

IMPOSSIBLE ROMANCE: NATION AND GENDER IN PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE

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The important role of literature in nation building has caught the attention of scholars of nationalism like Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha. In the Latin American context, Julio Ramos has explored the relationship between writing, modernization, and the consolidation of states in the Nineteenth Century. In the same vein, Doris Sommer has established that nation building novels in Latin America took the specific form of romances (allegorical love stories) in which erotic passion was the means to bind together different sectors of the nation. Significantly, Sommer did not find any Puerto Rican novel to fit her description of national romance.

I am interested in looking at the fictions that substitute for national romances in Puerto Rico. Erotic passion is an important element in Puerto Rican nation building fictions, however, this passion is not used to signify the optimism about the future of the nation but rather the pessimism vis a vis the difficulties of bringing it to life. I have chosen two novels by Manuel Zeno Gandía as paradigmatic examples of how gender has helped to articulate discourses about the nation in Puerto Rican literature.

Zeno is an interesting figure because he occupied a dominant position in the field of power as well as in the literary field. He was an hacendado, a journalist and newspaper owner, and founder of several political parties (Republicano, Unión, Independencia). He had in the field of power as much power as Puerto Ricans were allowed to have in the colony. Both as a writer and as a Puerto Rican politician, Zeno was part of the dominated section of the field of power. If in Latin America literature was a privileged space for nation building, in Puerto Rico it was probably the only space available, since the state was in metropolitan hands. Zeno left us many novels which, because of their interest in analyzing how Puerto Rican society is constructed and how it could be re-structured, can be read as nation building fictions.

The core of Zeno's work is a collection of novels grouped under the title "*Crónicas de un mundo enfermo*" ("Chronicles of an Ailing World"). The word "chronicle" suggests verity; Zeno claims to accurately re-present reality. In calling his novels "chronicles", he has joined the two forms Benedict Anderson argued provided the technical means for "re-presenting" the kind of imagined community that is the nation (25).

The first of the novels that integrate the chronicles was published in 1890; the last one, in 1925. The 35 years elapsed

between these novels bridge the last years of Spanish colonization with the first of the American occupation. Traditional literary criticism considers the American invasion of 1898 to have caused a trauma that fundamentally affected literary activity in Puerto Rico. Talking about the chronicles, Francisco Manrique Cabrera has proclaimed:

We are in the last years of the Nineteenth Century. The great novelist's creative faculties are at their highest point. Works come out of his pen like a torrent from an ever flowing stream. But...there came the year 98! Abrupt change of domination. The base of the collective soul is shaken and a spiritual rip is produced. *Being* is obstructed and with it all creative spirit is paralyzed (italics in the original 186).¹

A more graphic example of the importance literary critics have given the invasion of 1898 is the history of Puerto Rican literature written by Cesáreo Rosa Nieves, which uses the invasion as the criteria that divides the two volumes. Puerto Rican literature and history are often considered split between Spanish times and post-1898 times.

Cabrera considered the divide to be great enough to say that little unites the first two novels of the chronicles to the last two. Nonetheless, I consider the complete set of the chronicles to provide important clues as to how the Creoles made sense out of the fast-changing reality and slowly adjusted their nation building discourse to it. The confrontation with a radically different situation was accompanied by changes in the system of representation. I will analyze the last two novels that constitute the chronicles to explain such changes, as well as the continuities. One of them, El negocio, is atypical in the context of Puerto Rican literature; the other one, Redentores, can be considered a trend-setting prototype.

A Puerto Rican Creole Family Romance:
A Model for the construction of a Nation

El negocio, the third novel of the collection, was published in 1922 but was already finished by 1903, if not earlier.² Why was it published so late is not known, but some sort of censorship should not be ruled out as a possible reason. Set in the end of the Nineteenth Century, this novel is full of a hope inspired by the vicinity of the granting of the *Carta Autonómica*, the Act that allowed for the establishment of an autonomous government in Puerto Rico in 1897. It also has an air of rebelliousness, a hint of an independentist desire. If Puerto Rico had not become a United States colony in 1898, this novel would probably occupy the slot of a nation building novel in the schools curriculum.

One of the two main story lines is the love story of Clarita and Sergio. Clarita is a rather sickly Creole girl, the daughter of Andújar and Filomena. Filomena is also a Creole woman, and Andújar is the same Spaniard who in La charca owned a store and sold the peasants bad and overpriced basic-need items. He represents the corrupt power of the Spanish government as well as the class of Spaniards who dominated commerce in the colony. His ambition had made him conceive a deal in which the item sold was her daughter: in order to merge two fortunes, he wanted Clarita to marry a rich young man she detested.

Clarita was in love with Sergio, a young Creole who worked for her father, but Andújar was opposed to their union because of his lack of fortune and his obscure origin. Sergio felt humiliated by Andújar and decided to renounce to the love of Clarita arguing that it was her duty to obey her father. Disappointed by the man who "did not know how to win her"(138), Clarita decided to consent to marry whoever their parents wanted. Submitting to the authority of the father was painful and unfair, but was still considered the dutiful thing to do.

While everybody is waiting for the marriage ceremony that would ratify the authority of the father, the status quo, Sergio joins his friend Camilo at the tavern. Camilo is a "tavern politician" who constantly gives speeches about the need to save Puerto Rico from the oppressive colonial government. Even though he does not find a way to help advance the independentist ideal, he actually solves the personal problems of a few friends. If we look for the relationship between his rebellious political ideas and his concrete actions in the novel, we find a clue for an allegorical reading of the text in which private life stories have a political meaning.

Camilo calls Sergio a coward, and Sergio is bewildered: "A coward! Camilo had called him a coward...Did he think, by any chance, that his conduct obeyed fear, not upright principles and gentleman codes? A coward he who does his duty?"(164). Camilo has put the meaning of duty into question, and argued that it was legitimate to use violence to obtain what has been unjustly denied him. Sergio's masculinity and determination has also been put into question. Thinking about all this, he heads for the beach where he plans to commit suicide at the same time that the wedding was going to be celebrated.

Surprisingly, unlike the earlier chronicles, this one does not end at the peak of despair. Clarita fainted in the middle of the wedding ceremony, and somebody stopped Sergio from killing himself; there is a second chance to do things right.

Lupe, a woman the narrator calls "Indian" because she had "ethnic characters of a people reduced to dust" (99-100) is the person who saved Sergio. She was a poor prostitute who also worked for Andújar and had always loved Sergio in silence. Considering that Sergio could not possibly love a fallen woman, she offers to be his slave. After Sergio learns that Clarita did not get married, he goes to Lupe to ask for help to take Clarita away from her parent's house.

The allegory that organizes this plot is charged with implications of how race, class and gender hierarchies were expected to work for the autonomous nation. Clarita, the child of a Spaniard now asphyxiated by the authority of the father and attacked by a continuous illness, is a symbol of the nation. The opposition of Andújar to the love between Clarita and Sergio, another Creole, represents the tyranny of the Spanish colonial government that did not let Creoles govern themselves. Then Sergio's fight for the right to marry Clarita is also the fight for self-government. This romantic allegorical plot represents the struggle for an *autonomista* government like a struggle between men: Spanish vs Creole. Women were not expected to play an active role in this struggle, they are just intermediaries. Whereas to be self-assured and assertive is the behavior pattern for the men in the nation to be constituted, the behavior advocated for women is either passivity or sacrifice. Clarita is the passive type, she has no initiative and just follows happily Sergio's plans. Lupe is all sacrifice: her love for Sergio inspires her to help him be happy with Clarita. A man is supposed to fight for what he wants, a woman is expected to sacrifice herself. Things are further complicated if we notice that Lupe is also poor and an "Indian"; the sacrifice of the subaltern groups she embodies is the base of the happiness of the Creoles. The nation envisioned by the Creoles was thus one in which Creole men were protagonists and the rest of society was just a supporting cast.

Sergio discusses with Camilo different plans to take Clarita out of her father's house and have her marry Sergio before being discovered. It was important for Sergio to actually get married, he wanted a legal, legitimate right to Clarita. His reasoning is consistent with *autonomista* thought; they played by the rules of the system they were challenging. The final plan was decided: to take Clarita to Saint Thomas to get married, and then go to Paris. In a private meeting in Camilo's apartment, he gave Sergio two letters. One of them was for a friend who would help the lovers in Saint Thomas, and the other one was for Ramón Emeterio Betances, who would help them in Paris. The irruption of the name of an important Puerto Rican revolutionary leader in this context wakes up any reader who had failed to notice the presence of a political allegory in the text. The letter was given Sergio in private and not in the tavern because of the danger of being caught with evidence of being in contact with the radical leader. The mention of Betances provoked Camilo to give Sergio a long discourse about the crimes the Spanish committed to subjugate the American peoples, and about the lack of freedom still suffered in Puerto Rico. Betances, dedicated to obtain the freedom of Puerto Rico, was presumed to be willing to help the rebellious lovers as well. In Camilo's mind, as well as in the logic of the text, the love of Sergio and Clarita was related to the emancipation of Puerto Rico.

When Filomena, Clarita's Creole mother, noticed what had happened, she was quickly won for the lover's side. First, she recriminated Andújar: "You are responsible for this. You, because of your recklessness, of your tyranny. Because you disowned the heart of the woman and negated your daughter her rights". (299) The selection of the words "tyranny" and "negated rights" once again relate the private drama to political life. Next, Filomena takes control of the situation. She decides to go join the couple in Paris. All the changes suited Clarita so well, that she was no longer sick. The incurable sickness that Juan del Salto in La charca argued corrupted everything in the colony, has been overcome: the sickness that affects the island is revealed as historically contingent and not as an essential character of its people. Filomena, who "had grown strong" (389), did not want to go back to Puerto Rico. Tired of being alone, Andújar succumbs to his family and decides to join them. Before leaving, Andújar re-emplotted the story:

Talking about this, he told the story his own way. One night Clarita was so sick, that they decided to make her travel urgently; and the trip suited her so well that she got better immediately. And what a coincidence! In Paris she met Sergio Madrid, a good boy, the son of a brave military man, a descendant of respectable people of Spain, who died gloriously. And

out of that meeting sprang a love that ruined the wedding plans with Rosaldez. That's life! Nobody was opposed and Clarita and Madrid got married and were extremely happy. (390)

This re-employment allowed Andújar to re-establish a relationship with his Creole family without acknowledging defeat in any way. Although "it was a real collective opposition of the family what frustrated Andújar's insistence" (391), he made things look like everything happened according to his own will. The Creole couple had made clear that they will direct their life as they wish but had left a space in the new family for the Spanish father. The national family has been redefined.

The optimism in El negocio is noticeable in the way in which women are portrayed. Suffering women in the previous chronicles are victims with no possibility of redemption; in this chronicle women are still in an oppressed position but there exists the possibility of fighting back. Clarita overcomes sickness and escapes an unwanted marriage to marry the man she loved; Filomena becomes empowered to have a say in the affairs of her family; and Lupe abandons prostitution to honor her love for Sergio. But women are not the agents of their own salvation; Sergio is responsible for the improvement of the situation of the three women. Thus, the rising of women to a nicer situation in this text is a way of making the power and masculinity of the Creole hero stand out.

I have read the happy-ending love story of Sergio and Clarita as an allegory for the successful history of the establishment of an *autonomista* government; the foundation of a Creole nation under Spanish authority. But there is in the text another story that runs parallel to that one, and that ends the text with a feeling of dissatisfaction. This story can be read as an allegory for the not accomplished project of political independence.

Leopoldo is a Creole merchant on the verge of bankruptcy because of his practice of loaning money to friends and of not having the heart to foreclose the mortgages on his debtors' properties. He is characterized as good-hearted and honest. Even though he would like to see Puerto Rico free, he had always remained lukewarm in politics for the benefit of his business.

Facing imminent bankruptcy, Leopoldo counts with the help of Leocadia and Camilo. Leocadia and Leopoldo were sweethearts when they were young but had separated later. After both had married and widowed, they got together again. Leocadia gave Leopoldo all her money, ready to go bankrupt with him. They did not get married and an argument for free love is made: to play by conventional rules was not as important for this couple as it was

for Sergio and Clarita. They are into a more mature and intellectual kind of love, and share a more radical politics.

Camilo suggests Leonardo to escape before being arrested, and uses some money that luck put on his hands to help him. Initially, Camilo thought of using that money to help the revolutionaries that were fighting from Europe and the United States for the independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico, but realized that the amount was insignificant for such a project (354). His decision to use it instead to help Leonardo directs the reader to relate Leonardo's struggle to the struggle for independence.

Leonardo's worst enemy and most ferocious creditor was Gastón, his own brother. Their father was Spanish but Leonardo was born in Puerto Rico and Gastón was born in Spain and had never been in the island: Leonardo was a Creole; Gastón, a Spaniard. Leonardo had taken care of the family patrimony after his father died, and used to send Gastón a share of money regularly. Gastón had lost all his money gambling and depended on the money from Puerto Rico to survive. When the money stopped coming, he decided to go to Puerto Rico to personally settle matters with his brother. He was moved by pure greed and his attitude towards Puerto Rico and the Creoles, including his brother, was typical of a Spanish conservative:

. . . . he arrived over there denouncing in the coarse gesture, in the proud disposition, the firm belief in a superiority for him indisputable: in the concept of an immortal possession and that part of *our overseas provinces* belonged to him; the complete certainty that he was arriving in his house, in the house of his compatriots, in the house of his government where the Creoles lowered the head in front of the historical sentence of slavery and subjection to the masters of their land. (*italics in the original* 394-5)

Gastón wanted Leonardo to give him all the money he was owed regardless of his brother's impossibility to do so and without questioning his right to that money. Leonardo's friends wanted to avoid a fight between the brothers so they gave him all the money they could, but their money was not enough. Since Gastón did not treat him like a brother, Leonardo decided to forget about their relationship: "He felt, then, as if a new energy shook his will; as if Gastón no longer mattered to him; as if those old home ties were broken, as if they were no longer brothers. Gastón was not worth the anxiety he had suffered for him in sleepless nights" (404).

In the story of Clarita and Sergio, the relationship between the Spanish and Creoles is configured like a triangle in which the men fight for the obedience of a woman. In the story of Leonardo and Gastón that relationship is portrayed like an unmediated struggle between brothers that, in spite of their

common origin, their differences are enough to cause a split. In the *autonomista* allegory, there was a space for the Spanish in the Creole family. In the *independentista* allegory, family ties between the Spanish and the Creoles are not just modified, but broken. There is no space for the Spanish in the radical *independentista* model for a Creole nation.

At the end of the text Gastón, not satisfied by the partial payment, starts to beat Leonardo. In the middle of the fight Gastón shouts: "Niggers!...You hate the old fatherland! . . . Filibuster, insurrect, mambí...!" (423). These adjectives are the ones used by the Spanish government to describe revolutionary activists. Gastón equates the failure to comply with his insensitive demands to an act of subversion against Spanish authority. Like real life revolutionaries at the time, Leonardo had to leave the island to avoid being liquidated; he ends in defeat. When he complained that Gastón had slapped him in the face, a major insult in gentleman code, Camilo reassures him and concludes the text: "Bah!... Laugh about that. . . . Heaven knows in whose face will the blows of the future fall...!" (425). In this way ends this novel that, while celebrating the partial success of an *autonomista* government, is not satisfied by it.

Because of a temporary optimism caused by the *Carta Autonómica*, El negocio is more similar to Latin American romances than to the tradition of Puerto Rican literature so full with stories about victimized women and unfulfilled manhood. In this chronicle abusive authority can be challenged, Creole women are not helpless victims, Creole men are to some extent capable of putting their ideas into action and of avenging insults to their masculinity, and sincere love exists and lovers can be happy. The fourth and last chronicle, however, will go back to a pessimistic plot and start a tradition in Puerto Rican literature in which abused women and humiliated men stand for the colonized nation.

Reconfiguring the Model of the Nation in the New Field of Power

Redentores was published in weekly installments in the newspaper "El Imparcial" in 1925 although it was probably written years earlier. The action of the novel is set in 1913, 15 years after the American invasion, and is very open in its critique of the colonial government. So open is it, that this novel was not included in the "Complete Works" collection published by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture in 1955. It was separately published later, but it has been mostly ignored by literary critics who just mention it in passing and point out that the title is ironic. The title is ironic, indeed. It is an allusion to the intervention of the United States in Puerto Rico, which

was welcomed like a force that was supposed to save the island from Spanish colonialism, but stayed to occupy its place.

In 1898 a socially fragmented Puerto Rico received the American invasion without resistance, no difference was made between the rejection of Spanish control and the acceptance of the American occupation. Internal social conflicts in Puerto Rican society exploded and a period of violent contestation of the established order followed. The first expression of this kind were the peasant revolts known as *partidas sediciosas*. Between 1900 and 1904 another expression of social discontent erupted. What is known in Puerto Rican history as *turbas republicanas* (the republican mob), was actually an urban popular political organization dedicated to violent activities directed to the advancement of the Republican Party, the party that opposed *autonomistas* and advocated a complete union of Puerto Rico to the United States.

This strong participation in national politics of subaltern groups like artisans and peasants was silenced in Zeno's novel. The text structures the national problem as a struggle between Americans and Creoles, thus excluding subaltern groups from the nation building process. It is significant that there are both American antagonists and American helpers to the national project in this text. These two categories of Americans correspond to an idea about different kinds of Americanization that was current at that time in Puerto Rico. On the one hand, there was the "true" spirit of Americanization which meant modernization and democracy; on the other hand there was the "atypical" Americanization which meant colonialism and antidemocratic practices not consistent with the American constitution.

The national problem is also constructed in this text as a problem between men in which women are symbolic objects, denied of subjecthood and agency. In one of the two main story lines the failure of Creole autonomist politics is structured as the story of a Creole man who fails to surrender the resistance of an American woman. The other main story line maps out the history of the American colonization as the story of an American man who seduces a Puerto Rican woman and pushes her into prostitution.

The main character is Aureo del Sol, a writer and journalist who was the leader of one of the major political parties.³ He was a very successful politician who during the novel will be trying to get appointed to become the first Puerto Rican governor. Aureo was in love with Madelón, an American teacher who resisted becoming his lover arguing that he could not be faithful to her unless he was also faithful to the ideal of Puerto Rican independence. She established that unless he stopped negotiating with the colonial government to appoint him governor and acted according to his ideals he would not be worthy of her. Madelón is turned into a symbol of Puerto Rican

independence. Why does an American woman represent Puerto Rican independence in this text? This is a complex gender and nation allegory. Why could not the character of a strong and independent woman, without any precedent in Zeno's chronicles, be a Puerto Rican? This behavior pattern was not compatible with the ideal obedient woman the Creoles wanted in their family. On the other hand, Madelón figures in the text as the prize the Creole will get in the fight for independence. The invasion of the fatherland was supposed to be revindicated by the possession of a woman of the colonizing people.

The other main story line is about Piadosa, a poor Creole obsessed by a litigation that would restore her rights to a land, the long lost property of an ancestor who was a Count. The American Secretary of Government Elkus Engels, presents himself as a redeemer who would help settle the suit. There is a parallel between the conduct of Engels regarding Piadosa and the conduct of the United States regarding Puerto Rico; both meant to exploit while pretending to help, both are false redeemers.

According to the narrator, Piadosa was, like her mother Piedad, a model of female virtue. The narrator defines this virtue as not having more world than her husband, her children, her love and her home (25). But this living model of Puerto Rican womanhood was corrupted by Engels, who exploited the girl's desire for a good life and made himself agreeable by offering her trips in his car (107) and a luxurious life in New York (149). Piadosa finally gave in to the metropolitan life utopia offered by Engels and accepted the offer of a ride in automobile. After the ride, Engels took her to a private place for dinner, made her drunk and seduced her. After that, Piadosa went to New York where Engels promised to join her but she was worried he was not going to marry her. Engels eventually abandoned her, he never intended to legalize his union to Piadosa and, according to a conversation overheard by Piadosa, as a politician he was not worried about the lack of legitimacy of his power in the colony either. After working as a cabaret dancer and being abused by many men, Piadosa returned to Puerto Rico and eventually became a prostitute. Antonio, Aureo's son, had always loved Piadosa but she had rejected him. When he heard that Piadosa was back he looked for her and offered her a new life by marrying him. They got married but she did not love him.

This story is built on the assumption that Puerto Rican women should keep a particular type of behavior: to stay in the home and keep themselves for Puerto Rican men, and not to desire the pleasures of modern commodities. Women were expected to resist the temptations of the Americans, they were assigned the responsibility of keeping the private sphere of the Puerto Rican family free from the overwhelming influence that Americans had in public and state matters.

At the same time that Antonio proposed marriage to Piadosa, it was officially announced that Aureo was appointed governor. Father and son had an argument because Aureo did not approve of the marriage. Madelón also had an argument with Aureo and decided to go back to the United States. Thus, at the end of the text Aureo is alone:

He felt sorrowful, unhappy, wretched. What a way to wake up! So many dreams of gold and reality was bitter! Alone, alone without love and without caresses; alone without his son, without the loved woman, and surrounded by danger, jealousy, Tartuffes, and enemies. Alone in the commotion of his triumph, in the clamor of his elevation; immensely sad, immensely unfortunate. (363)

Aureo won the highest post allowed a Puerto Rican in the colonial government, but lost his family. The chastisement of Aureo in the text is an object lesson for autonomist politics.

In spite of the existence of a minor independentist movement, the most powerful nationalist discourses in Puerto Rico, including the one that became official in the 1940s, have had political autonomy, and not independence, as a goal. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones has provided a useful short explanation of *autonomismo*:

The definition of *autonomista* political and cultural tradition maybe summarized as an affirmation of a nation without the state. The defense of a national project does not necessarily imply the creation of an independent state; rather, it stands for stricter collaboration and common citizenship with the metropolis (238).

Chatterjee has explained that Indian anticolonial nationalism built its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begun its political battle with the imperial power (6). In Puerto Rico, this inner domain was conceptualized by Creoles as "la gran familia puertorriqueña". However, autonomist nationalism started negotiations with the colonial power before having really managed to re-establish their control of "la gran familia" after 1898.

In Redentores Zeno makes the autonomist leader pay for his political success in the colonial government with the reproach and abandonment of his family and his loved ones. In this way he denounced the bankruptcy of an autonomista politics more concerned about getting a slice of power in the colonial government than about taking care of the problems of the nation. As a writer he was able to explore the limits of a political strategy in which he himself was engaged.

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NOTES

1.All translations are my own.

2.Ernesto Alvarez has cleared up the confusion between the publication date and the date in which the novel was written. As early as 1897, the publication was being advertised in Costa Rica (11-14).

3.Ernesto Alvarez has suggested that both El negocio and Redentores are a "roman de clef" of the *autonomista* leader Luis Muñoz Rivera (55). He does not give any evidence to support this argument, but I agree that Aureo del Sol in Redentores was probably loosely fashioned after Luis Muñoz Rivera. The antagonism between Zeno and Muñoz is well known, as a duel between them was organized but canceled at the last minute. Muñoz publicly criticized the inflexibility of Zeno's ideas, and Zeno probably couldn't stand Muñoz's volubility.