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Colonial Subjects, Imperial Discourses: Rosario Ferré's The House on the Lagoon and Judith Ortiz Cofer's The Line of the Sun
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This essay compares the works of two Puerto Rican writers as they (re)construct the nation and its colonial legacy. The author argues that colonization has produced ambivalent, sometimes damaged, notions of national identity, as presented in both Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* and Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun*.

Both texts are haunted by a colonialism that the narrators (and the writers) would like to repress and/or re-write but which remains inextricable from national imaginings.

[Key words: Puerto Rican, Cultural Nationalism, Colonialism, Nation, Gender, Women, Latino/a literature]
MAINLAND PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE’ HAS OFTEN dramatized the immediate difficulties of life in the United States—namely racism, cultural alienation, poverty, and identity. Despite the increased interest in historical romances among Latino/as in the U.S., very few Puerto Rican writers on the mainland dramatize the island’s politics or history. This is largely a consequence of the island’s continued colonial status. 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” (2000: 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.

Still, the nation 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 underscores the ambivalence of national imaginings for a colonial state. In his work on Puerto Rican literature, Efraín Barradas (1988) argues that the repetition of this island paradise unites mainland writers to a long island tradition. 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 1988: 74). In doing so, these writers employ cultural strategies necessary for survival in the U.S. However, in presenting the island as an edenic, yet sustaining myth, mainland Puerto Rican literature often sublimates critiques of colonialism.

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 2002: 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 from political statehood. Intense nationalist sentiment, which was politically dangerous in pre-commonwealth Puerto Rico, became incorporated into what Juan Flores calls the ‘postcolonial colony’ 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” (2005: 3). Instead, she argues that ‘colonial nationalism’ is a more appropriate term to characterize the cultural nationalism of the 1950s because “not only [is it] 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” (2005: 2). Novels like Rosario Ferré’s The House on the Lagoon and Judith Ortiz Cofé’s The Line of the Sun demonstrate that the colonial condition has been ultimately inseparable from national culture or from national narratives.

This essay 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 (1996) 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 obscures 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. 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 patriarchal legacies. Like Ferré, Ortiz Cofé 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 which becomes essential to her development. The island myth functions as an alternative to the cultural alienation of life in Paterson, New Jersey. Despite the mythic representation of island life, however, the narrator remains unable to reconcile the contradictions inherent to the postcolonial colony; Marisol is ultimately incapable of uniting the two halves of her text or of her identity. Instead she opts to turn her Puerto Rican history into a sustaining, yet distant myth. As such, she removes the island/nation and its political present from her discourse and turns her Puerto Rican identity into something much less polemic than political identity. Consequently, the narrative reinforces the colonial project and the belief that culture can be separate from national politics. 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.

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

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. 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, as Janer (2005) 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 the nation/family within a colonial state (Janer 2005: 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” (2005: 7).

THE MYTH OF RACIAL INTEGRATION FUNCTIONED AS A NATIONALIST COUNTERPOINT TO THE RACIST PRACTICES ON THE MAINLAND BY REPRESENTING PUERTO RICAN CULTURE AS MESTIZO—SPANISH, AFRICAN AND TÁINO.

Ferré’s 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 hand, deconstructs patriarchal myths and exposes the bourgeois lies of la gran familia puertorriqueña in order to justify her violent break with the nation.

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, 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. Likewise, 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 safeguarding of ‘progress’ through the protection of ‘truth’ is also a prominent feature of Sweet Diamond Dust. In her “Preface,” 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” (1988: viii). Like The House on the Lagoon, Sweet Diamond Dust deconstructs the integrationist myths implicit in representations of nation as family. By using contradictory narrative voices Ferré teases out the inconsistencies that 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 Camprubí 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 inclusion 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. 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” (Ferré 1996: 6). Interspersed within her narrative reconstruction of family genealogies are her husband Quintín’s interruptions and refutations of [Isabel’s] ‘herstory.’ As Isabel records family history, she 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. 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 mestizo—Spanish, African and Taíno. Yet, as Jorge Duany explains, “[i]n elite as well as in
popular forms of culture, Afro-Puerto Ricans continue to be represented as marginal and subordinate outsiders, somehow less Puerto Rican than white people” (2002: 14).

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 doing so is necessary to preserve 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 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 United States.

Isabel’s narrative, however, also 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” (Ferré 1996: 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. As such, the opening chapters, in which she details the celebration of U.S. citizenship and the arrival of the Spanish patriarch, might be read as an instance of what Homi Bhabha calls colonial mimicry. He explains that “the desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry—through a process of writing and repetition—is the final irony of partial representation” (Bhabha 1994: 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. (Ferré 1996: 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, it becomes an example of the doubling that 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 1994: 86). That difference results in ambivalence toward the colonizing project and the uneven racial and cultural exploitation which results. As Bhabha explains, “[t]he menace of mimicry is its double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (1994: 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 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 . . . one who would eat her, lick her, nip her, and drink her, and then grind her into powdered sugar . . . (Ferré 1996: 29)

The language of militarized monarchy and conquest merges the desire for Spanish and American colonization with Rebecca’s longing for a suitor. The imagined romance of family beginnings is thus joined to colonial domination. Isabel’s text underscores the sexualized rhetoric of conquest, in which Puerto Rico figured as virgin land available for, and perhaps desirous of, colonization. Rebecca 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 and the 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:

. . . 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. (Ferré 1996: 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 U.S. colonial rhetoric. 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. stands in 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” (1994: 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” (Ferré 1996: 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” (Ferré 1996: 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” (Ferré 1996: 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” (Ferré 1996: 386). This misunderstanding results from Isabel’s contradictory 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” (Ferré 1996: 183). Yet even in her youth, 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. [Grandmother 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” (Ferré 1996: 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.

Aristides’ role in the 1937 shooting of Nationalist cadets, for example, calls attention to the ways in which 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 (1998: 10) 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. But, as Isabel explains in her novel, these relationships between local elite and the colonial power did not mean shared governance or equality. For example, 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” (Ferré 1996: 127). Aristides’ breakdown after the massacre points
to the cultural and political ambivalence occasioned by inconsistent U.S. policies. Although he initially aligns himself with the colonizer, the massacre in Ponce forces him to confront the hypocrisy of colonial rhetoric. As a result, Arístides begins to preach independence and statehood together: “Puerto Rico will one day be the fortieth 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’” (Ferré 1996: 137). Arístides’ 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” (1997: 32). Quintín establishes his position within a U.S. economic market and thus secures his position among the island’s elite and within the imperial order. Isabel’s novel tampers with the patriarchal lies 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” (Ferré 1996: 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. 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” (Ferré 1996: 294). Isabel’s novel 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, 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 prejudices.
Yet Isabel's attempts to situate herself as a credible intermediary/witness between the colonizer and Puerto Rico's marginalized ultimately fail. Her adoption of paternalistic and colonialist ideologies impede her ability to form alliances with many of the women she encounters. She is even unable to empathize with Rebecca, Quintín's mother, despite similar economic circumstances, artistic interests and gender constraints. Instead, her descriptions of Rebecca as silly, childlike, and jealous only trivialize Isabel's attempts to narrate the oppression of women on the island. Throughout her text, 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 her efforts to establish that her bloodline is 'pure,' or white European, suggest that she too has bought into the racial hierarchies of colonial power. Moreover, as Isabel describes women like Petra, she often resorts to essentialized representations which underscore her own prejudices.

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.

Although Petra is one of few women in the text who wields real power within her 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. In fact, Petra's narrative functions to reinforce Isabel's whiteness for U.S. audiences and to reinforce the 'necessity' of colonial intervention. Frances Negrón-Muntaner argues that in Ferré’s novel, “criollo whiteness is an uncontested identity that requires a fetishized blackness for ratification” (2004: 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. Consequently, Isabel frames her difference from the colonizer as one of culture, not race.

Documenting Petra's exploitation and naïve loyalty also becomes essential to Isabel's attempts to cast herself as a viable 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” (Ferré 1996: 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 writing her novel in English: “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” (Ferré 1996: 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, Petra's 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.

Like Isabel, Ferré often positions herself as a translator or mediator caught between opposing cultures. In her essay “On Destiny, Language and Translation,” Ferré (1991) 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 1991: 155). Her responsibility, she argues, includes translating for those living on the mainland and exiled from cultural and 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 an immense loss, as they become unable to learn about their roots, having lost the language which is the mainroad 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 1994: 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 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 her public support for statehood have made her the subject of ire among many of Puerto Rico’s intellectuals and independentistas. Earlier collections like Papeles de Pandora, however, earned her the respect of the literary community because they tended to attack the myths of the Puerto Rican bourgeoisie and their complicity with colonialism. Although her father, Luis A. Ferré, governor of Puerto Rico from 1969–1973 and founder of the New Progressive Party, advocated statehood for the island, the author was vehemently pro-independence until her 1998 New York Times column. 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 (Castillo García 2005: 243). Her shifting political allegiances, however, make 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 to repress the 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” (Ferré 1996: 125). Moreover, the fire that destroys the house on the lagoon implies that destruction is inevitable for the nation 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 colonial anger onto Quintín. By killing Quintín, she exorcises her frustrations with the island's colonial status. In order to complete her alienation from the colony and complete her colonial forgetting, Isabel must destroy the house and the family.

ONE OF THE MOST HAUNTING ABSENCES IN THE TEXT IS THE LACK OF A PUERTO RICAN EXPERIENCE ON THE MAINLAND.

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 the lack of a Puerto Rican experience on the mainland. Although Isabel acknowledges that islanders frequently traveled to the mainland for economic and/or educational reasons, she never demonstrates an understanding of the discrimination and alienation which characterizes Puerto Rican migration. In this regard, Isabel appears to identify more closely with the colonizer than she does with Puerto Rico's bourgeoisie, its underclass, or its emigrants. In an interview with Gema Castillo García, Ferré rejects critiques that she has allied herself with the colonizer. Instead, she explains: “creo francamente que en el mundo en el que vivimos no debe haber ni conquistador ni conquistado. . . Hay que pensar en términos continentales, aunque cada cual debe guardar sus idiosyncrasias, 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”) (2005: 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, 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’: “[a]s 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” (Ferré 1998—my emphasis).

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 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 attention 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’ 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 the 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 Barradas (1988: 74) 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 among 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 (1993: 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, 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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, 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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 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. 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 (2001: 131), in fact, argues that the novel is an instance of what Bhabha calls interstitial space. 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” (Faymonville 2001: 143). 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 (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 108). Like Franco, the island becomes vacated of its place in the present. Additionally, Marisol appears to exhibit an overriding impulse to negate national-political history. Instead, she restricts herself to constructions of nation which represent the island as a non-threatening ethnic/cultural history divorced of its political potential.

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 overwhelmingly 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. 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 remains ambivalent toward assimilation, instead calling attention to the way colonial influence shapes mainland Puerto Rican representations of the island/culture.

**THE LINE OF THE SUN SUGGESTS THAT EMIGRATION AND ‘LIBERATION’ EXPERIENCES ARE RELATIVE TO CLASS AND PRIVILEGE; IT ALSO CALLS ATTENTION TO THE WAVES CULTURAL ALIENATION, MARGINALITY AND RACISM MINIMIZE THE ‘BENEFITS’ OF COLONIALISM.**

Unlike Ferré, who chooses to write in English, often translating her works from Spanish to English for initial publication, Ortiz Cofer writes in English out of necessity. Although she was born in Puerto Rico, Ortiz Cofer has spent most 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 (1994), she explains that “[t]here is not just one reality to being a Puerto Rican writer. I am putting together a different view.” 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-Belén 1993: 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 are the result of the prevalent sense that mainland Puerto Ricans are not authentic Puerto Ricans. As a result, Ortiz Cofer’s interviews and works exhibit some anxiety in their negotiations of national inclusion. In fact, The Line of the Sun broaches U.S.-Puerto Rican relations lightly. Given the U.S.'s immense economic, political and cultural influence on the island, the absence of a discourse on colonization seems particularly glaring. Instead, Ortiz Cofer writes nation as largely independent of the island’s political status, a move which transforms Puerto Ricanness 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 55). Mr. Clement, on the other hand, appears benevolent and perhaps slightly paternalistic. 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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 two walk hand in hand through a pasture until

She fell to her knees and the soldier pulled her gently toward him. He held her arms pinned at the wrists behind her . . . 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 . . . 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 . . . At that moment of renunciation Sonny probably felt more like a hero than he would ever feel during the rest of his life. (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 161–2)

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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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. In El Building, she re-constructs the island through familiar objects and décor, as well as through the comforting sounds and scents of island life. While Rafael and Marisol belong to “the world of phones, offices, concrete buildings, and the English language” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1990: 104). For Ramona, maintaining cultural practices like espiríntismo within the enclosure of El Building means remaining connected to cultural identity. Her fear of Americanization 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 suffering sexual abuse and exploitation in New York. She becomes the victim of patriarchy and colonial violence in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico. As an unmarried woman with a daughter, she also challenges the morals of the community. Her merging of espiríntismo and Santería, 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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” (1993: 88).

While the story does highlight the ways that women often reinforced restrictive gender roles, particularly for other women, it also calls attention to the ways communities determine in/ex-clusion. Rosa’s ostracism and subsequent expulsion from Salud reflects 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. After all, her practice of espiritismo with Santería threatens the purity of Puerto Rican spiritual practices and also the supremacy of Catholicism—as a part of their Hispánidad—in Salud. 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 by transforming her Puerto Rican cultural history into myth.

THE EXISTING DIVISIONS BETWEEN ‘AUTHENTIC’ ISLAND CULTURES AND ‘ASSIMILATED’ MAINLAND CULTURES REPRODUCE THE LANGUAGE OF OTHERNESS CHARACTERISTIC OF DOMINATION.

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/ex-clusion 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 Hispánidad 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] (1993: 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.

The cultural nationalism of 1950s Puerto Rico absorbed much of the independentista 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. Both programs essentially distanced the emigrant poor—those displaced by the Americanization of agriculture and industry on the island—from the national. Emigrants later found that islanders no longer considered them authentic Puerto Ricans because they had adopted hybrid language and lifestyle practices. For many, class differences became encoded as cultural differences. The class dimension of emigration during the 1950s and 60s coupled with the resulting hybridization of culture led to even greater chasms between those who left and those who remained.

Speaking, writing and publishing in Spanish remain markers of authenticity and Puerto Ricanness among islanders. Ortiz Cofer 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” (Acosta-Belén 1993: 89). The fear of becoming the Other, in this case the emigrant whose Otherness is doubled by colonial migration and class, 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 223). By calling these emigrant practices distortions or caricatures of island life, and thus misrepresentations of Puerto Ricanness, Marisol reproduces the rhetoric of cultural purity. 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 170). Like her father, Marisol also engages in narrative 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. She highlights her own perceived 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 asserts 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, and 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. 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” (1967: 215). Accordingly, 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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 hair-do like the other ladies; I wanted her to wear tailored skirts and jackets like Jackie Kennedy” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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 not 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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 . . . I dreaded walking with her, a human billboard advertising her paranoia in a foreign language” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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”
(Ortiz Cofer 1989: 170). This stain is not only a reflection of Marisol’s growing awareness of her own position 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” (1967: 18). Ramona’s inability to adapt haunts the narrator’s attempts to re-create herself in the U.S.’s cultural standards. Marisol is unable to escape the gaze of the colonizer; in fact, it shapes her assessment of all 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 cultural identity. Lured into leaving Puerto Rico for the ‘opportunities’ of U.S. employment, Guzman finds himself working as an indentured farm worker in upstate New York. He escapes 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 216). Despite his obvious struggles against racism and exploitation, Guzman fails to acknowledge the failures of the colonial system and, instead, holds emigrants responsible for their mistreatment and lack of opportunities. 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 (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 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” (Ortiz Cofer 1989: 253). The narrator 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 the 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 of inclusion, perhaps because economic privilege often eases the hardships of emigration and second-class citizenship. Both of these texts remain haunted by a colonialism that the narrators (and the writers) would like to repress and/or re-write but which remains inextricable from national imaginings. These novels reveal that colonial subjects have in fact internalized imperial discourses touting ‘modernization’ and ‘progress’ as necessary yet unattainable without colonization. As a result, both novels are marked profoundly by ambivalent, perhaps even damaged, notions of national identity.

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NOTES
1 For the purposes of this essay, I use ‘mainland’ to refer to the United States and ‘island’ to refer to Puerto Rico. I don’t mean to suggest that either is by any means a monolithic group.
2 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” (2000: 10).
3 For an extended discussion of romance as national novel see Sommer (1991).
4 The signing of the Jones Act on March 2, 1917 also made all Puerto Rican men liable for military draft. The political timing of citizenship is particularly important 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.
5 Although Puerto Rico’s Spanish legacy is often feminized in the context of U.S.
colonization, especially as regards culture, this novel aligns both Spain and the U.S. with patriarchal domination. In this context, Puerto Rico might be read as having been fathered by both the U.S. and Spain, or conversely, as marrying first Spain, then the U.S. Only in the realm of ‘inherited’ and adopted culture does Spanish ancestry become feminized.

6 In an interview with Castillo García, Ferré admits that she wrote *The House on the Lagoon*, *Eccentric Neighborhoods* and *Flight of the Swan* in Spanish first, and then translated them into English (2005: 242). She claims to have published all three novels in English first in order to create a market for the Spanish editions (2005: 240–3).

**References**


The Book of Judith is the story of a Jewish heroine living during the period of the Second Temple when the Jewish community had returned from the Babylonian captivity and reestablished temple worship in Jerusalem. In this story, a fictional Near East sovereign threatens the religious hegemony of the Jewish people. The story is famous for Judith’s pursuit and beheading of the King’s general, Holofernes. Judith’s success against all odds epitomizes the charter myth of Judaism itself—cultural survival through the commitment to the preservation of the Mosaic Law, with the help of God.

Judith: oh, hello, Paolo. This is Judith Preiss here. Paolo: Hi, Judith. I’m calling about that meeting. Can you make next Wednesday? Judith: I’m sorry, Judith. I can’t. But I can make Thursday or Friday. Paolo: Of course. I can pick you up from the station if you like. Judith: Great. See you on...