camila meets while petitioning for her father’s return to the presidency, into an unwelcome reminder of her ‘otherness.’ Despite her ‘unmentionable’ difference from Marion, Camila also participates in the effacing of her African ancestry. In fact, many of her reflections on mulattéz within the narrative are couched in descriptions of her mother’s blackness, not her own. Even when she speaks to Domingo about her race, she speaks of it in terms of her mother, using Salomé as way to connect to her African ancestry, as well as a means of separating herself from it. In the novel, her relationship with Scott Andrews, however, forces her to acknowledge not only her mother’s blackness, but also her own. Although Alvarez’s Camila often hears that she is “taller than her mother, more attractive . . . she has never
know if this compliment is a euphemism for ‘whiter, paler, more Caucasian’ in her looks” (INS 204). Scott’s whiteness intrudes upon this perception of herself as somehow ‘whiter, paler’ than her mother. Early in their relationship, Scott makes a point of explaining that his ancestors were early abolitionists (INS 195), a fact which Camila repeats in her unmailed letters to Marion as well as to her brother, Pedro. She seems to want to assure herself and others of Scott’s tolerance. Yet as their relationship progresses, Camila is often made aware of her ‘unmentionable’ difference, something which seems to trouble Camila more than it does Scott.

At a local jazz club, Camila momentarily sees her connection to the musicians:

She thought jazz was the sassy music of white flappers . . . But jazz belongs to us, she thinks, colored people, as they are called here . . . Of course, the only apparently colored people in the room are up on stage, and no one would guess that Camila, pale-skinned with her wavy, marcelled hair, is one of them. (INS 198)

Yet despite her initial feeling that she may share more with the musicians on stage than with the fair-skinned Scott Andrews, Camila distances herself enough from the musicians to note the characteristics that allow her to pass. Even though “they could be her brothers,” Alvarez cannot give Camila completely to this identification, which is why the narrative shifts from speaking of “us . . . colored people” to speaking of the musicians as ‘them.’ Ironically, Camila and her family are in a position similar to that of the jazz musicians who must enter and exit the club through the back door. Scott’s attempts to help Camila’s father gain a meeting with President Harding consist in inviting Camila to one of Mrs. Harding’s garden parties. Pancho, however, complains that “‘We will not go in the back door!’” (INS 199).

Alvarez writes Camila’s relationship with Scott Andrews as one which retains vestiges of colonialism and conquest apparent in the U.S.’s relationship with the Dominican Republic, with nationalism as that which will not allow the potential lovers to become lovers. The author, in fact, entangles Camila’s attempts to arrange a meeting for her father with President Harding with
Camila’s fantasy of a future with Scott. When the Marine asks her for an answer to his marriage proposal, Camila refuses to separate her commitment to family/nation from her romantic desires. Instead, Alvarez has Camila reply with an ultimatum:

Before we went any further, I decided to tell S.A. [Scott Andrews] that it is absolutely necessary to arrange an interview between Papancho and President Harding. Absolutely necessary. . . . I looked him straight in the eye and said, “If you want a future for us, you will not refuse me.” (INS 206)

When Camila later slaps the officer for betraying her confidence and her country, she repeats a symbolic gesture of national resistance. Alvarez echoes the stories of Mencia, the wife of Enriquillo, who rebukes the advances of a Spanish conquistador with the same gesture, as well as that of the Dominican woman who slaps a Haitian soldier during the 22-year occupation. In addition to the emphasis on nationalism, these national myths also clearly have a racial dimension repeated in Camila’s rejection of Scott, a member of the occupying force in her country. Race, in a sense, becomes that unmentionable difference which neither author nor protagonist can internalize and accept. Alvarez, in fact constructs “Love and Yearning” as a potential romance; letters detailing a romanticized relationship between Camila and Scott intrude upon the third person perspective of the chapter. The political dimension of their relationship—Pancho’s attempts to persuade the U.S. to withdraw from the Dominican Republic—and the reminders of Camila’s blackness disrupt the fantasy of a romance with the officer. In an unsent letter to her friend Marion, Camila writes:

S.A. invited us all for refreshments at an elegant café nearby. Ay, Marion, what a painful moment. The establishment would not serve us. They said they did not have enough room for such a large party, but there were many empty tables . . . Pedro immediately turned on his heels and took Isabel home. . . . we found a nearby stand and sat on park benches, S.A. beside me, silent and shaken. Before we parted, he turned to me and said in the most feeling way, “Camila, I am so sorry,” I cannot tell you how moved I am by this demonstration of S.A.’s support. (INS 206)
In the passages that follow this excerpted letter, Alvarez has Camila contemplate being in love with Scott. Yet, as she does so, Camila’s thoughts in the novel also turn back to race, her mother’s darker complexion and her father’s whitening of Salomé in a posthumous portrait. While Alvarez appears to privilege the nationalist dimension of this failed romance, race clearly has a role in separating the lovers.

Alvarez’s Salomé, on the other hand, seems much more aware of the ways in which her talents and privileges accord her a measure of acceptance among Dominican elites, who might otherwise have been intolerant. As the novel explains, the historical Salomé Ureña’s father, Nicolas, was from a prominent family with Spanish roots. He was a lawyer, a poet and a statesman. Salomé’s unconventional education and her father’s connections allow her to meet and interact with some of the most prominent intellectuals and statesmen of the period. In the novel, when she first reveals herself to be the poet Herminia, Salomé realizes that “It’s as if I had on a disguise, a famous face behind which I watched people who just a few months ago would not have said good day to me on the street suddenly smile with deference” (INS 87). Fame in a sense masks her African ancestry. And yet despite the famous face which disguises “the same eyes, mouth, big ears . . . the nose [she] wished were a little less broad, the springy hair,” Salomé’s self-consciousness in the novel frequently takes the form of a discourse on beauty. When she spots Pancho, her future husband, speaking to Trinidad Villete, she immediately notes her rival’s “rosy skin and dark eyes and black hair, which she wore in silky ringlets at her ears” (INS 131). The rosy complexion and silky ringlets of her rival contrast Salomé’s admission that the “color to their skin” makes her and Ramona look “like somebody’s chaperones” (INS 129). Here she reiterates the connection between whiteness and elite society in the Dominican Republic. Likewise after meeting Hostos’ wife, Alvarez has Salomé realize that “[e]VEN IF WE
had not pledged ourselves to others, I was not beautiful enough to attract a man like Hostos” (INS 173). Race, particularly Africanness, becomes as unmentionable for Salomé as it is for Camila’s friend, Marion. The racialized underpinnings of a Western standard of beauty lie beneath the surface of Salomé’s observations. Given Salomé’s sudden entry into the intellectual circles dominated by a predominantly white elite, and the racism characteristic of anti-Haitianism in Dominican national discourses, Salomé’s discomfort only with women who vie for the attention of men she cares for seems rather superficial. Given the absence of a discourse on Dominican blackness, Alvarez redirects Salomé’s concerns about race onto a discussion of beauty.

As Alvarez recounts in the novel, Salomé’s father was one of many intellectuals who felt that Spanish recolonization was preferable to Haitian annexation. The novel repeatedly notes that Salomé and her family fear Haitian invasions, but, instead, what materializes in the novel is a prolonged period of civil wars from 1844 until 1861, when the nation-state becomes a Spanish colony once again. Historically, politicians and intellectuals justified annexation to Spain by reiterating the threat of another Haitian occupation. Yet the struggle for independence from Haiti in 1844 was met with some resistance from the masses. Race factored prominently in the first stages of Dominican nationalism; in order for intellectuals and members of the elite to arouse popular resistance to Haiti, they were first required to allay the fears of that population by putting into law the abolition of slavery. By the War of Restoration in 1861, when the nation-state once again becomes independent, anti-Haitian rhetoric was firmly entrenched in Dominican society, and much of this took the form of negrophobia. Alvarez deflects much of this in the novel by effacing race/racism as a determining factor for her protagonists. Although she clearly identifies Salomé Ureña as a mulatta, she remains silent on the ways race/racism shaped
nationalism during the nineteenth and twentieth century. For instance, General Ulises Heureaux, referred to as Lilís in the novel, was the illegitimate son of a Haitian father. He was subject to a variety of racist political attacks for his skin color and his Haitian ancestry during his presidential terms (1882-1884, 1887-1899). These are silenced in Alvarez’s narrative and might have revealed something about the historical Salomé Ureña’s perspectives on racism during this period. Instead, only Heureaux’s oppressive regime becomes a part of the novel.

Alvarez’s fictionalized portrayal of Eugenio María de Hostos and of positivism’s influence on Salomé effectively revises the racist undertones of this ideology. Hostos, a Puerto Rican nationalist, educated in Europe, settled in the Dominican Republic in 1879 and began a campaign of education reform incorporating positivist views of scientific methodology. Positivism’s slogan of order and progress emphasized gradual change, which was often welcomed by the ruling classes. Alvarez has Hostos facilitate Salomé’s awareness and acceptance of positivism, an inaccuracy often repeated in critical works on Salomé Ureña. In fact, the novel turns Hostos into the poet’s ‘moral’ lover; Salomé explains that Hostos “was a true companion for [her] soul” (INS 173). In the novel, Hostos motivates Salomé to give up her poetry in order to join his project of education reform. She subsequently opens the first school for Dominican girls. Yet Alvarez’s emphasis on positivism’s valuation of education and science also conceals the racism of many positivists. Alvarez explains that positivism “held that mankind was evolving toward a higher, perfect state. . . . to replace the dark cloud of unreason and violence and religion with reason and progress and science” (INS 134). Positivists valued scientific knowledge and methodology and favored a progressive view of history which included modernization. But many positivists also supported racist policies/practices for bringing about ‘progress,’ some of which included extermination of unwanted races and miscegenation as a means of arriving at a
more civilized race of peoples. Torres-Saillant explains that Hostos “could not relinquish the notion that Caucasians were the owners of the wisdom and ability necessary for civilization and progress” (138). In the 1880s he supported the Dominican government’s efforts to encourage immigration from Russia and Germany, arguing that they would bring with them ‘civilizing values’ (Torres-Saillant 138). Historian Ernesto Sagás notes that most of Hostos’ supporters used racist arguments; Hostos himself participated in the racial attacks on then dictator Ulises Heureaux, calling him “that blackener of Quisqueyanismo” (qtd in Sagás 38). This aspect of positivism, however, does not make its way into In the Name of Salomé. Instead, Alvarez writes out the racist undertones of positivism in favor of Hostos’ attempts at education reform in the Dominican Republic. This has the effect of both writing racism out of late nineteenth century Dominican nationalism and of writing out Salomé’s race as a part of her nationalist efforts.

If Alvarez’s motivations stem from a desire to voice a history which has often remained silent in and outside of the nation, she is also guilty of reinscribing certain silences into her ‘history’ of the Henríquez Ureñas. In fact many of Salomé’s chapters instead emphasize the different and seemingly antithetical responsibilities of woman and national poet. Early in the novel, her fame becomes a disguise with which to mask herself, her race and her gender. Salomé’s patriotic poetry often disassociates her from her womanness, so much so that when she receives the national medal, an observer exclaims, “what a man that woman is” (INS 141). Likewise, when she decides to publish a more personal poem about women’s desire and longing, Salomé aligns her motivations with women’s liberation from social constraints. A young girl’s unplanned pregnancy motivates the poet to publish her poem, “Quejas.” Salomé wonders why it is “all right for a man to satisfy his passion, but for a woman to do so was as good as signing her death warrant?” (INS 144). She realizes that “[t]here was another revolution to be fought if our
patria was to be truly free” (*INS* 145). The public scandal that follows emphasizes the nation’s desire to see the poet (and woman) divorced of a physical—sexual and racial—body. Later, when she writes two poems for her absent husband, he responds with an exhortation that she not “squander away [her] talent by singing in a minor key” (*INS* 177). Her daughter’s chapters also reveal a continued concern with separating the national poet from her woman’s, perceived as personal, voice. In the novel, Camila notes that her brother, Pedro, excludes many of their mother’s ‘personal’ poems from his edited reissue of their mother’s poetry. Consequently, much of the novel hinges on precisely this effort on the part of mother and daughter to recover and validate their voices. For Salomé, public participation comes early on as long as she silences the personal. Camila, on the other hand, must struggle to make herself heard in public forums, especially in light of the famous men in her family. In writing this struggle as one rooted almost exclusively in gender, Alvarez minimizes race and class as essential components in their quests to vocalize/locate a female nationalism.

Consistent with her attempts at re-valuing the ‘personal’ in writing the national past is Alvarez’s more complicated task of plotting the domestic’s relation to the nation. The result is a portrait of the ways in which the turbulence of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shape family relations and political activism in the Henríquez Ureña households. Yet, as with her silences on race/racism, the separation of the domestic (and women) from the national remains largely intact. That the national figures in the domestic is less a breakthrough in feminist thinking than how the domestic and the national function together. Despite Salomé’s better known political/national poetry, the novel includes few descriptions of intellectual or political anecdotes which support the writing of these poems. Instead, much of her poetry in the novel becomes bound to love and romance. The idea of romantic love’s entanglement with love
of country is a relic of the founding fictions which Doris Sommer so artfully decodes and which Alvarez attempts to revise. Making women central to nationalist struggles destabilizes the masculinized character of earlier Latin American narratives; however, *In the Name of Salomé* really offers only a limited view of women’s nationalism. In the novel, the publication of Salomé’s first poems come as a consequence of her brief romance with Miguel Román (*INS* 59-60). Alvarez writes the publication of poems like “Recuerdos a un proscrito,” “Contestación,” and “La Gloria del Progresso” as the result of a liaison between the poet and her tutor’s younger brother. When her parents forbid contact with the young man, Salomé manages to get him her poems, which he in turns sends out for publication. Alvarez provides little context for the writing of these poems, much less explanations for the dedications which the historical Salomé Ureña included to express/explain her political intentions. “Contestación,” for instance was dedicated to Temístocles Ravelo, a poet who fought for Cuban independence and was exiled as a result. “La Gloria del Progresso” includes positivist undertones, even though the poet had not yet met Hostos when she wrote it, a fact which contradicts Alvarez’s depiction of Salomé’s introduction to positivism through Hostos. Rather than focus on the political context of her poetry, Alvarez chooses romance as a vehicle for her fictionalized Salomé’s entry into intellectual circles.

Likewise, Alvarez writes Salomé’s re-entry to political poetry after her father’s death as the result of her romance with Francisco Henríquez y Carvajal, who would later become her husband. In fact, Alvarez characterizes their romance as one which results from Pancho’s love of Salomé’s poetry. Alvarez carries this entanglement further when she describes Salomé’s creativity as issuing from a desire for love:

... random phrases would sometimes pop into my head, and I would go over them and over them in mind... All day for day, I would work those lines over in my head, and then
one night, after we had swept the parlor and put the chairs back in their places . . . I would get up and write down the entire poem, and when I was done, I would dream that now he would come, the great love that would fill the vacant space left inside me by this creation I had made of love. (INS 92)

Her poetry goes through a period of gestation and birth, but also desires a physical love to take the place of that creation. The poems whose writing become anecdotal within the novel are primarily those which her husband and son later call ‘personal’ poems, such as “Quejas” and “Vesperina.” Later, her participation in Hostos’ campaign for education reform seems provoked partially by her ‘moral’ love for the Puerto Rican intellectual. While the historical Salomé Ureña may have had political and intellectual incentives for her poetry, Alvarez does not explore these possibilities within the novel. The result is a novel which while attempting revisionist history, winds up reinforcing a gender system which continues to polarize male/ female and personal/political, while at the same time evading blackness. As Joan Scott explains, history does not merely record changes to gender but is also a “participant in the production of knowledge about sexual difference” (2). As such, In the Name of Salomé often fails to part with representations of women rooted exclusively in the maternal, the romantic and the personal.

Both In the Time of the Butterflies and In the Name of Salomé recount histories of women active in nationalist movements. Both novels also make women central rather than supplemental to national history. Yet as the novels demonstrate, writing women into history often requires more than a discussion of patriarchy and/or gender simply in terms of men and women. Alvarez’s position as a wealthy, white woman of color shapes her representation of Dominican history as one centered on women with access to privilege. Gender, however, includes much more complex interactions with class, race and sexuality than the author includes in these two novels. The result is a situated representation of Dominican history, one produced from the outside and often unconcerned with racial and class inequalities within the nation. In fact, In the
Name of Salomé’s attention to racism in the context of the U.S. suggests that perhaps the author’s knowledge of racism in the U.S. and her life outside the Dominican Republic prevent her from inscribing Dominican varieties of racism and/or classism.
CHAPTER 3
FAMILY FEUDS, NATIONAL STRIFE AND PATRIARCHAL LEGACIES IN CRISTINA GARCIA’S NATIONAL NOVELS

The nation as family is a familiar metaphor in the national imaginary. The imagery of family suggests both the naturalness of social hierarchies and of cultural unity. Nationalist rhetoric relies on and reinforces the naturalizing of subordinate roles for women and minorities in order to “guarantee social difference as a category of nature” (McClintock 91). Benedict Anderson notes that nationalism, in fact, rose out of and replaced older social systems of unification like kinship. Rather than see nationalism as an ideology, he suggests that “one [treat] it as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion’ rather than with ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’” (Anderson 5). National narratives often reinforce the affinity of families and nations by figuring the state as homeland, motherland, and/or fatherland. In this way, the nation-state, like the family, becomes naturalized as an unchosen, and therefore innate, social organization (Anderson 143). Nationalist literatures have often invoked the image of the family as a means of writing the nation’s imagined homogeneity. Latin American literature, particularly during the post-independence period, used the family, or the prospects of constructing a family, to write the future prosperity and unity of emerging nationalisms. By marrying off couples from diverse social, cultural, religious and/or ethnic communities, these narratives projected cultural unity onto heterogeneous populations.  

Yet the family’s role in nationalist rhetoric has not, as Anne McClintock notes, prevented the family itself from being “figured as the antithesis of history” and modernity (91). McClintock explains that “[t]he family as a metaphor offered a single genesis narrative for national history while, at the same time, the family as an institution became void of history and excluded from national power” (91). In fact, the family as an institution has

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9 For more about this, see Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*
often competed with the nation-state in the latter’s attempts to gain and legitimize its primacy in the national subject’s allegiances. Ferdinand Mount contends that emerging state ideologies and doctrines often call for loyalties greater than and in opposition to the family (6). By appropriating the imagery of the family and the symbolism of home, comfort, and kin, states often seek to reinforce national loyalties. Mount’s assertion that the family is perhaps “the only consistently subversive organization,” however, also emphasizes the family’s potential to threaten or undermine state power/allegiance, and, thus, explains the state’s interest in curbing access to power. Families, however, have also often served as repositories of social behaviors and attitudes, such as those consistent with sexism, paternalism and racism and condemned those within the unit who transgressed these codes. So while families frequently compete with the state for the individual’s loyalties, they may also reinforce behaviors and ideas consistent with the state.

This chapter proposes to undertake a study of the tensions implicit in national narratives written as family sagas. In particular, I will be looking at the ways in which Cuban American author, Cristina García, represents the tensions that characterize competitive forms of social identification like the family and the nation-state. Her novels borrow from a Latin American literary tradition of using family romances to write and later critique national history. In fact, she often cites writers and poets such as Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, and Pablo Neruda as inspiration for her works. Rather than foreground the construction of nationalism so prevalent in early Latin American literature, García examines the extent to which nations and families can fail individuals. In her novels, *Dreaming in Cuban*, *The Agüero Sisters* and *Monkey Hunting*, the family functions not as merely another allegory of the state, but as an interdependent social process/practice necessary in the (re)construction of historically constituted
identities in and outside of Cuba. García’s characters frequently find that neither family nor state offers them a complete or consistent history through which to come to terms with alienation and loss. Instead, nation-state and family become polemical, and allegiance to one necessarily becomes alienation from the other. Although García’s texts seem to suggest the family’s potential as a unit capable of providing her characters with a sense of cultural identity, the characters are rarely able to form anything but superficial reconciliations with family members. My contention is that legacies of patriarchy naturalized in state and family institutions doom attempts at both national and familial identifications/reconciliations for the characters in these novels.

García’s novels repeatedly stage the parallel polemics of political and personal traumas, both of which frustrate her characters’ attempts to reconcile state loyalties with those to the family. In many cases, the nation-as-family rhetoric comes at the expense of blood/kin relationships. Families remain divided over the fate of Cuba, as well as over the representations which emerge both from exile groups and from the state itself. In her novels, disagreements over who has the authority to represent the family’s past frequently parallel disagreements over who has the authority to represent the nation. As each of the novels unfold, a discursive struggle over history—familial and national—fuels a movement toward reconciliation which only hesitatingly, if at all, materializes through family connections. García, in fact, often exchanges political reconciliations for familial acceptance, forgiveness and/or partial reunification, a move which points to the impossibility of uniting oppositional discourses on Cuban politics at this historical moment. While families are sometimes able to resolve or accept difference in these novels, political unions are often entirely forestalled. This seems to suggest the family’s impotence in generating or inciting national accord. At the same time, for many of García’s characters, family
unity remains fragmented, partial and, ultimately, incomplete. While family and nation in García’s novels function interdependently, one clearly affects and is affected by the other, the reasons for their failures are perhaps less clearly identifiable. Although her novels examine the costs of the 1959 Revolution, as well as the losses which result, García’s emphasis on the interdependence of family and state highlights the ways patriarchy, despite its modernization and transformation in contemporary ideologies, fuel these political and personal traumas. For the women in particular, neither of these social organizations offers them an ultimate sense of belonging.

In her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), García writes personal and political divisions through the voices of Celia, the matriarch who has embraced communism in Cuba, and her daughter, Lourdes, an exile committed to U.S. capitalism. Yet much of what haunts these women stems from a lack of understanding of the traumas they each endure as a result of social and sexual violence. Pilar, Lourdes' daughter and a first generation exile who grows up in NY, narrates the ways in which patriarchy and sexism recur despite her mother's and grandmother's attempts to restructure their lives. In *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), Constancia and Reina Aguero, two sisters ambivalent to politics, illuminate the differences which divide the novel's exiles from those on the island. The two women repress a history of domestic violence and neglect, as well as the 'secret' of their mixed racial ancestry by immersing themselves in opposing state ideologies. For the women of both novels, national traumas compound already problematic family relationships. In fact, one might argue that family tensions in these novels often highlight greater nation-state inequalities which García's characters are unable or unwilling to overcome. Reina's and Constancia's differences, for instance, typify the differences which separate the racially mixed Cubans on the island from the much whiter professional class who migrated in the
early 1960s. *Monkey Hunting* (2003), perhaps García's most pessimistic novel, takes a global look at past and present international economic systems and the damage they wreak. Family is once again divided physically and ideologically, this time among the marginalized Cuban descendants of Chinese coolies and African slaves. Domingo and his father, Pipo Chen, make their way to New York, splintering the family between three countries—China, Cuba and the United States. Their disillusionment with the American dream leaves them despondent and eventually leads to Pipo's suicide. In China, Pipo's half sister, Chen Fang, can find acceptance neither in traditional Chinese society, nor in the communism of the People's Republic. Her gender and her education impede full acceptance into a patriarchal society. *Monkey Hunting* highlights the costs of the revolution on men in particular and the ways in which communism's courting of the oppressed often meant havoc for those formerly with access to privilege. Although García's earlier novels point to the ways men with privilege were often unable to adapt to changing social structures in the midst of the Cold War, *Monkey Hunting* seems to more acutely emphasize the ways in which race and gender inequalities can doom organizations, like the family and the nation, which once helped to define a subject's identity. That this novel ends without the possibility of even a partial familial (or national) reconciliation seems to underscore the continued fragmentation of national communities and families produced not only by competing modes of production, but also by the remnants and transformations of an older, patriarchal order. For those unable to re-envision family connections within changing social systems, nationalism becomes oppressive and identity elusive.

Although García often deploys the family as a means of representing the fissures of an ideologically divided national consciousness, it also makes evident that shifting modes of production, from colonialism to emergent capitalism then abruptly to communism, undermine
social practices and organizations. While these changes often begin as a means of remedying social inequalities, García's texts suggest that state and family organizations frequently wind up reproducing these inequalities in new, and perhaps, subtler ways. Patriarchy, sexism, and racism often pass from one generation to the next and from one regime to the next. Images of the nation as family reinforce the gendered and racialized divisions of patriarchy. In García's novels, the shifts in social and political life both in Cuba after 1959 and in the U.S. mean greater and perhaps more abrupt challenges to these remaining patriarchal structures. This is not to suggest that patriarchy does not exist in the U.S. or in Cuba after 1959, but that both capitalism and communism in these respective countries, offered greater opportunities for freedom for peoples formerly oppressed by the previous social organization. In Cuba, for instance, the redistribution of wealth and the nationalization of many formerly foreign companies meant that people had greater access to the promotions and wage increases that had been reserved for American employees. Likewise, although the Revolution did not initially organize around the issue of racial discrimination, many of the changes it instituted benefited greater numbers of blacks than it did whites, mainly because the former constituted a larger percentage of the lower classes (de la Fuente “Race and Politics” 61). Moreover, Alejandro de la Fuente explains that some “discriminatory practices were eliminated as early as 1959, giving blacks immediate access to former private and racially exclusive facilities such as schools, beaches and social clubs” (“Race and Politics” 61). For women, the revolution meant increased opportunities for education, professional work and public visibility. Yet despite the Revolution's reforms, racial and gender inequality remains, perhaps in more naturalized forms. García's novels examine these freedoms and the ways in which they have often led to new manifestations of inequality.
Between Family and Nation: Gender Politics in Dreaming in Cuban

Dreaming in Cuban narrates the stories of three generations of Cuban women as they struggle and fail to reconcile personal differences which become calcified in their opposing political worldviews. Although conflicting political allegiances are the most clearly visible barriers which separate Celia, Lourdes, Felicia and Pilar from one another, personal betrayals and tragedies underlie their individual politics. As the novel demonstrates, the family has not been an apolitical source of comfort and acceptance. Even before the Revolution, misunderstandings, abuses and inequalities associated with a patriarchal order plague the del Pino family. Celia’s problematic relationship with Lourdes, and to some extent with Felicia, stems from a mental breakdown which her husband facilitates early in their marriage. After having pursued Celia tirelessly and married her despite her lovesickness for another man, Jorge asserts his authority over her by abandoning Celia to his mother’s house. In a sense, he repeats the actions of her former lover, Gustavo, who leaves Celia for his wife in Spain, and of her parents, who abandon her to her aunt’s care after their divorce. Celia’s physical confinement with Berta and Ofelia Arango—women who reinforce strict ideas about women’s place in society—only heightens her anxiety about the lack of available roles for women of her time. Phyllis Chesler explains that patriarchal culture upholds the idea that “for a woman to be healthy she must ‘adjust’ to and accept behavioral norms for her sex even though these kinds of behaviors are generally regarded as less socially desirable” (756). Celia’s inability to ‘adjust’ or to protest her lot hastens her mental illness. Only after his death does Jorge acknowledge his role in Celia’s breakdown, and subsequently, in Lourdes’ alienation from her mother. He admits,

... I left her with my mother and sister. I knew what it would do to her. A part of me wanted to punish her. For the Spaniard. I tried to kill her, Lourdes. I wanted to kill her. I left on a long trip after you were born. I wanted to break her, may God forgive me. When I returned it was done. (195).
Jorge’s betrayal, however, is compounded by his decision to order shock therapy for his wife after her internment. In order to complete her ‘forgetting’ he buys her a house by the sea and a piano. His motivations stem from a desire to erase Gustavo from Celia’s memory, and by so doing, erase Celia’s sexual history.

Although Jorge is ultimately unable to make Celia his in the way he wants, he does manage to take their daughter, Lourdes, away from her mother. In a sense, Lourdes fills in where her mother cannot; she extends and receives the affections which Jorge cannot lavish on his wife. When he dies, Jorge visits Lourdes, not Celia, repeatedly in order to help her reconcile with her mother and to discuss their disdain for El Líder. As a child, Lourdes waits for her father expectantly in a party dress each time he returns from a business trip. The incestuousness of their relationship also points to the ways in which Lourdes substitutes for Celia. When Rufino initially courts Lourdes, her father becomes increasingly jealous and antagonistic to the courtship. Later, when her father arrives in New York for cancer treatment, Lourdes’ sexual appetite increases so much that her husband must “[beg] his wife for a few nights’ peace” (21). Because he cannot conquer Celia, he takes possession of Lourdes instead. As Jorge explains to his daughter, “I wanted to own you for myself. And you’ve always been mine, hija” (196).

Jorge, however, not only disrupts Celia’s relationship with Lourdes, who cannot forget her early abandonment, but he also transfers his political and social views to his daughter. Lourdes’ disagreements with her own daughter, Pilar, often turn on attitudes about sexual propriety inherited from her father. Lourdes reiterates the stereotypes and social conventions of womanhood through her consistent attacks and paranoia over what she perceives as Pilar’s sexual promiscuity. The narrator explains that
Lourdes was a virgin when she married, and very proud of it. The hip-splitting pain, the blood on the conjugal bed were proof of her virtue. She would gladly have hung out her sheets for everyone to see.

Pilar is like her grandmother, disdainful of rules, of religion, of everything meaningful. (168)

Her midnight phone calls to Pilar at art school, her intrusions while Pilar is showering, and her reading of her daughter’s journal proceed from a desire to control her daughter’s sexual behavior. Lourdes internalizes the stereotypes which compelled Jorge to abandon and then intern Celia after their marriage.

She also belongs to her father in the sense that she espouses a similar ideology—American capitalism. Like her father, who traveled all over the island working for an American company, Lourdes too upholds the ideals of an American work ethic. Her Yankee Doodle bakeries, in fact, come to dominate her life in the U.S. Both Lourdes and Jorge essentially neglect their families in their pursuit of capitalist success. Ironically, Lourdes utilizes an employment system similar to the system of U.S. imperialism on the island; she relies on low-paid, immigrant labor to maximize her business profits. Her bakeries also become a meeting place for exiles whose politics lie with American interests on the island. Lourdes’s admiration for “American moguls . . . like Irénée du Pont” further emphasizes her alienation from her mother and her lack of understanding of the ways American imperialism paved the way for Castro’s rise to power. Thus for both Jorge and Lourdes, entrenchment in capitalism and idealization of U.S. culture does not mean the abandonment of sexist or racist attitudes. The tensions apparent in Lourdes’ relationship with Pilar, as well as in her relationship with her mother, Celia, are not only the result of systems of domination which oppress women and people of color, but also the result of their inability to understand the subtleties of oppressions which emanate as much from the state as from within the family.
Celia and Lourdes’ different political views also underscore the ways in which competing modes of production affect women disproportionately. Unlike Celia, who is abandoned by most of the men in her family and has few outlets for personal fulfillment in 1930s and 40s Cuba, Lourdes enjoys the doting affections of her father and of her husband until the upheavals occasioned by the Revolution. Moreover, Lourdes embarks on a career which keeps her from feeling the same sense of confinement as her mother. The narrator explains that after her marriage to Rufino, Lourdes “got right to work on the Puente ranch. She reviewed the ledgers, fired the cheating accountant, and took over the books herself” (130). Through her marriage to Rufino, whose family owns large farms and casinos on the island, Lourdes also gains access to wealth and social status, both of which she loses at the onset of the Revolution. Pilar notes that “[b]ack in Cuba, everyone used to treat mom with respect. . . . like their lives depended on the bolt of fabric she chose” (63). The nationalization of businesses and lands, the closing of casinos and the expulsion of American businesses on the island are catastrophic for the Puente family, who must eventually migrate to Miami. These changes also mean a loss of wealth and social standing for Lourdes. More significantly, she begins to associate the Revolution with violence and genocide. Her miscarriage and her rape become entwined with the state’s efforts to nationalize businesses and appropriate large estates. Lourdes’ miscarriage follows immediately after she resists the state’s efforts to appropriate the Puente estate. The loss of property compounds the much greater loss of a son. Likewise, Lourdes’ rape by a soldier of the new regime suggests that the system remains one in which gender functions as a means of articulating power relations. The expropriation of the Puente estate essentially parallels the soldier’s forced sexual appropriation of Lourdes’ body. In a final act of territoriality, the soldier carves an unreadable message on Lourdes’ stomach, an action which mimics the haphazard carving up of
continents in the early years of the Cold War. The rape scene illustrates the ways in which women become a means of contesting and articulating power between men, and specifically between the state and the family.

If for Lourdes the Revolution epitomizes the violence of patriarchal power, for Celia it means just the opposite. The Revolution offers Celia the opportunity for a life beyond the confines of her house by the sea and the little resistances of playing Debussy on her piano. She becomes a community judge, settling local and domestic disputes; she also takes part in various national microbrigades which include building nurseries for infants, inoculating children against malaria, and later, harvesting sugar in the summer of the ten million. While some critics note that the ‘domestic nature’ of Celia’s public participation often calls for redirecting her maternal instincts (O’Reilly Herrera 77), I would argue that her activities in fact point to the limitations which the state imposes on feminist praxis. As Muriel Nazzari points out, the Revolution’s efforts to recruit women into the workforce have met with challenges rooted in patriarchal ideas about women being primarily responsible for domestic and care-giving duties (254-255). Although the state created and subsidized free childcare for working mothers in the early years of the Revolution, workers at these facilities have remained predominantly women. Likewise, primary responsibility for children and ‘domestic’ chores continues to reside with women. Although volunteering for these campaigns, especially in the early years of the Revolution, was regarded as a means of slowly integrating women into the workforce, it often reinforced stereotypes about ‘appropriate’ employment for women. Nicola Murray explains that voluntary labor in Cuba “is very definitely a political action . . . but it is nearly all in typically ‘feminine’ areas of work: running children’s interest circles’ . . . helping out in schools, hospitals, and in hygiene and inoculation campaigns” (71). However, the nature of some of the campaigns Celia
takes part in, which benefit working women who continue to be the primary caregivers on the island despite the Cuban Family Code\(^{10}\), also suggests her commitment to expanding available roles and professions for younger women. Her granddaughter, Luz, notes that “Abuela Celia tells [her and her sister] that before the revolution, smart girls like [them] usually didn’t go to college. They got married and had children while they were still children themselves” (121). Despite the ‘domestic’ character of much of Celia’s political work, it liberates her from the anxiety and restlessness of her married life.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Celia’s transformation after the Revolution is that she stops writing her annual, unmailed letters to her former lover, Gustavo. She announces in her last letter, which also closes the novel, that “[t]he revolution is eleven days old. . . . I will no longer write to you, mi amor. She [Pilar] will remember everything” (245). After the Revolution begins, her letters become histories—personal and national—which will allow Pilar to preserve the past. That she stops writing ‘gloomy’ letters to Gustavo also signals her transformation from an observer of history to an actor in that history. Years later she explains that “she feels part of a great historical unfolding. What would have been expected of her twenty years ago? To sway endlessly on her wicker swing, old before her time? . . . She remembers the gloomy letters she used to write to Gustavo before the revolution, and thinks of how different the letters would be if she were writing today” (111).

The Revolution takes the place of both her idealized ex-lover and her paternalistic husband. Celia even replaces her husband’s photograph with one of El Líder, an action which suggests the overlapping of sexual and political desire. That she replaces her husband’s picture rather than merely supplementing another photograph suggests that for Celia, sexual/physical

\(^{10}\) The Cuban Family Code (1975) made husband and wife equally responsible for housework and childcare.
desire is bound to political emancipation. A revolutionary who seemingly enacts what in the past was only the rhetoric of equality becomes her ideal mate. Celia articulates an early awareness of the relationship between desire and equality in a letter to Gustavo:

... when I applied for a job at El Encanto, the director wanted me to be a model, to walk up and down the aisles in gowns and hats draped in chiffon. The salesmen bought me perfume and invited me to lunch. But they couldn’t talk to me about why families of guajiros slept in the city’s parks under flashing Coca-Cola signs. Those men only whispered sweet nonsense to me, trying in vain to flatter me.

You were different, mi amor. You expected much more of me. That is why I loved you. (206)

Her years of letters to Gustavo reveal not only intimacies about her life and her children but also observations about the island’s growing political and social problems, especially in light of the U.S.’s influence. Her letters supply the novel’s historical context; however, they also affirm her desire for an equal and intellectually stimulating relationship with a mate. The letters perhaps stand in for conversations which Celia could not have with Jorge, especially given his dedication to American business ethics. The Revolution opens a space for her beyond the confines of the patriarchal family structure and the exigencies it placed on women. It also alleviates her sense of inadequacy in meeting the standards of womanhood. Yet, this liberation comes at the cost of her relationships to other family members, primarily her husband and her daughters. Neither of her daughters understands that for Celia, the Revolution has meant the expansion of available roles for women and a substantial liberation from patriarchy. Likewise, she fails to understand that for many, the Revolution becomes another system of domination.

If Lourdes and Celia epitomize the extremities of allegiance to the state, despite its subtle rearticulations of paternalism, Felicia’s and Pilar’s stories function as a foil to these idealizations. Pilar’s narrative in particular contrasts her mother’s American success story. She points out the ways in which Lourdes’ success hinges on the exploitation of immigrants, as well as the ways in which U.S. culture perpetuates its own brand of paternalistic and sexist ideologies. Pilar’s
immersion in and knowledge of U.S. cultural practice allows her the perspective to see its failures, something which her mother is unable to do. Discussing the art world, Pilar explains that

> Even supposedly knowledgeable and sensitive people react to good art by a woman as if it were an anomaly, a product of a freak nature or a direct result of her association with a male painter or mentor. Nobody’s even heard of feminism in art school. The male teachers and students still call the shots and get the serious attention and fellowships . . . As for the women, we’re supposed to make extra money modeling nude. What kind of bullshit revolution is that?  (140)

Like her grandmother, Celia, Pilar feels the constraints of a culture which places certain limitations on women. The ambiguity of her reference to a “bullshit revolution” also plays on the failures of the Cuban Revolution to guarantee women equality. Moreover, the punk version of the Statute of Liberty that Pilar paints in her mother’s bakery is not only ironic commentary on her mother’s political views, but also a rejection of the emptiness of signifiers like liberty and equality for the political Other. Although Lourdes defends her daughter’s artistic vision from a crowd of New Yorkers, she does so as a result of maternal instinct, rather than from an understanding of Pilar’s political views. Despite Lourdes’ success and independence in the U.S., it remains a system in which gender functions as a means of articulating power relations. That Lourdes and Pilar are both victims of sexual violence in different countries and at different times, points to the limitations of those transformations effected by the Revolution and/or by the move to the U.S.

Like her niece, Felicia too demonstrates that Cuba remains a country in which men exercise power over women. Her first husband, Hugo, abuses her and infects her with syphilis, the results of which are bouts of insanity and permanent alienation from her daughters. Hugo’s violent encounter with Jorge after their marriage also highlights Felicia’s position as a
trophy/conquest over which men of different races/classes compete in order to establish or contest power relations. Maria Teresa Marrero explains that in marrying a black man, Felicia . . . does what white women usually don't do: she marries "down." Her father's rejection of such a union bespeaks an antagonistic attitude toward the marriage. Celia, her mother, detests the "hocus pocus" of Santería, and goes so far as to desecrate the images on Felicia's altar. Therefore, while Felicia's life unfolds in post-revolutionary Cuba, the judgment of her actions by her family is heavily coded with the prejudices of a pre-revolutionary, racist bourgeoisie. Felicia's open embrace of Afro-Cuban culture is specifically coded as an interfacial act. (153)

Her subsequent attempts to create or hold together her family after this violent marriage ultimately fail. Her relationship with her father becomes strained after her marriage to Hugo, her relationship with her mother is marred by their different experiences of oppression under the new regime, and her brother and sister no longer live on the island. Felicia’s inability to ‘see color’ makes her a liminal character in a society still entrenched in bourgeois notions of European whiteness. Marrero notes that Felicia’s liminality, occasioned by her marriage as well as by her dedication to an Afro-Cuban religion, “can only be resolved by her death” (153). In a move reminiscent of the generation which precedes them, Luz and Milagro, Felicia’s daughters, fail to understand their mother’s lack of political dedication or her violent rejection of their father. Political ideology stands in for Luz and Milagro’s failed relationship with their mother; they take refuge in state ideology because it is a means of resisting Felicia, who makes her disdain for the Revolution apparent. They do not understand the ways in which domestic abuse, illness, and bourgeois stereotypes destroy their mother.

Felicia’s awareness of the regime’s methods for maintaining power through militarized propaganda prevents her from being able to take part in the changes. After one of Felicia’s episodes with insanity, she is sent to a guerilla camp with other social malcontents, where she notes that “all she sees is a country living on slogans and agitation, a people always on the brink of war” (107). The state’s polarization of masculine/feminine continues to reinforce a hierarchy
in which men retain power. Moreover, the state’s emphasis on war as a condition of everyday life on the island underscores the ‘need’ and ‘primacy’ of the state and of the men who make up a large majority of both military and government administration. Cold War politics, in fact, often relied on the imagery and rhetoric of militarization, something which Castro’s regime continues into the twenty-first century, to maintain masculinized images of power. The regime frequently transforms ‘domestic’ chores into duties necessary for the advancement of the state, but by doing so, it also attempts to blur the ways in which it propagates sexist stereotypes about the division of labor. Herminia Delgado, a black santera who befriends Felicia, notes that despite some changes in power dynamics, the state continues to reinforce male power:

Things have gotten better under the revolution, that much I can say. In the old days, when voting time came, the politicians would tell us we were all the same, one happy family. Every day . . . it was another story. The whiter you were, the better off you were. . . . There’s more respect these days. . . . One this hasn’t changes; the men are still in charge. Fixing that is going to take a lot longer than twenty years. (185)

As Herminia explains, the rhetoric of nation as family often contradicts social and political practice, particularly with regard to gender, class and racial difference. More significantly, despite some changes to society since the Revolution, it remains one in which men determine women’s status and well-being.

In a 1994 interview, Cristina García suggests that *Dreaming in Cuban* explores the effects of the Revolution on women and the ways it shaped their relationships both to the state and to their families: “I wanted to examine how women have responded and adapted to what happened to their families after 1959. I also was very interested in examining the emotional and political alliances that form within families” (López 609). One might also add that her treatment of family and nation-state make evident that changing political and/or national allegiances do not mean an end to the patriarchal structure of family and nation. David Mitchell, in fact, argues that family and nation necessarily coexist in this novel because neither system succeeds in fulfilling
the promise of unity to which both systems aspire (52). This elusive ‘unity’ predates the Revolution, and, in fact, originates in the patriarchal order which continues to characterize both the nation-state and the family. As García makes evident in her novel, women may acquire a sense of political independence as a result of Revolution or exile; however, the disproportionate effects of these changes often mean continued oppression and increased alienation.

The del Pino women do not recognize that their alienation from one another, and from the state, springs from the misunderstandings, abuses, and repetitions of forms of patriarchy. These women fail to communicate to one another how their experiences as women determine their political and personal allegiances. So while Pilar can sense her mother’s restlessness and her resentment for Celia, she does not understand that Lourdes’ nightmares, her hatred for the regime, and her obsession with Pilar’s sexuality stem from her personal experience of the Revolution, and more specifically, the rape and loss that accompanied Castro’s regime. Her move to colder climates in a sense allows her to numb that pain; it also frees her from the conventions of Cuban society which her in-law’s re-establish in Miami. Likewise, Celia’s commitment to the regime heightens what Lourdes perceives as her mother’s lack of dedication to her children and husband. Celia’s experiences with U.S. interventions in the island’s political and economic past, however, motivate her disdain for the materialism of U.S. society. More importantly, her commitment to the Revolution rises out of the unhappiness of her experiences with paternalism and socially constricting gender roles. Neither woman understands that the violence and unhappiness of gender and race oppression shapes the other’s political allegiances.

Although ideology often becomes a battleground on which Lourdes and Celia enact their differences, it also fills in for the lack/loss of viable family connections. In the case of the del Pinos, the family has ceased to represent a coherent means of identification and unity. Both
women in fact immerse themselves in state ideologies in order to redirect and repress what they can not or will not resolve. Yet as the novel demonstrates, this immersion in a culture of politics, both in the U.S. and in Cuba, comes at the cost of memory, history and alienation passed from one generation to the next. Celia, for instance, fills her life with responsibilities to the state after her daughter, son and husband leave the island. When her husband, Jorge, dies and her daughter, Felicia, becomes ill, Celia joins in the Revolution’s campaign to harvest sugar. She explains, “Ten years or twenty, whatever she has left, she will devote to El Líder, give herself to his revolution. Now that Jorge is dead, she will volunteer for every project” (44). Lourdes too immerses herself in an ideology as she struggles to acclimate to life in the U.S. and to repress the violence of a miscarriage and a rape. So absorbed is she with accumulating and with working, that she alienates her husband and her daughter. Moreover, Lourdes’ obsession with eating the baked goods she sells, especially the cinnamon buns, points to this need to accumulate, if only through foods, in order to ‘fill up’ her sense of loss. Her excessive eating emphasizes the excesses of American society and its capacity to overwrite history and loss through accumulation. A large part of what separates these women stems from their lack of understanding of the ways that oppressive systems have altered their lives.

Buried Histories, Violence, and Forgetting in The Agüero Sisters

Cristina García’s second novel, The Agüero Sisters, centers on the effects of Blanca Agüero’s murder on her daughters, Constancia and Reina. Although the murder remains a mystery to the two sisters until the end of the novel, when they discover their father’s journal confession, the narrator opens the novel with a description of Ignacio murdering his wife on a scientific expedition in the Zapata Swamp. The text that follows intersperses the third person narratives of Constancia and Reina with their father’s first person chronicle in an effort to unravel the motivations and causes which lead to Blanca’s murder and to her daughters’
alienation from one another. As in her earlier novel, which traced the codependence and failures of state and family organizations, *The Agüero Sisters* maps out the ways in which patriarchy dooms attempts to create and conserve viable family and national relationships. In her discussion of late twentieth century Latin American novels, Margarita Saona argues that “[t]he subject’s crisis we observe in some of these novels springs from the fact that both national and familial structures are crumbling, and the subject cannot find a place for himself either in the family or in the nation” (208). While some of these novels find that breaking with an older patriarchal order, whether epitomized in the family and/or the nation, can create new, more equitable relationships, García’s novel examines the human toll of this break with an old order as well as the ways both old and new systems retain hierarchies which ultimately fail the individual.

For the Agüero sisters and their children, the alienation and fragmentation that originates in Blanca’s experience of domestic violence only intensifies in the power dynamics of competing nation-states. Both Constancia and Reina essentially use political ideologies to bury their discomfort with their father’s version of history. Blanca’s racial and sexual otherness become the novel’s—and the Agüero’s—real mystery; it propels her husband, Ignacio, to murder and it drives her daughters and their families to a collective amnesia.

The lies of the father take literal form in Ignacio’s attempts to hide his culpability in Blanca’s murder, but they are also manifest in Cuba’s national narrative of cultural and racial homogeneity. Post-independence Cuba often relied on the silencing of race as a means of articulating national unity. Alejandro de la Fuente notes that although Afro-Cubans at times used the silencing of racial difference to their advantage in the emerging nation-state, the 'myth of racial equality’ could also be used by the elite to mask the subordination of Afro-Cubans (“Race and Politics” 45). Likewise, the 1920’s and 30’s interest in Afrocubanismo and
transculturation was a variation of Latin America’s interest in mestizaje, and one which was also tinged with racist undertones. As Kristina Wirtz explains, “the lasting impact of Afrocubanismo has been to delineate an Afro-Cuban folklore that encompasses all cultural forms marked as African and to locate these forms in a nationalist historical narrative of progress through racial and cultural hybridization” (423). By relegating the African to the past of a progressive national narrative, the nation could continue to construct itself as modern, while emphasizing the ‘primitiveness’ of African cultural forms. In socialist Cuba, race became paradoxical. On the one hand, Castro declared the island an Afro Latin nation, yet, on the other, the regime continued the decades-long practice of silencing or denying race. Although the regime agreed that racial discrimination existed on the island before the Revolution of 1959, authorities claimed that they had eliminated racial discrimination from the island as early as 1962 (A Nation for All 179). In order to bolster the state and consolidate power, the regime has often suppressed political movements emphasizing Afro-Cuban issues; it also discouraged and shutdown Afro-Cuban societies and religions. The Agüero Sisters highlights the ways in which this myth of racial equality and the bourgeois myth of a white, criollo Cuba underscore divisions within the family as well as within the nation.

Ignacio personifies a criollo history, traced through his Spanish father and Cuban mother, as well as the bourgeois desire to preserve Cuba’s past. His journals consistently bemoan the changes which modernization wrecks on the island’s animals and plants; he also demonstrates a preference for Spanish and British imperial legacies on the island. His preservation of different species by killing them for scientific study points to the lifelessness of nostalgic reconstructions of the past. The dead specimens that Reina inherits from Ignacio suggest that the history she and her sister inherit is also dead. In fact, Ignacio murders his wife, Blanca, in a final attempt to
preserve her in what he perceives is a moment of matrimonial happiness. Ignacio’s scientific studies lead him to the conclusion that what distinguishes human beings from lower life forms is “a unique human ability to plan for the future, to predict the behavior of matter in ways wholly distinct from animals” (116). His decision to murder Blanca stems from what he believes is this ability to predict his wife’s future actions: another affair with the ‘unnamed, giant mulatto’ who fathers Reina. Blanca’s murder results not only from Ignacio’s failed attempts to control his wife’s body, but also from the way her relationship with a black man foregrounds her own racial ancestry. Despite Blanca’s name, which means ‘white,’ her mother is a mulatta descended from French colonists who fled Haiti after the slave revolt. Her name hides the secret of a racial identity which Ignacio buries and which her daughters later refuse to acknowledge. As Stephen Knadler explains, Blanca is “the mother, whose sexual anatomy and gender deviance must be regulated—and finally stopped—so that she does not fail to reproduce both biologically and culturally . . . a European descent bourgeois culture” (29).

Ignacio’s desire for Blanca as a specimen which retains a connection to Cuba’s natural history becomes increasing evident in his early observations of Blanca, which recall the ways he studies flora and fauna on the island. According to Ignacio, Blanca is naturally intuitive, knowledgeable in herbal remedies, and physically built like an ‘underfed cat’ or rare bird (223). During a carnival party, Ignacio ironically dons a scientist’s costume, “complete with a flashlight and [his] fine-mesh net,” while Blanca transforms herself into one of the “dazzling bird[s]” her husband studies (267). Early on he also likens Blanca to a malleable substance:

she seemed to have an odd, mimetic gift for inanimate substances. When she worked with sulfur . . . her normally green eyes took on a yellowish tinge. If an experiment called for phosphorus, she vibrated with an unearthly glow. And ordinary lead made her appear heavy and malleable and gray. (185)
Despite this his early belief in her malleability and in his own ability to control her, Ignacio fails to transform her into another specimen or possession until her murder. On their honeymoon in the Isle of Pines, Ignacio explains that he is “overcome by the wonder of [his] possession” (223). After their marriage, however, he meets with continued resistance from Blanca, who refuses to accept his sexist decision to stop compensating her for her scientific work. Her first pregnancy, in fact, heightens her unhappiness with her lot. Ignacio’s explanations underscore his belief in his wife’s status as a possession to be governed by the etiquette of a patriarchal, bourgeois order:

I had stopped remunerating her since our marriage, because, frankly, I no longer saw the need. I admit I am not what one might call an emancipated man. Although it is true that . . . Mama taught music all her life, I had certain expectations of my wife. Not only did I refuse to pay Blanca; I prohibited her from seeking other employment. (225)

Ignacio only gives in to Blanca’s request when her pursuit of other employment begins to slow his own research. When Blanca refuses to fulfill her role as a mother/wife, Ignacio enlists the aid of shock therapies to mold Blanca into the woman he desires. Unable to make her husband understand the value of her work and hemmed in by the sexism of 1930s Cuba and her new role as a mother, Blanca ‘escapes’ with a black santero. Her inability to maneuver in a patriarchal society eventually fuels the splintering of the Agüero family and culminates in her murder.

That Blanca runs away with a black santero, who fathers Reina, signals a rejection not only of the bourgeois myth of Cuba’s racial fraternity, but also of the especially stringent gender constraints imposed on (white) women. Although Blanca returns to Ignacio battered and pregnant, her ability to accept and nurture Reina suggests that she finds some amount of peace in reconnecting with a part of her racial history. Knadler contends that in retaining a fragment of her mulatta mother’s bone, Blanca “sought to resist the whitening of Cuban history and national identity” (30). In fact, Blanca’s rejection of Constancia after her return suggests her inability to accept participation in perpetuating this myth. Ignacio attempts to impede and erase his wife’s
investment in Afro-Cuban culture and miscegenation by offering his wife’s lover money and, finally, by forcing himself back into the marriage bed. In a scene which foregrounds the ways women often become a means of articulating power between men, Ignacio watches as a ‘huge’ mulatto pulls Blanca out of a party and into her bedroom. Once the party breaks up, Ignacio “force[s] open Blanca’s door” and takes sexual possession of his wife. Although he insists that Blanca does not physically resist him, he does note that she whispers “‘Au pays des aveugles, les borgnes sont rois’ . . . then she merely received [him], forlorn in her dimming flesh, concealed by a thousand invisible veils” (268). Despite the knowledge of his own mother’s rape by a prominent, married man and the pain of her subsequent ostracism, Ignacio does not hesitate in forcing Blanca to submit to his desire.

Blanca’s conspicuously missing narrative within the novel suggests the continued silence/suppression of women’s history. She is the only central character whose story must be related through a (male) narrator, a move which implies patriarchy’s continued control over historical texts, and in particular, women’s history. After all, Ignacio murders his wife, and then records their story; despite his violence, the narrative elicits sympathy for the patriarch of the family at every turn. In an interview included at the end of the novel, García explains that the novel “is a story that explores how family myth evolved and how history is made.” Similarly, in an earlier interview, she explains her commitment to re-evaluating the gender politics of traditional history:

the way it [traditional history] has been written, interpreted, and recorded, obviates women and the evolution of home, family, and society, and basically becomes a recording of battles and wars and dubious accomplishments of men. . . . I was trying to excavate new turf, to look at the costs to individuals, families and relationships among women of public events such as revolution. (López 610).
Although Garca is referring to the motivations for her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, she clearly continues to examine the effects of gendered visions of history and historical events, particularly for women, in *The Agüero Sisters*.

The myths which their father creates about Blanca become manifest in Constancia’s and Reina’s lives years after both parents have died. Constancia in particular remains constant to her father’s vision of national and family history; she frequently finds herself repeating her father’s edicts on the preciseness of evolution and the fallibility of history. Constancia’s immersion in the lies of the father have her privilege Ignacio’s vision of Cuba’s, and the Agüero’s (white) European ancestry. Reina, who internalizes Ignacio’s lies reluctantly, notes that “[a] year after Cuba’s independence, her grandfather had come to the island from the hills of Galicia. . . . Constancia, used to say proudly that this made them true *criollos*” (12). Constancia’s immersion in this myth of Cuba’s whiteness finds material representation in her home’s décor, which is marred only by Reina’s arrival and the red roses of her admirers. The novel’s Miami community of exiles extends Ignacio’s vision of a racially pure Cuba. Her refusal to see herself as one of them stems as much from her reluctance to remember as it does from her politics:

> Constancia doesn’t consider herself an exile in the same way as many of the Cubans here. In fact, she shuns their habit of fierce nostalgia, their trafficking in the past like exaggerating peddlers. . . . Evolution . . . is more precise than history. (45-46)

Like her father, Constancia focuses on the certainties of science in order to repress the memory and history of gender and racial subordination which lead to Blanca’s murder. Likewise, the novel’s exiles repress a history of national discontent, poverty and discrimination in order to retain the vision of a Golden Age in 1950’s Cuba.

The paternalistic impetus to sublimate racial and gender histories which contest the primacy of those in power is at the center of Constancia’s and Reina’s political/national allegiance. Both women turn to political ideologies as a means of overwriting a history which
raises questions about cultural and familial legitimacy. In fact, the transformations to women’s labor within the U.S. and Cuba serve largely to facilitate their repression of family history. Each woman takes refuge in the ideals of her respective nation, using political or cultural allegiance to ward off memory. Immersion in each value system becomes a tool for severing their ties to the past. Reina dedicates herself to her work, to the ideals of the Revolution, and to the pleasures of sensuality. Likewise, Contancia uses her work to forget the past—her abandonment, her son’s deafness, her family’s exile, and her father’s suicide. When the past threatens to return through her mother’s face, imposed over her own, Constancia once again turns to capitalism to transform history into a saleable commodity. For both women the opportunities of the workplace enable them to invest in the present in ways which keep them from confronting the knowledge that their father killed their mother, that the revolution has failed, and that the divisions which continue to separate them are more personal than political.

Their relative independence also obscures the ways nation and family limited Blanca’s access to personal and professional fulfillment. Their immersion in work, and more specifically in the values of their respective political system, however, has meant increased alienation from their families. Reina’s access to privilege on the island prevents her from recognizing her daughter’s necessity and the ways in which race and gender determine access to dollars during Cuba’s Special Period. Likewise, Constancia’s dedication to material pursuits leaves her out of touch with her children as well as with her husband. More significantly, immersion in opposing political ideologies allows these sisters to embrace myths of racial fraternity. Surrounded by Miami’s largely white exile community, Constancia can continue to suppress her mother’s, her sister’s and her own racial mixture. Likewise, the practice of silencing discourses on race which the Revolution continues allows Reina to ignore the motivations which may have compelled
Ignacio to murder her mother; it also stimulates the repression of her own racial ancestry until much later in the narrative. If, as Stephen Knadler contends, the bone fragment which Blanca carries signifies a connection with an African diasporic history, then Reina’s desire to locate and keep that bone signals her desire to reconnect with this African cultural history.

Like her sister, Reina initially preserves her father’s lies, retaining his rare specimens and books in her home in Havana. Although she does not pass on Ignacio’s lies to her daughter, Dulce, she fails to pass on her mother’s history or the secret of their racial ancestry. Her dedication to the Revolution also keeps her from recognizing her daughter’s necessity and victimization within the regime. Dulce’s narrative relates the continued exploitation of women and men despite the Revolution’s promises. She explains that sex is the next best currency after dollars . . . Almost everyone I know my age, male or female, turns a trick once in a while (Agüero Sisters 51). Sex, or rather prostitution, becomes the means by which many, like Dulce, survive Cuba’s rations system in the early 1990s. Prostitution in sense becomes encoded as a doubled form of exploitation, triggered by the U.S. blockade of foodstuffs and other necessities, as well as by the Cuban government’s appropriation of the island’s limited imports for the tourist industry. Despite the arrests and raids, prostitution, Dulce suggests, exists largely as a by-product of that industry. Ironically, the regime’s propaganda that AIDS does not exist on the island makes the sex industry particularly successful (Agüero Sisters 51). Prostitution succeeds largely because those involved have begun to engage with a foreign market, something which the exhausted national market is no longer permitted to do.

Both the sex trade and tourism reproduce the inequalities of gender and race relations. Women, men and island become subordinate to foreigners/nations engaged in tourist enterprises; the government’s regulation of tourism only succeeds in sanctioning unequal relations. The
revolution’s early commitment to women’s rights and to national sovereignty, evident in the closing of brothels and casinos associated with U.S. imperialism, becomes a means of keeping the economy afloat in the 1990s. Tourism, in fact, heralds the country’s entry into capitalism. But as Ruth Behar notes, A capital is arriving in Cuba in many forms, none more savage than that piercing the female body® (xiii). In addition to the exploitation of women’s bodies, the development of tourism on the island has also led to an increase in the racialized division of labor. Hotel workers and service personnel are clearly segregated, with the whitest Cubans often dealing directly with tourists. The result is that white Cubans typically have greater access to dollars, and therefore privilege, than do Afro-Cubans on the island.

Despite her initial refusal to confront Ignacio’s lies, Reina disrupts Constancia’s ideas about their family history, about women’s sexuality, and about the racial makeup of Cubans. The red roses that her lovers send literally mar the white décor of Constancia’s Miami condo; the red and white which results also allude to Changó, the African/Afro-Cuban orisha associated with lightening. Constancia’s nostalgic notion of cubanidad, which she uses to market her line of skin care products, upholds a vision of national identity grounded in whiteness. Blanca’s “pale face” adorns Constancia’s Cuerpo de Cuba products, which she markets to Miami’s exiles “to embody the exalted image Cuban women have of themselves; as passionate, self-sacrificing, and deserving of every luxury” (131). Through her beauty products, Constancia attempts to make over the Cuban woman’s body piece by piece; the use of her mother’s pale face to market her products suggests that she intends to reinforce ‘whiteness’ as a characteristic of the Cuban woman. Moreover, the specificity of products like Senos de Cuba, Ojos de Cuba and Muslos de Cuba suggests the disembodiment of the national body as a result of nostalgia for an idealized, hegemonic past.
Reina’s refusal to accept the need for lotions and fragrances, and her ability to captivate men’s attentions with ease, intrude not only on Constancia’s ideas about femininity and beauty, but also on her conceptions of a white Cuban identity. Her patchwork skin, the result of skin grafts after her accident, reflects the hybrid nature of Cuba’s identity. Her skin literally incorporates the histories, races and ideas that make up Cuban national identity, what Fernando Ortiz once referred to as the Cuban *ajiaco* or stew. Reina’s arrival in Miami subsequently forces Constancia to confront her own mixed ancestry. Reina’s symmetry with Changó, her initial allegiance to the Revolution, and her African heritage position her as representative of Cuba’s African and mestizo history. That her accident takes place near the site of the Virgin of Caridad’s (Oshún) shrine also suggests that Reina embodies Cuba’s mixed cultural identity. In the nineteenth century, the Virgin of Caridad purportedly appeared to the three Juans, a *criollo*, an African and a Native of the island, signifying the desire for unity/mestizaje as a component of the new nation. Yet the narrator also notes that the site of the electrocution, a copper mine, was also the site of a slave rebellion which culminated in the emancipation of Africans in Cuba. The emphasis on hybridity often turns back on the foregrounding of an African/Afro-Cuban history which intrudes on the nostalgic comfort of the exile community in the novel.

Reina’s affinity to Changó and Constancia’s immersion in the Afro-Cuban religion, Santeria, suggest the potential for a new awareness of Cuban heterogeneity and of their own mixed ancestry. Marrero, in fact, argues that García’s representation of Santeria “challenges notions of the hegemonic, predominantly white, politically conservative Cubans to define identity politics for all Cubans in the U.S.” (141). Constancia’s interest in the miraculous and her practice of Santeria, which increases upon her arrival in Miami (and her proximity to Cuba), meets with disdain from her husband, Herberto, who identifies with the novel’s conservative,
bourgeois exiles. Yet Santeria’s counter-hegemonic function in Afro-Cuban history resurfaces in the novel in order to facilitate a reunion between the Agüero sisters and remedy the paternal lies which have divided them. As the two women journey toward Cuba, their divergent views of Blanca’s murder and Ignacio’s role in that death become central to their reconciliation. Although the women are ultimately only able to make amends after the prospect of another family murder, they are able to reach an understanding which allows Constancia to return to Cuba and uncover her father’s journals, and consequently, his lies. In fact, despite the women’s ambivalent politics and their proximity to one another after Reina migrates, they are only able to initiate this limited reconciliation with the assistance of magical-religious help transmitted through Santeria.

The novel demonstrates that the desire for racial ‘purity’ ultimately dooms the family to disintegration. Ignacio can overlook his wife’s racial ancestry (blackness) as long as it is repressed in her family history. Once she engages in a relationship with a black man and produces racially mixed offspring, he can no longer deny his wife (and his daughter’s) mulatiz. Although Constancia knows about her sister’s illegitimacy and her racial mixture, she denies Blanca’s, and therefore her own, African heritage. The whiteness of her mother’s face, and of her home’s décor, contrast sharply with the truths about her racially mixed ancestry. This inability to understand her mother’s sexual and racial oppression keeps her from reconciling with her mother or her sister, Reina. Likewise, Reina’s ambivalent acceptances of these myths facilitate her own repression of the factors which compelled Ignacio to kill her mother, and later, the factors which propel her daughter’s entry into prostitution. Denial of racial discrimination, and the downplaying of women’s continued exploitation make Reina incapable of understanding Dulce’s necessity. If the family stands as representative of the politics which continue to divide
the national body, then racial and gender inequality continue to function as the apex of this dissent.

**Chinese-Cuban-American Identities, Hegemonic Masculinity and Exile in Monkey Hunting**

While *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters* focus primarily on the ways patriarchal structures—in new and in older political systems—preclude women’s ability to negotiate unitary relationships with family members or with the nation itself, *Monkey Hunting* turns to examining the effects of these changes on men. The novel proceeds primarily through the narratives of Chen Pan, the family patriarch who boards a ship for Cuba in 1857, his granddaughter, Chen Fang who resides in China, and his great-grandson, Domingo Chen who flees Revolutionary Cuba with his father. Perhaps the greatest contrast comes from comparing Chen Pan’s narrative, which relates his journey from Chinese coolie to successful family patriarch in Havana’s Chinatown, with Domingo’s, which recounts the alienation and loss that accompany his exile to the U.S. Although both men arrive in foreign countries with little material or emotional support, Chen Pan manages to become a prominent businessman within the Chinese-Cuban community of Havana. Domingo, on the other hand, experiences a series of losses, beginning with the approbation and rejection of his mother and culminating in the isolation and displacement he feels among other American soldiers in Vietnam.

Chen Pan and Domingo illuminate the ways in which family and community become necessary to constructions of national identity. For Chen Pan, marriage, children and community acceptance ensure his emotional and psychological well-being. Domingo’s exile, his father’s suicide, and the racial tensions which his ambiguity raises among other soldiers, prevent him from establishing permanent ties to family or to nation-state. The family unit itself becomes a powerful force in Chen Pan’s life, as well as an important absence in Domingo’s; however, their
access to privilege within the both the family and the community ultimately determines their ability or inability to acclimate to new nation-states. Both institutions function as either facilitators or foils to the preservation of male privilege and/or socially constructed ideas about masculinity. Likewise, Chen Fang, the only female narrator of *Monkey Hunting*, demonstrates the ways in which masculinities are learned behaviors. Yet despite her education in masculinity, her sex impedes success and fulfillment of male privilege. Instead, her narrative highlights the ways in which non-hegemonic masculinities often mean complete alienation from society. These narratives suggest that changes to traditional patriarchal roles and institutions often meant increasing disorientation for men as well as for women.

Because the Revolution and migration to the U.S. both restructure (though they do not do away with) patriarchal institutions, García’s male characters find it increasingly difficult to adjust to changes in their access to male privilege. *Monkey Hunting*’s Pipo and Domingo Chen demonstrate that these shifts in access to hegemonic masculinity often also prompted increased alienation from family and nation/state. As R.W. Connell explains, hegemonic masculinity exists as a “configuration of gender practices which . . . guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (*Masculinities* 77). However, as Connell makes clear, hegemonic masculinity is a contested practice which exalts specific (and sometimes competing) types of masculinity. Moreover hegemonic masculinity intersects with race and class in determining which masculinities are exalted. As a result, “when conditions for the defense of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded” (*Masculinities* 77). The new military culture of the Cold War, as well as the culture of politics that accompanied the 1959 Cuban Revolution meant shifts in the ‘defense of patriarchy’ and changes to the representation and acceptance of some masculinities. Thus, as García’s male
protagonists confront a new social and political order upon exile and revolution, their relationship to hegemonic masculinity also changes. For Cuban men of color without access to wealth, reconciling their own conceptions of masculinity with those of the new order becomes increasingly problematic and alienating.

*Monkey Hunting* opens with Chen Pan boarding a ship to Cuba in search of economic success, only to discover that he and other Chinese migrants are to become coolies in Cuba’s sugar plantations. In this novel, García traces the history of Chinese migration to Cuba, which began in the late 1840s in order to meet the increasing demands of the sugar industry. As a result of the gradual abolition of slavery during this period, the Spanish began looking for other sources of cheap labor. After the British victory in the Opium War (1839-1842), European merchants were better able to penetrate Chinese ports and contract indentured laborers (Meyer 146-7). Chinese men like Chen Pan typically became indentured for eight years and were often forced to renew the terms of their contracts. As Gracia’s novel demonstrates, many Chinese died on the voyage to Cuba. Once in Cuba, however, some eventually became day laborers on sugar plantations, often suffering the same conditions they had endured as indentured servants; others managed to establish successful businesses in what became Havana’s Chinatown. Former Chinese coolies began establishing Havana’s barrio chino (Chinatown) as early as 1858 and by 1870, had also established enclaves in other Cuban cities (K. López 91). In the novel, Chen Pan manages to escape and construct a successful business and community life in Havana.

Despite the racism of the *criollos* and Spaniards in late nineteenth century Cuba, Chen Pan develops an affinity for the colony. Unlike his Chinese companions, he does not engage in the nostalgia for the Chinese countryside; instead, he remembers the harshness of the climate and the labor which the fields demanded. During the Ten Years War, the family patriarch even delivers
machetes to Chinese Commander Sian, as the latter struggles to liberate the island from the Spanish. Years later, he admits: “[l]istening to his friends, Chen Pan questioned whether he was genuinely Chinese anymore” (83). Chen Pan’s shifting national identifications, or rather, the accommodation of a burgeoning Cubanness within his sense of Chinese identity, is the result not only of his many years on the island, but also of his success and social position within both the Chinese community of Havana and the family which he forms. In fact, Chinatowns in Cuba often incorporated networks of privilege and power. Kathleen López explains that “Chinese from Juijiang, Nanhai County, represented the economic elite of the Chinese merchant community, dominating the powerful Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Havana” (96). And while their power often included aiding new migrants and potential Chinese businesses, the Chinese in Cuba clearly established a social order. Chen Pan’s wealth and access to privileges position him within Chinatown’s early leadership.

Community and family do not simply ‘fill in’ for those lost upon his departure from China, although that is certainly an element in his ability to acclimate to a foreign land, but, more importantly, these institutions allow Chen Pan to regain and maintain his social position as a patriarch within the microcosm of Havana’s Chinatown. After all, Chen Pan manages to acquire a significant amount of wealth after opening his antiques shop, The Lucky Find. In fact, he becomes wealthy enough to loan money, at a small profit, to Chinese entrepreneurs. He also earns enough money to purchase and free a slave woman and her child, who later become his family. Moreover, Chen Pan enjoys privileges which others in the community do not. After saving the Count de Santovenia, Chen Pan earns his freedom, as well as a powerful ally in his business endeavors. The Count offers Chen Pan protection from criollos and Spaniards, which allows him to escape the violent racism of Cuban society. Although he does not return to China
with the riches he imagines, Chen Pan does establish himself successfully in Havana. Cuba means a multitude of social, cultural and political changes, yet the basic structure of his relation to society changes very little. In fact, his wealth and his privileged position within the small Chinese community of Havana mean perhaps greater social standing than that which he enjoyed in his native village.

Chen Pan’s kindness, his dedication to his family, and his minority position within the larger Cuban community belie the gendered privilege which he continues to enjoy in Cuba. Despite the colony’s antagonism to racial ‘others,’ the close-knit community of Chinatown, along with family connections, preserve a limited amount of patriarchal privilege which Chen Pan’s descendents do not enjoy. Domingo’s and Pipo’s experiences with community and family are, in fact, far different from Chen Pan’s. Pipo, in particular, flees the island after refusing to give up his job as a cook on the American military base lands him in a psychiatric hospital. Before the Revolution, his job meant access to American goods, but after 1959, it becomes the cause of his persecution. Domingo explains that his mother “testified against [Pipo], reporting that he’d trafficked in contraband (a few packs of cigarettes here, a case of condensed milk there)” (111). When the new regime fails to recruit Pipo, they send him to a psychiatric hospital, where he suffers “special revolutionary treatment: psychotropic drugs, electroshock therapy, beatings by the criminally insane” (112). The regime’s efforts to ‘break’ Pipo resemble those of Dreaming in Cuban’s Jorge del Pino and The Agüero Sisters’ Ignacio Agüero. As with Celia and Blanca, electroshock therapies are introduced as a means of punishment, as well as an attempt at behavior modification. For Pipo, institutionalization also carries the ‘punishment’ of feminization which imprisonment and even torture do not. Phyllis Chesler notes that because mental patients are often treated like women—as infantile and ‘emotional’—male mental
patients are stigmatized more so than male convicts (751). As such, Pipo’s punishment for refusing to submit to the authority of the state is the stripping of gender privilege.

Even before institutionalization, however, Pipo’s function within the family begins to shift. Family dissipates as he and his wife become increasing antagonistic to one another. Idalia’s Revolutionary fervor becomes particularly apparent when she joins the militia in the Bay of Pigs invasion, during which she kills a fleeing Cuban exile. In fact, descriptions of Idalia often underscore a masculinization heralded by the changes wrought by the Revolution. Not only is she active against the Bay of Pigs invasion, but she also participates in the state’s efforts to assist North Vietnam. Domingo’s memories of his mother and father often iterate the hard/soft lexicon of cold war masculinities. K.A. Cuordileone explains that the political culture of the cold war era relied heavily on representations of “hard masculine toughness and rendered anything less than that soft and feminine and, as such, a real or potential threat to the nation” (516). As such, Pipo’s connections to the bourgeois comforts of American capitalism potentially threaten the Revolution’s military culture. Moreover, his refusal to take a ‘hard’ stance against U.S. imperialism, as his wife does, makes him increasingly subject to feminization, and therefore persecution, by the new regime. Dissent also means a significant reduction of Pipo’s access to power/privilege within both the family and the nation. His subsequent exile to the U.S. only subjects him to more subtle forms of gendering, as he confronts the emasculation inherent to American forms of racial discrimination. His suicide compounds this increasing feminization; in Chinese culture, suicide has frequently been associated with women as an acceptable means of escaping shame, oppression, or family condemnation. Pipo’s suicide results at least in part from his inability to reconcile gender with his changing social position.
The seeming emasculation of racialized male characters and their subsequent struggles to adjust to shifting standards of masculinity continues through Domingo Chen’s experiences with the Vietnam War. Like his father, he too must contend with the racism of U.S. society and the ambiguity of his relationship to Cuba and to his family. His decision to join the military after his father’s death, a move which mirrors Chen Pan’s decision to take part in independence struggles in order to alleviate his grief over a lost son, seems motivated by a desire to belong, as well as by his growing sense of alienation and emasculation. Joining the U.S. war effort also signals a more tangible rejection of his mother’s political allegiances, and, quite possibly, a way of reaffirming his father’s politics; when Idalia learns of his participation, she breaks off contact with her son. For Idalia, state allegiance clearly trumps family loyalty. During the cold war crisis of masculinity, military service perhaps also became an avenue through which Domingo could reassert his manhood within a culture which devalued racial Others. Connell, in fact, notes that “episodes of major violence (counting military combat, homicide and armed assault) are transactions among men. . . . [and] can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles” (Masculinities 88). Military service, however, does not cultivate a sense of belonging for Domingo, nor does it reverse the emasculation of American racism. Instead, the lushness of Vietnamese foliage and the ambivalence of other soldiers reinforce his loneliness and exacerbate his seeming racial ambiguity. Even though the Vietnam War saw the first fully integrated military force, it continued to uphold a racist hierarchy within its ranks. As a result, American soldiers often viewed Domingo suspiciously because “[h]is skin was too dark, his features not immediately identifiable as one of them. . . . In the hospital, wounded and with a couple of medals to his name, he hadn’t been treated right either” (209). In fact, Domingo’s
awareness of his own racial proximity to the Vietnamese prompts him to hope for the poetry of a death at the hands of a distant relative.

Although both Chen Pan and Domingo join military efforts after the loss of loved ones, only Chen Pan finds meaning and healing through participation with the nation/state. Military service offers Chen Pan a way out of the impotence he feels after his son’s death. Unlike his great-grandfather, Domingo does not find a renewed sense of national loyalty or masculinity through military service; instead, motivations for the war become increasing intangible. Rather than legitimate his position within the U.S., his time in Vietnam forces him to acknowledge the divide that separates the military’s bureaucracy from those on the front lines. He remarks that all around him is “this relentless feeding of death, as if it were a specialty of the poor, like playing the congas or tending water buffalo” (111-112). The imagery which Domingo associates with the poor underscores the racial make-up of social hierarchies within the U.S. If Domingo joins the military in order to reclaim his sense of masculinity, he soon realizes that the military offers little relief from the emasculation of racial Otherness. He admits that “[h]is biggest fear was that in the heat of a firefight, his fellow soldiers would mistake him for a Viet Cong and shoot him dead. Enough of them were suspicious of him to begin with” (107).

Even his relationship with Tham Thanh Lan and his unborn son do little to alleviate his increasing despair. Instead, Domingo seems terrified of becoming a father, and even more afraid of the racism and approbation he might encounter if he took Tham Thanh Lan back to the U.S. He notes that the “army frowned upon this [taking wives home], did everything possible to keep the couples apart, more so if children were involved” (208). Domingo’s fears of fatherhood are also entrenched in what he perceives as his inability to meet socially encoded standards of masculinity. As he studies Tham Thanh Lan’s pregnant body, “Domingo [grows] frightened.
How could he become a father? He hadn’t been able to protect his own father, much less finish being a son” (212). Domingo’s failure to establish familial connections or a sense of national belonging are largely the result of his inability to adjust to shifts in his own access to power and to the ways in which paternalism resurfaces in the racism of military culture. His meditations about failed migrations and doomed “cross-cultural lusts” highlight his concern with the way societies often condemn racial mixing (209).

Domingo’s experiences with racism, however, are not limited to the U.S. or to the military. He acknowledges that in Cuba, he was arrested for “practicing ‘negritude’—all because he’d let his hair grow into an Afro” (209). Despite the Revolution’s claims to the contrary, it too reproduces earlier bourgeois myths about racial equality, largely by suppressing discussions of racism. The Revolutionary government’s silence on race, however, does not prevent it from promoting and celebrating de-politicized versions of Afro-Cuban culture and history (De la Fuente “Race” 61). Domingo recounts the “ludicrous thefts” of his uncle’s congas when the government decides these are “cultural artifacts because they once belonged to . . . the legendary El Tumbador. Now the congas were on display at a folklore museum where el pueblo could admire them but never hear their boom-tak-tak-a-tak again” (56). The appropriation of the family’s belongings effectively turns the drums into artifacts of a national past which denies or obscures their continued relevance and use in Afro-Cuban communities. The confiscation of the drums, Domingo’s harassment, and his mother’s deprecation of Afro-Cuban music impede his ability to construct a social identity which reconciles race with gender norms. Robert Dean explains that individuals often construct gendered identities from a range of cultural narratives; however, these identities “are constrained by culture and class” (6). Likewise, Connell notes that “there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men”
Race hinders Domingo’s ability to construct a national—read as male—identity consistent with socially available narratives.

The seeming emasculation of Cuban men as a result of the Revolution and of migration to the U.S., both of which restructure patriarchal institutions, is a common thread in all of García’s novels. Often, male protagonists emphasize the disorientation which results from the changes in their access to power and privilege. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Rufino, Lourdes’ husband, finds himself without direction after exile. After she and her family move to New York,

> It became clear to Lourdes . . . that he would never adapt. Something became unhinged in his brain that would make him incapable of working in a conventional way. There was a part of him that could never leave the finca or the comfort of its cycles, and this diminished him for any other life. (*Dreaming* 129)

Rufino, in fact, misses the ‘comforts’ of Cuba’s social system. Whereas Lourdes gains independence from the overbearing Puente family and upper class society, Rufino loses the privileges associated with his family’s wealth. Likewise, in *The Agüero Sisters*, Herberto’s involvement with La Brigada Caiman, an organization of exiles plotting to overthrow the regime, is an effort to reclaim his social position and his manhood. His sense of masculinity becomes increasing sexual after he joins this exile group: “[i]nvasion. The word makes Herberto hard as a young man. . . . The tight ridge of expectation in his groin” (*Agüero Sisters* 124). His participation in the invasion of Cuba also stems from the changes he sees in his wife. He notes that “[w]ith each passing season, Constancia, like any woman with her own money, grew more confident . . . and Herberto was besieged by all that had escaped his life” (*Agüero Sisters* 125). Herberto’s inability to reconcile himself to his wife’s increasing independence leads him to attempt a futile reclamation of 1950s Cuba. However, unlike the men of *Monkey Hunting*, the men of García’s earlier novels face fewer instances of racism after exile, largely because they come from the whiter, professional class who fled Cuba in the early years of the Revolution.
Domingo and Pipo, on the other hand, must grapple with racism as well as economic necessity, changes in the structures of privilege that accompany masculinity. Their inability to cope with these changes ultimately dooms their attempts at social belonging.

While the men of *Monkey Hunting* struggle with the changes to their social positioning, Chen Fang, the primary female narrator, recounts the multiple oppressions which haunt women regardless of the political climate. Raised as a boy so her father in distant Cuba would continue to support her family, Chen Fang is later unable to adapt to the conventions of Chinese womanhood. Although her role-playing allows her access to privileges she might not otherwise enjoy—an education and freedom from ‘women’s’ chores—it also makes Chen Fang a marginal figure in Chinese society. She acquires the skill set of the opposite gender, yet not the biological sex to pursue these skills. After years of living among boys, Chen Fang finds she is unprepared to perform the functions expected of women. Soon after her marriage, she realizes that “there is no harder work than being a woman” (96). Her life as a boy leaves her unable to pour tea, cook, or perform “the usual deferences” (96). Although she finds a limited amount of acceptance among the teachers at the foreign school in Shanghai, her education and her sexuality prevent her from partaking of traditional Chinese society. She explains that

> In China they say the greatest glory for a woman is to bear and raise sons for the future. So where, I ask, is my place? I am neither woman nor man but a stone, a tree struck by lightning long ago. Everything that has followed since counts for nothing. (149)

The tree metaphor foregrounds Chen Fang’s disconnection from family and national genealogies as a result of her position outside of normative gender roles. Her refusal to submit to social norms for women, however, also means alienation from the state. If, as Anderson and others have suggested, the nation-state relies on the idea of the family to suggest a sense of cultural homogeneity, it seems only natural that the lack of family connections within the state might render someone an outsider. Furthermore, if, as García’s novels seem to imply, national identity
is defined primarily through family and history rather than through the nation-state, then Chen Fang’s solitary life makes her relation to the nation tenuous at best.

Chen Fang’s position outside a normative patriarchal institution also makes her potentially dangerous to the state. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Franz Fanon explains that “[m]ilitarization and the centralization of authority in a country automatically entail a resurgence of the authority of the father” (141-142). Her lack of male family members puts her seemingly beyond the authority of a father, an independence which the new communist government might perceive as dangerous. Because the family structure legitimates a patriarchal state order, which organizes men, women, children and ‘Others’ into a hierarchy of power, Chen Fang’s life outside the “authority of the father” turns her into a foreigner within the state. Her disconnection from any clearly identifiable (male) authority suggests her mutability, and therefore, her potential as a threat to the state. She explains that “[i]n China women do not stand alone. They obey fathers, husbands, their eldest sons. I lived outside the dictates of men, and so my life proved as unsteady as an egg on an ox” (226). Her life “outside the dictates of men” and her father’s Cuban identity become particularly problematic for her after the Cultural Revolution. Cuba’s ties to the U.S. economy and its politics make her suspect to a communist government increasingly antagonistic to the West. Likewise, her job with the foreign school in Shanghai comes under increased scrutiny after the communist victory. Despite women’s increased participation in communist China, the shift in governments proves catastrophic for Chen Fang, who lacks available male family members to claim her. As in García’s earlier novels, changes to hegemonic power affect women disproportionately. Yet even before 1949, Chen Fang is subject to the deprivations and oppressions of Japanese imperialism and of Republican China. As the
novel suggests, changes in state ideology do not guarantee women freedom from oppression; often, they merely reiterate old oppressions.

Like the women of García’s earlier novels, Chen Fang’s inability to find a stable family unity is largely the result of multiple forms of patriarchal oppression. Her sisters, traditional Chinese women, are unavailable to her after they join their husbands’ families. For Chinese women marriage meant joining a new family and breaking off ties with other family members. As a result, Chinese families rarely invested in their daughters; they were prepared for other families. Thus, even within their biological families, women were in a sense already outsiders. Chen Fang’s fate is no different; she is married off to ensure her mother’s economic livelihood. Although she struggles with the decision to leave her son, Lu Chih-mo, it is her only recourse to the violence of her husband and the oppressiveness of her role within his family. Although Shanghai offers her some relief from gender oppression, the limitations of traditional Chinese society prevent her from engaging in more than one brief love affair. Her relationship with Dauphine, in fact, becomes possible only because Dauphine’s foreignness places her outside Chinese society.

Yet Chen Fang’s narrative also allows García to highlight the different ways patriarchy prevents women and men from forging stable familial and/or national connections. As a woman, Chen Fang’s only option for a position within the family and the state is one which requires her physical and emotional subordination—marriage to an abusive husband and his disapproving family. Her exile and alienation is the result of the physical violence and ostracism of her husband’s family, as well as of her physical separation from kin. She has no recourse to parents or sisters. Likewise, Chinese society’s strict policing of women and women’s sexuality prevents Chen Fang from finding another lover after Dauphine. State and family become so intricately
connected in this narrative, that Chen Fang has no choice but to remain in the margins of society. Despite her training as a ‘man,’ she has no access to male privilege of any sort. Men like her grandfather, Chen Pan, on the contrary, form familial communities by banding with Other oppressed men and women. However, as Chen Pan’s and Domingo’s narratives make clear, diminished access to hegemonic masculinity does not eradicate their continued dominance over women, though it may mean fewer women over which to exert power. Not surprisingly, both men choose to court women in extremely diminished circumstances. Chen Pan purchases Lucrecia, a mulatta slave raped by her own criollo father, and Domingo essentially ‘purchases’ Tham Thanh Lan, a Vietnamese prostitute. Both women are the victims of rape and other forms of physical abuse; they are also socially ‘beneath’ the men they become involved with. In an interview, Cristina García explains that “these were not unusual fates for women of these times and places—and in fact, for many women today in various parts of the world. . . . I wanted very much to make their dire situations come vividly to life” (Brown).

Chen Fang’s narrative, in fact, foregrounds women’s subordination to men as a deeply embedded network of practices and processes. As R.W. Connell explains, “[a]ll forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men” (Gender and Power 187). While both Chen Fang and Domingo remain marginal figures within the state, Chen Fang clearly endures the physical and emotional violence of patriarchal power. Despite his diminished access to hegemonic masculinity, Domingo continues to enjoy some access to male privilege. However, the novel demonstrates that these men are largely unable to cope with changes they perceive as emasculating. While Domingo’s narrative closes with his abandonment of Tham Thanh Lan and his own increasing disorientation, Chen Fang’s ends with a continued faith in the family as a means of restoration and preservation despite the
violence of patriarchal authority. Patriarchy’s web of practices and process ultimately prevents
the men and the women of this novel from establishing unitary family or national identifications.

*Monkey Hunting* traces the ways in which a changing hegemonic masculinity can and does erode
men’s ability to form and maintain familial and national connections, yet at the same time, it also
highlights women’s continued subordination despite the accommodations of shifting political
systems.
CHAPTER 4
THAT RED RUBICON: ANXIETY AND NATIONAL NOSTALGIA IN SANDRA CISNEROS’ CARAMÉLO

In an era in which globalization and transnationalism have de-emphasized the importance of nationalisms, it might seem unusual to continue to discuss the nation’s relevance within migrant and minority communities, and even more so to discuss the nation’s relationship to family within these communities. The migrations which continue to result from global politics, however, have not discarded the necessity of the nation, but in fact, changed the nation’s role in the lives of communities and individuals. Certainly nationalisms are also changing as more and more of us become emigrants, exiles and refugees, moving farther and farther away from the centralized nationalisms of home countries. Likewise, the influx of settlers to host countries located at the center of global markets shapes the ways nationalisms are deployed, re-imagined and performed within that host country. Despite these changes, the nation’s representation as a family continues to have much currency in political and imaginative texts. Benedict Anderson notes that modern nationalism rose out of and replaced older forms of social identification, like kinship. Yet even if political and social organizations no longer rely on kinship as they did in the past, the remnants of this imagery remain a powerful political tool in nationalist rhetoric. Images of the family help naturalize the state’s desire to maintain a hierarchical social order and preserve ‘traditional’ values while at the same time welcoming ‘progress.’ But at the same time, the nation-as-family’s representation in migrant communities can emphasize a deterritorialized, hybrid nationalism, as well as the more conservative nationalisms of home. Thus, although the family remains a powerful metaphor for state unity, it also retains its potential for counter-hegemonic articulations of nation and nationalism. Emigrant and/or ethnic literatures can contest the hegemony of the host nation, as well as revise the ‘traditional’ culture of home. The nation,
as Homi Bhabha explains, becomes split within itself, “internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic and tense locations of cultural difference” (148). However, these representations of ‘home’ cultures or communities can also reproduce nostalgic, patriarchal, and socially exclusive visions of nation and nationalism. Because emigrants must increasingly rely on literal kinship, as well as that fostered among ethnic communities, for a sense of belonging, it is not surprising that family sagas would remain a necessary means of writing national imaginings.

Literary allegories of the nation as family abound in American literature from both continents. In Latin America, the family saga, written most often as romance, easily became a way of imagining and unifying a diverse national community. For other writers in the Americas, however, nation and nationalism via the family saga fills a lack which results from migration and/or marginalization. Writing the family in many instances becomes a means of writing oneself into the nation, either the nation of ‘origin’ or the nation of residence. Those communities separated from the state’s center and excluded from the ‘shared’ history of their country of residence often turn to family history as a means of tracing ties to a homeland. In Sandra Cisneros’ novel, Caramelo or Puro Cuento, the narrator uses her family to establish her own cultural-national belonging. The narrator thus challenges the geographic boundaries which limit national belonging and citizenship. In these narratives, family functions ideologically to transmit ‘traditional’ values and myths while as the same time introducing a counter-narrative to territorial or state representations of the nation. As Mary N. Layoun explains, “[c]ultural and literary narratives . . . can be read as attempts to negotiate, to counter, to reimagine, to articulate differently the dominant narratives—literary and cultural as well as national and transnational—in which they participate and the boundaries those narratives draw and seek to maintain” (94).
Despite *Caramelo’s* attempt “to articulate differently the dominant narratives,” the novel’s investment in specific forms of Mexicanness keeps it from fully challenging the gender and racial hierarchies of more traditional national narratives.

*Caramelo* or *Puro Cuento* chronicles the history of the Reyes family as a means of challenging state-based representations of the nation. Rather than continue the rhetoric of homogeneity, Cisneros uses a family saga to redraw the borders which define national communities and cultures. Through the Reyes family, Cisneros traces the political and historical circumstances which propel the narrator to construct a country ‘that never existed.’ *Caramelo* spans four generations of the Reyes family history and approximately one hundred fifty years of Mexican and U.S. history. Family helps fill the void left by divergent and exclusionary representations of official national history and becomes primary in the political and social development of the narrator. As she defines her place within the family, Celaya, the narrator, also clarifies her relation to both the U.S. and Mexico. Thus, the novel is at once a chronicle of the Reyes’ history and at the same time an account of Celaya’s coming of age. As a child of Mexican and Mexican American parents, Celaya has difficulty reconciling Mexican cultural traditions passed down through the family with the weight of those customs that characterize life in the U.S. Transcribing her parents’ and her grandparents’ histories allows her to chart her own ambivalent relationship to Mexico. While her birth and residence in the U.S. place her outside the Mexican state and the its bordered national community, Celaya’s ethnicity clearly make her marginal within the U.S. Part of Celaya’s project thus becomes an effort to establish her relationship to the nation. But rather than write an assimilation tale, the narrator constructs a history which records the ambivalence inherent in hybrid national identifications. Her use of
family, friends and acquaintances to imagine a ‘country that never existed’ results in a deterritorialized expression of Mexican nationalism.

Despite her claims to be fashioning an *imagined* homeland rooted in family history, the narrator clearly takes on the task of (re)constructing a Mexican nation to which she may lay claim. In fact, *Caramelo* frequently gestures at cultural-national legitimacy through various contradictory and ambivalent methods. As a result, many of the novel’s interventions of monolithic nationalism alternate between revisions of hegemonic master narratives and nostalgic repetitions of Mexico as a territorial Fatherland. Genealogical claims to Mexicanness, for instance, reprioritize the historical and contest the notion that the family is antithetical to the state.  

Consequently, the novel utilizes family history to organize and give meaning to national history. The structuring of the family genealogy itself, however, privileges the middle-class Mexican, Spanish or white, ancestry of Celaya’s father over the Mexican American, indigenous ancestry of her mother. In addition to claiming the nation via genealogy, the narrator also authorizes herself through her adoption of recognizably Mexican generic forms, such as the *telenovela*, and through her didactic inclusion of Mexican national and popular history. The novel’s rescripting of romance paradigms, which states have often used to maintain the illusion of cultural homogeneity, challenges gendered representations of the nation. Yet at the same time, these critiques of romance frequently contest gender roles at the expense of reinscribing other hierarchies. Likewise, the narrator’s inclusion of Mexican history in the narrative as well as in the endnotes, call attention to the interrelated histories of Mexico and the U.S., as well as to ways U.S. imperial and racist policies affect Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Nevertheless, Celaya engages in a nostalgia for Mexico which hinders her ability to critique or even

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11 In “No Longer a Future Heaven,” Anne McClintock argues that although the family functions metaphorically to naturalize social divisions, it has often been figured as the antithesis of the nation.
acknowledge the ways Mexican nationalism often relies on gender difference and inequality. According to Bhabha, however, “[t]he minority does not simply confront the . . . powerful master-discourse with a contradictory or negating referent. It interrogates its object by initially withholding its objective. Insinuating itself into the terms of reference of the dominant discourse” (155). As such, minority articulations of the national, in this case Mexico, frequently underscore the ambivalence of the nation as an historical and social force. In what follows I examine the ways in which Cisneros’ *Caramelo* deploys and revises various master narratives as a means of writing the ambivalence of national imaginings.

In a “Pilon” at the end of the narrative, Celaya alludes to the networks which bind emigrant nostalgia to the quest to reconcile gender, national inclusion, and cultural and geographic Otherness. She notes that Agustín Lara’s song, “Farolito,” “the taste of a caramel called Glorias on my tongue. . . . a girl with skin like cajeta . . . The caramel color of your skin after rising out of the Acapulco foam” all remind her of “a country I am homesick for, that doesn’t exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all *emigrants* caught between here and there” (434, my emphasis). The narrator’s self identification as an emigrant foregrounds her claims to Mexicanness; it also explains, in part, her nostalgia for Mexico as an imagined homeland. Her identifications with Mexico, however, also reveal an awareness of not belonging to the nation in any conventional way, of being “caught between here and there” (434). Celaya explains her Otherness as both cultural/geographic and as specifically gendered. After all, the novel’s project of writing an imagined country consists of negotiating a gendered identity often stereotyped in nation-state imagery. The narrator explains that cultural difference accompanies gender inequality within the nation. Consequently, Lara’s song about nostalgia and
memory also propels Celaya to remember a time when she was unaware of her own marginality
or of the need to reconcile gender with culture:

Not exactly a time, a feeling . . . . a state of being to be more precise.
How before my body wasn’t my body. I didn’t have a body. I was a being as close to a
spirit as a spirit. . . . I mean the me I was before puberty . . . I don’t know how it is with boys. . . . But girls somewhere between the ages of, say eight and puberty, girls forget they
have bodies. It’s the time she has trouble keeping herself clean, socks always drooping,
knees pocked and bloody, hair crooked as a broom. She doesn’t look in mirrors. She isn’t
aware of being watched. Not aware of her body causing men to look at her yet. There isn’t
the sense of the female body’s volatility, its rude weight, the nuisance of dragging it about.
There isn’t the world to bully you with it, bludgeon you, condemn you to a life sentence of
fear. . . . She is a being as close to a spirit as a spirit. Then that red Rubicon. That never
going back there. To that country, I mean. (433-434)

In her “Pilon” at the end of the novel, Celaya essentially correlates the weight and vulnerability
of womanhood with that of cultural Otherness. For the narrator, both gender and cultural
marginality become a ‘rude weight’ which she must consistently re-negotiate in order to
reconcile family history and expectation with her marginal position in the U.S.

The cultural angst which fuels Celaya’s text stems from her alienation from U.S. and
Mexican societies, neither of which accepts hybridity or difference easily. In fact, once the
Reyes family moves to Texas, Celaya finds that even among the marginalized, acceptance is
often elusive. Chicano views of ‘brown power’ as rooted specifically in a mestizo history of
colonization within the U.S. contrast sharply with the narrator’s identification as a Mexicana of
Spanish and American descent. Thus when Celaya recounts the story of her great-grandfather
Eleuterio Reyes from Seville, her classmates harass her for “[p]retending like your Spanish”
(354). The narrator, however, understands Mexican identity and mestizaje as much more varied
than her classmates will acknowledge: “There are green-eyed Mexicans. The rich blond
Mexicans. The Mexicans with the faces of Arab sheiks. The Jewish Mexicans. . . . The negrito
Mexicans of the double coasts. The Chinese Mexicans. The curly-haired, freckle-faced, red-
headed Mexicans” (353).
In addition to confrontations with Chicano views of Mexicanness, Celaya must also reconcile her Mexican family’s views of Mexicanidad, one which also seemingly excludes the narrator. According to her Awful Grandmother, her Aunty Light-Skin and even her father, Americans are barbarians, people without proper manners or morals. The narrator notes that her father often calls Chicanos “exagerados, vulgarones, zoot-suiting, wild-talking, mota-smoking, forgot-they-were-Mexican Mexicans” (251). Thus, for Innocencio and other members of the family, Mexican identity is often bound to questions of authenticity and mimicry. As such, Celaya must repeatedly assert her own Mexican identity in the context of these two conflicting and limiting views of Mexicanness. By narrating the family’s migratory Mexican and U.S. history and by employing strategic Mexican cultural forms, Celaya re-confirms her claims to Mexicanidad. As she explains, “I am Mexican. Even though I was born on the U.S. side of the border” (353). By claiming this identity, she also redraws the borders of national inclusion.

In articulating her claims to a Mexican identity, Celaya must also redefine her relationship to the gendered hierarchy of family relations. Her desire for independence and a room of her own contradicts her father’s belief that “Good girls don’t leave father’s house until they marry” (359). Otherwise, her father explains, “you leave . . . como una prostituta” (359). Moreover, as the only daughter among siete hijos, the narrator often feels marginalized. The opening scene of the novel, in fact, recounts a trip to Acapulco and a family photograph from which Celaya is notably absent. She explains, “It’s as if I didn’t exist” (4). Thus, the novel’s re-evaluations of family and national history allow Celaya to redefine women’s roles with both institutions. As a result, much of the text hinges on reconciling her nostalgia for Mexico with the realities of women’s position with in the nation. The ambivalence which results points to the difficulties of

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12 “Siete hijos” means, literally, seven sons. In Spanish, however, hijos can also mean children.
challenging master-narratives for emigrants and other nationals living outside the borders of the state. After all, maintaining a relation to an ‘imagined’ homeland functions as an important means of structuring identity within a foreign country. As Caramelo demonstrates, articulations of nationness, even from the margins, are not necessarily free of the legacies of hegemonic power. Celaya’s attempts to re-write influential romance paradigms, as we will see, reveals some of these inconsistencies.

**Rescripting Romance Paradigms**

Doris Sommer’s seminal work on Latin American national narratives demonstrates that nineteenth century romance novels of emerging nations relied on heterosexual love as a means of projecting unity among diverse populations. She explains that during this period, “national ideals are . . . ostensibly grounded in ‘natural,’ heterosexual love and in the marriages that provided a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts at mid-century” (6). After all, Latin American nations gained independence after lengthy struggles in which criollos figured most prominently. For countries with large indigenous and African populations, independence meant a continued effort at unification on the part of the bourgeoisie. Romance novels, according to Sommer, facilitated middle class attempts at a mythical heterogeneity. Consequently these romances often bridged class, race and religious differences through marriage as “an exhortation to be fruitful and multiply” (Sommer 6). Despite these romantic attempts to bridge class and racial differences, however, Sommer notes that national narratives frequently projected ideal states which reinforced the status quo. Like these early romances, the contemporary telenovela reproduces hierarchical visions of the national community. Telenovelas are Latin American serials equivalent to U.S. soap operas; however, the former are usually much shorter, airing for three to twelve months. According to Adriana Estill, telenovelas “provide the perfect means for synthesizing diverse regional identities into an
intelligible, cohesive national whole” (169). Likewise, Ana Lopez notes that they offer “dramas of recognition and re-cognition by locating social and political issues in personal and familial terms and thus making sense of an increasingly complex world” (257). The telenovela, in fact, borrows its Cinderella-like plot structure from these early Latin American romances. Class mobility in the telenovela remains gendered; it also repeats the romance’s attempts to establish criollo claims to the land/nation by making a generative (via love and marriage), rather than a genealogical claim (Sommer 15). As a result, class mobility in the telenovela is often restricted to virtuous and/or morally superior women whose physical appearance remains consistent with Latin American notions of whiteness. Both gender and race are reproduced in ways which often only simulate mobility by granting it to the ‘worthy’—virtuous, white women. Both the founding romances of Latin American nationalism and contemporary reproductions of hegemonic nationalism via the telenovela reinforce gender, racial, and regional hierarchies.

For instance, a popular 1997 telenovela, María Isabel: Si Tu Supieras, traces the rise of a poor but beautiful young woman. Adela Noriega stars as María Isabel, a humble Huichol Indian who befriends Graciela, the wealthy daughter of her family’s patron. When a pregnant Graciela discovers that her father has had her lover murdered, she runs away with María Isabel and later dies in childbirth. María Isabel completes her vow to her friend and raises Rosa Isela, Graciela’s daughter, as her own. In raising the orphaned child (whose grandfather was too cruel to be trusted with the task), María Isabel willingly takes on the role of the suffering mother, a role which has a long history in Mexico. In presenting herself as a single mother, she also subjects herself to the criticisms and judgments of those around her. After years of searching for permanent employment and fleeing Don Felix, Graciela’s father, she finally secures employment in the home of a wealthy widower. The two eventually fall in love and marry, as Ricardo, played
by Fernando Carrillo, learns not only of María Isabel’s virtue, but also of her ability to sacrifice herself for others. But as in most telenovelas, their marriage occasions a host of other difficulties as María Isabel tries to navigate society’s prejudices. Eventually, however, the lovers find happiness and social acceptance; the evil characters are either killed or imprisoned and society comes to accept María Isabel. Yet her movement into upper class society is facilitated by her beauty, or rather, her whiteness. Despite her colorful braids and indigenous clothing, María Isabel does not bear any other physical markers of indigenous blood. Other servants, as well as María Isabel’s parents, however, have darker skin and more indigenous physiognomies. As a result, her movement into upper class society poses less of a threat to the existing social order. Once she begins to dress like the other society women, only María Isabel’s manners mark her as Other. Rather than challenging social hierarchies, María Isabel’s entry into society becomes a means of infusing ‘new’ blood into what appears to be a morally decaying aristocracy; María Isabel’s purity and simplicity, in fact, propel the society women who befriend her to reassess the prejudices of their class. In addition to legitimating class mobility via virtue and/or purity, many telenovelas also incorporate genealogical justifications for class mobility. In El Privilegio de Amar (1998) and Rosa Salvaje (1987), the protagonists discover that they are the daughters of wealthy women, and thus their marriages into society do not contest the social order.

Telenovelas also consistently reproduce binary representations of women. Main protagonists like María Isabel represent virtue and goodness, while scheming nemeses are typically presented as promiscuous, manipulative, and evil. These telenovelas are thus constantly reproducing the battle between good and evil as a means of reinforcing a moral view of the national culture. As Estill argues, the telenovela’s emphasis on “morality, justice, and the eternal play between good and evil . . . create at every turn a portrait of what the nation should
be” (179). Moreover, the battle between good and evil women is one which repeats the palimpsest of the nation’s founding, that between the mestiza Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche (Estill 179). Both women essentially represent the foundations of a mestizo nation, but while the nation venerates the image of the Virgin as that which its women should follow, national narratives have often made La Malinche into a scapegoat for the conquest of Mexico. La Malinche, or Doña Marina, was the indigenous slave of Hernan Cortes who presumably aided in Mexico’s conquest by acting as an interpreter for the Spanish. Jean Franco notes that it was not until independence and the subsequent attempts to construct a coherent national identity surfaced that Doña Marina became La Malinche, the national traitor (131). She then “came to symbolize the humiliation—the rape—of the indigenous people and the act of treachery that would lead to their oppression” (Franco 131). Moreover, in figuring Doña Marina as La Malinche, national myths also erased women from any active/public role in the founding of the new nation. As Franco explains, the problem of national identity thus becomes figured as a problem of male identity, with women represented as passive mothers/rape victims or as traitors (131). Although scholars and writers like Cisneros have revised older myths about La Malinche, telenovela representations of women as virgin/whore have continued to reproduce these stereotypes. It is precisely this opposition which telenovelas frequently employ as a means of reinforcing particular roles for women within the nation. As telenovelas like Maria Isabel demonstrate, women should take their place as self sacrificing mothers and caregivers in order to find happiness, but also as a means of preserving the nation.

Cisneros’ 1992 story, “Woman Hollering Creek,” critiques the ways in which telenovelas conspire to efface women’s agency by reinforcing traditional gender roles. The narrative opens with Cleófilas, a young Mexican woman, preparing for her marriage to a man living on the other
side of the border. Cleófilas dreams of love and passion, “[t]he kind books and songs and
telenovelas describe when one finds, finally, the great love of one’s life, and does whatever one
can, must do, at whatever the cost” (44). Despite her dreams of a telenovela-like life in Texas,
however, she soon finds that her husband is controlling and abusive. She notes that her life is
much like the telenovelas she watches, “only now the episodes keep getting sadder and sadder”
(52). The fotonovelas she fills her days with only reinforce the gender stereotypes about
passivity and women’s sexuality/morality. Her neighbors, Dolores and Soledad, however, make
evident the dangers of these narratives. Both neighbors fill their days mourning the past and the
men who have died and/or abandoned them. Their names, which translate literally as pain and
solitude respectively, offer Cleófilas a glimpse into her own future if she remains in her abusive
marriage. Only by refusing to wait for the narrative of her life to change on its own does
Cleófilas manage to escape her abusive husband. She seeks and finds the strength and assistance
to leave him through Felice, an independent woman who surprises and impresses her:
“Everything about this woman, this Felice, amazed Cleófilas. The fact that she drove a pick-up. .
. . The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it” (55). Felice, which means happiness,
demonstrates that independence can also offer women avenues for self-fulfillment. Cisneros’
narrative emphasizes the ways in which telenovela romances are burdensome for women because
they reinforce the notion that ‘good’/pure women should not be independent (of husbands) and
should remain loyal to family and children.

Although Cisneros draws on these romantic forms again in the second section of
Caramelo, she often does so ambivalently. On the one hand, Soledad’s narrative is a critique of
romance paradigms in telenovelas and fairy tales, on the other, the narrative frequently indulges
in nostalgia for the nation-state which seems anathema to her critique of romance. “When I was
“Dirt” plays on the conventions of the *telenovela/romance* as a means of reconstructing, and to some extent understanding, the Awful Grandmother’s life. In this section of the text the narrator’s grandmother, Soledad, is simply an orphaned girl of humble origins whose life takes a number of unexpected turns. Although her narrative begins rather conventionally, with Soledad’s father sending her away to a relative after he remarries, Celaya consistently calls attention to the parallels between *telenovela*, romance and fairy tale by making references to “The Snow Queen” and “Cinderella,” by suggesting potential melodramatic section titles, and by citing song lyrics to accompany the chapters. Despite her playful framing of the narrative as a textual *telenovela*, Celaya undermines the romance’s binary representations of women. Rather than repeat the *telenovela’s* narrative of virgin/whore as good/evil, Celaya writes her grandmother’s sexual experiences as a means of calling attention to the power dynamics which often govern(ed) representations of women. In fact, Soledad’s interruptions into the narrative, which the author sets in bold typeface, serve to highlight the differences between idealized versions of the romance paradigm and Celaya’s rescripting. Soledad’s narrative reveals her inability to escape these paradigms despite her efforts at restitution. She explains, “just like in the fairy tales, he [Narciso] fell in love with me, even though I was dusty from the house chores. All the same, he could see I was his love of loves. So quick as could be, he arranged to have me stolen, and well we married, and there” (122). Celaya’s narrative, on the other hand, describes Soledad’s naïveté about her body, her sexuality in particular, and Narciso’s belief in his own privilege. Soledad was so “naïve . . . about her body, she did not know how many orifices her body had, nor what they were for. Then as now, the philosophy of sexual education for women was—the less said the better” (156). The couple only marries after Narciso’s father learns that Soledad is pregnant and exhorts him to marry her. Moreover, the narrator departs from the
conventional fairy tale and *telenovela* plot by continuing the narrative beyond the wedding. Whereas Soledad’s version stops at her wedding—“well we married, and there” (122)—Celaya’s continues in order to recount Narciso’s love for another woman, and the transference of Soledad’s love onto her first born son, Innocencio, the narrator’s father. Celaya rejects the fairy tale ending in favor of a continued exploration of the sufferings which caused Soledad to become the Awful Grandmother. In doing so, she questions the romance’s ability to represent women, as well as the ways in which it perpetuates myths about gender relations and marriage.

Thus although “When I was Dirt” remains less critical of the *telenovela* form than “Woman Hollering Creek,” it does attempt a demythification of women’s status in Mexican and Mexican American culture. Soledad’s sexual experience in particular allows a more varied representation of women’s sexuality than contemporary *telenovelas*, which often fall into categorizing female protagonists as exclusively virtuous or fallen. Women in romance narratives which reinforce centralized visions of national culture are often figured as archetypes. The resulting dichotomy often draws on Mexican myths about La Malinche and of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In an attempt to break down these stereotypes, Celaya’s narrative underscores the differences in power which led to her grandmother’s pregnancy and subsequent marriage. Like La Malinche, Soledad was a servant who had no access to family or authority which might allow her to protect herself from serving her patrons in any way they desired. For Celaya, in particular, understanding her grandmother’s history, and the power dynamics which led to her marriage, allows her to re-evaluate her own gendered identity within Mexican-Mexican American culture. In using her grandmother’s story to frame her own cultural history, she also raises questions about women’s roles with the nation.
If, as Anne McClintock argues, “the needs of the nation [are] typically identified with the frustrations and aspirations of men” (89), then Cisneros’ construction of an imagined national history through Soledad contests the notion that men are contiguous with the nation. Although Soledad’s story does not vary greatly from contemporary telenovela’s reproduction of gender roles, the story’s incorporation of footnotes and of parallel/ divergent stories and characters offer readers a way out of masculinized notions of nation/nationalism. In an interview with Gayle Elliot, Cisneros comments on the difficulty of recovering ancestors, particularly women: “they’re so anonymous that a woman gets lost within a generation or two. In most cases, even if you knew them you don’t know their last names.” Part of the novel’s project thus becomes a recovery and rewriting of women and nation. In Caramelo, Soledad’s story becomes the primary vehicle through which to trace Mexican history. In addition to incorporating historical events into the backdrop of the narrative, Celaya also footnotes geographical references, tangential historical events and personages, as well as fictional accounts of the Reyes’s family history. The result is a national history secondary to the family’s narrative. In other words, Reyes family history determines the meaning and the importance of Mexican and American national histories. The footnotes also highlight the narrator’s creative role in imagining a liminal nationalism from fragments of Mexican history.

In addition to fulfilling a didactic function for readers unfamiliar with Mexican history, the footnotes also often incorporate historical and contemporary women who resisted traditional gender roles. Unlike telenovelas, which typically condemn ‘fallen’ and/or evil women, Caramelo’s footnotes playfully recount the stories of women who refused to be hemmed in by national-cultural myths. For instance, the narrator recounts the escapades of Panfila Palafox, or Adela Delgadina Pulido Tovar, a singer “famous for running off with everyone’s wife” (180).
She not only runs off with the fictional Exaltación Henestrosa, who has an affair with the narrator’s grandfather, Narciso, but Panfila also rejects her bourgeois Mexican upbringing when she becomes a traveling singer/performer. Likewise, María Sabina offers the narrator another opportunity to include women who defied national traditions. After Exaltación leaves him, Narciso seeks help from María Sabina, a curandera famous for introducing a sacred mushroom ceremony to outsiders. Both stories reject binary representations of women and make women central to Celaya’s national imaginings.

But Soledad’s story also allows Celaya to recover and reconstruct Mexican history as a means of coming to terms with her own identity and as a way of understanding the ways gendered national narratives condition women to accept limited roles. Soledad’s story, in fact, becomes a cautionary tale for Celaya, who narrates the story only after her dead grandmother appears to her at her father’s hospital bed. Soledad tells her granddaughter,

> It’s you, Celaya, who’s haunting me. I can’t bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? To live as I did? There’s no sin in falling in love with your heart and your body, but wait till you’re old enough to love yourself first. (406)

Celaya’s attempt at mimicking telenovela romances by eloping with her boyfriend, Ernesto, prompts the Awful Grandmother to reveal her own unhappiness, and consequently, the failures and inconsistencies of romance fantasies reproduced in fotonovelas, telenovelas, and other mediums. She warns Celaya, “don’t wind up like me, settling with the first man who paid me a compliment” (407). Soledad’s story, like Cleófilas’ in “Woman Hollering Creek,” explores the ways romance fictions can inhibit women’s independence.

Despite Cisneros’ overtures to disrupt the telenovela’s romance plot through Soledad, the narrative often lapses into a repetition of these paradigms, as well as a nostalgia for bourgeois Mexican culture. For instance, Regina’s story, footnoted in Soledad’s narrative, incorporates race critiques while at the same time reproducing Mexican myths about ‘la India bonita.’
Celaya’s footnotes explain that Regina, Soledad’s mother-in-law, comes from a family “as dark as cajeta and as humble as a tortilla of nixtamal” (116). Regina’s social standing changes, however, when she marries Eleuterio Reyes, a Spanish immigrant. Celaya uses the racial differences between her great-grandparents to question Mexican perceptions of beauty which value whiteness. She explains that her great-grandfather “was like a big grizzled vulture, but so pale and hazel-eyed, Mexicans considered him handsome,” while Regina “thought herself homely because of her Indian features, but in reality was like la India Bonita” (117).

La India Bonita, the beautiful Indian woman, has her roots in 1920s Mexico as the country recovered from civil wars and tumultuous shifts in government. In an effort to promote a unique national culture, artists, intellectuals and politicians looked to an indigenous past as a means of celebrating a Mexican culture different from its European colonizer. In 1921, Mexico celebrated a beauty pageant called ‘La India Bonita’ in which indigenous women were asked to participate. Apen Ruiz argues that “‘La India Bonita’ is a significant example of the gendered nature of nationalism; it is a public display that crystallizes a multiplicity of nationalist concerns about purity, tradition, and anti-feminism” (287). The 1920’s representations of indigenous pageant contestants in particular emphasized their timelessness as well as their movement toward modernity as they migrated from the countryside to the city. La India Bonita pageant was clearly invested in representing a passive, traditional, historic vision of the mestiza and indigenous woman. Regina serves as a contradiction to these representations of indigenous women; however, her placement within a romance plot structure aligns her more closely with the ways in which telenovelas have used Mediterranean and white actors to play indigenous characters. Like Adela Noriega’s María Isabel, Regina too becomes whitened by her beauty, while indigenous blood remains associated largely with a “family . . . as dark as cajeta” (117). Stephen
Knadler contends that, “the mestiza has become a site of contestation within current U.S. culture, and although she has often been held up as a figure of multicultural or global consciousness, many representations of the mestiza, even those coming from the margin, can preserve the strong normative function of whiteness and trivialize, if not completely erase the mestiza’s . . . diasporic history and culture” (2).

In fact, race as a marker of national-cultural identity remains one-sided throughout much of the narrative. Regina’s beauty and class position minimize her indigenous heritage, just as the positioning of her story within a footnote buries the Reyes’ ties to an indigenous/mestizo past. Likewise, Celaya’s Mexican American mother, Zoila, has feet like “barro,” an obvious allusion to her indigenous roots, yet she receives little discussion or description in the narrative. Instead, Celaya privileges her father’s white, Spanish, Mexican ancestry. Although the narrator’s emphasis on a Mexican, rather than a Mexican American, history appears to be the result of her position in the U.S., it also seems to replicate middle class notions of Mexican whiteness. This nostalgia for Mexico as a white fatherland perhaps also stems from the author’s personal losses at the time she was working on the novel; Cisneros’ father was dying of cancer during the writing of this text. In an interview with Hispanic Magazine, Cisneros explains: “I knew he was going to die when I was writing the book . . . It was kind of a way to carry me through that rite of passage” (Newman). In the same interview, she also acknowledges that she “created this story to fill in gaps so that [she] could understand [her] father and to write his history” (Newman).

Yet despite the absence of a varied racial discourse, mestizaje haunts the text through a number of different metaphors and images. The caramelo color of Candelaria’s skin, Candelaria herself, the caramelo rebozo, and the mixed generic form and plot of the narrative constantly highlight a mestizaje that nevertheless remains marginal to the Reyes family history. The
caramelo rebozo, for instance, figures prominently in the narrative; it is the only memory/artifact Soledad retains from her mother. The narrator notes that the Mexican rebozo evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies, from Spanish shawls, and from Chinese silk embroideries; “[t]he rebozo was born in Mexico, but like all mestizos, it came from everywhere” (96). Nevertheless, mestizaje as a central component of the Reyes family remains largely symbolic and/or marginal. The grandmother’s rebozo thus symbolizes a mestizaje which never becomes a part of the central discourse or of Celaya’s construction of a new nationalism rooted in family history.

Like the grandmother’s caramelo rebozo, Candelaria, Celaya’s half sister and the daughter of her grandmother’s indigenous washerwoman, haunts the narrator’s family/national history. She is the marginalized, illegitimate and unacknowledged daughter of the narrator’s father. Yet ironically, the image of Candelaria rising out of the water gives birth to the rest of this narrative. Cisneros explains that her novel in part evolved from an unfinished short story about a childhood memory of a girl who had skin the color of caramel: “‘She was a mulatto, with this incredible colored skin that I’d never seen before’. . . ‘I saw her for a couple of seconds in my life, and I wondered all these years why she stayed with me. The title really belongs to that little girl’” (Newman). Candelaria, in fact, raises a number of questions about race, gender and power; however, these are discarded as the narrator focuses on family jealousies. Early in the narrative, this girl with skin like “a caramelo. A color so sweet, it hurts even to look at her” (34) prompts Celaya to rethink accepted notions of beauty. She explains, “until I met Candelaria I think beautiful is Aunty Light-Skin, or the dolls with lavender hair . . . or the women on the beauty contests we watch on television. Not this girl with too many teeth like white corn and black hair, black-black like rooster feathers that gleam green in the sun” (34-5). But Celaya also learns that
Candelaria’s exclusion is closely tied to the skin and hair color that she finds so fascinating. Her Mexican cousin taunts Celaya for playing with a “dirty Indian” (36) and the rest of her family ignore or avoid the girl.

Candelaria’s presence in the narrative acts to highlight a mestizaje which the narrator refuses to make part of the family’s history. Her image haunts the narrative through the repetitions of caramel colored rebozos, photographs, candies, and other family artifacts. Yet there is no attempt to discuss or reveal the implications of Candelaria’s presence as a mestiza, illegitimate daughter. In a sense she comes to represent an alter ego for Celaya, a presence which illuminates her own mixed heritage especially given her mother, Zoila’s, mixed ancestry. But if Candelaria represents the beauty of a mestizaje which Celaya only superficially accepts, she also reveals Celaya’s fears of gender and racial Otherness within both family and nation. After all, Celaya could have been this ostracized girl, unrecognized and unloved by her father. Moreover, Celaya’s close identifications with her father’s white Mexican family and her position as an Other within the U.S. hinder her from full identification with Candelaria.

Rather than engage in a discussion of mestizaje and of Candelaria and her mother’s exclusion from the Reyes’ perception that they are ‘gente de bien,’ the narrator subsumes this discourse within petty family jealousies. The awful grandmother’s jealousy of Zoila, her son’s wife, prompts her to reveal that Candelaria is really Innocencio’s daughter. Likewise, Ziola’s response fuels an ultimatum which forces her husband to choose between her and his mother. Any discussion of power relations or of gender/race oppression is transformed into a struggle between women for one man’s attention. Years later when Zoila reveals the truth, Celaya seems more concerned about her father’s regrets than about the lives of his oldest daughter and her mother. Her first words are “Poor Papa” (405). Instead of questioning her father, she questions
the Awful Grandmother about her motivations for revealing the secret to Zoila. When she finally has the opportunity to ask her father about his actions, and particularly about his inability to live up to the family expression, “we are not dogs,” Celaya keeps her questions and her thoughts to herself. Although the narrator attempts to understand her grandmother’s actions over the years, primarily by recounting her story in the novel, she clearly judges her more harshly than she does her father for Candelaria’s position and upbringing.

Despite the narrator’s gestures at rescripting romance, Candelaria’s story, which is gleaned in bits and pieces throughout the narrative, reinforces class/race hierarchies. After all, she is the daughter of a maid and her young patron. But unlike the Cinderella-like plot structures of popular telenovelas, she is never recognized by her father, nor does she manage to make her way into the middle class by marrying up. Instead, she disappears with her mother into the Mexican countryside, where her family can protect her from men like Innocencio. In fact, Candelaria’s early departure from Acapulco allows the author to underscore the irony of her desire to become a telenovela star. Early in the narrative, she confides to Celaya that she wants “to be an actress, like the ones that cry on the tele” (35). Upon her return to Mexico City, Candelaria gets lost at the bus terminal and she “does appear on television crying and crying telenovela tears” before she and her mother return to their village in Nayarit (68).

Perhaps Celaya’s failure to critique instances of patriarchal power is the result of the author’s position that Mexico is a ‘matriarchal’ culture and that the love between mothers and sons and between fathers and daughter is the quintessential Mexican love story. After all, parent child bonds are the most productive instances of love in the novel. The main narrative, in fact, reads like an inverted love story between Celaya and her father. Romance, as Cisneros explains,
becomes a means of representing Mexican-ness. In an interview with Gayle Elliot after the publication of *Caramelo*, Cisneros claims that macho societies come from matriarchal cultures. What I’m always looking for—and I think every writer must look for this—is the thing that makes us different. . . . When I think about what makes me different, I’m always looking at my Mexican culture. Of course, I like to write about love, but then I’ll ask, how is Mexican love different from American love? I’ll look at the Mexican models of love, and that leads me to the true Mexican love. True love in Mexico isn’t between lovers; it’s between a parent and a child. Mexico is a very intense culture of sons adoring their mothers, and this is why I claim that Mexican culture is matriarchal. (Elliot)

In this passage Cisneros draws a correlation between Mexican culture and romance, a move which implicates her own narrative’s claims to Mexican cultural authenticity. The relationship between Innocencio and Soldedad, which is later transposed onto Celaya and her father, is thus figured as uniquely Mexican/national. In a chapter aptly titled “A scene in a hospital that resembles a telenovela when in actuality it’s the *telenovelas* that resemble this scene,” Cisneros stages a struggle between Soledad and Celaya over Innocencio’s fate. Soledad in sense transfers her own love for her son to her granddaughter, who later acknowledges “the terrible truth of it. I am the Awful Grandmother. For love of Father, I’d kill anyone who came near him to hurt him or make him sad. I’ve turned into her” (424-5). According to Cisneros ‘Mexican love’ is thus uniquely different from ‘American love’ because it emphasizes love between a parent and a child.

Ironically, *telenovela* romances, which Cisneros rescripts in Soledad’s story, often rely primarily on love between heterosexual couples, not parents and children. Despite her gestures at revising nationalist myths, she participates in the essentializing of Mexican culture. Furthermore, in claiming that “[w]hatever bravado Mexican culture may have, its macho society, is created from a matriarchal culture” (Elliot), Cisneros suggests that women have much more active roles in the propagation and exercise of patriarchal power. On a narrative level, her
comments suggest that Innocencio’s actions are somehow conditioned by his relationship with his mother, the Awful Grandmother. Thus ‘Mexican love,’ being matriarchal, presumably inhibits Innocencio’s ability to form a relationship with his illegitimate mestiza daughter. But Candelaria’s conception and birth are conspicuously absent from the narrative, as are Innocencio’s explanations for abandoning his first daughter. This version of motherhood thus reproduces or sanctions a vision of nation which continues to exclude non-white/indigenous Others from the national family. Repeating this stereotype of self-sacrificing motherhood as a characteristic of the national culture also reveals a desire to reconstruct the nation within the parameters set by state representations of nationalism, and, thus, further cement her own (and the narrator’s) claims to Mexicanidad. As Ellen McCracken observes, “Cisneros herself and her writing might be understood as a series of nomadic texts in which she continually reconfigures ethnic images [and symbols] as spectacle in order to recuperate memory and identity” (par 3). Only the legitimate, ‘white’ daughter, however, can claim Mexicanidad.

**Footnoting Imagined Histories**

If the *telenovela* quality of Cisneros’s novel, *Caramelo*, gestures ambivalently at the narrator’s (and perhaps the author’s) cultural legitimacy, then the endnotes included at the end of most chapters provide her a vehicle through which to further stage the narrative’s claims to Mexicanness. These endnotes are primarily didactic, explaining historical references, trivia, pop cultural references and figures, as well as creative spaces where the narrator can include buried family sub-plots. Still, they serve largely as a means of incorporating Mexican history. The subordinate status of national history in the novel, its placement literally at the margins of the family’s history, contests the ways in which states construct nation and nationalism. By using her family to determine the meaning and relevance of Mexico’s history, Celaya destabilizes the notion that the national is synonymous with the state. In doing so, she also suggests that the
family, not the state, is the primary means of national and cultural identification, particularly for emigrants and their children.

In addition to re-prioritizing state and family relationships to national imaginings, the endnotes also help authenticate Celaya’s family memoir. In scholarly texts, footnotes and endnotes are marginalia which explain sources and “step outside the critical discourse and comment on it” (Benstock 204). In other words, scholarly endnotes typically provide writers a space in which to engage directly with readers in a voice different from that of the primary text (Benstock 204). Shari Benstock explains, however, that “authority in fictional texts rests not on extratextual sources that support an intellectual aesthetic but on the implied presence of the author—as creator certainly and sometimes as speaker—who is immediately and frequently directly engaged with the reader, not solely with the text” (207). As readers we are aware of Celaya’s role as the writer of the Reyes’ family history, and thus, her role in constructing the endnotes. Yet, on another level, we also expect that the endnotes, like scholarly notes, will be authorial interventions or digressions. To further complicate matters, Cisneros uses the endnotes both as a tool for her own editorializing and as a way to expand Celaya’s narrative voice. For instance, Celaya uses an endnote to record one of her great-grandfather’s waltzes; however, this note is followed by another in which the author credits the waltz to her own great-grandfather:

*A Waltz without a Name* because I lost that paper but I remember it went . . . †

(Composer—el Señor Eleuterio Luis Gonzaga Francisco Javier Reyes Arriaga, born in the year 1871 and baptized that year as per records found in the rectory of Saint Stephen of Seville. This document proves without a doubt the family Reyes is directly descended from Spanish blood.) . . .

†This song was actually written by the author’s great-grandfather, Enrique Cisneros Vasquez. (123)

The first note clearly belongs in the fictional realm, while the other asks us to entertain the idea that this episode, like others, is ‘real’ and/or historical. Celaya’s note simulates historical fact by establishing Eleuterio Reyes’ Spanish bloodline, which I will return to in a moment, and by
providing additional documentation—the lyrics of the waltz. The author’s endnote, however, emphasizes the first note’s position as simulacra and immediately pulls the reader out of the realm of fiction. At the same time, this note establishes its own veracity and affirms that the previous note, and possibly other aspects of Eleuterio’s story are in fact based on the author’s family history. The result is a secondary note which breaks the suspension of disbelief and testifies to the narrative’s basis in reality. Moreover, the use of the endnote to establish Eleuterio’s “Spanish blood” emphasizes the narrator’s attempts to authenticate her own claims to the Mexican middle-class.

The endnotes frequently call attention to the presence of the author, a strategy which not only allows Cisneros to authorize her narrator, but which also enables a reading of this text as an historical-cultural artifact. The shifts from indirect to direct address within the endnotes in fact rely on the prior construction of Cisneros’ authority on the histories she negotiates and reimagines. Given the overlapping of Cisneros and Celaya’s voices in the endnotes, as well as the parallels between the narrator’s life and the author’s, it seems Cisneros intentionally presents her novel as having a basis in ‘truth,’ even if facts and names are often altered within the narrative. After all, both narrator and author are daughters of Mexican fathers and Mexican American mothers; both grow up in Chicago and the southwest; both were only daughters among six brothers; and both spent their childhoods traveling between Mexico and the U.S. Her playful exhortations that the novel is “puro cuento” belie her efforts to educate readers about the intersections of U.S. and Mexican histories. In fact, Celaya frequently highlights the contradictory meanings of historia, which can mean either story or history, when recalling family memories passed down to her. Cisneros herself acknowledges that much of the narrative comes from her own experience:
it’s based on real people but it isn’t autobiography. . . . I think that as human beings people touch us, especially people we love the most and we can’t help but do character sketches when we go to our art. I felt that I was taking some real filaments of my life, some real memories, but I was embroidering from that . . . The characters were spun from real memories and there might be some of the plot—the trips to Mexico that were based on memory . . . (Birnbaum)

Likewise, the “Disclaimer” which opens the novel plays on the truths and ‘embroidery’ of the narrative which follows: “The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together . . . I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do . . . If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, perdónenme.” In both interviews and narrative interventions, Cisneros grounds her text in the historical as lived—personal—experience. As such, the narrator’s authority to reconstruct national history emanates from the author’s experiences and her access to the testimonies of others who experienced these histories. After all, if this novel is dedicated to Cisneros’ father, as well as to emigrants like him, then it seems logical to assume that the didactic inclusion of historical references is an attempt at recovering a familial and cultural past.

Like Julia Alvarez, who not only puts herself into her novels as a means of bearing witness to the histories she presents but also incorporates human and textual sources into her epilogues and acknowledgements, Cisneros too credits “the walking Smithsonians” who helped her recover fragments of the past (Suarez). In her “Acknowledgements” at the end of the book, the author credits family and friends who helped her reconstruct a family and national past which she ‘embroidered’ as the story of the family Reyes:

For research assistance I am indebted to several individuals for their testimonios and investigations. First to my father’s cousin . . . cuyas páginas me ayudaron para inventar el mundo “when I was dirt.” Mr. Eddie Lopez for sharing his personal papers on World War II, and to his wife, la Sra. Mariá Luisa Camacho de López, for her invaluable knowledge on rebozos. . . . Gregg Barrios and Mary Ozuna for memories of San Antonio in the early 1970’s, and . . . my sister-in-law Silvia Zamora Cisneros for her Chicago memories. (443)
Although Cisneros is certainly less earnest than Alvarez in her claims to historical accuracy, she does lend her authority to Celaya as a means of reminding readers of the narrative history’s basis in ‘truth.’ For instance, many of the explanations of geographic locations in Chicago, Texas and Mexico rely on and incorporate both the narrator and the author as witnesses to urban changes. Early in the novel Celaya uses an endnote to explain that Maxwell Street was the site of a well-known Chicago flea market which was later relocated upon the growth of the University of Illinois. A secondary endnote, however, allows the author to editorialize about the implications of these changes, while also reminding readers of the textuality of the narrative. The note explains, “Alas! While busy writing this book, Jim’s Original Hot Dogs was gobbled up by the University of Illinois and Mayor Daley’s gentrification; tidy parks and tidy houses for the very, very wealthy, while the poor, as always, get swept under the rug, out of sight and out of mind” (9, emphasis mine)

While the endnotes clearly call attention to the author as a means of authenticating the historical aspects of the text, the endnotes themselves also suggest that this ‘history’ is in fact ‘real’. In using a form long associated with scholarly work, and specifically with historiography, Cisneros appropriates the authority of this genre. As Roberto González Echevarría argues, “the novel, having no fixed form of its own, often assumes that of a given kind of document endowed with truth-bearing power by society at specific moments in time” (8). Although González Echevarría focuses primarily on Latin American literature’s use of the archive and anthropological/ethnographic discourses for his discussion, I think we can extend his argument to the use of historiographic forms in contemporary Latina narratives. Despite postmodernism’s claims to the contrary, historical investigations which contest master narratives and hegemonic visions of state history are often less interested in questioning the possibilities of historical
knowledge than they are in re-envisioning those narratives. The advent of histories and narratives from the margins of American culture, in fact, depend on the continued validity and potential authority of the historiographic form. Cisneros’ efforts at constructing an imagined, yet historical, Mexico can thus be viewed in the context of grounding the narrative in an historical tradition. While Shari Benstock contends that “[b]ecause footnotes in fiction cannot serve the same ends they serve in the scholarly tradition, they parody the notational convention and draw attention to the failed authority present in all such structures,” Caramelo’s didactic use of historical endnotes suggests quite the contrary (220). Moreover, the author’s claims that the novel aims to understand and explain her father’s history implies that even playful exhortations that the novel is ‘puro cuento’ are in fact underscored by historical truths. As a result, the narrator frequently rescinds her claims that the novel is merely invention. For example, in recalling her grandfather’s desertion of the military during the Mexican Revolution, she refuses to repeat her Uncle Old’s story because “nobody talks about it, and I refuse to invent what I don’t know” (134).

Likewise, many of the notes documenting street names, markets, Mexican cinema, and Mexican actors suggest the incorporation of lived experience and/or testimony. The juxtaposition of historical events and popular or cinematic representations of Mexican history emphasize the tensions implicit in writing and rewriting the national. As Bhabha explains, “[s]uch a shift in perspective emerges from an acknowledgement of the nation’s interrupted address articulated in the tension between signifying the people as an a priori historical presence . . . and the people constructed in the performance of narrative, its enunciatory ‘present’ marked in the repetition . . . of the national sign” (147). Bhabha calls attention to the contradictions implicit in articulating the nation as an historical object and at the same time performing nation.
Caramelo’s weaving together of Mexican history along with the nation’s representation in cinema underscores the contradictions which result from different cultural mediums. One of the novel’s endnotes, for instance, explains that “[d]uring World War II, a squadron of Mexican fighter pilots, Esquadron 201, helped liberate Luzon and Formosa. . . . the squadron of 38 fighter pilots and 250 ground personnel serving under U.S. orders logged 59 missions and 1,290 hours of combat flight time” (207). Yet this note also directs the reader to the movie Salon México, “a super-sentimental story of Squadron 201” (207). Knowledge of Mexican popular culture allows both writer and narrator to situate themselves within a larger ethnic national community. In this case, their knowledge suggests the legitimacy of their claims to national and cultural belonging even if they remain geographically outside the state proper. Popular culture associated with an originating homeland can become particularly strong for emigrants (and their children) in instances where connection to the new country is hampered by minority gender, race and/or class position.

But the endnotes about Squadron 201 also demonstrate that national narratives often reproduce the same myths and stereotypes that states use to reinforce specific forms of nationalism. The narrator instructs readers: “Note the Mexican matriarchy scene between the injured returning pilot and his angelic mother. This scene alone will explain everything” (207). Although her note remains ambiguous, it clearly highlights “angelic” motherhood, an allusion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, as a fundamental image of Mexican nationalism and love. As the scene in this movie demonstrates, women’s place within the nation remains relegated to reproducing the nation and upholding a specifically virtuous image of national identity. The ambiguity of Celaya’s reference to this movie scene suggests her participation in the reproduction of Mexican
matriarchy as an essential characteristic of national culture. It also contradicts her earlier efforts to revise women’s role within the national through her revisions of romance paradigms.

Although the endnotes reproduce national narratives ambivalently, they do serve a more apparent political function in critiquing instances of U.S. imperialism and racism. For instance, Narciso’s participation in the Mexican Revolution allows the narrator an opening through which to footnote the U.S. invasion of Veracruz in 1914. In addition to noting the “hundreds of civilian casualties,” Celaya explains the ways in which political interventions shaped Mexico’s ongoing civil wars:

. . . the U.S. was trying to bring about the destruction of General Huerta’s government by encouraging the selling of American arms to northern revolutionaries like Pancho Villa. (This is interesting, since [Woodrow] Wilson had supported this same General Huerta when he ousted President Madero from office with a military coup. Madero and his vice president were arrested at the National Palace and under mysterious, or not-so-mysterious circumstances were shot point-blank while being taken to the penitentiary for “safety.” . . . Thanks to Woodrow Wilson’s and the world’s lack of protest, Huerta became president of Mexico. (136)

The historical-political digressions incorporated into the text via endnotes allow the narrator/author to educate readers about periods in Mexican and U.S. history which often influenced migration patterns and violence on both sides of the border. Subsequent endnotes also describe the migration of Mexican Americans to Mexico in 1915 as a result of increased persecution from the Texas Rangers whose “bullying led to the death of hundreds, some say thousands, of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, who were executed without trial. The end result was that Mexican-owned land was cleared, allowing developments by Anglo newcomers” (142). Likewise, the chronology that ends the text revises the limited imaginings of state nationalisms by interweaving U.S. and Mexican histories. In fact, much of the chronology documents shifting U.S. policies and attitudes about immigration. Like Chinese and Japanese immigrants, Mexicans immigrants were subject to periodic changes in legislation over the course
of the last two centuries. In reclaiming this history of Mexican migration, the narrator not only points out the way racism has shaped U.S. policy, but she also recognizes a tradition or history of migration between Mexico and the U.S. which legitimates her own effort to redraw the borders of national inclusion. Moreover, in situating U.S. and Mexican politics within the history of Mexican popular culture, Celaya suggests that both political and popular cultures have the power to reproduce nation for migrants. Thus despite the racism which appears to determine U.S. policy toward Mexico and Mexican policy toward its citizens/nationals, emigrants like the Reyes retain their connections to home/nation through popular culture.

The endnotes and chronology also enable Celaya to call attention to migration as an essential characteristic of Mexican experience on both sides of the border. While her family’s narrative demonstrates that the Reyes have a history of back and forth movement between the U.S. and Mexico, the historical endnotes and chronology document the widespread national character of migration between the two countries. Narciso’s and Innocencio’s migration, as well as the Awful Grandmother’s migration, make them no less Mexican. By calling attention to the migratory character of Mexican culture, Celaya also carves a space for herself within the nation. After all, she too has traveled back and forth between the two countries.

Yet despite these efforts to revise the terms of national inclusion, the narrator often refuses engage completely in challenges to state-defined forms of Mexican nationalism. The narrative’s ambivalence is perhaps most clearly visible in the closing scene of the novel—the celebration of Innocencio and Zoila’s anniversary. The chapter opens with a series of eavesdroppings, snippets of conversation, which suggest the dialogic nature of Celaya’s text and family history. Yet Candelaria’s voice is again conspicuously absent. Although Celaya imagines her “sister Candelaria dancing a cumbia” among “[e]veryone, big and little, old and young, dead and living,
imagined and real” (425), her vision of this imagined country/Mexico remains entrenched in a very specific, middle-class view of nation. In fact, as Lala and her father discuss life’s lessons, the narrator reflects on her father’s silence about Candelaria and concludes that perhaps “[t]here are stories no one is willing to tell you. And there are stories you’re not willing to tell” (429). By equating her botched elopement with Ernesto to her father’s refusal to acknowledge his oldest daughter, Celaya again overlooks the power differential in her father’s relations with his daughter and the washerwoman. Consequently Innocencio’s exhortation that Celaya “promise . . . [she] won’t talk these things” (430) reads as the narrator’s promise not to engage or challenge the machinations of national and familial belonging. Celaya’s desire for inclusion, for a place within even this imagined Mexico, ultimately inhibits her ability to fully question the persistence of race and gender hierarchies. As she redraws the geographic, cultural and historical boundaries of Mexico in order to make a place for herself, she cannot escape some of the inconsistencies of traditionally bourgeois nationalisms, nor can she fully escape the problems of post-independence national romances. For those, like Celaya, who often struggle to legitimate their belonging within a foreign homeland, contesting national myths can perhaps become more daunting.
I’ve waited until my last chapter to discuss the ways Puerto Rican women use the family romance to write nation largely because the case of these writers is a complicated one, intricately tied to the island’s colonial status. Despite the existence of a unique Puerto Rican culture and of a clearly defined ‘national’ territory, the island remains a colonial possession of the U.S. and therefore quite literally not a politically recognized nation-state. As such, discussing the ways in which writers imagine nation presents both a unique opportunity and also a bit of an obstacle. On the one hand, Puerto Rico can perhaps facilitate closer scrutiny of the ways nations or homelands are imagined even in the face of domination. On the other, the island is technically not a nation if we define nation as an internationally recognized political state. On this point, I will defer to scholars like Jorge Duany and Juan Flores, who have argued in various ways that Puerto Rico’s cultural uniqueness, shared language and shared history make the island a nation even if its government is not recognized as such. Duany, in fact, argues that “[c]ulturally speaking, Puerto Rico meets most of the objective and subjective characteristics of conventional views of the nation . . . The Island also possesses many of the symbolic attributes of nation, such as a national system of universities, museums and other cultural institutions; a national tradition in literature and the visual arts” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 15). In fact, Puerto Rican literature in the U.S. and on the island demonstrates the force of ‘nation’ as a communal, if not shared, idea.

Unlike Cuban-American, Dominican-American, and to a lesser extent Chicano literature, most mainland Puerto Rican literature remains concerned with the immediate difficulties of life in the U.S.—namely racism, cultural alienation, poverty, and identity. In fact, very few Puerto

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13 For the purposes of this essay, I use ‘mainland’ to refer to the United States and ‘island’ to refer to Puerto Rico.
Rican writers on the mainland dramatize the island’s politics or history as a family romance. This is largely a consequence of the island’s continued colonial status despite euphemistic designations like Commonwealth or Free Associated State. After all, Puerto Rico remains bound economically and politically to the United States. Juan Flores explains that “[t]hose whose collective identities in the United States were constituted by a long-standing history of conquest and colonization generate a literary expression which contrasts with that of comparatively recent arrivals from countries with less direct ties to U.S. imperial power” (176). More to the point, those who have been prevented from constructing a political nation-state while simultaneously suffering the disadvantages of second-class U.S. citizenship display more ambivalence to nation as an imagined family unity. Instead, many of these novels suggest that colonial and/or national inclusion require continuous re-negotiation. This is not to suggest that Puerto Rico or the nation does not appear in this literature. On the contrary, it often finds its way into the literature from the mainland as an edenic or idyllic paradise lost. And while some critics have argued that these representations are romantic and nostalgic, writing the island as a lost paradise often reveals subtle contradictions and inconsistencies which point to the ambivalence of national imaginings for a colonial state.

In Judith Ortiz Cofer’s novel, *The Line of the Sun*, the island as paradise is consistently undermined by the intrusion of U.S. culture and imperialism. In his work on Puerto Rican literature, Efraín Barradas argues that the repetition of this island paradise unites mainland writers to a long island tradition which began in the nineteenth century (74). Yet, as he explains, “el poeta neoyorrican transforma el viejo mito de Puerto Rico como edén perdido y lo convierte en una utopia interna” [“the neorican poet transforms the previous myth of Puerto Rico as a lost eden into an internal utopia”] (Barradas 74). In doing so, these writers reclaim cultural origins
often denied them by island writers, while employing cultural strategies necessary for survival in the U.S. However, novels such as Ortiz Cofer’s also demonstrate that Puerto Rico’s colonial status continues to shape representations of nation, especially on the mainland where Puerto Ricans must grapple with racial and ethnic discrimination despite their legal claims to citizenship.

The writing of Puerto Rico as cultural or ethnic identity divorced of political urgency owes something to the strategies of imperial power, which since the 1950s have managed to separate cultural nationalism from the struggle for political independence. In fact, cultural nationalism became the dominant ideology of the Commonwealth in the 1950s, particularly after the 1953 United Nations resolution declaring commonwealth a non-colonial form of nationhood (Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation* 129). Luis Muñoz Marín, one of the island’s most prominent political and intellectual leaders, advocated the preservation of a unique Puerto Rican ‘personality’ or culture against encroaching American influence, while at the same time strengthening economic and political ties to the U.S. The cultural nationalism of the 1950s managed to effectively bridge ideological differences between those political leaders who advocated statehood and those who struggled for independence by divorcing Puerto Rican culture, defined broadly as the attitudes and customs of the people, from political statehood. According to Muñoz Marín and other leaders of the time, cultural nationalism was possible without political nationalism. Moreover, as Jorge Duany explains, “It [cultural nationalism] served to detach the political from the cultural implications of asserting such an [national] identity and thus to allay the fears of pro-statehood supporters” (*The Puerto Rican Nation* 134). Yet at the same time, the adoption of nationalist symbols such as the flag to represent cultural nationalism succeeded in diluting the revolutionary potential of those symbols. Intense nationalist sentiment, which was politically
dangerous in pre-commonwealth Puerto Rico, became incorporated into what Juan Flores calls the ‘postcolonial colony’\(^{14}\) as a legitimate marker of the Puerto Rican ‘personality’ or culture. But as Zilkia Janer notes, cultural nationalism “suggests that culture can be separate from politics . . . that culture can be a ‘free zone’ and hides the materiality of colonialism and the materiality of culture” (3). Instead, she argues that ‘colonial nationalism’ is a more appropriate term to characterize the cultural nationalism of the 1950s: “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” (Janer 2). Novels like Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon* demonstrate that the colonial condition has been ultimately inseparable from national culture or from national narratives.

This chapter will examine the novels of two Puerto Rican writers, one from island and one from the mainland, in an effort to determine the ways in which nation functions as an imagined construct in the face of a colonial present. Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon* (1998) chronicles the history of the Mendizabal and Montfort families, but it also deconstructs the myth of ‘*la gran familia puertorriqueña.*’ The paradise of nationalist literatures becomes a myth which sublimates a history of race and gender oppression. In the end, Isabel, the novel’s primary narrator, can only escape this oppression by becoming an accomplice in the destruction of the family and fleeing to the U.S. Ferré’s narrator essentially breaks with Puerto Rican history as well as with the nation in order to set herself free, a strategy which suggests that like the family, the nation is also doomed unless it can somehow break with a patriarchal legacy. Like Ferré,

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\(^{14}\) In *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, Juan Flores explains that “colonialism cannot be extricated from the new cultural politics of difference, nor from the meaning and range of ‘Latino’ culture and identities. The direct colonial tie, as in the case of Puerto Rico is . . . the extreme limit in the range of ‘postcolonial,’ and Latino, grid lines” (10).
Judith Ortiz Cofer also invokes the image of Puerto Rico as an island paradise. Although *The Line of the Sun* (1989) is a coming-of-age narrative, the novel opens with an idyllic account of the narrator’s family history. Embedded in this immigrant acclimation story is a brief rendition of a family saga. This family romance, which records the childhoods of Marisol’s parents and her uncle, becomes essential to Marisol’s own narrative. The island myth functions as a comforting break from the realities of life in the U.S. and as an internal utopia necessary for Marisol’s survival in Paterson, New Jersey. Despite the mythic representation of island life, however, the narrative reveals subtle contradictions which allude to the nation’s colonial relationship to the U.S. Yet the narrator remains unable to fully engage these contradictions in spite of their influence on her self-perception. Marisol is ultimately incapable of reconciling the two halves of her text, or her identity; instead she opts to turn her Puerto Rican history/heritage into a sustaining, yet distant myth. As such, she ruptures the island/nation and its political present from her discourse and turns her Puerto Rican identity into something much less polemic than political identity. In what follows I will discuss the varying strategies these writers employ to break with the nation as a way to examine the effects of colonial influence on national imaginings.

Part of my project in exploring the works of Ferré and Ortiz Cofer stems from a desire to discover the nuances that characterize Puerto Rican national narratives. Additionally, these two writers continue with my attempt to map the ways in which the romance evolves as it emerges from privileged positions within Latina/o literature. Although Ferré is not a U.S. Latina, as are Cristina García, Julia Alvarez and Judith Ortiz Cofer, Puerto Rico’s unique relationship to the United States—namely its ‘commonwealth’ status—precludes easy exclusion of island writing from Latina/o literature. Like the other women writers of this study, Rosario Ferré often uses
family genealogy to narrate national history, to incorporate women into nation, and to consider the borders and boundaries which determine national inclusion/exclusion. Although island and mainland writers experience nationness differently, based not only on their geographic locations, but also on their proximities to political discourses, both are undoubtedly influenced by the overwhelming presence of the U.S. on the island since before 1898. As an identity marker, ‘Puerto Rican’ remains delimited by the island’s colonial condition. As such, it invokes the U.S., if only implicitly as its opposite. As a result, Flores and other critics consistently point to the necessity of addressing the colonial dimension of ‘Latino/a’ as it pertains to Puerto Rican social formations and institutions on the island as well as on the mainland.15 In the case of Rosario Ferré, her recent self-positioning as a U.S./Puerto Rican Latina suggests that integration with the imperial center necessitates continuous re-negotiation. Her 1998 guest column for the New York Times, in fact, reveals her attempts to negotiate a U.S. Latina identity within the U.S. She explains, “When I travel to the States, I feel as Latina as Chita Rivera. But in Latin America, I feel more American than John Wayne” (“Puerto Rico, U.S.A.”). By choosing to identify with Chita Rivera, a U.S. born Latina of Puerto Rican descent, Ferré locates her identity as grounded in U.S. Latino/a culture rather than one aligned with Puerto Rican or Latin American cultures.

Writing and translating her own works into English, advocating statehood for the island, and essentially casting herself as a mediator between mainland and island also makes for fruitful comparisons with writers who engage more fully with the mainland consequences of a colonial condition. The House on the Lagoon, in fact, was Ferré’s first novel to be published initially in English, a decision which she often explains as dictated by the marketplace. Likewise, the

15 Flores argues that “From the perspective of ‘Puerto Rican/Latinos,’ . . . the category ‘Latino’ into which they are grouped . . . has utility only if it can account for the colonial dimension of difference in the U.S. setting and as an international background” (11).
literature of the mainland is essential to understanding Puerto Rican national identity. Flores explains that “the diaspora is integral and relational to the national and regional; it constitutes the most obvious and profound instance of fragmentation of the national” (41). Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun* presents a mythical counterpoint to the contested bourgeois romance of Ferré’s protagonists, and thus enriches our analyses of the convergences and divergences of national imaginings as they intersect with colonial domination.

**Failed Romance in Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon***

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the family romance has a long history in Latin American literature; in the post-independence period in particular, it functioned as a way to imagine and project a desired national unity. More recently, however, Latinas have rescripted the terms of the family saga in order to negotiate their own position within an imagined transnational homeland. Yet as the novels of Julia Alvarez and Sandra Cisneros reveal, romance paradigms often prove inadequate to the task of exposing and revising the hierarchies and inequalities that characterized Latin America’s founding fictions. Perhaps because Puerto Rico has not experienced a period of post-independence consolidation, given that it went from Spanish colony to American possession in 1898, its national romances have frequently taken the form of failed romances, or as Zilkia Janer argues, ‘impossible romances.’ Rather than build nation through reconciliations and heterosexual unions, as did other Latin American founding fictions, Puerto Ricans writers have more often dramatized the impossible unity of nation/family within a colonial state (Janer 7). As Janer explains, “‘Impossible Romance’ is the dominant allegory, articulating the incapacity to satisfactorily define the relationship between different sectors of Puerto Rican society and the colonizer as lovers who cannot agree on the terms of their love relationship” (7).
Ferré’s 1995 novel, *The House on the Lagoon*, reproduces this ‘dominant allegory;’ however, she transforms the struggle between colonized/colonizer to one waged among the colonized as they grapple with colonial in/ex-clusion. *The House on the Lagoon* stages a political-national struggle over the terms of the island’s ‘marriage’ to the U.S. as a gendered conflict between lovers. Her rewriting of nation, however, links failed romance/impossible unity to the internal structures of Puerto Rican society, namely the legacies of patriarchal power which nation and family continue to uphold. Family discord, in fact, reproduces the battle over the terms of national inclusion within the imperial center; however, the crux of this struggle does not center on independence versus annexation, but on the different, gendered understandings of imperial power and equality. Both narrators—Quintín and Isabel—support Puerto Rico’s continued relationship with the U.S. Where they disagree, however, is on the terms and rationale for continued association. While Quintín remains invested economically in Puerto Rico’s continued relationship with the U.S., he nevertheless supports the preservation of patriarchal national myths. Isabel, on the other hands, deconstructs patriarchal myths and exposes the bourgeois lies of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* in order to justify her violent break with nation and family.

The gendered struggle over control of the family/national history, however, functions to efface Isabel’s political motivations. Ferré replaces the independence-statehood political opposition with a gendered conflict between husband and wife. The question of Puerto Rico’s political status becomes secondary to the dispute between the couple despite Quintín’s claims to the contrary. Both of these ‘conflicts’—national status and gender equality/authority—act as diversions, redirecting Isabel’s motivations in ways which obscure her, and perhaps Ferré’s, colonial ambivalence. The struggle for domination which takes place on both a narrative and a
textual level involves not only a quest to appropriate masculinized authority for women and minorities who have historically been marginalized, but it also implies a re-evaluation and re-narrativizing of colonization as beneficial to those who have historically been excluded from the machinations of power on the island. Isabel, who positions herself ambivalently in support of the U.S.’s ‘civilizing’ mission on the island, exposes the island’s history in an effort to justify her own violence at the end of the novel, as well as the colonial violence implied in the opening scene of Spanish and U.S. occupation. While Isabel reinforces the rhetoric of colonial domination, she nonetheless expresses a certain amount of ambivalence toward U.S. colonization. In fact, the opening chapters of her text often border on parody as they mimic the language of imperialism. In what follows, I will examine the ways in which Isabel’s narrative underscores the ambivalence of national imaginings and of colonial obedience, particularly for the island’s elite. By exposing the bourgeois lies of Puerto Rico’s elite, Isabel not only breaks with legacies of patriarchy, but she also suggests that doing so is necessary in order to safeguard ‘progress’ on the island. Undoing family and nation while at the same time recording it as a textual artifact facilitates Isabel’s dissociation from the island and her associations with the colonizer.

*The House on the Lagoon* reenacts the macrocosm of Puerto Rican history through the Mendizabal and Monfort families. The narrative itself is, in fact, the text of Isabel’s novel as she attempts to “interweave the woof of [her] memories with the warp of Quintín’s recollections” (*House on the Lagoon, House, 6*). Interspersed within her narrative reconstruction of family genealogies are her husband Quintín’s interruptions and refutations of Isabel’s ‘herstory.’ Yet as Isabel records family history, she also attempts to rescript the terms of the national romance, particularly the ways in which it has tended to promote Hispanophilia to the exclusion of African
influences on the island. Intellectuals in the early twentieth century responded to encroaching American influence and domination on island culture by promoting Puerto Rican origins as predominantly Catholic and Hispanic. Although “[the] construction of a Hispanic identity for Puerto Rico was in part an anticolonial strategy. . . . it was also an act of violence against the large black and mulatto population of the island” (Janer 31). Likewise, the myth of the ‘great Puerto Rican family’ relied on a paternalistic organization which subordinated non-whites and women to white men. This myth of racial integration functioned as a nationalist counterpoint to the racist practices on the mainland by representing Puerto Rican culture as a mestizo—Spanish, African and Taino—culture. Yet, as Duany explains, “[i]n elite as well as in popular forms of culture, Afro-Puerto Ricans continue to be represented as marginal and subaltern outsiders, somehow less Puerto Rican than white people” (The Puerto Rican Nation 14). Likewise, in her “Preface” to Sweet Diamond Dust, Ferré explains that the myth of an island paradise “never existed except for a privileged few, the landed aristocracy of the nineteenth century, whose praises were sung by our poets and musicians. . . . without ever mentioning that the greater part of the islanders lived in Hell” (viii). Like The House on the Lagoon, Sweet Diamond Dust also deconstructs the integrationist myths implicit in representations of nation as family. By using contradictory narrative voices Ferré teases out the inconsistencies which characterize edenic versions of the island’s history. Don Hermenegildo’s biography of statesman Ubaldino De la Valle reveals his own desire to invent a pre-occupation national history in which islanders co-existed in peace and in neighborly solidarity. Yet as the narratives of Gloria Camprubi and Laura Latoni make clear, racial inequality, gender oppression and class hierarchies undermine national and familial solidarity on the island.
While *Sweet Diamond Dust* dismantles the lies of the father through the intrusion of subaltern voices, *The House on the Lagoon* attempts to do so by re-writing those national romances from the perspective of a privileged intermediary—Isabel Montfort. In deconstructing these myths, however, Isabel also reproduces the language of colonialism. As a result, her text not only dismantles integrationist myths and those national romances which reinforce it, but it also suggests that breaking with the remnants of patriarchy is necessary to forge a new identity, one which preserves the ‘civilizing’ influence of the U.S. The novel begins on July 4th, 1917 with the arrival of Buenaventura Mendizabal, the family patriarch, from Spain. His arrival also coincides with President Woodrow Wilson’s signing of the Jones Act, which imposed U.S. citizenship on all Puerto Ricans despite their legislation’s vote against it. Isabel thus conflates the ‘founding’ moment of the family/nation with the moment that islanders first gained citizenship. Much like other founding fictions, Isabel writes the family’s genesis to coincide with what she perceives as the nation’s beginnings—the granting of U.S. citizenship and, thus, their legal claims to the U.S. Yet unlike Julia Alvarez’s *In the Name of Salomé*, which unites Salomé Ureña’s birth with the Dominican Republic’s independence, Isabel’s narrative underscores the lack which characterizes what might otherwise have been Puerto Rico’s national beginnings. She explains that “[a]s Buenaventura’s ship dropped anchor in the harbor, the festivities celebrating our brand new American citizenship were going full blast. Now each of us would have the right to an American passport, a talisman so powerful it opened doors all over the world” (*House* 16). In order to imbue her own text with authority, Isabel repeats the discourses of colonialism. She also ignores the political timing of the Jones Act to coincide with the U.S. entry into World War I.16 As such, the opening chapters, in which she details the celebration of

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16 The signing of the Jones Act on March 2, 1917 not only imposed U.S. citizenship onto all Puerto Ricans, but it also made all Puerto Rican men liable for military draft. The political timing of citizenship is particularly important
U.S. citizenship and the arrival of the Spanish patriarch, might be read as an instance of what Homi Bhabha calls colonial mimicry. In “Of Mimicry and Men,” Bhabha explains that “the desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry—through a process of writing and repetition—is the final irony of partial representation” (88). In a telling passage describing the benefits of colonization, Isabel remarks that

. . . our brand new American citizenship was hailed as a godsend, and a first class celebration was in order. We would now have a definite identification with the most powerful country in the world, and the golden eagle would be stamped on the cover of our passport. Henceforth, we would cherish it as our magic shield; we could travel anywhere . . . we had the inalienable right to political asylum at the local American Embassy; and the American ambassador would be our civil servant. (House 16)

Although this passage reflects a certain amount of irony, Isabel’s text remains earnest in its support of the U.S. presence on the island. As a result, I am more inclined to read this irony as an example of the doubling which Bhabha associates with mimicry. In this context Isabel acts as an authorized colonial interlocutor, that “reformed, recognizable Other” who repeats the language of the colonizer, but with a difference (Bhabha 86). That difference results in an ambivalence toward the colonizing project and the uneven racial and cultural exploitation which results, a subject I will return to a bit later in this chapter. Thus as Bhabha explains, “[t]he menace of mimicry is its double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (88). Isabel’s gaze is redirected at the colonizer, in this case the American presence on the island, as she reproduces the democratic and civilizing rhetoric of imperialism to re-write Puerto Rico’s history.

Isabel’s joining of national and familial beginnings also reproduces the masculinized imagery of colonialism and conquest. Despite the novel’s obvious efforts to ‘marry’ American

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given that the U.S. was only weeks away from entering World War I. Approximately 18,000 Puerto Ricans served during WWI, most in racially segregated units.
and Spanish colonization and so dramatize Puerto Rico’s colonial foundations, the text clearly casts the island as feminine subject caught in the midst of a battle for domination. The genesis of nation is here constructed as a masculinized historical moment, one which welcomes the Spanish patriarch/colonizer and the militarized presence of American Marine cadets. The gendering of the colonial/national foundation becomes increasingly apparent as Isabel narrates Rebecca’s desire for a suitor/escort to the Spanish Casino’s ball. She explains that Rebecca

wanted a true monarch, one who could subdue her with a single glance. A sovereign with shoulders spread like infantry battalions, strong cavalry thighs. . . . A real commander in chief, who would raise her slumbering regiments at a command. She wanted a prince who longed for the whole of her: her marzipan throat and her cream-puff shoulders, her coconut custard breasts, her dainty rice-and-cinnamon feet, and her delicate ginger pussy; one who would eat her, lick her, nip her, and drink her, and then grind her into powdered sugar . . .

(\textit{House} 29)

The language of militarized monarchy and conquest merges the desire for Spanish and American colonization with Rebecca’s longing for a suitor/husband. The imagined romance of family beginnings is thus joined to colonial domination, which persists throughout Rebecca’s marriage to Buenaventura. Isabel’s text underscores the sexualized rhetoric of conquest and colonization, in which the Americas figured as virgin/vacant land available for, and perhaps desirous of, conquest. Rebecca, thus, stands in for the island-nation, hemmed in by colonial domination. Reproducing these metaphors, however, undermines Isabel’s larger quest to expose instances of women’s oppression. By suggesting that Rebecca/nation desire the violence of conquest, Isabel merely validates the colonial project.

In fact, while describing her own politics, Isabel reproduces the stereotype of a feminized and subordinate Puerto Rico:

\ldots our island is like a betrothed, always on the verge of marriage. If one day Puerto Rico becomes a state, it will have to accept English—the language of her future husband—as its official language, not just because it’s the language of modernity and of progress but also because it’s the language of authority. If the island decides to remain single . . . it will probably mean backwardness and poverty. (\textit{House} 184)
Although Isabel claims to be sympathetic to the independence movement, she clearly prefers the ‘progress’ of associations with the U.S. over the ‘backwardness’ of independence. This feminization of the island and its association with backwardness reproduces the colonial rhetoric of twentieth century U.S. policies toward the island. After 1898 and the U.S.’s acquisition of the island, politicians from the mainland tended to frame occupation as a civilizing or modernizing mission. Consequently, Puerto Ricans were often represented as people in need of tutelage. Isabel’s text echoes this discourse by creating a binary opposition in which Puerto Rico figures as the backward and traditional mother, while the U.S. is represented as the masculinized bastion of modernity and progress. As Frantz Fanon explains “the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonization came to lighten their darkness. . . [and] to drive into the natives’ heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation” (“On National Culture” 37). By repeating these stereotypes, Isabel not only situates her text in a more favorable place within an imperial marketplace, but she also legitimates her own break with the island’s ‘backwardness.’

Although Isabel never clearly identifies her political loyalties with respect to the island, she does express her desire for a continuing relationship between the island and the mainland. Her dream of the “island being part of the modern world” suggests that only continued association with the U.S.—commonwealth status or statehood—will guarantee the island’s ‘progress,’ and, more specifically, gender equality. She explains that “[t]he purpose of a commonwealth is precisely to preserve the possibility of change. It’s the most flexible and intelligent political solution for us, but it makes others feel insecure” (House 184). Even though he is secretly reading her novel as she writes it, Quintín fails to recognize that Isabel shares his desire for continued relations with the U.S. He too believes that “English [has] made it possible
for Puerto Ricans to be part of the modern world, whereas Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti were still in the Middle Ages” (*House* 150). Both husband and wife view annexation versus independence as a choice between modernization and backwardness. Yet while Quintín values modernization for its potential to increase his profits and expand his clientele, Isabel espouses modernization and ‘progress’ for its potential to liberate her from Quintín and from the gender constraints of Puerto Rico’s elite. As she tells Quintín, “[m]y novel is about personal freedom . . . It’s about my independence from you” (*House* 336).

Yet Quintín mistakenly associates her desire for gender equality and personal freedom with the independence movement on the island. In fact, Quintín consistently attacks Isabel’s text as a “feminist treatise, a communist manifesto” (*House* 386). This misunderstanding results from Isabel’s ambivalent representations of both the national and colonial projects. Although she reluctantly identifies with the colonizing government, she consistently expresses her sympathy for the independence movement. She explains that as a young girl, she “felt a great deal of sympathy for independence” because she was so close to her grandmother, Abby (*House* 183). Even in her youth, however, she feels the effects of contradictory messages dispersed through the marketplace. Although the Montfort family remains divided politically, they all succumb to the materiality of the Sears catalogue, suggesting that the marketplace is perhaps imperialism’s most effective means of conquest. As a result, Isabel explains, “I didn’t know what to believe. [Abby] wanted the island to become independent for moral reasons, and in this I agreed with her wholeheartedly. . . . But Abby also put great store in progress, and cherished her American passport as if it were a jewel” (*House* 183). This confusion becomes apparent throughout much of the text as contradictory representations of imperialism and of the U.S. inevitably seep into her novel.
Isabel’s narrative describing Aristides’ role in the 1937 shooting of Nationalist cadets, for example, calls attention to the ways that imperial power relies on the local elite to obscure the machinations and sources of colonial domination. After the massacre on Easter Sunday in 1937, Aristides becomes the scapegoat for the abuses of imperial power as it confronts the growing independence movement of Pedro Albizu Campos. Michael González-Cruz notes that one of the strategies of colonial consolidation involved placing professionals, merchants and landowners who favored annexation or who had been educated abroad into leadership roles within the municipal government (10). But, as Isabel explains in her novel, these relationships between local elite and the colonial power did not mean shared governance or equality. In narrating a meeting between Aristides, Quintín’s maternal grandfather, and Governor Blanton Winship, she reveals the paternalism inherent to interactions between the two countries. When Aristides expresses his support for statehood, Governor Winship merely replies that “[w]e can teach your people to take care of the land; how to make it more productive with modern methods. . . . It’ll be much better for you if you stay as you are, enjoying the protection of the American flag, but keeping your own personality” (House 127). Aristides’ breakdown after the massacre points to the cultural and political ambivalence occasioned by inconsistent U.S. policies on the island. Although he aligns himself with the principles of the colonizer, the incident in Ponce forces him to confront the hypocrisy of colonial rhetoric. Isabel notes that Aristides begins to preach independence and statehood together: “‘Puerto Rico will one day be the forty-ninth state in the Union’ . . . ‘and will thus bring greater glory to our fallen Nationalist cadets. Praised be our American Constitution, as well as our American congressmen, who will one day grant us statehood so that we can become an independent nation’” (House 137). Aristides’ speech ultimately calls attention to the colonial nonsense of U.S. rhetoric, and more specifically, to the
emptiness of signifiers like equality, sovereignty and liberty for colonial subjects who attempt to identify with the U.S.

As a result of Isabel’s historical reconstructions which subtly critique colonial power, Quintín misreads her narrative as an ‘independence manifesto.’ Such a novel becomes particularly dangerous for Quintín, as well as for other men of his class. Quintín’s support for statehood and his preservation of patriarchy aligns him with the early twentieth-century elite who aided U.S. colonization in order to secure and increase their own economic interests. Likewise, the commonwealth period became particularly important in securing a favorable position within the new order. By establishing themselves as colonial administrators, the elite sought to maintain strict hierarchies which preserved their own privilege. Arlene Dávila points out that “[t]he commonwealth has been rightly interpreted as an accommodation on the part of the new elite, descendents of landowners and the new professionals, who required local governmental autonomy and American capital to constitute themselves as a hegemonic class within the constraints of colonialism” (Sponsored Identities 32). Quintín manages to establish his position within a U.S. economic market and thus secure his position among the island’s elite and within the imperial order. Isabel’s novel tampers with the patriarchal lies/myths of Puerto Rico’s elite, and as such threatens Quintín’s position in society. He explains that “he [doesn’t] understand why she [Isabel] insisted on baring his family’s secrets to the world” (House 247). Moreover, he consistently feels the threat of violence implicit in his wife’s re-writing of their history, and in fact, this violence materializes as Isabel maneuvers Quintín off the boat in their final struggle at the end of the text. In order to expose and/or dismantle patriarchy, Isabel reveals Quintín’s unethical behavior and his bourgeois prejudices. The more he reads of her novel, the more “Quintín began to worry that he was in some kind of danger . . . Isabel could . . . accuse him of
all sorts of crimes, but it was only on paper. As long as the novel wasn’t published, she couldn’t hurt his reputation and she certainly couldn’t hurt him physically. Or could she?” (*House* 294). Isabel’s novel, however, threatens violence as it unravels the myths and discourses of patriarchy. It aims to un-write Quintín’s history, and thus, his position within Puerto Rico’s elite. The text also propels him toward his own violent end in order to guarantee Isabel’s usurpation of his position within the new colonial order.

Although both Quintín and Isabel align themselves with colonial power throughout the novel, they disagree on the meaning and goals of that alliance. So while Quintín’s support of the colonizer may seem to position him as an alternate intermediary between island and mainland, his commitment to bourgeois ideologies makes him much less ‘progressive’ than Isabel and her ‘liberal’ politics. By exposing Quintín’s unethical behavior, Isabel denies him legitimacy as a colonial subject versed in the rhetoric of liberal democracy. Instead, she positions herself as a more credible intermediary, one who is not only sympathetic to nationalist movements, but also to Puerto Rico’s underclass. In doing so, she negotiates a new position as a potential translator of subaltern speech. Her decision to include the details of Carmelina’s rape, Willie’s adoption, Buenaventura’s liaisons with women from Las Minas, and Esmeralda’s and Coral’s mistreatments demonstrate her commitment to exposing Quintín’s racist family prejudices.

Moreover, the revelation that Buenaventura fathers a parallel family of blue-eyed mulatto children with the descendents of Petra Avilés, the family’s black servant, suggests that the African and Spanish families merged at the earliest points of contact. Yet the geographically obscure space of Las Minas, where Petra’s family lives, and its distance from the Mendizabal house suggests that the African foundations of Puerto Rican culture are literally kept hidden until Isabel reveals them. Likewise, the structure of the house on the lagoon reinforces the African
foundations of Puerto Rican culture and nation despite their exclusion from the visible part of the home/nation. Petra and her family literally occupy the foundational spaces of the Mendizabal house—the cellars. Despite multiple demolitions and reconstructions of the house, the cellars remain unchanged and integral to the house’s structural integrity.

In explaining Isabel’s attempts to situate herself as a credible intermediary/witness between the colonizer and Puerto Rico’s marginalized, I do not wish to suggest that she successfully translates the Other. Isabel’s privileged position and her adoption of paternalistic ideologies impede her ability to form alliances with many of the women she encounters. She is even unable to form a healthy relationship with Rebecca, Quintín’s mother, despite similar economic circumstances, artistic interests and gender constraints. Rather than empathize with the limitations imposed on women like Rebecca, Isabel often describes her as silly, childlike, frivolous, and jealous. These descriptions wind up trivializing Isabel’s attempt to narrate the oppression of women on the island. Although Isabel originally comes from humble economic origins, her father manages to successfully move the family into the middle class. As a result, Isabel completes her education in the U.S. Moreover, as she admits in her narrative, her bloodline is ‘pure,’ or white European. Throughout her text, however, she associates less with women like Rebecca, who were born into privilege and more with women like Esmeralda and Petra, who because of their skin color, have had far less access to privilege. Yet as Isabel describes these women, she often resorts to essentialized representations which reveal her own privileged position.

Although Petra is one of few women in the text who wields real power within her family/community, much of her power functions to reinforce the patriarch’s position in the family. Her power is also overdetermined by her race; according to Isabel, Petra’s power comes
from her African heritage and her knowledge of religious practices. Yet this power remains incongruous given Petra’s almost unquestioned loyalty to Buenaventura and the other Mendizabals. Isabel provides little evidence to support such loyalty; instead, she reveals only that Petra saved Buenaventura’s life and as a result becomes a part of the household. So intense is her commitment to Buenaventura’s family that she often places the family’s interests over her own family. When Brunilda, one of the servants, complains that Rebecca’s dress costs five hundred dollars while her salary is only eight dollars a month, Petra counsels her “to keep quiet about it. Rebecca was Buenaventura’s wife, and she had the right to spend whatever she wanted on clothes, which were an important symbol of her husband’s position in the world” (House 236). Likewise, when other servants complain of mistreatment, she advises them to “say nothing.” After Quintín rapes Carmelina, Petra’s granddaughter, Petra is even willing to sacrifice the infant in order to preserve the family’s reputation. RoseAnna Mueller argues that “Petra is composed of a number of stereotypical black servant traits . . . but Ferré manages to give this stereotype a different reading and values the stereotypical characteristics in a positive manner” (203). This assessment of Petra’s representation in the text, however, fails to consider Isabel’s motivations in reproducing these stereotypes for an outside audience.

Petra’s exploitation and naïve loyalty become essential to Isabel’s attempts to cast herself as a viable mediator/translator for mainland audiences. She admits that “a tale, like life itself, isn’t finished until it’s heard by someone with an understanding heart” (House 380). And although some critics have argued that that ‘someone’ is Petra, the text itself is not intended for Petra. After all, Quintín reveals that Isabel is, in fact, writing her novel in English. He asks, “Would she have written her manuscript in English if she didn’t think English was important? If she had written her novel in Spanish and published it in Puerto Rico, why only a handful of
people would read it! But if she published in the United States, thousands would read it” (House 151). Petra’s change in loyalties at the end of the narrative, once she learns that Willie will be disinherited, thus reveals more about Isabel’s desire to cast herself as a credible interlocutor than it does about Petra. In fact, her decision to curse Quintín in defense of Willie seems rather out of character given her unquestioning support of the Mendizabal patriarchy throughout the novel. Rather than attribute this inconsistency to Isabel’s fledgling writing skills, we might read it as another one of Isabel’s attempts to forge—bring together and falsify—alliances with the marginalized and so legitimize her own narrative. In this way, Isabel manages to receive a blessing of sorts from Petra as she engages the violence of patriarchy to save herself and her son, Willie.

In addition to bolstering Isabel’s position as a potential translator of subaltern speech, Petra’s narrative also functions to reinforce Isabel’s whiteness for U.S. audiences. In “Rosario’s Tongue,” Frances Negrón-Muntaner argues that in Ferré’s novel, “criollo whiteness is an uncontested identity that requires a fetishized blackness for ratification” (194). By representing and reinforcing her own whiteness—and that of Puerto Rico’s elite—Isabel (and Ferré) also facilitates her own move closer to the imperial center. As Negron-Muntaner explains,

Ferré does not deny racial diversity on the Island; instead, in the image of the mythic American South, she presents two fairly impermeable Puerto Ricos: one poor, black, and exotic; the other rich, white, and eccentric. This, in a move very different from her earlier work, represents the value of racial purity as a social fact, not a construct. By plotting Puerto Rican ethno-nationality through the subjectivity of white women and their fundamental and foundational conflict with Puerto Rican white men, Ferré cancels out asymmetrical power relations between Puerto Ricans and Americans and reinscribes the supreme value of whiteness over racialized subjects. (194-5)

Consequently, Isabel is better able to emphasize her (racial) likeness those in power despite her sympathy for the plight of racialized Others. Isabel’s thus frames her difference from the colonizer as one of culture, not race.
Like Isabel, Ferré often positions herself as a translator or mediator caught between opposing cultures. In her essay “On Destiny, Language and Translation,” Ferré imagines herself as Ophelia adrift in the ocean between the mainland and the island. She explains that as a writer, her “true habitat” is “neither Washington nor San Juan, neither past nor present, but the crevice in between” (Ferré, “On Destiny,” 155). Thus, her responsibility, she argues, includes translating for those living on the mainland and exiled from cultural/national memory:

Obliged to adapt in order to survive, the children of these Puerto Rican parents often refuse to learn to speak Spanish, and they grow up having lost the ability to read the literature and the history of their island. This cultural suicide constitutes as immense loss, as they become unable to learn about their roots, having lost the language which is the main road to their culture. I believe it is the duty of the Puerto Rican writer, who has been privileged enough to learn both languages, to try to alleviate this situation . . . (Ferré, “On Destiny,” 163, my emphasis)

This passage suggests that Ferré views herself as able to, and responsible for, translating Puerto Rican culture to those living on the mainland. Her comments, however, are troubling in that they reveal a lack of understanding of mainland Puerto Ricans and emigration. By conflating language with cultural knowledge, she expresses an elitist view of nationalism and identity. Moreover, her assumption that emigrants refuse to learn Spanish ignores the complexity of colonial domination, particularly for those living on the mainland.

Ferré’s decision to begin publishing and writing in English—her last three novels have all been published first in English—as well as recent, public support for statehood has made her the subject of ire among many of Puerto Rico’s intellectuals and independistas. Earlier collections like Maldito Amor and Papeles de Pandora, however, earned her the respect of the literary community because they tended to attack the myths/lies of the Puerto Rican bourgeoisie and their complicity with colonialism. These early collections often undermined the same class from which the author emerged. Her father, Luis A. Ferré, was the governor of Puerto Rico from 1969-1973 and the founder of the New Progressive Party, which advocated statehood for the
island. Yet the author was vehemently pro-independence until her 1998 New York Times column advocating statehood. As a result, her recent work in English is often viewed as pandering to the American marketplace. Ferré, in fact, admits that her decision to publish first in English is rooted in her desire to increase her marketability and readership. Her shifting political allegiance, however, makes readers and critics more prone to interpreting The House on the Lagoon as an assimilationist tale. And while I do not completely disagree with that assessment, I do think that the novel’s representations of nation and colonization are more complex. Despite Isabel’s (and Ferré’s) gestures at assimilation or colonial legitimacy and inclusion, her novel is ultimately unable to subsume all the ill effects of colonial oppression.

While narrating Ermelinda Quiñones’s participation in needle industry strikes, Isabel also records the U.S. exploitation of women factory workers during the industrialization projects of the 1920s. She notes that Puerto Rican legislators, bribed by the tycoons of the garment industry, managed repress the strikers/factory workers and maintain a profitable climate for mainland investors. Likewise, Isabel’s discussion of Jim Crow on the mainland calls attention to the emptiness of the colonizer’s ‘democratic’ rhetoric: “The concept of equality under the law, which the new democratic regime supposedly had brought to the island and which they had so earnestly embraced because they wanted to be good American citizens, was interpreted very differently on the mainland” (House 125). Moreover, the fire that destroys the house on the lagoon implies that destruction is inevitable for family/nation/house constructed on land acquired illegally or unethically. Like the house on the lagoon, built on land that Buenaventura obtained under questionable circumstances, the colony, built on domination and exploitation, must also face failure or destruction. In this context, Isabel’s violence becomes her way of displacing her

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colonial anger onto Quintín. By killing Quintín, she exorcises her frustrations with the island’s colonial status. In order to complete her alienation from nation/colony and complete her colonial forgetting, Isabel must destroy house/family.

However, Isabel’s decision to escape to Miami rather than New York allows her to ignore the racial hierarchies which remain in place on the mainland, as well as the colonial dimensions of those systems. One of the most haunting absences in the text is thus the lack of a Puerto Rican experience on the mainland. Although Isabel acknowledges that islanders frequently traveled to the mainland and that others frequently emigrated for economic and/or educational reasons, she never demonstrates an understanding of the machinations of imperial power or of the discrimination and alienation which characterizes Puerto Rican migration. In this regard, Isabel appears to identify much more closely with the colonizer that she does with the Puerto Rico’s bourgeoisie, its underclass, or its emigrants. In a 2005 interview with Gema Castillo García, Ferré rejects critiques that she has resorted to using the language of the colonizers. Instead, she explains: “creo francamente que en el mundo en el que vivimos no debe haber ni conquistador ni conquistador. . . . Hay que pensar en términos continentales, aunque cada cual debe guardar sus idiosincrasias, su orgullo nacional y sus raíces” [“frankly, I believe that in our world, there should be neither conqueror nor conquered. . . . We must think in terms of continental relationships; however, each country should preserve its idiosyncrasies, its national pride and its roots”] (239). Like Isabel, Ferré fails to acknowledge that despite our best efforts, relations of power will not in and of themselves disappear. Her column for the New York Times, in which she declared her intentions to vote for annexation in the next plebiscite, also overlooks the unevenness of power which has characterized U.S.-Puerto Rican relations since 1898. Instead, she represents the colonial relationship as one through which Puerto Rico received the
benefits of ‘progress.’ As a result of ethnic diversity on the mainland, Ferré explains, “we no longer need to fear that ‘el otro,’ the other, will swallow us up. We have become the other. As a Puerto Rican and an American, I believe our future as a community is inseparable from our culture and language, but I’m also passionately committed to the modern” (“Puerto Rico U.S.A.”).

Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon* functions as an instance of colonial nationalism in that it ultimately seeks to validate and strengthen the existing colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Yet despite the novel’s obvious attempts to represent colonization as a ‘civilizing’ mission, it is unable to resolve the contradictions inherent to conquest, domination and exploitation. The unconscious of the text thus manages to reveal these inconsistencies, particularly at the intersections of labor, capital and material culture. As a form of colonial mimicry, then, Ferré’s text unintentionally calls attentions to the structures of domination. Moreover, by rooting the narrative conflict in gender difference and inequality, Ferré highlights the ways in which women in colonized cultures must often navigate between the greater freedoms offered by U.S. culture and the more patriarchal cultures of home. For Isabel specifically, ‘progress’ becomes intricately tied to women’s liberation. Thus, even as a form of colonial nationalism, *The House on the Lagoon* manages to underscore the complexities of colonial relationships.

**Colonial Identities in Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun***

While Rosario Ferré’s novel makes overt her desire to position herself as a viable interlocutor for Puerto Rico, Judith Ortiz Cofer’s 1989 novel, *The Line of the Sun*, instead underscores the difficulties of writing nation from within the imperial center. Marisol, the novel’s narrator, struggles to reconcile her Puerto Rican history and culture with her desire for acceptance in the U.S. The first half of the novel is, in fact, Marisol’s textual reconstruction of
her parents’ and her uncle’s adventures in Puerto Rico. Like Ferré’s Isabel Montfort, Marisol imagines her family’s history in order to understand and re-imagine her position within the U.S. Yet unlike *The House on the Lagoon*, which successfully integrates the past and present into the narrator-writer’s reality, *The Line of the Sun* imagines nation as a pastoral and/or idyllic community completely removed from the harsh experiences of alienation and discrimination in Paterson, New Jersey. Consequently, the novel is composed of two very distinct parts: the pastoral romance of her parents’ Puerto Rico and the poverty and dislocation of Marisol’s life in El Building. As Efrain Barradas astutely notes, edenic visions of the island often function as internal utopias that sustain emigrants living on the mainland. Marisol’s romantic re-writing of her family’s history on the island becomes an escape from the difficulties of her position between the emigrants of El Building and the Anglo-Americans in the surrounding community. Yet at the same time, her inability to integrate the two halves of the text into one narrative or to imagine the island as more than myth suggests that Marisol has also been unable to reconcile conflicting loyalties to home and homeland.

As we saw in Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon*, women’s greater freedoms on the mainland can and often do supersede critiques of colonialism. For Isabel Montfort identifying with U.S. ‘progress’ means greater opportunities for personal freedom. In fact, women’s status in colonized communities has often been a space of colonial intrusion. Partha Chatterjee explains that in order to represent colonialism as a ‘civilizing’ mission, the colonizer “[assumed] a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood,” turning her into “a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature” of the conquered culture (118). Certainly Isabel’s attempts to identify with the oppressed on the island—Afro-Puerto Ricans and the lower classes—suggest that she has not only bought into the notion of an “oppressive and unfree”
island culture, but also that she has accepted the mainland as inherently more ‘civilized’ and ‘progressive’ regarding women and minorities. In Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun*, however, the freedoms of the mainland prove less tangible. Although Marisol recounts her mother Ramona’s childhood as one spent caring for siblings and other family members, the narrator appears reluctant to characterize either culture as necessarily offering more freedoms for women. She notes that while much of her mother’s youth was spent on domestic responsibilities, it also allowed Ramona certain freedoms. Marisol explains, “If I were on the Island, I would be respected as a young woman of marriageable age. . . . a girl’s fifteenth year . . . she dresses like a woman and joins the women at coffee in the afternoon. . . . I was almost fifteen now—still in my silly uniform, bobby socks and all . . . still not allowed to socialize with my friends” (*The Line of the Sun, Sun*, 222). Although Marisol is freed from the strictly defined gender roles of Salud, she endures greater marginality in the U.S. as a result of cultural, colonial and gender difference. Likewise, Ramona’s role in the community of Salud may have been restrictive, but her movements were not. On the mainland, however, Ramona’s fear of the city keeps her a virtual prisoner of El Building. The family’s move to the suburbs only increases this imprisonment by cutting her off from a cultural community. Marisol acknowledges that the new house became “a place that threatened to imprison her [Ramona]. In this pretty little house, surrounded by silence, she would be the proverbial bird in a gilded cage” (*Sun* 285). Ramona does not view the island as repressive, but, rather, as a site of nurturance, a place which provides access to kin-centered networks. *The Line of the Sun*, thus, suggests that emigration and ‘liberation’ experiences are relative to class and privilege; it also calls attention to the ways cultural alienation, marginality and racism minimize the ‘benefits’ of colonialism. As we will see, Marisol’s narrative remains
much more invested in reconciling her alienation from both U.S. and Puerto Rican cultures than in articulating assimilation as a means of resolving gender inequalities.

Critical analyses of *The Line of the Sun* have often noted Marisol’s efforts to negotiate a hybrid identity composed of both her Puerto Rican culture and her immersion in U.S. culture. Carmen Faymonville, in fact, argues that the novel is an instance of what Homi Bhabha calls interstitial space (131). She explains that “Ortiz Cofer’s new and different reality of diaspora cannot be understood through the traditional concepts of nationhood and literary borders. Indeed, Ortiz Cofer’s construction of a hybrid migrant identity appears transnational rather than foundational” (143). In the construction of transnational identities, many of the national narratives in this study transform what were once foundational narratives into vehicles for transnational identity that challenge the fixity of bordered nationalisms. Yet by constructing Puerto Rico as a pre-modern society, Marisol does not open the borders of national inclusion; instead, she constructs an almost linear temporality. The island thus becomes the past of a present and future imagined largely on the mainland. The past time of Puerto Rico is perhaps most clearly visible in the image of Franco el Loco, whose “time had stopped like a dropped clock” and whose body was bent permanently at a seventy-five degree angle (*Sun* 108). Like Franco, the island becomes vacated of its place in the present. Furthermore, *The Line of the Sun* departs from the narratives of Latinas like Cristina García and Sandra Cisneros in that Marisol appears to exhibit an overriding impulse to repress and/or negate national history. By this I do not mean that she effaces or denies her Puerto Rican history, but that she restricts herself to constructions of nation which represent the island as a non-threatening ethnic/cultural history divorced of its political potential. Moreover, unlike the protagonists of many of the Latinas in this study, Marisol does not take a journey (back) to the island, but instead engages in further
mythification of the island and Salud. Consequently, I am much more interested in the strategies
Marisol (and Ortiz Cofer) utilizes to negotiate conflicting allegiances than in calling attention to
instances of hybridization.

The formal splitting of Puerto Rican and U.S. life into distinct narrative sections coupled
with the very different generic conventions of these sections suggest that Marisol’s transnational
identity is overwhelming caught up in the rhetoric of imperial power. The binary oppositions
Marisol uses to characterize her parents and her island repeatedly reproduce the colonial
representations of Puerto Rico as child-like and pre-modern. The narrator often resorts to overt
and implicit representations of Ramona as dark, sensual, earthy, spiritual, and exotic and of
Rafael as white, disciplined, practical, angelic, and familiar in order to dramatize what she
perceives as the differences between island and mainland. In her narrative, Rafael represents
assimilation, while Ramona represents the stigma of cultural difference. Moreover, although the
narrative remains invested in imperial representations of Puerto Rico, it also appropriates
nostalgia and myth in order to repress the colonial history of the island. However, in identifying
the colonial overtones of The Line of the Sun, I do not wish to suggest that this novel is another
instance of colonial nationalism in the same sense as Ferré’s The House on the Lagoon. On the
contrary, Ortiz Cofer’s novel poignantly captures the alienation and confusion of emigration and
discrimination, as well as the colonial dimensions of that struggle. As in Ferré’s novel, colonial
ambivalence emerges from the unconscious of the text, through those unassimilable and
disruptive elements in the narrative. Marisol’s text thus bolsters assimilation ambivalently,
instead calling attention to the way colonial influence shapes mainland Puerto Rican
representations of the island/culture.
Unlike Ferré, who chooses to write in English, often translating her works from Spanish to English for initial publication\textsuperscript{18}, Ortiz Cofer writes in English out of necessity. Although she was born in Puerto Rico, Ortiz Cofer has spent the majority of her life living in the United States. Writing, she claims, allows her to explore the different meanings and ways of being Puerto Rican. In an interview with Rafael Ocasio, she explains that “[t]here is not just one reality to being a Puerto Rican writer. I am putting together a different view.” Likewise, Ortiz Cofer writes in English not “a political act but as a necessity (Acosta-Bélén 91). Because of Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship to the United States, language can be a particularly polemical issue among islanders and mainland Puerto Ricans. As a result, she explains, “I feel very close to my heritage. Even if I cannot be geographically in the place I was born, I consider myself a Puerto Rican the same way that anyone living on the Island is a Puerto Rican and if I could, I would write in Spanish” (Acosta-Belen 90). While Ferré has received criticism for her use of the language of the colonizer, writers like Ortiz-Cofer are frequently excluded from the canon of island writers for writing in English. Ortiz Cofer’s comments about language usage and Puerto Ricanness also reveal her desire to legitimate and/or articulate her relationship to the island culture despite her geographic location in the U.S. Her comments, as I suggested, are the result of the prevalent sense that mainland Puerto Ricans are not legitimate/authentic Puerto Ricans. While many of the women writers in this study have called attention to the precariousness of their own national identifications given their emigration to, or birth in, the U.S., Ortiz Cofer’s interviews and works exhibit much more anxiety in their negotiations of national and cultural inclusion. Writers like Cristina García and Julia Alvarez, for instance, are much more willing to

\textsuperscript{18} In an interview with Castillo García, Ferré admits that she wrote \textit{The House on the Lagoon, Eccentric Neighborhoods} and \textit{Flight of the Swan} in Spanish first, and then translated them into English (242). She claims to have published all three novels in English first in order to create a market for the Spanish editions (240-243).
call attention to the shortcomings of nation-states and to expand the borders of national inclusion than are writers like Ortiz Cofer. In fact, *The Line of the Sun* broaches U.S. - Puerto Rican relations lightly, if at all. Given the U.S.’s immense economic, political and cultural influence on the island, the absence of a discourse on colonization, independence or annexation seems particularly glaring. Instead, Ortiz Cofer writes nation as largely independent of the island’s political status, a move which transforms Puerto Ricannes into a non-threatening form of ethnicity.

Although Marisol’s reconstructions of the island include references to the U.S. presence in Puerto Rico, she often displaces colonial violence onto intolerant and/or ‘wicked’ members of the community. For instance, Don Juan Santacruz, Rafael’s father and foreman of the local sugar mill, stands in for the violence and exploitation characteristic of the American-owned sugar mills that replaced many of the local estates after occupation. As the narrator explains, “Don Juan made friends with no one, spoke only to the American [Mr. Clement] . . . and had a reputation as a man who could hold his cups and who was easily aroused to anger” (*Sun* 55). Mr. Clement, on the other hand, appears benevolent, perhaps slightly paternalistic, in Marisol’s text. Don Juan’s violent mistreatment of his wife and exploitation of his son mitigate the horror of Mr. Clement’s adoption (or purchase) of Rafael’s sister, Josefa. In this way, the family’s personal losses become largely the result of Don Juan’s character flaws, not of the colonial system. Likewise, when Ramona’s brother, Carmelo, dies in the Korean War, her mother, Mama Cielo blames the intolerance of the local townspeople rather than the colonial government. She explains, “Carmelo—handsome and sensitive, forced to leave his home because of the evil minds that could only see that he was different from the other young men—killed in another man’s war. She felt in her heart that people like Doña Tina had killed Carmelo” (*Sun* 85). Despite the
narrator’s acknowledgement that the “illusory Eden” in which “poverty was romanticized and relatives attained mythical proportions” never quite existed, Marisol continues to represent the island as a closed community removed from colonial policies. Violence, vice and intolerance become effective strategies of dissimulation, directing the narrative away from overt confrontations with colonial exploitation.

Perhaps the most haunting scene of colonial ambivalence occurs when Ramona, out on an excursion to collect medicinal herbs, encounters a troop of American soldiers in the midst of a field expedition. Ramona walks hand in hand with a nineteen year old soldier in a pastoral scene that romanticizes American occupation of the island as a mixture of desire and benevolent compassion. The pair walk through a pasture filled with “cows . . . with . . . huge, moist eyes moving against them with passive sensuousness,” until they come to a stream. Then,

She fell to her knees and the soldier pulled her gently toward him. He held her arms pinned at the wrists behind her with one of his large farmer’s hands. . . . Ramona wanted to scream, but even in her confusion of fear and desire she somehow knew that this boy would not harm her. . . . So she relaxed, wiggling her fingers to let him know that he could release his grip now. She turned to face him.

. . . Ramona felt her body rising in a pleasurable wave that was taking her deeper and deeper into a dangerous oblivion. . . . He told her with his tongue what he wanted . . . He wanted to possess her but not take her like a whore. He saw that tears were sliding down Ramona’s flushed cheeks. He knew she was responding to his desire but was frightened and confused. . . . He got to his feet and raised her up. At that moment of renunciation Sonny probably felt more like a hero than he would ever feel during the rest of his life. *(Sun 161-162)*

The idyllic encounter between Ramona, the ‘dark beauty,’ and the pale American soldier re-imagines the first moment of colonial interaction between the island and the mainland. In this scene, however, the encounter is one of renunciation and compassion as well as of desire. And while the narrator alludes to the soldier’s use of force, she also explains that Ramona “somehow knew that this boy would not harm her” *(Sun 161)*. The violence of colonial encounters is hauntingly absent despite the obvious military presence; instead Marisol imagines it as a failed
(or impossible) romance. The scene also implies desire and complicity on the part of the island, which is feminized through representations of Ramona. The narrator, in fact, consistently depicts her mother, Ramona, as embodying the spirit of the island. She re-constructs the island through familiar objects and décor, as well as through the comforting sounds and scents of island life in El Building. While Rafael and Marisol belong to “the world of phones, offices, concrete buildings, and the English language” (Sun 273), Ramona remains essentialized as the embodiment of a stereotyped Puerto Rico. Rafael, on the other hand, represents the ‘order’ and ‘subdued’ tastes of middle-class U.S. life. He substitutes the American soldier with whom romance is impossible. Marisol even imagines her mother’s continued desire for the aggression of her encounter with the soldier: “Ramona sometimes imagined that the arms that held her were the soldier Sonny’s. And then she thought that Rafael was too timid in his lovemaking. Why wasn’t her blood pounding in her ears as it did when the Americano had crushed her to the ground, his mouth drawing her breath and her tongue into himself” (Sun 168). Through this romantic desire, the narrative again underscores U.S.-Puerto Rican relations as grounded in mutual desire and attraction despite its sometimes violent manifestations.

Notions of cultural ‘purity’ also haunt Marisol’s reconstructions of island and barrio culture in ways that recall the language of imperialism. Like Ortiz Cofer’s mother, Ramona also maintains the “fantasy that her exile from Puerto Rico [is] temporary and that she [does] not need to learn the language, keeping herself ‘pure’ for her return to the Island” (Silent Dancing 104). For Ramona, maintaining cultural practices like espiritismo within the enclosure of El Building means remaining connected to cultural identity. Her fear of Americanization and refusal to adapt also suggests a fear of ‘contamination’ and the likely rejection of islanders. Rosa’s story functions as a lesson to Ramona and Marisol as they negotiate their loyalties to culture and
community. Rosa, called ‘La Cabra’ by the townspeople, returns to Salud after years of living in New York and suffering sexual abuse and exploitation. She becomes the victim of patriarchy and colonial violence in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico. As an unmarried woman with a daughter, however, she also challenges the morals of the community. Her merging of esiritismo and Santeria, which she learned in New York among other Puerto Ricans and Latino/as, as well as her lifestyle make her an outsider within this small community. Marisol notes that “in another era, in a different place, Rosa might have become a student of psychology, a physician, a healer; but . . . Rosa was, to herself as well as to others, nothing more than a cunning fortuneteller and a whore” (Sun 97). In an interview with Edna Acosta-Belén, Ortiz Cofer explains that Rosa’s “options were limited by her social class and society’s moral expectations” (88). And while the story does highlight the ways in which women often reinforced restrictive gender roles, particularly for other women, it also calls attention to the ways communities determine in/exclusion. Rosa’s ostracism and subsequent expulsion from Salud highlights the ways in which mainland Puerto Ricans are often denied cultural legitimacy within island communities. Rosa represents that unassimilable other, not merely in terms of her refusal to abide by gender roles, but also in terms of her merging of cultures. Her story functions as a moral tale for both Ramona and Marisol, who must invent strategies for coping with discourses of cultural purity. While Ramona chooses to keep herself ‘pure’ by shutting out as much of mainland life as possible, Marisol chooses to move closer to mainland culture/Americanization by transforming her Puerto Rican cultural history into myth.

By chasing Rosa out of Salud, the women of the Holy Rosary Society also cleanse the town of the only hybrid [read Americanized] member of the town. Given that the town’s name translates as ‘health,’ Rosa’s expulsion can also be read as necessary to the Puerto Rican
community’s (or nation’s) cultural well-being. Although she is not the only woman in the community who rejects the town’s moral codes, she is the only one who has lived abroad and adopted U.S. customs. By framing Rosa’s expulsion as one determined largely by social class and gender, Marisol subsumes her own awareness of the ways in which colonization has conditioned the terms of cultural in/exclusion on the island. Discourses of cultural purity are, in fact, prevalent on the island. Given their colonial relationship to the U.S., islanders often promote an almost excessive Hispanidad which excludes those who have lived on the mainland for extended periods. The existing divisions between ‘authentic’ island cultures and ‘assimilated’ mainland cultures reproduce the language of Otherness characteristic of domination. As Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones explains, “[l]a Otredad—y la intolerancia—comienzan en casa, profundamente condicionadas por la ideología colonial. Es el lenguaje del poder—internalizado en la colonia—dispuesto a una especie de higiene social” [Otherness—and intolerance—begin at home, profoundly conditioned by colonial ideology. It is the language of power—internalized by the colony—disposed to a form of social hygiene] (80). While the nation/colony challenges the imperialist gaze that subordinates it, the colonized, particularly those in power, reproduce the language of exclusion through images of contamination and impurity.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the cultural nationalism of 1950s Puerto Rico absorbed much of the independista sentiment through a program to restore the island’s cultural ‘personality’ while at the same time promoting modernization as an avenue for economic stability. Operation Serenity, a term coined by Luis Muñoz Marín, was supposed to be the corollary to Operation Bootstrap, the economic program to export Puerto Rican labor to the U.S. and thus alleviate social unrest caused by unemployment. Operation Serenity emphasized
spirituality and culture along with modernization as the goals of the Puerto Rican economy, and, as such, it promoted emigration as necessary for the good of the people and the nation. In doing so, colonial administrators encouraged the preservation of a distinct cultural identity for those on the island, while also encouraging emigrants to adapt to life in the U.S. Emigrants later found that islanders no longer considered them authentic Puerto Ricans, because they had adopted hybrid language and lifestyle practices. The island/state’s continued representation of Puerto Rican culture as primarily Hispanic and Catholic marginalizes emigrants as well as those born on the mainland. As Duany points out, “the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, as well as other cultural institutions, has often displayed an excessively pro-Hispanic bent that often reifies the Spanish language as the litmus test of Puerto Ricanness” (The Puerto Rican Nation 135).

Consequently, speaking, writing and publishing in Spanish remain markers of authenticity and Puerto Ricanness among islanders. Ortiz Cofer, who was educated primarily on the mainland, often notes the ways in which language can become a tool for exclusion. She explains, “When I go to Puerto Rico, I am always reminded that I sound like a gringa. . . I cannot change the fact that I have lived most of my life in the United States, I am married to an American, I live in Georgia. The kinds of things that I experienced every time I went back to Puerto Rico, they left an impression on me, particularly as a young child. When you go to Puerto Rico, they call you la americanita “ (Acosta-Belén 89). The fear of becoming the Other, in this case the emigrant whose Otherness is doubled by colonial migration, conditions Ramona’s life in El Building as well as Marisol’s representations of the emigrants she encounters. Moreover, Rosa’s rejection and subsequent expulsion from Salud suggest to Marisol that perhaps assimilation to U.S. society is her only chance for acceptance.
Marisol’s representations of the pastoral, traditional Salud and its corrupted ‘facsimile,’ El Building reflect her own sense of alienation from building residents and from her Anglo classmates. As she grows older and becomes more aware of her own difference, Marisol explains that she feels “more embarrassed . . . about living in this crowded, noisy tenement, which the residents seemed intent on turning into a bizarre facsimile of an Island barrio” (*Sun* 220). Likewise, she notes that “in Paterson, in the cold rooms stories above the frozen ground, the smells and sounds of a lost way of life could only be a parody” (*Sun* 223). By calling these emigrant practices parody, she suggests that they are distortions or caricatures of island life, and thus misrepresentations of Puerto Ricanness. The result is repetition of ideas of cultural purity or authenticity which also reinforce her own claims to a distinct form of Puerto Ricanness.

Likewise, although she consistently notes the ways in which residents preserve memories of the island through foods, nostalgia and spiritual practices, she is careful to point out their difference from islanders. She notes that “[t]wo years in New York City had taught [Rafael] that a street-tough Puerto Rican immigrant is not the same species as usually gentle and hospitable Islander” (*Sun* 170). Like her father, Marisol also engages in strategies to distance herself from the “street-tough” Puerto Ricans of El Building. In fact, her creation of a pre-modern Puerto Rico in the first half of the novel allows her to claim a cultural heritage, while at the same time emphasizing her difference from the other residents of El Building. Moreover, she inverts what may appear as her own exceptionalism by suggesting that the emigrants of her building are in fact very different from the “gentle and hospitable” islanders which she claims as her own descendants. In doing so, she also claims a Puerto Rican identity divorced of the material realities of other emigrants. While this may be useful to alleviate Marisol’s sense of alienation from both the emigrants of her building and the Irish, Italian and Polish children she attends school with, her repetitions of these
stereotypes are troubling because they only subtly touch on the conditions which necessitate emigrant ‘toughness.’ After all, unlike the other emigrants, Marisol’s family does not worry about money or about lay-offs and labor disputes. Her father’s job with the U.S. Navy allows the family to live more comfortably than their neighbors. More importantly it allows them the luxury of diminished economic pressures. Additionally, Rafael’s blonde hair and “textbook English” allow him, if not his family, to escape the brunt of U.S. racism. In contrast, many of the emigrants of El Building suffer the hardships of frequent unemployment and racism.

Marisol’s difficulty reconciling her cultural heritage with her desire for U.S. acceptance stems from her awareness that claiming a Puerto Rican identity means also recognizing the emigrants of El Building as a part of her cultural community. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explains that the colonized “does not compare himself with the white man qua father, leader, God; he compares himself with his fellow against the pattern of the white man” (215). As a result, Marisol often casts herself in stark opposition to the other tenants of El Building, those who do not measure up to U.S. standards. For instance, as her mother and the other women of the building prepare for a spiritual meeting, Marisol remarks, “[t]o me, it was all an embarrassing activity my mother spent too much of her time on” (*Sun* 238). Given the very different worlds she inhabits—El Building and St. Jerome’s Catholic School—Marisol often feels she must choose between those, like her classmate’s father, who look down on Puerto Ricans and those, like her mother, who recreate the island in El Building. Consequently, Marisol also struggles to reconcile her loyalties to family with her desire for acceptance. Her mother, Ramona, often comes to represent the Otherness Marisol wants to negate: “My gypsy mother embarrassed me with her wild beauty. I wanted her to cut and spray her hair into a sculpted
hairdo like the other ladies; I wanted her to wear tailored skirts and jackets like Jackie Kennedy” (*Sun* 220).

Implicit in the shame she feels when her mother intrudes on the Americanized world of her school is the fear that she too will be perceived as Other. Marisol acknowledges that her mother “was what I would have looked like if I had worn my hair in a tight braid, if I had allowed myself to sway when I walked, and if I had worn loud colors and had spoken only Spanish” (*Sun* 220). As she grows older, Marisol begins to view Ramona as the embodiment of her own difference, a difference which stems from a doubled awareness of how the colonizer views the colonized. Marisol admits that “[o]n the streets of Paterson, my mother seemed an alien and a refugee, and as I grew to identify with the elements she feared, I dreaded walking with her, a human billboard advertising her paranoia in a foreign language” (*Sun* 174). Moreover, she notes that her mother carries “la mancha... the stain that has little to do with the color of our skin... it was the frightened-rabbit look in our eyes” (*Sun* 170). This stain is not only a reflection of Marisol’s growing awareness of her own representation in U.S. society, but quite literally, her mother becomes a marker of Marisol’s difference. Fanon explains that for the colonized, acceptance is proportional to the “adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 18). Ramona’s inability to adapt haunts the narrator’s attempts to re-create herself in the U.S.’s cultural standards. In fact, one of the narrator’s first observations upon her mother’s return from the island is that “[t]o our neighbors (and all of the years we lived there I always felt that their eyes were upon us) she must have looked like a new immigrant” (*Sun* 284). Marisol is thus unable to escape the gaze of the colonizer; in fact, it follows her in her assessments of her mother and of other emigrants.
Guzmán, the uncle who dominates much of Marisol’s island fantasies, perhaps best exemplifies the ways in which colonization, second-class citizenship and liberal rhetoric can impact self-perception and cultural identity. Lured into leaving Puerto Rico for the ‘opportunities’ of U.S. employment, Guzman finds himself imprisoned and working as an indentured farm worker in upstate New York. He escapes through his own cunning, but endures years of hiding, confusion and self-isolation for fear of retribution. Yet despite these experiences in New York, he espouses the U.S. rhetoric of upward mobility implicit in programs like Operation Bootstrap, which promised prosperity through individual effort and hard work. When local newspapers report the rising unemployment and welfare recipients in Paterson, Marisol notes that it “angered him. [Guzmán] called them parasites and beggars. The women and children, he said were the victims” (Sun 216). Moreover, he uses himself as an example of the possibilities of prosperity through hard work and self-sacrifice: “I saved everything I made in those holes I worked in. For the past couple of years I’ve slept in rats’ nests” (Sun 216). Despite his obvious struggles against racism and exploitation, Guzman manages to save enough money to return to the island “in style.” However, he fails to acknowledge the failures of the colonial system and, instead, holds emigrants responsible for their mistreatment and lack of opportunities. Yet Guzman’s return to the island suggests that perhaps second-class citizenship and exploitation have bankrupted his Algerian notions of upward mobility. Likewise, Rafael’s increased silences after each Navy outing become glaring; they contrast his espousal of assimilation. His silences about racism and the lack of job mobility shape his attitudes toward other emigrants, who he frequently rejects, and toward Americanization. Yet like Guzman, Rafael’s adoption of U.S. values remains haunted by his own inability to minimize oppression. Although the novel
supports assimilation at the expense of colonial awareness, ambivalence emerges in moments where U.S. rhetoric brushes against Puerto Rican experience.

The fire that leads to the narrator’s escape from El Building ultimately destroys that emigrant community that Marisol, in her desire for acceptance, cannot reconcile with her fantasies about the island. While Marisol acknowledges that she “will always carry [her] Island heritage on [her] back like a snail,” she is relieved when Guzman, the main protagonist of her island narrative, returns to Puerto Rico (Sun 273). She explains, “[i]n a way I was glad he would no longer be around to confuse me. He and El Building would be gone but not forgotten” (Sun 282). Moving away from El Building enables Marisol to return to her island fantasies without the disruptions of colonial realities like necessity, unemployment and racism. Moving also facilitates her construction of an apolitical Puerto Rican identity rooted in myth. By transforming her island heritage into a mythical narrative, Marisol overcomes the spiritist’s prediction that she “will be hindered by those closest to [her] from attaining what [she] want[s] in life” (Sun 253). The narrator thus breaks with the island in order to facilitate her own assimilation and acceptance within the imperial center.

**Conclusion: National and Colonial Ambivalence**

After more than one hundred years of U.S. colonialism, Latino/a representations of Puerto Rican nationness are marked profoundly by the contradictory effects of emigration, Americanization and domination. Writers like Rosario Ferré and Judith Ortiz Cofer dramatize the conflicting loyalties which mark assimilation narratives emerging from within the geographic and/or ideological spaces of colonial influence. While Ferré remains more invested in the current political realities of the island, she uses social inequality, corruption and necessity to bolster the colonial imperatives of the U.S. In her novel, these inequities become largely independent of the island’s political status; instead, they serve to reinforce the ‘necessity’ of
colonialism. Consequently, Isabel, the novel’s protagonist-writer, finds that she must destroy the nation/family and seek refuge in the colonial center in order to escape the ill effects of patriarchal power on the island. Likewise, Judith Ortiz Cofer’s novel, *The Line of the Sun*, suggests that inclusion and acceptance within the U.S. necessitate a break with nation. Marisol’s writing of a mythical, pre-modern Puerto Rico reifies nationness into a non-threatening form of ethnicity which she finds necessary in order to negotiate her position within the U.S. In fact, *The Line of the Sun* constructs a type of apolitical ethnicity which bears some similarities to the cultural nationalism of the 1950s and projects like Operation Serenity. Still, Ortiz Cofer’s narrator reveals much more anxiety about the terms of in/ex-clusion within either nation, perhaps because claiming a Puerto Rican identity means also claiming colonial and island stereotypes. Ferré’s Isabel Montfort, on the other hand, displays more willingness to abide by the colonizer’s terms inclusion, perhaps because economic privilege often eases the hardships of emigration and second-class citizenship. Yet at the same time, both of these texts remain haunted by a colonialism that the narrators (and the writers) would like to repress and/or re-write. As such, these novels reveal that in many ways colonialism has succeeded in transmitting and naturalizing its own discourses within segments of the Puerto Rican community.
Caught between Here and There: Latinas in the Americas

. . . sooner or later I’d have to return to New York. I know now it’s where I belong—not instead of here, but more than here. (García, Dreaming 236)

. . . that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country . . . I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there. (Cisneros, Caramelo 434).

Each of the novels in this study demonstrates the overwhelming influence of Latin American nations on Latinas and their ideas about belonging, community, and history. Pilar’s observation in Dreaming in Cuban that she belongs in the United States ‘more than,’ rather than ‘instead of,’ in Cuba underscores the complexities of locating national ‘origins’ for Latino/as. Her anxiety about this realization is intricately bound up with her fear of betraying her grandmother. Yet, this anxiety also results from having to choose between two nations, and her subsequent fear that returning to the U.S. signifies a betrayal or rejection of Cuban national belonging. Likewise, Cisneros’ narrator, Celaya, articulates a similar anxiety about national belonging in the face of competing national territories and cultures. For many of these writers, imagining the nation also means acknowledging their own alterity within the Americas. Moreover, identification with any one nation or territory remains out of reach for many Latino/as. Caramelo’s Celaya imagines an emigrant identity despite her birth in the U.S., underscoring her hybridity. By calling herself an emigrant, she foregrounds her literary and imaginative migration from North to South, yet she also highlights her connection to and identification with those who emigrate to the U.S.

Although national spaces are expanding as a result of global practices, exiles, migrants and the children of diasporas continue to confront issues of authenticity and legitimacy within multiple cultures and communities. In many cases, place of birth continues to determine how
Latino/as will be perceived and represented by ‘home’ countries. On the other hand, ethnicity/race continues to function as a signifier of Otherness within the United States despite place of birth. As a result, Latino/as often feel the double rejection of Latin American nations and of U.S. communities. The turn to national history, however, intrudes on these limited conceptions of national belonging. In sense, the historical narrative aims to legitimate claims to national belonging by foregrounding historical and popular knowledge of Latin American countries. Novels like *Caramelo*, for instance, make use of multiple cultural productions and genres in an effort to articulate Mexican national identity despite the narrator’s position in the U.S. And while all of these texts undoubtedly attempt to recover linkages to lost and/or unavailable histories, they also reveal—to varying degrees—their anxiety about their claims to nation. Whereas Cisneros’ novel seems increasingly concerned with articulating *Mexicanidad*, Julia Alvarez’s novels are much more concerned with tracing Dominican histories which the author can claim as foundational and as parallel to her own emigrant experiences. Tracing the continuity of emigration patterns allows these authors to situate their own migrations within a much larger historical context.

For other writers, however, the burdens of colonialism threaten even the possibilities of imagining nation. Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun*, for instance, replaces the Puerto Rican nation with a non-threatening form of ethnicity invested in assimilation and upward mobility. Likewise, Rosario Ferré’s investment in the consumability of her novels prevents her from imagining the nation or its history in ways that subvert colonialism and domination. U.S. Puerto Rican writers offer a particularly challenging view of the role of nation, one that I believe merits closer study. That there have been so few national novels among Puerto Ricans living off the island, especially given the size of their population and their long history on the mainland,
points to the pervasiveness of colonialism and perhaps, as Juan Flores argues, to the absence of
cultural capital in the form of a diplomatic and institutional infrastructure (177-179). As a result,
the works of writers like Ferré and Ortiz Cofer exhibit anxiety about their place within the
colonial center as well as about the terms of their in/ex-clusion within Puerto Rico.

Because of this anxiety about national belonging, many of these writers seem reluctant to
completely displace or disrupt nationalist hierarchies. In fact, their double marginality often
leads them to limited critiques of their locations as national. Women, in particular, often become
the primary vehicle for challenging national in/ex-clusion, while the lower classes and people of
color often become marginal to writing the nation. That gender inequality constitutes the
foundation of these national narratives suggests that for Latinas, gender continues to determine
the limits of national belonging. In other words, women continue to struggle to define the terms
of their inclusion within the nation, a sentiment perhaps more acutely felt in the United States,
where women have gained greater independence. Yet, as these novels demonstrate, access to
liberties and equality is often relational, based in part on access to varying forms of privilege—
racial, class, educational, and/or economic. Thus while Ortiz Cofer’s Ramona finds herself
caged in by life in New Jersey, García’s Constancia Agüero discovers that life in New York and
Miami offer her greater possibilities for independence and entrepreneurship.

Likewise, the positions from which these writers speak also matters. Although they remain
marginal to U.S. literature, they are, however, Latinas with access to varying forms of privilege.
Their representations of class and race dynamics in Latin American nations often reflect their
positions as social and sometimes racial white women looking for color. Thus protagonists like
Ferré’s Isabel Montfort function not only to translate the stories of Puerto Rico’s black
underclass, but also to underscore the value of whiteness within the context of both island and mainland communities.

Longing for national inclusion seems to both aid and inhibit these writers. Of the five writers in this study, García articulates the strongest and most even critiques of nationalism and the nation-state. Her novels offer nuanced visions of Cubans living in and outside the state, as well as of the relational politics of gender, class and racial oppression. While novels like *The Agüero Sisters* clearly exhibit longing, and perhaps even nostalgia, for Cuba, they also demonstrate an awareness of the dangers of nationalisms for the marginalized. Writers like Alvarez and Cisneros, on the other hand, tend to represent the national community and the state much more ambivalently. While both offer critiques of women’s oppression and of U.S. imperialism, their nostalgia for nation precludes their ability to fully challenge limitations of some nationalisms. Instead, the nation becomes an imagined, yet elusive unity which they must reclaim. Thus while Cisneros brings together people from both sides of the border to create an imagined Mexico, Alvarez recovers moments of nationalist unity during periods of state rupture and oppression.

*Recovering Our Histories / Re-Valuing Ourselves*

Bringing these Latina writers together raises unique and challenging questions about national belonging, about the connections between history and literature, and about influence of Latin America on different women writers. Despite the facetiousness with which many of these writers engage history and archive, these two forms remain integral to the novels of Julia Alvarez, Cristina García, Sandra Cisneros, Rosario Ferré and Judith Ortiz Cofer. On some level, their reliance on history as a discourse imbued with truth-value follows a pattern much like that of Latin American writers. Roberto González Echevarría contends that Latin American writers often adopted the form of a “document endowed with truth-bearing power by society at specific
moments in time” (8). For these women writers, history—whether in the form of metatext, historiography, myth/fable or testimonio—continues to function as a strategy for resisting cultural obliteration in the United States.

With the exception of Ferré, all of these writers spent the majority, if not all, of their youth and adulthood living in the United States. Their writings in part respond to the experience of negotiating conflicting cultures, languages, and loyalties. Alvarez, Cisneros, García, and Ortiz Cofer also share similar educational experiences in that they completed their degrees during periods in which there were few Latina literary models to emulate. In fact, writers like García and Ortiz Cofer often acknowledge that they only read Latin American and Latino writers much later in their careers. Perhaps for these reasons, historical recovery becomes paramount in their writings. In this context, re-writing nation becomes not only an act of self-affirmation, but also an act of cultural survival.

According to Walter Benjamin, history must be seized “as it flashes up in a moment of danger,” otherwise it may “disappear irretrievably” (225). For large numbers of people now, this extended period of global change and mass migration indeed constitutes a ‘moments of danger.’ In the U.S., the growth of Latino/a populations, the increasing political debates about aliens and immigrants, and the continued conservative outlook on national identity and history have perhaps helped to underscore both the precariousness and the urgency of historical recovery for Latino/a communities. Historical recovery at this particular moment also calls attention to the necessity of articulating nation-specific Latino/a identities. Although pan-ethnicity can be useful politically, it can also erase the class, race and historical differences which position Latino/as differently within U.S. society.
Throughout this project, I have emphasized the problems that surface in re-creations of nation and history; however, I also acknowledge that these texts offer readers—Latino/as and U.S.-Americans alike—tremendous opportunity to rethink the histories of the Americas. Although these novels project very specific visions of nation, they also posit alternatives to pan-ethnic labels and stereotypes, as well to Euro-centric visions of U.S. history. Perhaps a corollary to this study would be a look at the ways these texts are read within the Latin American countries they imagine. After all, these novels also challenge the tendency of Latin American nations to exclude emigrants and their children from national imaginings. Moreover, the discontinuities and inconsistencies which I highlight in the preceding chapters do not diminish the contributions these novels make to Latino/a literatures or to Latinas in search of literary predecessors. In fact, these novels foreground the changing landscape of the historical novel in the face of global, national and local imaginaries.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jessica Magnani began her academic career at the University of Miami in 1992. After earning a B.S. in journalism and English in 1995, she worked as a technical writer and as an English instructor at Florida International University. In 2001 she completed an M.A. in English at Florida International University. Years of working with African American and women’s literature, of always looking for sources of cultural affirmation finally led Magnani to pursue work in Latino/a studies. This project is a continuation of work that began as a master’s thesis under the guidance of Alfred Lopez and Erik Camayd-Frexias. Magnani received a PhD from the University of Florida in 2007. She plans to continue researching Latino/a literature, especially as it relates to issues of race and gender. She is of Peruvian descent with strong ties to her parents’ country of origin.