

Introduction

Much of what we understand today as Puerto Rico's national literature is inextricably linked to the intellectual projects of the *Generación del Treinta*. Credited with exploring the nature of Puerto Rican "character and personality," the writers and thinkers whose works were first published in the turbulent 1930s resolutely formulated the bases upon which to build a uniquely Puerto Rican literature. Essayists, poets, novelists, and short story writers such as Antonio S. Pedreira, Tomás Blanco, Margot Arce, Luis Palés Matos, Julia de Burgos, Juan Antonio Corretjer, Enrique Laguerre, and Emilio S. Belaval conceived their work both in aesthetic terms and as a gesture of cultural affirmation and nation-building during a time of great political, economic, and cultural upheaval. As inheritors of the historical changes triggered by the United States's political and economic sovereignty over Puerto Rico after 1898, they, and other Creole intellectuals, endeavored to respond to a new colonial reality, experienced, in different forms, by all Puerto Ricans during the first half of the twentieth century. From the vantage point of the writers of this intellectual generation, the crisis was not limited to the political and economic spheres alone, but had severe ramifications for the island's culture. To counter the all-encompassing sense of social and cultural dislocation, the intelligentsia proposed to discover anew Puerto Rico's "national character" (*personalidad puertorriqueña, personalidad como pueblo*) in order to affirm the existence of the nation and to provide the discourses that would buttress new political projects. Thinkers, writers, and politicians, most of whom were members of the new professional elite coming of age in the 1930s, set out to instill Puerto Ricans with a renewed sense of collectivity, and took it upon themselves to speak on behalf of all their compatriots.¹ Significantly, many important members of this intellectual formation were literary critics and historians, who played a fundamental role in setting the parameters of the discourse on Puerto Rican culture. Through their access to cultural institutions such as the University of Puerto Rico, the

Ateneo Puertorriqueño, and a number of publications, figures such as Margot Arce, Antonio S. Pedreira, Concha Meléndez, Manrique Cabrera, Nilita Vientós Gastón, Tomás Blanco, and many others were instrumental in delineating a Puerto Rican literary canon, with its attendant interpretations and authoritative readings, that would influence contemporary and future critics and readers. With minimal changes, the cultural proposals of this generation would be incorporated into the populist political undertakings of the 1940s and 1950s.

This book examines the underpinnings of race, class, and gender evidenced in the cultural nationalist projects of the intellectuals of the *Generación del Treinta*. Their embattled responses to the questions “What are we as a people?” and “Who are we?” were the result of complex debates and negotiations for cultural leadership in the midst of competing proposals from U.S. colonial interests, subaltern formulations regarding social justice, and a more politically militant nationalist activism. The resulting national identity discourse formulated by these liberal intellectuals, when understood as a project undertaken by multiple and competing voices, reveals its elements of “creation and invention,” to use historian Eric Hobsbawm’s now famous conceptualization. More often than not, cultural nationalists select, reconfigure, and reimagine the defining elements that constitute the nation, conceiving new relationships, reorganizing meanings, and creating a synthesis suitable to their purposes. In the nationalist context, this discursive practice is part of an effort to inculcate certain conceptual frameworks, values, and norms of behavior in order to “establish continuity with a suitable historic past.”² This new understanding of the past is then written into the present and projected onto the future. In the Puerto Rican context, the discourse of national identity that coalesced in the 1930s sought to connect the nation to a highly contested Spanish colonial past that would stand in opposition to the difficult colonial present inaugurated by the American intervention. At best, this new historical narrative of the *Generación del Treinta* engaged, only to marginalize, Puerto Rico’s multi-racial history and the painful legacies left by centuries of racial slavery. At worst, it perpetuated a racial hierarchy grounded in centuries of stigmatization and discrimination against the descendents of enslaved Africans, a considerable sector of Puerto Rican society. Colonial modernity was the stage on which Creole intellectuals rehearsed their scripts for national identity vis-à-vis working class militancy and North American colonial intervention. As a group vying for social hegemony in the midst of the social crisis of the 1930s, their challenge was to modernize social and intellectual discourses while still retaining, to a large extent, their society’s paternalistic values.³

With very few exceptions, the very milieu of the writers who have come to form the Puerto Rican literary canon demanded that they deal with the theme of national identity and “Puerto Ricanness” in one way or another.

The *Generación del Treinta* firmly established this expectation, often understood to be mandatory, as the legitimate endeavor for every Puerto Rican writer. Accordingly, the Puerto Rican artist is charged with the awesome task of being a guarantor of the existence of his or her culture. Following this logic, writers worth their salt reaffirm the reality of a uniquely Puerto Rican literature and culture; they are called to act as the national conscience within strictly defined boundaries. Already the overarching, sempiternal theme is "our unique way of being." This enduring ethical dictum has nurtured the flowering of literary works, as well as scholarly endeavors directed at documenting the persistence of a cultural tradition. But as writer Ana Lydia Vega attests in a 1988 essay, the powerful legacy of the *Generación del Treinta* can overwhelm many writers: "Such is the magnitude of the project that one can easily end up in a formidable *writer's block*. . . . Because, in addition to Saving the Fatherland, Affirming the Culture in Crisis, and Accelerating the Advent of the Great Popular Dawn with the utmost originality and within the utmost orthodoxy possible, one is also asked to denounce, with every touch of the key, the Vile Machista Oppression, a somewhat *risqué* variant of the dear class struggle. No, even in literature we are pursued by the double shift!"⁴ (Tal es la magnitud del proyecto que podría fácilmente desembocar en un formidable *writer's block*. . . . Porque, además de Salvar la Patria, Afirmar la Cultura en Crisis y Acelerar el Advenimiento de la Gran Aurora Popular con la mayor originalidad y dentro de la mayor ortodoxia posible, se le pide también que a cada teclateo de máquina denuncie la Vil Opresión Machista, variante algo *risqué* de la querida lucha de clases. ¡No, si hasta en literatura nos persigue la doble tarea!) Vega argues for the freedom to explore topics and genres other than those sanctioned by what has become an established tradition. Although the author takes a jab at the ensuing literary endeavors of the 1950s and 1970s, her irreverent and humorous declaration of independence is an oblique homage to the success of the cultural nationalist project to write the nation and, in the process, usher it into being.

Puerto Rican cultural nationalism was forged in the heat of political opposition and state repression of the more radical and militant nationalism promulgated by the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. The Nationalist Party's call for sovereignty and total independence from the United States threatened the grip that North American sugar and other corporations had on the island's economy. In an effort to gain actual as well as symbolic terrain, militant nationalists defended the Spanish language and a Spanish-derived identity, promoted the use of a Puerto Rican flag, spread Catholic dogmatism, raised an unarmed liberation army, and organized marches and political meetings all over the island. The most ardent apostle of Puerto Rican independence and the leader of the movement, Harvard-educated Pedro Albizu Campos, suffered harassment and, later, incarceration and torture at the hands of the colonial authorities. A great admirer of Irish nationalism and in particular of

Sinn Fein, Albizu Campos believed that activism and confrontation would lead to an ebullient raising of consciousness among Puerto Ricans and to mass opposition to colonial rule.⁵ Other nationalist-leaning groups were not so willing to go the route of militant confrontation with the regime and opted to struggle within the system. However, given similarities in class background, there were many points of agreement between the liberal young intellectuals who comprised the *Generación del Treinta* and the militant nationalists. They all agreed that imposition of colonial capitalism had been ruinous for the hegemonic aspirations of Puerto Rican landowners and for society as a whole, and that political independence was a way to solve the crisis. They also coincided in their conservative defense of Hispanic culture and the Spanish language as a way to reclaim cultural and political space. Their assertion of Puerto Rico's cultural difference vis-à-vis the United States was a way of approaching the greater issues of political sovereignty. In this, Puerto Rican cultural nationalists were not alone. Underscoring cultural difference was a practice widely used by other Caribbean and Latin American countries under the massive weight of the United States's economic and political influence.

In their efforts to establish the uniqueness of Puerto Rican culture and, thus, the separateness of Puerto Rico from its new colonial master, the *Generación del Treinta* would enlist the aid of a number of paradoxical strategies. They chose to combat one colonialism with another, and to formulate their idea of the nation using racist discourses that were in contradiction to the heterogeneous racial reality of the island. This was not a simple matter, given that elite intellectuals were strongly invested in their identity as white descendents of Spaniards. Puerto Rican "whiteness" was further brought into crisis as it encountered the intransigence of the United States's racial hierarchies in which white Latin Americans occupied a lower position in relation to white Euro-Americans. Let us not forget that "whiteness" is a form of social capital jealously guarded in all societies that have experienced white supremacy. This was one of the many dislocations faced by the Puerto Rican intelligentsia in the early twentieth century. The Spanish conquest and colonization of the Caribbean and the Americas had put in place complex and highly fluid systems of classifying people by race, a legacy still remaining with us today. From the inception of Spanish colonialism, the ongoing process of race mixing was codified in a system of racial castes or *sistema de castas* with social privilege and life opportunities available according to a person's Spanish, Indian, or African parentage. *Mestizo*, *castizo*, *morisco*, *mulato*, *lobo*, *saltatrás*, *tente en el aire*, and *chino* are some of at least sixteen designations used at one time in eighteenth-century Mexico, for example. Each country developed its own cataloging systems based on the ratio of the races and the particular economic conditions of the time. For centuries the highest colonial and religious offices, as well as the

best economic opportunities, were reserved for peninsular Spaniards, a practice resented by the Creole elites whose hegemonic aspirations would, in time, lead them to spearhead the various independence struggles of the early nineteenth century. As defined in this book, Creole or *criollo* are terms used to categorize the white descendents of Spanish and other Europeans born in the Americas. Yet in common parlance, *criollo* also refers to anyone or anything native-born. These two usages are interrelated, as we see in my later discussion of race.

Even as race mixing has continued uninterrupted in most of Latin America, it is vital to understand that the prevalence of *mestizos*, mulattos, or people of mixed race, does not imply an absence of racial hierarchies. Economic status, life opportunities, ideals of beauty, social desirability, and political power are constantly being negotiated within an elaborate system of white supremacy, where the most “European” in phenotype remain at the top and the most “African” and “Indian” remain at the bottom. People of many shades of brown, facial features, and hair types represent the broad middle of the scale. Race and class are interlocked—one category can at times supply what is perceived as lacking in another. For instance, money or circumstance can socially—though only up to a certain point—“lighten” or at times also “darken” a person, influencing his or her placement in the social hierarchy. Self-identification, phenotype, economic status, gender, ancestry, and social context all help define race. In Puerto Rico today, as in most of Latin America, social pressure toward *blanqueamiento* or “whitening” of one’s bloodline by marrying a lighter-skinned person continues undiminished. For centuries race mixing occurred independently of formal legal marriage and was strictly forbidden among the upper classes by custom, and at times by law. Among the working classes race mixing has followed its own variegated logic.⁶ Notions of race have been integral to questions of national identity and will be examined at length in this book.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the island’s elite had a vested interest in internally and externally projecting an image of Puerto Rico as the whitest of the Antilles. The main points of comparison were the Anglophone and Francophone islands, with their obvious predominance of people of African descent, and Cuba, viewed by Puerto Rican intellectuals with both admiration and ambiguity. In the case of Cuba, the Creole elite’s formulation of discourses of nationhood were powerfully informed by the massive presence of black Cubans who had provided the manpower for the sugar plantation and tobacco booms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Popular involvement in the War of Independence, a developing Afro-Cuban consciousness, continuous race mixing, and the United States’s political and economic intervention would shape discourses about “Cubanness” or *cubanidad*. In Puerto Rico conditions were somewhat different, given its lesser integration into international markets and a greater preponderance of

small *haciendas*. As with Cuba, nonetheless, there had been an ongoing process of race mixing and repeated immigrations of whites from the newly independent Spanish colonies and from Spain at various moments in the nineteenth century. And even though at the time of abolition in 1873 most Puerto Ricans of African descent were not enslaved, the stigmatization of blackness was, and remains today, part of the fabric of life in Puerto Rico. To the proponents of nationalism writing in the 1930s, scarcely sixty years after abolition, the population's racial heterogeneity was a thorny question.

With the North American intervention, Puerto Rican elites came face to face with a new version of white supremacy that placed even the whitest and most educated islanders in a subservient position to the Euro-American. In 1898, most Puerto Ricans were not considered white by the invading troops, nor by the photographers and journalists who came to document life in the newly acquired colony. Nonetheless, the majority of Puerto Ricans, though "colored" in North American eyes, did not see themselves this way. In the new colonial economic and political context, the Creole intelligentsia underwent a crisis of legitimacy that led to anguished questioning of its role as a demoted white-identified elite intent on leading a racially heterogeneous populace.

The complexities of Creole responses to these new challenges are exemplified by literary critic Margot Arce de Vázquez, a figure I have chosen to highlight in my study. As she strives to construct a narrowly conceived Spanish foundation for Puerto Rican culture, concepts such as "race" and "cultural tradition" are appropriated by the author and invested with new meanings. Arce would glorify the Spanish colonial past as a way to combat the present colonial impositions. Similarly, her exegesis of Luis Palés Matos's *negrista* or "black poetry" is deeply embroiled in polemics about the nature and extent of the nation's racial heterogeneity. My analysis of the *Generación del Treinta* privileges the figure of Margot Arce as paradigmatic of the profound interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality in cultural nationalist discourses. While she is often mentioned as a contributor to the cultural nationalist projects of the time, my study places her squarely in the midst of the projects of this generation as one of its principal authors and interlocutors.

Margot Arce's long career as teacher, critic, and political activist spanned more than fifty years. Born Margarita Arce Blanco in Caguas in 1904 (a tobacco producing town at the time), Arce attended high school under the newly established U.S. public school system, whose expressed aim was the acculturation of Puerto Rico's youth into a specifically American way of life.⁷ After attending the University of Puerto Rico and teaching there for a short time, she traveled to Spain in 1928 where she completed a doctorate in Spanish literature. Her career as a Hispanist began with the publication of her doctoral dissertation, by the famed Centro de Estudios Históricos, on Spanish Renaissance poet Garcilaso de la Vega. While in Spain, Arce traveled extensively and had contact with members of the Spanish intelligentsia, experiences

that would greatly affect her later intellectual and political endeavors. She also became a close friend of the Chilean poet and ambassador to Spain, Gabriela Mistral. Yet in contrast to a number of Latin American intellectuals (Alfonso Reyes, for example) who visited Spain in the 1910s and 1920s and partook of the more avant-garde aspects of Spanish intellectual life, Arce went to Spain in search of a Spanish tradition, not in search of modernism and avant-garde culture. Her aim was to connect with a literary and cultural heritage, personified especially by the writers of the Golden Age and the Spanish Generation of 1898, and later the exiles of the Generation of 1927.

Upon her return to Puerto Rico, Margot Arce resumed teaching at the University of Puerto Rico in the Department of Hispanic Studies and was very active in the intellectual scene. She served on the editorial boards of professional journals such as *Revista del Ateneo Puertorriqueño* and *Brújula* (the journal of the Circle of Spanish Teachers), published in *Índice*, and edited the *Revista de la Asociación de Mujeres Graduadas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* (Journal of the Association of University of Puerto Rico Women Graduates). In 1946 Margot Arce became a founding member of the *Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño*, a party dedicated to the attainment of political independence from the United States through the ballot and by appeal to the United Nations. As director of the Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Puerto Rico from 1943 to 1965, Doña Margot, as she was respectfully known, trained generations of students and critics.

One could argue that Puerto Rican women of the *Generación del Treinta*, such as Margot Arce, identified more strongly with the concerns of their class and race than with interests stemming from their condition as gendered subjects.⁸ Yet, such an additive model of these systems of domination does not capture the fluidity inherent in the construction of social subjectivities and the radical interconnectedness of these categories. As feminist critics have amply demonstrated, these social categories function in co-constitutive ways, each acquiring meaning and salience in the presence of the other. One is designated as a woman differently because one is a white woman whose very classification as white becomes intelligible and possible only in the presence of the non-white—the mixed-race and black women. Elite white women's gendered interests, in effect, only gain meaning when understood as inseparable from these women's race, class, and sexual identification. This interconnectedness could account for the apparent paradox that women intellectuals faced during this period. While participating in the propagation of a discourse of national identity, they both challenged and acquiesced to its patriarchal and paternalistic tenets, thus simultaneously advancing and limiting their options as social subjects. My argument is that discourses of national identification presuppose certain gender relations that have complicated ramifications for those they address as well as for those they marginalize. Women intellectuals are often excluded as the addressees of the texts of

national identity that are almost invariably male, or imagined as generically male. Moreover, the women intellectuals of my study often do not—or cannot—escape the dominant practice of inscribing the subject as male and white. This is not just a question of adhering to correct grammatical usage. Women writers such as Margot Arce at times attempt to minimize their female self-representation, and the demotion of authority that accompanies it, by deliberately effacing a gendered presence. Nonetheless, they strategically stress gender when it helps their case. This is further facilitated by the protection that their identification with light-skin privileges affords them.

An overview of the two competing versions of feminism during the decade of the twenties shows the term “woman” to be a hotly contested one. The unequal access to power available to working-class feminism versus the elite suffragist movement may account for the way each group appropriates and redefines the category “woman” in relation to other social identities.⁹ Intellectuals of the post-suffragist generation such as Margot Arce were poised to participate in the formulation of cultural nationalist discourses by continuously repositioning themselves within existing social categories and discourses. As a woman who aspired to be a protagonist in the intellectual life of her country, Arce left her mark in many areas during her lengthy career. In a fiercely androcentric milieu, she distinguished herself as a prolific essayist, a scholar, and a highly regarded professor of literature. She indefatigably struggled to escape the ancillary position to which women’s intellectual work is often relegated.

The frankly male-dominated canon of the Latin American essay has led some critics to brand the production as a “masculine monologue.”¹⁰ The problem that this represents for the history of literature is complex. Literary tradition has valued the writing of masculine authorship and has overlooked the contributions of countless women writers. Canadian scholar Mary Louise Pratt points out that, in the case of the Spanish-American essay, the women authors that are included in the canon such as Clorinda Matto de Turner and Gabriela Mistral, for example, only represent a minuscule number among the copious production that still lies unvalued in newspapers, journals, and public and private archives. Pratt proposes that the essays of cultural identity be read in a dialectical relationship with what she calls the gender identity essay whose central theme is the fight for women’s civil rights. A more representative reading of the diversity of the genre requires as fundamental that dialogic relationship that Pratt assumes between the essay of cultural identity and the gender essay. “The criollo identity essay,” notes Pratt, “. . . must also be read as a response to the demands of women and other marginalized groups for full inclusion in society. . . . It requires reading the claims of the criollo essayists not as *sui generis* expressions of a particular imagination but as *contested* claims arising out of a profound and ongoing legitimization crisis.”¹¹ It would be worth asking the reason for these omissions, and under

what conditions the women writers that did form part of the corpus of our national literatures came to be a part of it. It is within this controversy that I situate Margot Arce's work.

Chapter 1 places the nationalist rhetoric of *Generación del Treinta* in the context of the great social changes that resulted after 1898. A review of the period reveals the underpinnings of a discourse of national identity aimed at curtailing the loss of hegemony suffered by the Creole elite in the wake of the American intervention. Colonial modernity was implanted on the island, giving rise to new social subjects and shifting class alliances. An examination of cultural and literary institutions shows how they provided the means by which class, racial, and gender interests were played out in the context of the United States's political and economic hegemony over the island. The Creole intelligentsia sought empowerment in the formulation of a rhetoric of national identity that recuperated, to a large extent, Spanish cultural models and elite sensibilities. In so doing, it failed to engage adequately Puerto Rico's multi-racial history. In addition, such a project did not envision women as co-authors of the discourse or as enfranchised historical agents. The chapter ends with an analysis of the concept of "roots" as interpreted by nationalist intellectual Margot Arce.

With increased educational opportunities after 1898, diverse sectors of women tried to promote their advancement and interests. Chapter 2 argues that the suffragist movement was fertile ground for the development of women's professional and intellectual institutions. Women's suffrage, as an expression of modernity, was often interpreted by the male elite as a potentially destabilizing force and a threat to Creole hegemony. White middle-class and elite *criollas* were confronted with the option of aligning themselves with the male elite in order to gain a measure of access to the power structure, ultimately strengthening the future cultural and political projects of this class. An examination of the work of suffragist and educator Mercedes Solá gives us clues about the articulation of Creole feminism. This chapter's aim is to explore the possibilities and limits of inter-class gender solidarity.

The projects of university-educated Creole women professionals are the subject of Chapter 3. To this end, it analyzes the *Revista de la Asociación de Mujeres Graduadas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* (1938–1942), the publication that expressed and promoted their vision. This eclectic journal provided a vital space for women intellectuals and professionals in training to test their ideas and showcase their talents. Under the direction of Margot Arce, an ethos of service is coupled with a discourse of competence as a way to gain a voice into the affairs of the nation. As a university-based publication, the journal positioned itself vis-à-vis more male-oriented forums.

Chapter 4 presents responses to Pedreira's *Insularismo* by Tomás Blanco, Emilio S. Belaval, and Margot Arce. These writers contest and amplify his

proposals via the *mestizaje*, *criollista*, or telluric road. Their dialogue illustrates the diversity of positions within the group. Blanco seeks to be more racially inclusive within the limitations of a discourse of white supremacy. Belaval wants to rally others around him to transform and amplify the Creole nationalist project. His discourse is in marked contrast to the pessimism of Pedreira. Arce, for her part, tries to apprehend her subject via the lyrical voice. The chapter examines both the aesthetic and the ideological import of their interventions.

The humorous short stories of Emilio S. Belaval, *Los cuentos de la Universidad*, are the topic of Chapter 5. Belaval's mordant comments on the new gender roles adopted by women in the late 1920s are interwoven with his valuation of the role of racial diversity in the island's culture. His is a decidedly masculine perspective on the conjunction of gender and race in this example of the Creole imaginary. The figure of the mulatto as symbol and social agent is of great importance in Belaval's collection. The stories provide us with the opportunity to inquire into the practice of the renewed *criollismo* expounded in Chapter 4. Formally and thematically, these stories challenge accepted notions and themes cultivated by his contemporaries. The chapter closes with an examination of complications surrounding the uses of irony.

Chapter 6 analyzes the work of María Cadilla de Martínez, a suffragist and mentor of many women intellectuals. The argument of this chapter is that as the author rewrites specific events and episodes of Puerto Rico's history, she becomes both interpreter and proponent of a cultural past devoid of racial conflicts. A number of anxieties surround questions of racial heterogeneity in the short stories of folklorist Cadilla de Martínez. She represents the Indian conquest and decimation by the Spaniards not as an act of war but as a story of devotion. Likewise, the slave past is reinterpreted from a Creole perspective that is unmindful of its responsibility in the history of enslavement. Cadilla de Martínez's literary treatment of the subaltern subjects of Puerto Rican nationalism reaffirmed a vision of national identity which includes, but only to subordinate, mixed-raced Puerto Ricans in national culture.

Chapters 7 and 8 interrogate the efforts of critic Margot Arce in the promotion and propagation of the *negrista* poetry of Palés Matos. Attention to Arce's role in the controversy over Palés Matos's poetry and her part in the canonization of his works allows us a better understanding of the interconnected nature of the race, class, and gender discourses that inform the *Generación del Treinta's* ideas of national identity. While Palés's *negrista* poems might argue that blackness gives Puerto Rican culture its difference, making it part of the Caribbean, many readers resisted their Afro-Caribbean perspective and social implications. To grasp the enduring impact of this poetry, we need to take into account the history of its reception and the social context in which these poems were first received. Their meaning is inseparable from the ways in which they were read and later promoted.

Ultimately, Chapter 8 questions whether *negrismo* contributes to the stereotyping of people of African descent and the demotion of Afro-Puerto Ricans and their historical contributions.

Nationalism, perforce, calls into play race, class, culture, and gender in its service. All of these structures of domination are typically made invisible or subservient to the discourse. Yet my exploration of the discourse of national identity does not seek to minimize its primary oppositional role. The cultural nationalism of the *Generación del Treinta* was a valiant response to the presence of a new hegemonic power in the lives of Puerto Ricans after 1898, and as such its status as a statement of anti-colonial resistance cannot be understated. It was an effort to create a distance between the new colonizer and the colonized. In this aspect, the discourse of Puerto Rican national identity takes its place among other literatures of anti-imperialist resistance that, as Edward Said has said in a similar context, developed "quite consciously out of a desire to distance the native African, Indian, or Irish individual from the British, French or (later) American master."¹² He stresses that before this overt anti-imperialist literature can flourish, however, "there is a pressing need for the recovery of the land, which, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, *is recoverable at first only through the imagination*."¹³ It is this recovery and, as I hope to show, the reimagining of the national space that—all while strategically responding to their own social, racial, and class interests—the members of the *Generación del Treinta* most poignantly tried to achieve.

CHAPTER I

Nationalism Revisited: Deciphering the Creole Imaginary

The only way to vigorously counter our bewilderment is by projecting a cultural nationalism where we could all coincide in a consistent vision of Puerto Ricanness. (La única forma de contrarrestar vigorosamente nuestro desconcierto es mediante la proyección de un nacionalismo cultural donde podamos coincidir todos en una consistente visión de lo puertorriqueño.)
—Emilio S. Belaval, 1935

During the third decade of North American domination in Puerto Rico, the contradictions of colonial modernity had come to a head. Signs of social discontent were evident in the many marches and protests of striking workers, in the tracts and declarations of outspoken suffragists, and in the renewed militancy of nationalist activists. As a result of the implantation of colonial capitalism—with its concomitant imposition of descending social mobility for large numbers of citizens and the vertiginous socio-cultural changes it brought about—people from all walks of life experienced an ongoing sense of dislocation and uncertainty. Three decades of American domination had profoundly affected the survival strategies of the poor, who struggled with rapacious sugar corporations, loss of land, and hunger. Young Creole intellectuals, for their part, interpreted this societal and economic upheaval as a crisis of representation, demanding discursive remedies. Essayists and writers of the period channeled their class and political angst through a cultural nationalist ideology that cast their group as the defenders of the homeland's culture and "character." Perhaps no one better than Antonio S. Pedreira expressed

this vision of Puerto Rican culture and the plight of the nation. In his 1934 book-length essay *Insularismo: ensayos de interpretación*, the university professor, essayist, and intellectual trailblazer offered a systematic analysis of the imperiled Puerto Rican national soul.¹ In short, Pedreira set out to map the parameters of the Puerto Rican “personality” in an effort to make sense of the country’s many problems and to sketch some solutions. He found the causes of the contemporary crisis in the island’s colonial history, geography, and racial composition. Accordingly, in Pedreira’s view, both internal forces (the island’s climate and geography, centuries of race mixing) and external forces (its geopolitical position for Spain and the United States) had thwarted national development. In spite of these obstacles, a difficult birth of the Puerto Rican way of being had taken place in the nineteenth century, the high point of the *hacienda* economy. The period saw the rise of a Creole liberal reformist tradition that would culminate in the granting of political autonomy to the island in 1897, a process abruptly interrupted by the U.S. invasion. Another obstacle was the lack of homogeneity amongst the island’s populace. According to Pedreira: “In the depths of our population we can easily find a biological struggle of disintegrating and contrary forces that have retarded the definitive formation of our ways of being a people.”² (“En el fondo de nuestra población encontraremos sin ardoroso empeño una pugna biológica de fuerzas disgregantes y contrarias que han retardado la formación definitiva de nuestros modos de pueblo.”) In this narrative of origin, the assumption is that only a racially homogeneous group of people can give rise to the national body. Race mixing, viewed by Pedreira as miscegenation or the ill-advised merging of disparate and antagonistic human lines, was responsible for too much unsettling heterogeneity. For Pedreira, the island’s brave Hispanic heritage was still very much alive, though encumbered by racial mixture with Indians and Africans who had left a legacy of irrationality and fear. Further, the Spanish-American War had traumatically ruptured the slow but ongoing process of spiritual differentiation and collective self-determination of the nation. Puerto Ricans, in spite of these difficulties, never gave up the sense of being Spanish. As the author explains, “In moments of historical transcendence that allow for the flowering in our gestures of the martial rhythms of European blood, we are capable of the highest enterprises and most glorious heroisms.”³ (“En instantes de trascendencia histórica en que afloran en nuestros gestos los ritmos marciales de la sangre europea, somos capaces de las más altas empresas y de los más esforzados heroísmos.”) This noble Hispanic heritage was unfortunately commingled with many mismatched elements, evident in people’s behaviors and ways of thinking, responsible for “our permanent docility.” Pedreira listed as unhappy elements of the Puerto Rican character the fear of the foreign, the lack of resolve to act, and the pernicious presence of the black “soul” among the mulatto sectors of the population. As the essayist asserts, “But when

the gesture is drenched in waves of African blood we remain unsure, as if stupefied by the sight of glass beads or frightened by the cinematic vision of witches and ghosts."⁴ ("Pero cuando el gesto viene empapado de oleadas de sangre africana quedamos indecisos, como embobados ante las cuentas de colores o amedrentados ante la visión cinemática de brujas y fantasmas.") For the author, blackness is a deeply troubling presence both in the text and in social life. Examination of the images used by Pedreira is quite revealing of the placement of people of African descent in this national narrative. The drowning metaphor suggests both the fear and powerlessness of being overcome by a menacing black presence. Yet, such a presence is subsequently mastered by deriding it as childishy primitive.

For Pedreira, the racial heterogeneity of Puerto Ricans interrupts the discourse of *one race, one language, one nation* so dear to nationalist thought. His acceptance of the myth of a profound biological antagonism between races can only lead him to despair as he looks to provide essentialist explanations for historical questions. Subscribing to notions of racial purity, Pedreira declares that "the Spanish element lays the foundation of our people and merges with the other races. Out of this *fusion* comes our *con-fusion*."⁵ ("El elemento español funda nuestro pueblo y se funde con las demás razas. De esta *fusión* parte nuestra *con-fusión*.") One wonders if there is not a certain amount of frustration on the author's part at the Spanish founding fathers' acts of fusion with other races, given the text's almost impossible mission of finding continuity and purity in an environment of change and hybridity. Pedreira is intent on portraying the vast majority of Puerto Ricans as descendents of purportedly pure Spaniards who had adapted to the rigors of the tropical climate, accounting for the upper classes and the mass of the peasantry. Yet Pedreira's characterization of the peasant, or *jíbaro*, is double-edged. On one hand, he insists on portraying the *jíbaro* as invariably male, white, generous, cordial, fun loving, astute—all desirable traits for him. The peasant is to be pitied as a victim of urban inequities and black competition in the coastal regions. Nonetheless, like most intellectuals of his generation, Pedreira rebukes common folk for their supposed apathy and faintheartedness when it comes to the nation-building projects. But the docility of poor and working-class people is more a projection than a reality, given the very obvious acts of personal protest and social "disorder," class-based militancy, and democratic aspirations that the colonial administration tried to discipline out of existence and that the Creoles feared and condemned. There is a contradiction here. Conceptualizing the *jíbaro* mainly as a "docile peasant" allows the author to attempt to contain this group's other identity as "displaced and unruly agricultural proletariat." As for inclusion in the national body, however, our author argues for the unquestioned acceptance of the supposedly racially pure mountain *jíbaro*, and disdainfully relegates the uppity population of people of African descent, *grifos parejeros*,

and resentful mulatto artisans to marginality.⁶ For Pedreira the new colonial reality of his times was one of great bafflement, of push-and-pull between Puerto Rico's enduring Spanish and Creole heritage and the new North American way of life. His examination of the successes and shortcomings of the nation-building projects ends with an appeal to other young intellectuals to add their efforts to his, so as to provide guidance to a bewildered country.

And respond they did. Pedreira's formulations held enormous sway with the Puerto Rican intelligentsia of his time. *Insularismo* helped to set the dimensions of the intellectual dialogues among Creoles, becoming an obligatory reference point for the writers of his generation as well as for later expressions of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism. His most noted interlocutors were all fellow members of the prestigious *Ateneo Puertorriqueño*, including Tomás Blanco, Emilio S. Belaval, Margot Arce, and Luis Palés Matos, to name just four. I will examine their responses in later chapters. First we must place Pedreira and his cohort in a historical context and direct our attention to the intellectual field that nurtured their cultural nationalist dialogues.

Rethinking the Intellectual Field: A Historical Perspective on National Identity

The image that we have of Puerto Ricans is white; thus, to identify whites we simply hear people use "Puerto Rican," and to identify blacks we hear "black Puerto Rican." But this justifies nothing, merely describing one more injustice: portraying all Puerto Ricans as white when they are of all hues imaginable. (La imagen que tenemos del puertorriqueño es blanca, de ahí que para identificar al blanco se escuche llana y simplemente "puertorriqueño" y para identificar al negro, "negro puertorriqueño." Pero esto no justifica nada, meramente describe una injusticia más: hacer blanca la imagen para todos los puertorriqueños, habiéndolos de todos los matices imaginables.)

—Isabelo Zenón Cruz, 1974

During the 1970s a new understanding of Puerto Rican culture and social history came to replace the widely accepted view that had been put in place by the intellectuals of the 1930s. Aided by the critical lens of Marxist theory, social historians and literary critics would reexamine the class, racial, and political interests and biases that informed the discourse of national identity as construed and popularized by the Puerto Rican intelligentsia during the previous four decades.⁷ This shift in critical perspective provided new answers to old questions, also pointing the way to research in previously unexplored areas. The pathbreaking studies of sociologist Ángel G. Quintero

Rivera on the Puerto Rican working class in the first half of the twentieth century were directed at uncovering a previously obscured "other face of history." Quintero Rivera argued that the discourse of national identity was the creation of the displaced descendents of the *hacendado* class and that, as such, it was a class-based defensive strategy. One of the effects of the United States's intervention in Puerto Rico was to interrupt the historical development of the planter class on its way to social and political ascendancy. For these children of generations of landed gentry, the land—and by extension, national territory and the very nation—had enormous symbolic importance. Their forebears had derived their power and prestige from land ownership and agrarian exploitation during Spanish colonial times. Dispossessed of their inheritance by the 1930s, the new generation would strive to recuperate their hegemonic potential in the professional and intellectual arenas, pressuring and negotiating with North American colonial institutions for political control.⁸ The emerging artisan/working class, for its part, contested the claims of elite cultural nationalism with political and economic demands of its own, and did not necessarily see political independence for the island as a guarantor of democratic social progress. Moreover, the proletariat, together with its intellectuals, would actively contest what Quintero Rivera called the "culture of deference and paternalism" that had developed around the *hacienda*. They organized labor strikes and political groups, and created their own press, literature, and social clubs, which sought to popularize alternatives to the elite's political proposals. Gender relations and sexuality also became subject to controversy, as the emergence of working-class feminism amply attests.

The socially conservative cultural and political nationalism that developed among the descendents of the *hacendado* class, plus small landholders and the petite bourgeoisie who identified with it, found expression in many of the cultural and literary works produced by this intelligentsia in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and even beyond.⁹ Literary critic Juan Flores has studied the intertextual and ideological relationship between *Insularismo*, José Ortega y Gasset's influential *The Rebellion of the Masses*, José Enrique Rodo's Latin American classic *Ariel*, and Oswald Spengler's trend-setting *The Decline of the West*. In his still-unsurpassed study Flores shows that these texts share similar essentialist and static notions of culture, and strong biases against working-class empowerment. Theirs is a vision of the intellectual as hero and rightful interpreter and leader of the national destiny, conceived of in narrow class terms. Flores's rigorous critique of the ideological tenets of Pedreira's work has led him to conclude that *Insularismo* should be read as a (white) middle-class utopia. The limited social and intellectual vision of Pedreira corresponds to the political and economic travails of the colonized bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie seeking to assert themselves.¹⁰ In addition, Flores calls into question *Insularismo's* sweeping appeals to "Spanishness"

as a buttress to claims of cultural belonging. Perhaps unaware of the fascist slant that racial and geographic deterministic theories were taking in Europe, Pedreira chose to stress the feudal and patrimonial legacy of the old colonizing power with the concomitant myths of its civilizing mission. Flores argues that such a choice disregarded the progressive and revolutionary tradition of modern Spain and the Spanish Civil War struggle, an important political and cultural referent all over Latin America at the time.¹¹

The critical clarity that Marxist analysis brought to the class dimensions of national identity is further enriched by studies that explicitly question discourses of race in Puerto Rican culture and scholarship. Whereas Pedreira was enshrined in previous decades as a disinterested critic of the Puerto Rican character, it is more accurate to see his works, and most of the literature produced by his contemporaries, as a deeply felt Creole vision of a nation divided by race. Arguing that a profound anti-black racism still informs the daily experience of all Puerto Ricans, critic Isabelo Zenón Cruz's 1974 study of Puerto Rican culture examines language usage, popular culture, and literary works to support his argument that Puerto Ricans of African descent have been estranged from the discourse of Puerto Ricanness and from the national imaginary.¹² As the *Generación del Treinta* tenaciously held to the view of the essential Spanishness of Puerto Rico, their works contributed to the caricature and effacement of black Puerto Ricans. In Zenón Cruz's examination, power relations are the key to deciphering the social status ascribed to those marked as black and as white on the island. One fundamental contribution by Zenón Cruz was to bring to Puerto Rican audiences a sustained application of the revolutionary ideas of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi about the psychological effects of colonialism for those who live in colonized societies. Following Fanon, he rejects the theory of the "racial soul" and the "collective unconscious" utilized by white supremacist literature to advance ideas about the atavistic backwardness of peoples of African descent. Zenón Cruz's ambitious work offers readers a roadmap to understand the history of Puerto Rico from the perspective of Afro-Puerto Ricans, bringing to the fore the many colonial laws and edicts that enforced slavery and—most importantly—policed free blacks and mulattos for over 370 years on the island. His multi-faceted analysis convincingly traces the development of the devaluation of blackness in literary and historical discourses produced by the Creole intelligentsia during the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

Zenón Cruz's bold critical intervention regarding the complex question of the past and present racial divisions of Puerto Rican society convulsed the Puerto Rican intelligentsia when his two-volume study was published. Nonetheless, many have yet to engage its proposals with the seriousness that they continue to deserve. One of the intellectuals to do so was writer and literary critic José Luis González. In a germinal essay on literature and

national identity, González further elaborated the idea that the literature produced in the first half of the twentieth century was strongly motivated by Creole nostalgia. Their project was to reconnect with a past in which the *criollo* elite held a quasi-hegemonic control over the class and racial societal structures.¹³ Whereas, during the nineteenth century, the intellectuals who gave voice to the progressive and liberal sector of the elite passed harsh judgment on the peasantry and the conditions on the island, their descendents' material and psychological loss led to an obsessive tellurianism and idealization of the Spanish/Creole colonial past. In marked contrast to the mythical and conservative representations of the writers of the *Generación del Treinta*, nineteenth-century intellectuals did not see their country, and its social reality, as a paradise lost. Many, after all, had to labor under the vigilant eye of a Spanish colonial system that was not interested in furthering the freedom of Creoles in the nineteenth, or any other, century.

Puerto Rico's culture during the first three hundred years of Spanish rule could be characterized as heavily Afro-Caribbean, according to González. An 1812 census stated that 93,623 "whites" and 89,391 blacks and mulattos were living on the island. Of the non-whites, already 58,983 were mulattos, 12,872 were blacks. The official slave population was 17,536. It should be stressed, however, that racial identification is not totally dependable, since we can infer that social pressures to pass as white, once a certain degree of phenotypic traits are present, were the norm. Fearing a repetition of the Haitian slave revolution, the Spanish crown made a concerted effort to augment the number of whites on the island.¹⁴ Of course, the Spanish were also seeking to capitalize on the disarray of the sugar industry that had resulted from the French defeat in Haiti. Be that as it may, the 1815 *Real Cédula de Gracias*, and other similar provisions, set a deliberate "whitening" process in motion. This decree permitted refugees of the Spanish-American Wars of Independence and numerous other Europeans (French, Dutch, Irish) to settle on the island, predominantly in the coastal regions. Also incorporated into the elite, but not really seeing themselves as Puerto Ricans, were the "uncultured, conservative, and arrogant" immigrants from Corsica, Catalonia, and Mallorca who settled in the central mountainous regions.¹⁵ The foreign entrepreneurs who settled on the island as a result of the relaxation of Spanish immigration and trade policies had a great impact on the Puerto Rican elite. They aimed at establishing trade relations with other markets in Europe as well as with the United States. This new economic activity helped foster among the island *criollos* a consciousness of the need to control foreign trade, which was in the hands of the colonial bureaucracy. But the *Real Cédula*, as Zenón Cruz clarifies, "officially fomented prejudice against (blacks) by adjudicating land without equity, imposing tributes on blacks that it did not impose on whites, and above all, stimulating the trade in black and mulatto slaves by allowing for their tax-free importation."¹⁶ Moreover,

Miriam Jiménez Román points out, it was not until 1860 that “whites” would feature as 51.5 percent of the total population, putting in question the commonly accepted numerical significance of the European immigration to the island and the predominance of the “white” population.¹⁷

In essence, Zenón Cruz and González challenge the claims that equate Puerto Rican history with the concerns of *hacendados*, their descendents, and a supposedly white peasantry. What emerges from their proposals is a much more nuanced idea of the ideological divisions among the pre-1898 Puerto Rican/Spanish elite, and between this class and the rest of the population. The mercantile and agrarian elite did not, in all probability, harbor the nationalist sentiments that the later generations ascribed to them. As González explains, “Still at the end of the century, the Mallorcan coffee *hacendados* spoke Mallorcan amongst themselves and only used Spanish to address their Puerto Rican peons.”¹⁸ Loyal to the colonial regime, these nineteenth-century white immigrants espoused a Eurocentric and seigniorial worldview. The literature and thought they produced were no match for the liberal culture generated by the coastal professionals represented by Manuel Alonso, Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, Salvador Brau, Manuel Zeno Gandía, and Eugenio María de Hostos, whose progressive tendencies are best exemplified in their literature and in the cultural institutions they developed. The elite also had among its ranks revolutionaries such as Ramón Emeterio Betances and Pachín Marín, although they were a minority.¹⁹ A number of these intellectuals were mulattos and blacks, as in the case of Betances, and later, Sotero Figueroa and José Celso Barbosa.

Representatives of the liberal intelligentsia within the *hacendado* class physician Manuel Zeno Gandía and sociologist Salvador Brau were not shy about portraying the *jíbaro* and the peasant world as “an ailing world” much in need of modernization. In sum, as part of a class on the rise in the nineteenth century, the forward-looking coastal professional elite was interested, to a certain extent, in modernizing Puerto Rican society.²⁰ It was only after 1898, when the landed gentry’s social and cultural hegemony came under attack by colonial capitalism, as we have seen above, that, in the main, this class would become defensive and conservative. For his part, Quintero Rivera also stresses that the national bourgeoisie-in-the-making was a “very contradictory seigniorial class” whose power was based on exporting goods produced by pre-capitalist forms of exploitation to the world capitalist market.²¹ By 1898, *criollo* patricians had increasingly wrested control from the hands of the Spanish colonial state and positioned themselves as the putative rulers of a racially heterogeneous people.

When the United States began its colonial ventures in Puerto Rico, a fundamental restructuring of Puerto Rico’s economy and society was set in motion. The changes that gave rise to agricultural capitalism had a tremendous impact on both the working classes and the *hacendado* bourgeoisie.²²

At first, the large landowners reacted positively to what they understood to be a beneficial change of colonial metropolis and an opportunity of having a share of the North American market for their coffee. The policies of the United States, however, were directed toward breaking the hegemony of the *hacendados*. These measures included limiting male suffrage, controlling customs and the levying of tariffs, and determining the value of currency conversion. In addition, the U.S. Congress reserved the power to veto any Puerto Rican legislation and to decide what federal legislation would be applicable to the island.²³ Washington designated a governor who had the power to make judiciary appointments. In short, these measures were meant to support huge corporate investments in land and sugar production. Together with these concrete policies, the new colonizers brought with them a host of white supremacist attitudes that were projected onto the Puerto Rican population. A United States army Brigadier General had this to say about the people of the new colony: "About one-sixth of the people of Porto Rico [*sic*] are educated and of Spanish blood, of the rest perhaps one-half can be molded by a firm hand into something approaching decency; but the remainder are . . . ignorant, filthy, untruthful, lazy, treacherous, murderous, brutal, and black."²⁴ This disparaging appraisal set the tone of racial relations that would characterize North American rule.

North American sugar interests controlled 62 percent of the sugar cane-producing land by 1910. Coffee production dropped so rapidly that by 1930 it amounted to less than 1 percent of island exports.²⁵ The *hacendado* class was forced to assume a defensive posture. There was, nevertheless, a sector of this class that was able to reposition itself as sugar investors (an anti-national bourgeoisie), or as importers of U.S. goods, which by the mid-1920s already accounted for 90 percent of Puerto Rican imports.²⁶ Aside from these economic and political measures, others aimed at debilitating the cultural hegemony of the *hacendado* class were promulgated by the colonial government: the establishment of a public education system and the growth of Protestant proselytizing. These two worked hand in glove, generating individualistic values, new attitudes toward manual labor, substitution of the minister for the *hacendado*, and some support for women's independence.²⁷

The advent of agro-capitalism gave rise to an agricultural proletariat that developed a concept of nationhood markedly different from the one promulgated by the *hacendados*. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the artisans of the urban centers—in the main, mulattos and blacks—began to develop a distinctly radical consciousness, identifying more with an international proletariat than with the Puerto Rican elite. According to Quintero Rivera, "Their self-definition in terms of production—workers, among many around the world—their rejection of the life of the *hacienda*, and an openness to their daily experiences, fostered a strong sense of internationalism within the artisan world; a sense they incorporated in their struggles