The historical scope and extensive details of everyday life that characterize Benito Pérez Galdós's fiction are rich sources of information about nineteenth-century Spanish society. The author's historical and realist narratives chronicle the establishment of the middle class early in the nineteenth century, its political fortunes from the reigns of Charles IV to Alfonso XIII, and its ultimate failure to solve vexing social and political problems during the years of the Restoration. The issues addressed at first glance seem to relate exclusively to the metropolis, to events within Spain's peninsular borders. Indeed, Galdós tends to avoid direct references to Spain's colonial history, particularly in his early historical novels. Nonetheless, the century that Galdós so carefully chronicled in both the Episodios nacionales and the novelas contemporáneas was framed by significant historical moments of territorial loss for the Spanish colonial empire, first much of the Americas in the early decades of the century, then the remaining Caribbean and Pacific colonies at century's end.

With the events of 1898, Galdós and the Spanish public were forced to accept that Spain was no longer a colonial power nor a significant force in world politics. Many historians and writers have considered Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War as a definitive moment of national trauma. I would point out, however, that public attitudes relative to colonial loss and the end of empire took shape and developed throughout the century, beginning with the initial imperial losses in the 1820s and culminating with 1898, and that these attitudes played an important part in attempts to establish a shared sense of national identity. In fact much of nineteenth-century Spanish literature offers evidence that its producers and consumers were involved with a process of coming to terms, slowly yet steadily, with the nation's colonial history even as they struggled to construct a definition of Spain as a nation.

Galdós's novels in particular prove fertile ground for examining late-nineteenth-century responses to Spain's colonial history. The author's narratives evidence a trajectory of opinion that surely influenced his readers, even as it was itself influenced by historical and biographical factors. Although his references to Spanish colonialism rarely rise to the level of main plots and central characters, the author fills out his fiction's broad portrait of Spanish society by using subplots and secondary characters with imperial connections. To date, only a few scholars have looked closely at Galdós's representations of colonial experience (Bly, Martínez, Delgado). John Sinnigen's Sexo y política: lecturas galdosianas certainly constitutes an important step toward understanding the connections between class, gender and empire in Galdosian fiction. Nonetheless, an in-depth analysis of Galdós's attitudes toward Spanish colonialism, particularly before 1898, has not yet appeared, largely because textual references are oblique and can easily be overlooked.

A paucity of critical attention notwithstanding, Galdós's fiction from the 1870s and 1880s reveals a complicated process of accepting Spanish colonialism as an essential part
of Spanish history. In the 1870s, the early years of his literary career, the author demonstrates a noticeable reticence regarding the inclusion of colonial issues in the Episodios nacionales that address the years of American territorial loss. By the 1880s, when Galdós writes novels placed within his own contemporary milieu, however, the references to colonial space and to Spain’s colonial legacy become more frequent and pointed. This study does not focus on Galdós’s work immediately before and after 1898, in part because so many writers at the time felt compelled to comment on the events of that year, but mostly because Galdós’s later work reveals changes in representational strategy rather than a significant reformulation of opinion, a topic I comment upon in my conclusions but which is more appropriately the focus of a separate article. I have also chosen to analyze certain novels, without attempting to include all that contain colonial references, in order to present examples that best illustrate the essential parameters of Galdós’s views about Spanish colonialism and its relationship to life in the metropolis.

In addition to referencing specific historical and biographical information, this analysis employs the framework of several theorists whose work has profoundly influenced the way we currently understand metropolitan and colonial relations. In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said has made the argument, now almost universally accepted, that “empire functions for much of the nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction” (63). Equally relevant are Benedict Anderson’s theories regarding the necessity of an imagined community in the process of creating the shared concepts of nation and nationalism. Both theorists focus on the importance of print culture and its often hegemonic strategies for supplying national narratives to a nascent reading public, and as Simon During has noted, “it is becoming a commonplace that the institution of literature works to nationalist ends” (138). Accordingly, to note that Galdós’s fiction participates in the cultural process of nation building in nineteenth-century Spain is not in itself new; but this study shows how he uses references to Spanish colonialism to explore the perceived obstacles to a successful establishment of national identity.

The plots, subplots and characters with a connection to Spanish colonialism tell us much about how Galdós perceived his nation’s colonial legacy. By including these references in his novels, Galdós clearly participated in the creation of an imagined community of Spaniards, who as readers of his very popular fictions tacitly accepted the author’s views and internalized them in their own process of defining the nation in a time of diminished international standing. Diane Urey has convincingly demonstrated how Galdós molded his readership through his widely read historical fiction, underscoring the importance of this bond between the author and public. Urey’s insights help highlight the link between literature and the process of nation building through the creation of an imagined community. Galdós’s historical and realist novels were not only a product of print capitalism, a phenomenon that Anderson identifies as a building block for national consciousness (37), they were also narratives whose very intent was to present for public consumption a palatable version of national history.

Biographically speaking, Galdós had compelling personal reasons to be aware of the
practical realities of colonialism and the transatlantic exchange of goods and labor. As a
child in the Canary Islands he was certainly witness to the daily maritime traffic between
the Americas and Spain. Even more important for purposes of this argument, Galdós’s
immediate family had extensive personal connections to Spain’s colonial empire. Galdós’s
maternal uncles, José María, Ignacio, Pedro and Manuel, all traveled to the Americas as
lawyers, soldiers and clerics. José María in particular had a long history as an administrator
in Cuba, never returning to Las Palmas (Ortíz Armengol 50). Galdós saw many of his own
siblings emigrate to America, most notably his oldest brother, Domingo, who left the Canary
Islands in 1847 for a military post in Cuba. He returned to Las Palmas a few years later
with a Cuban-born wife and sufficient funds to build the family home, now the Casa-Museo
Pérez Galdós (Ortíz-Armengol 90). Domingo’s wife, Magdalena Hurtado de Mendoza, gave
young Benito emotional and financial support, encouraging him to study in Madrid. Her
brother, also born in Cuba, eventually married Benito’s sister Carmen, and their child
became Benito’s principle caretaker in the author’s final years. In an interesting genealogical
wrinkle, Benito’s uncle José María had an illegitimate daughter with Magdalena’s mother,
Adriana Tate, herself born in South Carolina to a Scottish ship captain whose parents had
emigrated to Florida in the late eighteenth century. In short, the links between the Galdós
family, the Hurtado de Mendozas and colonial Spain were complex and stretched back
several generations.

Galdós’s decision in the 1870s to spend summers in Santander also increased his
awareness of the many connections between the metropolis and its former colonies
(Madariaga 15). At the time, Santander was a significant port city for traffic between Spain
and the Americas, with ships frequently traveling to Havana, Valparaíso, Montevideo,
Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. The many announcements of transatlantic traffic in local
papers kept the author informed of the connections between peninsular Spain and the
American territories. As a result, we might expect to see quite a number of references to
colonial matters in the author’s novels, but this is not the case in the first and second series
of Episodios nacionales, works that address historical events during the very years in which
the independence movements in the Americas gained sufficient strength to prevail over
Spain.

The noted historian Michael Costeloe, in his study of peninsular Spain’s response to
colonial revolution, claims that Galdós “makes only passing and superficial reference to
the wars in America, and permits his characters almost no opinions on what Spaniards felt
about the loss of empire” (2). If we accept this evaluation as true, we must ask why the
writer avoided this aspect of early nineteenth-century Spanish history and how such
avoidance affected his fictional portrayal of Spain in his own period. For a novelist who
initially supported Spain’s liberal bourgeois ideology with fervor and who later became one
of its staunchest critics, Galdós was in a unique position to comment on what the colonies
meant for the nation’s urban middle class. The situation merits closer scrutiny and reveals
a complicated picture of Spanish response to colonial loss.

Galdós experienced his earliest literary success with the first series of Episodios
nacionales, ten historical novels written between 1873 and 1875. They narrate the adventures of a young Spaniard who participates in the 1805 battle of Trafalgar against the British and later witnesses key events of the 1808-1814 War of Independence against Napoleon. The second series of Episodios, written soon after, narrates events occurring between 1813, when the war ended and Fernando VII regained the throne, and 1833, the year of the king’s death. This span of years, from 1804 to 1833, represents a crucial period in terms of the nation’s first and most significant historical loss of colonial territory. As one historian has noted, “The loss of America was a stunning economic blow to Spain, leading to continued national penury in the nineteenth century” (Anna 293). Yet the first series of Episodios remains surprisingly mute on the growing threat, and the second makes only oblique references to colonial loss, without exploring its effects on the nation. On the surface, Costeloe’s claims appear to be justified. Nevertheless, details in the Episodios reveal that the author’s references were far from superficial.

The lack of direct references in the first series, and in particular the novel Cádiz, which sets forth the events surrounding the writing of the Constitution of 1812, constitutes an attempt, I would argue, to forget colonial history. It is a strategy with a purpose, a rewriting of the past that “shapes its vision of the future out of the silences and ellipses of historical amnesia” (Gandhi 7). Unquestionably, Galdós saw the move to a constitutional monarchy as the first step toward establishing a viable middle class. In Los Apostólicos, the penultimate volume of the second series, the highly sympathetic character of Benigno Cordero offers the following assessment of that historical moment:

La formidable clase media, que hoy es el poder omnímodo que todo lo hace y deshace, llamándose política, magistratura, administración, ciencia, ejército, nació en Cádiz entre el estruendo de las bombas francesas y las peroratas de un congreso híbrido, inocente, extranjerizado si se quiere, pero que brotado había como un sentimiento, o como un instinto ciego, incontrovertible, del espíritu nacional. (Episodios Π, 881)

Because Galdós identifies Cádiz in 1812 as the time and place in which a new Spain is born, his representation of that moment needs to be understood as an attempt to define the modern nation’s parameters. The vision Galdós presents to his readers in the novel is uniquely postcolonial. I use the term here to indicate not only an image of Spain without its American territories but also the process of coming to terms with that loss. His presentation clearly reflects an 1870s perspective since the doceañistas could scarcely have predicted the astounding loss of empire that would occur within the next decade or its impact on their political agenda. As José Álvarez Junco has noted, “el Estado español pasó a lo largo de los tres primeros cuartos del siglo XIX, por una fase crítica, casi fundamental: ‘de imperio a nación’” (534). Without reference to colonial concerns in the political debates over the Constitution of 1812 and the war against France, Cádiz encourages readers to jettison this part of Spain’s historical past from any formulations of contemporary identity.

To show that Galdós’s representation of the period evidences notable gaps, we have
only to look at the Constitution of 1812 itself. Drafted by an assembly of clergymen, jurists, noblemen, professors, businessmen, high-ranking members of the government and representatives from both the Americas and the Philippines, the Constitution was the first Spanish political model for a constitutional monarchy. Political liberals considered it an essential legislative step toward bringing Spain into line with other modern European nations. Worth noting within the document itself are the very definitions of the nation and its citizens. Article One of the Constitución Política de la Monarquía Española, Promulgada en Cádiz a 19 de marzo de 1812 states, “La Nación española es la reunión de todos los españoles de ambos hemisferios.” Article Five defines a Spaniard as “Todos los hombres libres nacidos y vecindados en los dominios de las Españas, y los hijos de éstos.” These definitions, notably of residents of the metropolis as well as the American and Pacific colonies, demonstrate a conscious awareness of the importance of empire. The document consistently defines the physical geography of nation as “Las Españas,” thus emphasizing the desire of the Assembly of 1812 to unify the various territories of the nation and strengthen their political bonds at a time of national crisis. That the term “Las Españas” would later be used post-1898 to refer to the political divisions within the metropolis indicates a failure, perhaps even as refusal, to remember the nation’s colonial past.

In his representation of Cádiz in 1812, Galdós never mentions the Americas, the Philippines or Spain’s colonial empire by name. Despite the novel’s largely faithful rendering of the oratorical moments that determined the political tenor of the constitutional assembly, the furious debates occurring in the various tertulias in the city, and the growing concerns of conservative royalists, there are no colonial representatives in Galdós’s narrative. It is as if the Spanish colonial empire did not exist. However there are two references to colonialism that help clarify why direct references to Spanish colonial history are absent. Their inclusion in the plot structure of the novel points toward a desire to avoid direct representation of Spanish empire.

One of the more charismatic figures portrayed in Cádiz is an English nobleman, Lord Gray, a romantic adventurer who has rejected English society and wishes to fight with the guerrilleros against the French. When asked why he hates his countrymen, Lord Gray responds with a sharp condemnation of British imperial aspirations:

Aborrezco el comercio; aborrezco a Londres, mostrador nauseabundo de las drogas de todo el mundo; y cuando oigo decir que todas las altas instituciones de la vieja Inglaterra, el régimen colonial y nuestra gran marina tienen por objeto el sostenimiento del tráfico y la protección de la sordida avaricia de los negociantes que bañan sus cabezas redondas como quesos con el agua negra del Támesis, siento un crispamiento de nervios insoportable y me avergüenzo de ser inglés. (Episodios 1, 849)

This reference is a powerful condemnation of the economic underpinnings of colonial enterprise even as it places the blame squarely on a nation other than Spain. Though Spanish colonial history remains unexamined, the reference still describes colonialism in
unambiguously negative terms.

Lord Gray's repudiation of colonial economy involves one other important nineteenth-century colonial concern. He bitterly complains that his countrymen have failed to address the moral issue of slavery: "Se precian mucho de su libertad, pero no les importa que haya millones de esclavos en las colonias" (Episodios I, 849). This comment is both ironic and provocative, since it appears contrary to the historical realities of the slave trade in 1812 even as it reflects peninsular concerns in the 1870s about slavery in Spanish America. Spanish involvement in the slave trade, in particular in Cuba, sharply increased in the nineteenth century, even as England was pressuring other European nations to abolish the trade as it had done in 1808 (Curtin 35, 267). Accordingly, the trade that Lord Grey so thoroughly condemns was illegal in England by 1812 but was very much a part of the Spanish economy. In addition, when Galdós wrote Cádiz, in 1874, the question of slavery was a hot topic of metropolitan political debate due to the 1868-1878 Ten Year War in Cuba and the increased activity of peninsular abolitionist movements (Schmidt-Nowara 126). As one important study has shown, the Ten Year War marks "un antes y un después en la relación entre la elite hispano-cubana y Europa" (Bahamonde 362).

By limiting his discussion of the slave trade to British involvement, without referring to the historical reality of Spain's own investment in the practice, Galdós elides responsibility for the negative effects of colonialism, in terms of colonial subjects and the metropolis, onto an imperial power other than Spain, even as he subtly references the growing economic tensions affecting Spain and Cuba. Grey's comments can be read as not only a general critique of colonialism but also an acknowledgement of the contemporary political differences between metropolis and its most valuable colony. His words obliquely point to Cuba's growing economic independence in the 1870s and the consequent political distance between the two entities (Bahamonde 361). Accordingly, the absence of references to Spanish colonialism in the first series of Episodios nacionales signals an attempt to reconfigure Spain as a postcolonial entity in the minds of readers, as a nation moving beyond colonialism both in the past and the present. Most importantly, Spain's identity as constituted in the first series is that of a nation whose hopes of retaining pride in the face of defeat are predicated on silence regarding a significant part of its own history.

Nonetheless, the nation's colonial legacy and consequent problems only seem to have disappeared, because they still hover ghost-like in the text's allusions to other empires and distant colonial societies. The author's fictional representation of Spain as a nation with a purpose uncluttered by the moral dilemmas posed by colonialism and slavery ultimately proves problematic. It is an example of the Derridean concept of "hauntology," which Jo Labanyi employs so well in her analysis of another important moment in Spanish cultural history, specifically the representational strategies employed in Spanish film of the post-Franco period for dealing with the dictatorship. In the example of Galdós's historical novels, the very term postcolonial functions as a reminder that "colonialism réumts at the moment of its disappearance" (McClintock 255). By not including references to Spanish colonialism in the representation of Spain in 1812, Cádiz participates in the process of accepting colonial
losses of the past and, in terms of economic realities of 1874, anticipating colonial losses to come. Inevitably, in writing about his own contemporary bourgeois society, Galdós came to recognize the indelible effects of Spain's colonial legacy on metropolitan society.

In reference to the 1808-1813 war with France, Álvarez Junco writes, "Era difícil pedir un comienzo mejor al proceso de nacionalización contemporáneo" (129). For Galdós, however, the process experienced a serious setback during the reign of Fernando VII from 1814 to 1833, the years that constitute the historical focus of the second series of Episodios nacionales. In these novels, Galdós finally addresses the loss of the Americas, but he does so in such brief fashion and with such minimal impact that he erases its historical complexity. The single textual reference to colonial loss appears in the second volume of the series, Memorias de un cortesano de 1815, and it is presented from the perspective of Juan Bragas de Pipaón, an unsympathetic character who, the narrator tell us, "carecía por completo de imaginación y de sensibilidad fina" (Episodios II, 151). Bragas's utter lack of moral compass and sensitivity help him rise up the ranks of bureaucrats to become a member of Fernando VII's inner circle. That Bragas should narrate the moment when the king recognizes the historical reality of colonial loss heightens the negativity of the experience for the metropolis. Despite the effects that would be felt by so many Spaniards, the loss of empire and the diminishment of the nation are described as neither the fault of society in general nor the result of a particular imperialist ideology. They are due to the stupidity of specific individuals.

Galdós demonstrates this view by means of a conversation between Fernando VII and the members of his camarilla. When told that the royal coffers are empty and that only the riches of the Americas will allow Spain to compete with other nations of Europe, Fernando VII comments gloomily, in a single sentence, "Hay que despedirse de las Americas" (Memorias 122). His sycophantic followers, nearly all of whom are authentic historical figures, immediately reassure the king that "toda la insurrección americana se reduce a cuatro perdidos que gritan en las plazuelas" (122), reassurance that from the contemporary perspective of Galdós's readers is clearly ill advised and patently untrue. The conversation quickly turns to other issues, and the matter does not reappear in the novel.

This moment of recognition merits attention for a number of reasons. First of all, the king's phrasing reveals an attitude of resignation relative to colonial loss. Secondly, the statement allows the king to avoid a discussion of culpability. The response of his advisors demonstrates their failure to understand the situation. Bragas blames "unos cuantos presidiarios con cuatro docenas de ingleses y norteamericanos echados por tramposos de sus respectivos países" (122), but the reader has learned not to trust the narrator's notably poor judgment. By focusing on the king's remark and the poor advice that he receives, Galdós places blame for this imperial loss on Spain's leaders and their incompetent management, a view supported by historians (Anna 151-152). The moment unequivocally portrays the historical short-sightedness of the fernandino administration, but it does more than that from the perspective of Galdós's literary goal of narrating the nation's history. It serves to exculpate the Spanish people from colonial failures, an important step toward the goal of
reinventing Spain as a nation, not an empire.

The novel presents an important historical event in brief and resigned terms and sharply delimits those who should be held accountable. While readers can lay the blame solely on the king and his counselors, the text encourages them to move on to other issues, to shift their attention to other problems of the metropolis. In other words, the loss is acknowledged in this historical account, but radically truncated. The text encourages readers to accept colonial independence without seeing themselves as lesser for it. By presenting this version of Spanish history, the novel promotes the development of an imagined community of Spaniards, an act that Anderson will identify as “the novelty of [an] imagined world conjured up by the author in his readers’ minds (26).

The fact that Bragas blames the insurrection on the Americans and the British in a text written in 1875 appears prescient in terms of the colonial losses of 1898. Interestingly enough, this particular chapter from Las memorias de un cortesano de 1815 was reprinted in July of 1898 in Vida Nueva, one of the journals that sprang up in the aftermath of the nation’s defeat at the hands of the United States. The reprinted chapter appeared under the title “Fumándose las colonias,” thus reasserting the view that it was bureaucratic stupidity that had once again led the nation to defeat and shame. More importantly, the piece indicates that Galdós and the editors of the paper saw the two moments of colonial loss as closely related. The events of the early nineteenth century, from their perspective, are part and parcel of what happens in 1898, emphasizing the sense of a century-long political and historical process.

In analyzing these references, we must not forget that the connections between history and narrative are complex and hard to quantify. Homi Bhabha, for example, begins his introduction to Nation and Narration by claiming that “Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye” (1). This declaration aptly describes Galdós’s monumental project of narrating nearly the whole of nineteenth-century Spanish history in the five series of Episodios nacionales. Galdós’s historical narratives reflect the liberal impulse of the later half of the nineteenth century to re-envision the past as part of the complicated task of nation building. But the process of reinvention, in the service of establishing a sense of patriotic unity, begins with series of novels that omit unpleasant aspects of the nation’s historical past. The Spain that Galdós creates in the early Episodios has no history prior to the start of the War of Independence. Perhaps for this reason the first two series of Episodios remained bestsellers when published and for many years thereafter, far outselling the post-1898 novels that make up the last three series of Episodios (Botrel 50). The early novels functioned in a particular fashion for Spanish readers of the Restoration period. To borrow Doris Summer’s term for the romanticized historical novels of Latin America, the Episodios constitute a Spanish form of “foundational fiction,” novels that “developed a narrative formula for resolving continuing conflicts” (12), even as they reimagined Spain as a nation defining itself anew. As such, these early historical novels present a fictional narrative, an imaginary construct, of a nation
without a problematic colonial history.

What the concept of hauntology makes clear, however, is that there can never be a complete rejection of the past, only a choice of how to engage it. Galdós's attempts to minimize the importance of Spanish colonial history as part of his fictional evocation of national identity no longer function for him when he begins to write the novelas contemporáneas of the 1880s. He begins to employ other discursive strategies relative to the realities of Spanish colonialism. The ideological and generic structures of the historical novel prove inadequate for representing the myriad concerns of contemporary daily Spanish life, as the author's focus shifts away from the creation of a sense of nation through a reimagining of its past and toward an exploration of the nation's present and future. His novels during this period contain more frequent references to colonial history and reveal changing attitudes toward Spain's colonial legacy, in part because colonial connections were simply an undeniable part of Spanish society of the time. Galdós's fiction from the 1880s still focuses on the metropolis, addressing the practical results of the Restoration and the political stability of the turno pacífico. With that stability came the expectation that the nation would begin to address its problems, yet when this potential for progress appears to have stalled, Galdós begins to examine Spanish society with a more critical eye. Accordingly, references to the colonies, as they appear in his fiction, serve to emphasize metropolitan problems (Sinnigen, "Cuba en Galdós" 115). No longer is colonial history ignored. Instead, Galdós incorporates aspects of Spain's connections with present and former colonies into his fiction, and as he does so, he develops a perspective on what those connections mean for the nation.

An early example of this inclusion of colonialism into Galdosian fiction can be found in La desheredada, published in 1881. While the central plot of the novel addresses the class aspirations of Isidora Rufete, the secondary characters of Melchor Relimpio and Joaquin Pez reveal a great deal about how Spaniards understood the role of empire in their daily lives. The attitudes toward the colonies are stereotypical in that Relimpio, Pez and their respective families see the colonies, and in particular Cuba, as sources of easy money and as places for solving the problems of the metropolis. In the first half of the novel, Melchor, the ne'er-do-well son of José Relimpio y Sastre, becomes involved in a scheme to sell rotting beans and rice to the government. When this plan becomes a scandal in the press and the public expects him to be sentenced to jail, he is instead named, in a moment of Galdosian irony, "oficial primero de Aduanas en Cuba" (255). By means of this subplot, Galdós implies that Madrid's social parasites can be sent off to the colonies to make their negative effects less keenly felt by Spaniards at home. Readers later discover that Melchor remained in the position for a mere twenty days before he was dismissed and sent back to the mainland, a clear sign of the depth of his dishonesty and incompetence. The reference is a brief but significant commentary on the abysmal state of Spain's colonial administration. Later in the novel, Joaquin Pez, member of the famously greedy "familia pisciforme," contemplates taking a job in the colonies to revive his financial situation. Like Melchor, he is destined for a position in customs, and he says, "Los españoles tenemos esa ventaja sobre los habitantes
de otras naciones. ¿Qué país tiene una Jauja tal, una isla de Cuba para remediar los desastres de sus hijos?" (307). In short, the colonies, and Cuba in particular, provide quick and effortless fortune, even as they represent "una válvula de escape," a space where one can escape responsibility for actions at home (Sinnigen Sexo y política 80).

This stereotypical view of the colonies as a source of wealth is repeated in 1882 with the publication of El amigo Manso, but this time Galdós imbues the idea of colonial society with a moral value of its own. The novel is also perhaps Galdós’s closest fictional approximation to his own family’s colonial connections in its depiction of Máximo Manso’s brother, José María, who returns to Madrid a wealthy indiano with his Cuban-born wife, Lica and members of her family. Máximo’s description of his brother’s wife and her sister, just arrived by train from Santander, is the beginning of a noticeable articulation of cultural difference:

Ambas representaban, a mi parecer, emblemáticamente, la flora de aquellos risueños países, el encanto de sus bosques, poblados de lindísimos pajarracos y de insectos vestidos de todos los colores del iris. (60)

The description is essentially positive and initiates a trajectory in Máximo’s education relative to Spanish colonialism. At first, Máximo’s imagining of natural beauty as an essential quality of Cuba and the Americas results from his response to the visual image of his newly arrived family, most notably the colorful fashions of the women. The initial focus on physicality holds true for the entire family, which evidences its colonial experience through appearance. For example, José María’s face is described as “de color de tabaco” (60), setting him apart from his brother, and by extension, other Spaniards. Curiously, the differences that Máximo notes in his brother and wife are not the same. While the response to his creole sister-in-law leans toward the positive, his view of his brother grows more negative. This difference, exacerbated by the plot structure, shows Máximo favoring the colonial other over the returning Spaniard.

The family’s first task is to change its image to fit Madrid society by purchasing the latest in available fashion, a physical transformation representing the first step toward social integration. José María turns his attention to Spanish politics, uses his wealth to become a diputado representing Cuba, and turns his home into a lively salon. Lica, however, struggles to fit into Madrid society, and Máximo attributes this to her Cuban upbringing.

El origen humildísimo, la educación mala y la permanencia de Lica en un pueblo agreste del interior de la isla no eran circunstancias favorables para hacer de ella una dama europea. Y no obstante estos perversos antecedentes, la excelente esposa de mi hermano, con el delicado instinto que completaba sus virtudes, iba entrando poco a poco en el Nuevo sendero y adquiría los disimulos, las delicadezas, las practicas sutiles y mañosas de la buena sociedad. (76)

Máximo reveals his admiration for his sister-in-law in this description, viewing her disadvantages to be not of her own making. She rapidly becomes a sympathetic character,
one who is more honorable than her husband. In addition, Máximo sees Madrid society as fundamentally hypocritical. As Máximo understands the situation, part of Lica’s social education in the Spanish capital requires her to overcome her natural goodness in order to acquire the manipulative talents of the society women with whom she is expected to interact. That Lica eventually withdraws from her husband’s social life only serves to heighten Máximo’s regard for her, even as it sends the message that the metropolis is a corrupting influence. At several points in El amigo Manso, Lica, her sister and her mother profess a deep nostalgia for their former life in Cuba, as a place fundamentally different from Madrid. Lica complains of this new life “en que todo es forzarse una, fingir y ponerse en tormento para hacer todo a la moda de acá, y tener que olvidar las palabras cubanas para saber otras, y aprender a saludar, a recibir, a mil tontadas y boberías...” (142). Without including descriptions of life in Cuba, Galdós represents it as fundamentally foreign to the metropolis, but, ironically, more positive.

Unlike his wife, José María, has no difficulty adjusting to Madrid society. His wealth paves the way for him. In this curious portrayal of the indiano, José María is negatively compared to Lica. By attempting to seduce Irene, his children’s governess, José María demonstrates his disregard for the most fundamental of social values, a woman’s honor. Máximo has to threaten his brother with scandal in order to force him to end his pursuit of Irene, even as Lica remains a loyal wife. With this, Galdós does not imply that colonial experience itself has led to José María’s immorality; instead, by implicating other members of Madrid society in the plot to compromise Irene’s virtue, Galdós indicates that the corruption of values is part of the metropolis itself. The seeds of José María’s immorality lie in the fact that he is truly a metropolitan subject.

The story of Lica and José María remains secondary, but it does more than provide support for the novel’s central plot. It also presents a model of how colonial experience relates to peninsular Spanish society. José María, having been born in Spain, adapts with greater ease to the corrupt and hypocritical social sphere of the nation’s capital. The Cuban-born Lica is a different kind of Spanish citizen, one who must learn to abandon her social innocence. In other words, not all citizens of the empire are alike.

El amigo Manso represents an early attempt by Galdós to conceptualize the connections between peninsular society and colonial citizens. Máximo Manso’s own problems integrating into Spanish society indicate that the author was still ambivalent about the nature of these connections’ effects. Nonetheless, whereas the binary of self and other, metropolis and colony, has not been transcended, the author has managed to confuse the traditional moral values assigned to them. No longer does the metropolis exercise a civilizing influence on the colonial subject. Although Galdós employs a stereotype of the indiano, he complicates it with a positive representation of the colonial other. In this sense, El amigo Manso does not legitimize the discourse of nation as empire but rather employs a variety of representational strategies to question sharply its validity.

In 1884, with the publication of Tormento, Galdós places the issue of Spanish colonialism on center stage. For the first time Galdós presents a protagonist whose life has
lately been spent outside of Spain. Curiously, Agustín Caballero’s thirty years away from
the metropolis have been spent in Mexico and Texas, thus expanding the colonial references
beyond Cuba. Agustín is often described in the novel as “salvaje” (41, 61), and it is clear
that he, like José María Manso, displays physical signs of colonialism:

El color de su rostro era malismo: color de América, tinte de fiebre y fatiga en las ardientes
humedades del golfo mejicano, la insignia o marca del apostolado colonizador que, con la vida y la
salud de tantos nobles obreros, está labrando las potentes civilizaciones futuras del mundo
hispanoamericano. (40)

Again, true to the stereotype of the indiano, Agustín appears to have returned to Spain
with considerable wealth. He is, as his servant says, “capitalista” (9), but he is more than a
financier. Agustín actually feels the need to participate in the daily life of his society. He is
clearly uncomfortable in the role of idle gentleman, and when he discovers the disorganized
state of a friend’s business, he throws himself into the physical work of arranging the
stockroom. His concern with practical order mirrors his belief in the need for a similar social
order.

Like Lica, but unlike José María, Agustín experiences difficulty in reintegrating into
Spanish society. His years in America have forever changed him physically and emotionally.
Again, this inability to reconnect is described in terms that cast Agustín in a positive light,
allowing Galdós to criticize the political and social expectations of the period. Despite the
negative description of his life as a speculator in Mexico and Texas, which included selling
arms and supplies to the Confederate Army, Agustín is still described as having had a
positive role in the economic development of the Americas and thus stands in sharp contrast
to what happens in Madrid:

En verdad, aquel hombre, que había prestado a la civilización de América servicios positivos, si no
brillantes, era tosco y desmañado, y parecía muy fuera de lugar en una capital burocrática donde hay
personas que han hecho brillantes carreras por saberse hacer el lazo de la corbata. (40)

Unlike the Manso family, Agustín does not attempt to change himself. At one point
he claims, “Ya estoy viejo para reformas” (39), and he admits that life, and not the
circumstances of his birth, has made him who he is:

A mí me han hecho como soy el trabajo, la soledad, la fiebre, la constancia, los descalabros,
el miedo y el arrojo, el caballo y el libro mayor, la sierra de Monterrey, el río del Norte y la pútrida
costa de Matamoros... ¡Ay! Cuando se ha endurecido el carácter, como los huesos, cuando a uno se
le ha pintado su historia en la cara, es imposible volver atrás. Yo soy así; la verdad, no tengo maldita
gana de ser de otra manera. (43)

Galdós’s message is clear: Agustín represents a role model, albeit imperfect, and as
such can be a possible catalyst for change and progress, if society can accept him as he is.

Agustín is undeniably a sympathetic character, but he is not the only one in Tormento with a connection to the colonies. His rival, Pedro Polo, the fallen cleric whose seduction of Amparo threatens to derail her marriage to Agustín, is also linked to Spanish colonialism. Polo is a character of extremes, incapable of self-control, but capable of dominating others. He views himself as someone who “había nacido para domar salvajes, para mandar aventureros; quizás, quizás para conquistar un imperio, como su paisano Cortés” (112). His family, acknowledging that he is not fit for Madrid society, arranges for him to leave Spain and serve the church in the Philippines. In Pedro Polo, Galdós presents a character who evokes Spain’s imperial past, a character whose extreme temperament cannot thrive in contemporary society but is better suited to dominate other civilizations. At one point in the novel, Amparo imagines Polo in this very role, reflecting a romantic notion of an exotic other:

Vela un hombre bárbaro navegando en veloz canoa con otros salvajes por un río de lejanas e inexploreadas tierras, como las que trala en sus estampas el libro de La vuelta al mundo. Era un misionero que había ido a cristianizar cafres en aquellas tierras que están a la otra parte del mundo, redondo como una naranja, allá donde es de noche cuando aquí es de día. (194)

Significantly, given that Tormento parodies the sentimental plots and character stereotypes of the popular folletín and consistently depicts Amparo as less than worldly, this image of a conquest whose goal is to civilize that exotic other can be read as a critique of imperialist motives (Sieburth 105). But as important, Amparo’s vision sets forth an imaginary construct that perceives colonialism as a form of direct engagement that ultimately threatens the European subject with absorption into the imagined other.

By the end of the novel, Agustín discovers that he, like Polo, is unsuited for life in Spain, but his inability to integrate is quite different from that of his rival. The revelation of Amparo’s seduction has made marriage to her impossible, and Agustín finds that he cannot live up to his professed commitment to the three pillars of Spanish society: “familia, estado, religion” (288). He leaves Spain for Bordeaux, then a haven for Spanish indianos, taking Amparo with him as his unmarried partner. He rejects traditional social rules in favor of circumstance and reality, telling himself: “Sal ahora por el ancho camino de tu instinto, y encomiéndate al Dios libre y grande de las circunstancias. No te fíes de la majestad convencional de los principios, y arrodillate delante del resplandeciente altar de los hechos…” (300). He has learned that practical concerns trump ideology, especially when personal happiness is at stake.

While Tormento is a biting criticism of Isabelline society, the novel is also a turning point in Galdós’s representation of colonial experience and its place in Spanish society. No longer simply destinations for profligate sons in need of easy fortune, the former and present colonies are clearly described as places that are truly other, distinct from Spain. The novel implies that returnees from the colonies cannot successfully reintegrate into Spanish society
because the metropolis is corrupt and impervious to change. Those with colonial experience are forced to construct a world for themselves, where behavior depends on individual needs, and moral judgments are more carefully meted out. As one critic has noted, "The novel invites us to imagine a better world and a better ending [...] in which the burden of the past [...] does not weigh upon the future, in which an ideal society can be sketched on a blank slate" (Amann 475-76).

One of the most telling references to colonial experience in Galdós's novelas contemporáneas is in Fortunata y Jacinta, published in 1886-87. Instead of depicting the individual with colonial experience as unable to integrate, in this novel Galdós presents a character with the ability to carve out a niche for himself within Madrid society. Evaristo González Feijoo, a retired military man with many years of service in Cuba and the Philippines, embodies the possibility of co-existence through his tolerance and understanding.

Su facha denunciaba su profesión militar y su natural hidalgo; tenía bigote blanco y marcial arrogancia, continente reposado, ojos vivos, sonrisa entre picaresca y bondadosa; vestía con mucho esmero y limpieza, y su palabra era sumamente instructiva, porque había viajado y servido en Cuba y en Filipinas; había tenido muchas aventuras y visto muchas y muy extrañas cosas. No se alteraba cuando oía expresar las ideas más exageradas y disolventes. (Π, 16)

Through this generous and tolerant individual and his "curso de filosofía práctica" (II, 89), Fortunata discovers a new way of seeing herself and participating in society. She is encouraged by Feijoo to question the social rules of the time, to choose a path for herself that allows her a measure of stability and happiness. Yet the lessons that Feijoo offers Fortunata still stress the importance of social appearances. The novel presents his advice as practical and justified but not hypocritical, and consequently his role in the novel is positive and supportive. By means of this sympathetic representation, the reader can conclude that Feijoo's lessons constitute a valid pedagogy.

Feijoo and his "curso de filosofía práctica" mirror Agustín Caballero and his common sense recognition of circumstance and facts, but without the adherence to Madrid's bourgeois morality. The aging gentleman teaches Fortunata that her obsession with being "honrada" is inappropriate in her circumstances and, more importantly, irrelevant from a moral perspective. As he himself states, "no predico yo la hipocresía," adding, "sé que decir humanidad es lo mismo que decir debilidad" (II 103). He presents himself to Fortunata as an alternative lover, one who will in fact support her financially, allow her a degree of liberty and self-determination, a modest but comfortable life and a chance to recover her physical and mental health after her break-up with Juanito Santa Cruz.

This period of Fortunata's life is relatively short, but immensely important. She discovers in herself, as she listens to this discourse of practical wisdom, the possibilities for redemption and acceptance. Feijoo's ability to circumvent social expectations, knowing when rules can be bent and when they must be followed, comes from a lifetime of
experience, most of it outside peninsular society. His colonial connection, as a member of the military and not as an indiano motivated by financial self-interest, is crucial to his ability to present a reconfigured moral world that can accommodate the complexities of a person like Fortunata. Curiously, one of Feijoo’s trademarks is his personal use of “agua de colonia,” a clever Galdosian reference. Fortunata says to him one morning, at the start of their affair, “¡Huy!... Cómo huele usted a colonia. Ese olor sí que me gusta...” (II96). This comment appears in close proximity to the chapter’s description of Feijoo’s service to the empire, ironically connecting the two different meanings of the word. The implication is that this colonial experience and the knowledge gained from it have made Feijoo attractive to Fortunata. Like Agustín Caballero, he returns to the metropolis a better and wiser man. It remains incumbent upon metropolitan Spaniards, like Fortunata, to recognize this wisdom and learn from it.

Both Tormento and Fortunata y Jacinta indicate a changed view of Spanish colonialism on Galdós’s part. No longer is Spain’s colonial history to be avoided and repressed. The metropolis’s link to the colonies becomes in Galdosian fiction a means by which the nation’s lack of progress is rendered visible. From this point on Galdós’s critiques of Spanish society become ever sharper, eventually questioning the very notion of progress. If one accepts Eric Hobsbawm’s description of European nationalisms as beginning with a liberal revolution followed by imperial expansion, thus demonstrating “a proven capacity for conquest” (38), then the fact that Spain fails at both indicates that Spanish nationalism in the nineteenth century “tenía que inventarse una función” (Álvarez Junco 508). Rather than repress the memory of colonial engagement as he did in the early historical novels, Galdós begins to address the effects of colonialism on the metropolis, positing the possibility of an antidote to the corruption and decadence of Spanish society, teaching individuals to perceive the world on different terms.

Perhaps one of the most compelling reasons for this change is the fact that the author’s own political career began during this decade. In 1885 Galdós was asked by Práxedes Mateo Sagasta, the leader of the Liberal Party, to stand as a candidate for election to the Spanish Congress. He was to represent the district of Guayama in Puerto Rico, a place of which he had little knowledge and with which he had even fewer connections. Although the election itself was a textbook example of the political corruption associated with the turno pacífico, Galdós served in the Liberal Party’s long ministry from 1886 to 1890, during which time a number of reforms were achieved, including the enactment of universal male suffrage. As a representative of Puerto Rico, Galdós had no option but to learn about the many concerns of his constituents (Armas Ayala 107). His experience in the Congreso, in particular with issues relative to Spain’s last vestiges of empire, was to influence his writing and his political activities for the rest of his life. As Galdós himself later wrote about his own election as a diputado cunero—a representative from outside the district—“Con estas y otras arbitrariedades llegamos años después a la pérdida de las colonias” (Memorias 60). The author’s role as a legislative representative for one of the nation’s remaining colonies only underscores the need to look more closely at the attitudes
toward colonialism expressed in his fiction.

Galdós’s attitudes toward this complicated aspect of Spanish history changed, even as his own understanding of Spain’s relationship to the Americas grew. The Episodios nacionales written in the 1870s represent Galdós’s attempt to present a common vision of Spanish national identity. This contribution to a “proceso nacionalizador,” however, encouraged the Spanish people to overlook the empire’s former greatness as it defined itself in the present (Álvarez Junco 571). When the author turned to contemporary realist fiction, he invariably included descriptions of metropolitan and colonial relations, exploring the negative consequences for both sides. By the end of the 1880s, Galdós had moved beyond presenting the colonies as a destination for young men in search of fortune and began to entertain the idea that the colonies, both former and current, constituted independent societies that offered Spain possible solutions for its problems. Yet Galdós’s 1880s narratives pose the question of whether Spanish society was able or willing to accept this different perspective as a part of its new identity. The novels examined here indicate that Galdós feared Spain was not prepared to embrace changes that might result from an honest examination of its colonial history. Perhaps this is why his references nearly always remained on the level of secondary characters and subplots, a reflection of the “dreadful secundariness” that Said identifies as the permanent position of the colonized (“Representing the Colonized” 207).

What we discover in examining references to colonial history in the narratives of the 1870s and 80s is that Galdós instinctively grasped the importance of colonial experience in the process of defining national identity. The initial historical novels attempt to avoid it by presenting a vision of Spain without its colonial legacy, thus positing the notion that Spain could, and indeed should, redefine itself as a nation and not an empire. Yet, not surprisingly, colonial history eventually finds its way into Galdosian fiction, like the inevitable return of the repressed, this time in the form of a colonial other with a unique ability to reveal problems within the metropolis. Spain, these novels show, must adopt a practical approach to its colonial legacy, remembering and learning from it but not allowing it to become an overarching determinant of identity. In other words, Galdós’s treatment of Spanish colonialism can be read as a process of mourning, which “allows one to lay the ghosts of the past to rest by, precisely, acknowledging them as past” (Labanyi 65).

Galdós underscored the urgency of this process with a subtle but meaningful change in the text of one of his early Episodios soon after Spain lost its last Caribbean and Pacific colonies. The editions of Memorias de un cortesano de 1815 printed after 1898 are labeled “esmeradamente corregida,” with one revealing change in the conversation the king has with his advisors relative to the colonies. Instead of “Hay que despedirse de las Américas,” the author reformulates Fernando VII’s comment into a more vigorous and willful expression: “Despidámonos de las Américas” (179 Episodios, 1903). Clearly the events of 1898 led Galdós to pay closer attention to his earlier references to Spanish colonial history. The choice of a first person plural command in this instance serves to endow the Spanish people, not just Fernando VII and his camarilla, with a political will clearly absent in the
original phrase. In short, this textual change encourages readers to participate actively in the process of letting go of the past, consistent with what both Agustín Caballero and Fortunata must learn to do.

Notably, the perspective developed in the author’s novels by the end of the 1880s remains consistent with subsequent Galdosian references to colonialism, particularly after 1898. For instance, in the fourth series of Episodios written from 1902 to 1907, in particular Aita Tettauen, Carlos VI en la Rápita and La vuelta al mundo en la Numancia, Galdós again stresses the imperative to rethink Spain’s imperial past, the need to come to terms with a failed liberal revolution and the problems that result from imperialist projects incapable of sustaining a sense of national identity (Martín-Márquez 9, Coffey 363). These later Episodios no longer evidence the patriotic utopianism of the first series; instead, they serve as “antiépicas” that question the nation’s very ability to maintain its unrealistic perception of itself (Álvarez Junco 572). Indeed, these novels and others, including the fifth series of Episodios and El caballero encantado, place in doubt the very adequacy of realism as a mode of representation.

As his view of Spanish colonialism develops in the nineteenth century, Galdós becomes less sanguine about the possibility for progress on a national scale, and when Spain experiences the colonial losses of 1898, the author’s perspective grows increasingly pessimistic. Overall, Galdós’s fiction from the 1870s, 1880s and beyond continues to insist that Spaniards re-imagine the nation as an entity without pretensions to empire, but over time the author’s approach to this project shifts from denial to acceptance. By not addressing colonial history in the first series of Episodios, Galdós sends his readers the clear message: “Hay que despedirse de las Américas.” Soon after, with his subsequent novelas contemporáneas, Galdós begins to acknowledge the inability to repress Spain’s colonial legacy and eventually signals that the metropolis must come to terms with colonialism by means of a “curso de filosofía práctica.” Accordingly, Galdós’s fiction mirrors the process that the nation underwent as it experienced the inevitable transition toward a postcolonial state. That the colonial references in these novels and others have begun to attract attention should come as no surprise, considering the current interest in postcolonial studies. But what we find, in a careful reading of even the smallest of them, is that Galdós was very much aware of the importance of colonialism in determining Spain’s present and future, and aware of Spain’s unique challenges in re-imagining itself as a nation rather than an empire.


