

ROSARIO FERRÉ'S *THE HOUSE ON THE LAGOON*: PUERTO RICAN ETHNICAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES UNDER (DE-) CONSTRUCTION.

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The notions of 'nation' and 'ethnicity' in their most controversial dimensions, have recently acquired an unprecedented notoriety in the field of cultural and literary studies. But, most remarkably, this outstanding position has not been attained by sheer chance. Indeed, the ideological relocations concerning philosophy, society and culture that have accompanied poststructuralist thought, have caused a direct impact on the general perceptions surrounding these two terms. Hence, if the views on them that dominated most of the XIX century and the first half of the XX emphasised the intractable homogeneity and stagnation of both nation and ethnicity, in the last decades their reconfiguration have brought about their diversification as much as their complete reconceptualisation.

In this paper, I will aim at presenting a general approach to both notions as observed under the prism of postmodernist narrative techniques and major ideological and aesthetic concerns. Most specifically, and as the title of this paper makes explicit, the chief focus of analysis singularised in this particular context would concern Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré's major novel *The House on the Lagoon* (1995). Throughout an overview of Ferré's key topics related with the redefinition of nation and ethnicity both in this novel and in the rest of her works, I will attempt to sketch the principal tendencies of postmodernist theory that have conferred a diversified new slant on the conventional perceptions on both nation and ethnicity. As a consequence, my revision will not only bring about a mere analysis of them as reflected by Ferré's novel but also and, most importantly, I will try to display the abstruse number of notional intersections that operate through them. In this sense, gender and historiography prove to be two prime sites of discussion for both nation and ethnicity to expand.

In his approach to *nation* the theoretician Homi Bhabha has opted for focusing on the temporal impregnability of the term itself, "[...] the temporal dimension in the inscription of these political entities [history, power] serves to displace the historicism that has dominated discussions of the nation as a cultural force. The focus on temporality resists the transparent linear equivalence of event and idea that historicism proposes" (*Nation and Narration* 1990, 58).

Eloquently enough in this work Bhabha coined the term *dissemination* in allusion to the plethora of meanings and functions that the concept of nation can mobilise. In other words, nation according to Bhabha is but an ideological construction closely interlocked with the *politics of power* and, generally speaking,

promptly made to accommodate a political function whatsoever¹. This eager appropriation of the term on the part of those that purposefully make it fit their interests, is also experimented in regards to the concept of ethnicity. In parallel evolution with that of nation, it has not been until recent decades that this term has started to detach itself from the extremely racialised components that coerced its semiotic possibilities. In this sense, ethnicity was a synonymous expression for *race* and, as a consequence, it entered the biased area of racial taxonomies where race was measured against the degree of intellectual or mechanical development of those labelled under a particular racial or ethnic group. In short, under the auspices of intellectual evolutionism ethnicity was equated with a stage in the evolution of humanity thought to represent a spectrum towards the finest degree of perfection. As it occurred with the concept of nation, ethnicity has lately seen the proliferation of theories that struggle to achieve its de-essentialization by bringing it under close scrutiny in the light of deconstructionist and poststructuralist rhetorics. In particular, Werner Sollors, one of the most outstanding critics in the area of cultural studies, has devoted an unusual attention to the concept of ethnicity not so much by privileging the nuances of meaning that best accommodate a revised account of ethnicity in our contemporary context, but by reconstructing the term itself in relation to its relational possibilities. By so doing, Werner Sollors has reiteratively underpinned the various ideological axis that have contributed to the erection of the concept as it has been traditionally conceptualised. In so doing, Sollors has considered the promiscuous intersections of ethnicity with society, class, power, and most importantly for my concern here, with nation. As ideologically constructed terms, ethnicity and nation have become then cornerstones for the questioning of assumed rigid paradigms of racial and cultural nature.²

However, if the reconsideration of nation and ethnicity have enjoyed such a pre-eminent position, this has also had its origins in the scholarly attention committed to human populations where centrifugal ethnical and cultural forces have destabilised the monomaniac tyranny of the western *logos*. One of the most remarkable instances can be found in the Caribbean area where the degree of

¹ Most specifically, Homi Bhabha's starting point is based on the assumption that, despite the growing awareness of the cultural temporality of nations, the concept contumaciously perpetuates because the nation's discursive structures are underwritten by nationalist notions. Hence, any conceptualisation of the nation shows an intrinsically ambivalent nature, or a "Janus-faced discourse", as Bhabha puts it. Consequently, he develops this idea to a stage where any binary opposition between the discourse of nationalism (inside) and the actual existence of the nation (outside) becomes obsolete.

² According to current debates on ethnical and national issues (by Homi K. Bhabha, Werner Sollors, Fredrick Jameson, Linda Hutcheon, etc.), there is a consensus on their common ethos as based on culturally and historically variable assumptions. Nevertheless, given the brevity of this paper I have excluded any exhaustive theoretical or critical examination on the most problematic aspects of ethnicity and nation and their diffuse boundaries since the details of such a discussion would entail an analysis too ambitious for the scope of this article.

cultural miscegenation achieved aids to preclude any attempt to impose uniform nomenclatures of social, cultural or ethnical systematisation. Regarding this concern, literature has become one of the most relevant mediums through which Caribbean authors have tried to convey an acute sense of their societies as marked by the highest level of heterogeneity, dispersion and eclecticism. Thus, nation and ethnicity appear frequently depicted as central *loci* for cultural discussion from which other social issues such as gender come forth.

In this sense, there is no doubt about Puerto Rico adequacy as a site for dialogic interaction when bridging its Native-Afro-European legacy with its present social and political willingness to define an imaginative and autonomous cultural identity. Furthermore, in the twentieth century, Puerto Rico has been faced with an even more troublesome issue, that of its search for a stable national consciousness in the light of its status as a 'Free Associate State' of the US. In addition, Puerto Rico epitomizes, if evoking scholar Antonio Benítez Rojo's definition of the Caribbean area, an intense social and cultural fluidity that emanates from its variegated and contumacious ethnical and national intersections. Besides, despite the recurrent contraposition of Puerto Rico against the neighbouring Cuba by which the former tends to be conceptualised as the Latin American traitor nation that readily surrendered to the expansionist aspirations of the United States and the latter becomes recurrently singularised as the resistant nation that successfully opposed the same ambitions, Puerto Rico receives by this very stigmatisation a new angle of analysis enriching rather than deprecating its cultural conceptualisations. Therefore, any depiction of Puerto Rico usually brings into the forefront a conundrum of aspects that by their sheer connection play an essential role in the re-examining of the mentioned concepts of nation and ethnicity.

In this regard, Rosario Ferré's novel *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), becomes a vital textual exponent that presents a cultural juncture for Puerto Rican society, art and politics in literature to enter into productive dialogue. Most specifically, *The House on the Lagoon* outstands for being the first work of its prolific author composed originally in English and for its nomination for the National Book Award in 1996.³ As declared to *Publishers Weekly*, Ferré refers to her novel as "comprised of a [...] semi-fictionalized family history", tactic that is not at all alien to the numerous trends among minority/peripheral writers where nation and ethnicity correlate metaphorically and/or parodically with

³ The polemics raised by the publication of this novel in English instead of Spanish, language primarily used by the author until then, is worth considering in the context of my discussion. In fact, Ferré herself has undergone a revealing evolution from her more radical defence of Puerto Rican emancipation from the United States when younger to her conciliatory views on the matter. In this way, Ferré herself has made patent her positive evaluation of the increasing bilingualism and the cultural hybridisation that has originated as a result of the ambivalent status of Puerto Rico and the itinerant way of life of many of its population, continually drifting between mainland and island. This optimistic stance is drastically refuted by those that see in the indeterminate state of Puerto Rico an easy prey for the United States cultural hegemony over the island.

individual or familiar issues. In this manner, the realms of the public and the private become narrowly connected in an clear effort to display the individual relevance of political and social happenings. In a broader perspective, minority/peripheral authors have instituted, through this eclectic narrative style, a distinctive way to overcome the strictures of hierarchical thought.⁴ In this sense, Rosario Ferré has largely contributed to the explicit voicing of the necessity of promoting the permeability among diverse and frequently excised social spheres. Accordingly, in her essay “La cocina de la escritura” Ferré parallels the process of cooking, a task traditionally ascribed to women, with the writing process itself. For Ferré the same display of imagination, conscious mixing of ingredients and commitment are common to both activities. In most of her novels in the most playful manner, Ferré also tends to undermine the recurrent polarizations that have rigidly structured our understanding of social roles and cultural formations. Remarkably enough in this respect is her reputed collection of short stories *Papeles de Pandora* (1976) -translated to English as *The Youngest Doll*, 1991. The great majority of these stories provide an insightful approach to the subjugated condition of women in the bourgeois and snobbish patriarchal society of Puerto Rico not through the crude representation of the situations of oppression as such, but rather through the visualisation of the strategies employed by women to effectively cope with them. Most of the strategies depicted in these stories exhibit a precise juxtaposition of motifs by which elements of the public, social, patriarchal dimension become artfully appropriated by the rebellious members of the oppressed classes or groups for their own subversive means. The instance that best illustrates this characteristic procedure is encountered in the story entitled “La muñeca menor”, in which an innocent porcelain doll -obvious symbol of women’s submission and aseptic passivity- becomes a mischievous instrument of revenge on the part of its owner, a young woman cruelly abused by the whimsical behaviour of her husband. Equally, in “Mercedes Benz” the ostentatious car that gives title to this short story is the element through which Ferré activates a critical scrutiny of the derogatory biases that still infuse upper and middle Puerto Rican classes with a sense of respectability and despise towards lower classes and marginal peoples. In a parallel way, in “Cuando las mujeres aman a los hombres”, Ferré cunningly subverts the traditionally accepted extramarital liaisons of married men in patriarchal societies by eventually allying a white wife and her husband’s black mistress.

The writing of history and the implications of the agency of those in charge of this task becomes a central concern for Ferré as well. “Ferré dramatizes the

⁴ I am perfectly aware of the arguable use of the compound expression “minority/peripheral authors” since it encloses an amorphous number of writers in the most diverse circumstances and contexts. However, given the difficulty to coin a most accurate term, I have considered it pertinent enough in that it contributes to maintain an open category from where nobody could be drastically excluded, and to which nobody has to be particularly attached.

issue of who gets to write history gracefully incorporating it into a compelling panorama of Puerto Rican experience that is rich in history, drama and memorable characters.” (Publishers Weekly, July 3, 1995, 47). The contingency that presides over the codification of history is made explicit through Ferré’s constant offering of colluding and contradicting historical renditions. Thus, the pattern developed is continuously elaborated from intertwined lines of narration and satiric twists that convey a sense of deep ambiguity and mocking reversal of the traditional inert role attributed to history. This aspect is the most evident in regards to *The House on the Lagoon* where “what the novel is really about are the connections and the connections and disconnections between history and literature” (Julie Barak, 34). In this way, Ferré puts a particular focus on the possibilities of change engendered by the intersection of fact and fiction. Both categories become futile by their constant overlapping, their boundaries dissipate and, at that crucial point, an emphasis is placed on the inconsistency of attempting to discern any border dividing their respective fields of action. By so doing, Ferré overtly engages in the polemics fuelled by New Historical revisionism on the process of historical rendition. She clearly positions herself then on the side of those authors who support the idea of history as a highly contingent activity, always mediated by the manipulative interests and inclinations of its author. In all of her novels and, particularly in *The House on the Lagoon* as I have already mentioned, this distinctive impulse is marked by a major interest in women as agents of history writing. To this state of affairs it must be added a second level of interpretation, namely, the far from naive coincidence between the events and circumstances related in the novel and the main events shaping Rosario Ferré’s life. In other words “another way that authorial veracity is ransomed in the novel is that [the protagonist’s] families are similar to Ferré and her family in many ways, so that the line between fiction and fact is sometimes blurred by these convergences”. Ferré herself has expressed that “when writing about her characters, a writer is always writing about herself, or about possible versions of herself” (Barak, 34). In addition, Ferré pushes forward the argument that to be a writer implies undertaking a belligerent task that not only makes possible the establishment of connections between fact and imagination, but that creates effective alternatives of change in the ways historiography and fiction are generally envisioned.

Not less relevant is Ferré’s recurrent use of family genealogies in her longer works. Hence, her major novels *Maldito amor* -translated as *Sweet Diamond Dust*, *Eccentric Neighbourhoods* (1998) -translated as *Vecindarios excéntricos* (1999), *Flight of the Swan* (2001) -translated as *El vuelo del cisne*- and *The House on the Lagoon* itself are modelled according to this genealogical pattern of narration⁵. Again here

⁵ From the titles detailed here another relevant matter is made obvious, namely the systematic translation of Ferré’s works either to Spanish or to English. Actually, Ferré herself is the author of her own translations and she has frequently referred to this activity which for her does not consist of a mere rendering of meaning from one language into another. In this respect, Ferré has

the clashes between a stagnated vision of society is counterbalanced by the deliberately regenerating efforts of those individuals yoked under the severities of their immobilised system. Women of all ethnical and social backgrounds as much as men from social marginal groups incentive in these novels the promotion of greater freedom and social aperture resorting to such diverse tactics as an overt involvement with artistic activities, the practice of traditional religions or the satiric undermining of constraining paradigms of social and political conduct. Conversely, on the other extreme of the pole, Ferré tends to depict her male upper class characters with singular critical poignancy ever verging on disdain and mockery. In this sense, Ferré has had to resist a consistent number of critics that have accused her of effecting a mere reversal of traditional social roles by empowering her female characters in detriment of the male ones. Thus, the critic Ellen Friedman in her review on *The House on the Lagoon* (1996) articulates a harsh denigration of this book for its reliance on Manichean stereotypes and obsolete and reiterative aesthetic motifs. Julie Bark condenses the same idea when stating that in *The House on the Lagoon* “Ferre lines her characters up along traditional, patriarchal, gendered lines –masculine interest in and superiority at marshaling the facts, feminine interest in and superiority at developing the fancy” (35).

On the whole, many other critics have negatively pointed to Rosario Ferré’s well-off position as the daughter of an ex-governor in Ponce (Luis A. Ferré) situation that, according to them is reflected through Ferré’s bourgeois narrators and their correspondent middle classes, perspectives and experiences. For instance, in her review Ellen G. Friedman, seems the most disappointed by what she evaluates as the laconic manners of the majority of the novel’s characters and their implicit lack of political and social commitment. Nonetheless, fighting back these incriminations, Ferré has reasserted her willingness to “recover a world [the patriarchal oligarchic world of colonial times] that has disappeared, even though it’s a world that is based on such tremendous injustice that I’m glad it’s changed” (Magdalena García Pinto, 87, 1991). Equally, in Ferré’s defence it could be argued that by swapping roles she points all the most unambiguously to the artificiality of any social paradigm and, subsequently, to the unjust treatment received by those who helplessly bear the worst consequences of its burden. In this respect, the indolence that singularises most of her characters must not be read literally as a sign of detachment from the political and social preoc-

alluded to her perception of translation as a process that entails a cultural translation that must imply the conscious remodelling of the narrative in accordance to the cultural background of the audience to which the translation is addressed. Thus, she has declared how her Spanish versions are replete with sensorial and passionate descriptions, whereas the English ones pay a greater attention to the informational details. Additionally, Ferré has voiced her pedagogical commitment to those first generation Puerto Ricans that fled the island and tried to integrate into the “American way of life” by renouncing to their culture and language. By so doing, “her work serves to raise their consciousness of and educate them about their political cousins in Puerto Rico” (Julie Barak, 31).

cupations that constitute the conflictive status of the Puerto Rican nation and society. Quite on the contrary, its interpretation should be mostly based on the ironic portrayal of the rancid cultural and social grounds dominating Puerto Rican society that Ferré attempts to offer to her readers.

Whatever the case and coming back to the central topic of my paper, *The House on the Lagoon* recounts and genealogically reconstructs the lives of a Puerto Rican couple, Quintín Mendizábal and Isabel Monfort, who through formally implicit dialogue come into harsh conflict over national politics, gender, social class, ethnicity and the writing of history. Virtually then, every component of Puerto Rican society is touched upon in Ferré's work in different degrees of concern and intensity. The dramatization operated through the confrontation of voices is particularly ambitious in its scope by covering the most controversial aspects of Puerto Rican identity formation. Most specifically, Ferré creates an intergenerational dynamics through a familiar saga that parallels Puerto Rican history since its independence from Spain in 1898 up to the conflictive political and social struggles of the 50's on deciding upon the eventual sovereignty or statehood of the island. In this sense, *The House on the Lagoon* epitomises most of the above-referred aspects, converting it into one of the most highly articulated narratives ever produced by its author.

The thematic and structural lines of the narrative deploy in a postmodernist fashion, a revisionist analysis relevant to the construction of historical, national and ethnical identities in postcolonial Puerto Rico⁶. In this respect, the importance of postmodernism deserves to be explored in relation to the intricate portrayal of national and ethnical aspects offered by Ferré that outlines the architectural construction underlying Puerto Rican hybrid identity. By the composed, ambivalent term "(de-) construction" to which the opening title of this paper alludes, I would like to express the patent ambiguity and double-edged quality of the process underlying any course of constructiveness and, most specifically, as regards to nation and ethnicity as mentioned above. It is precisely this dual capacity that *The House on the Lagoon* fulfils both by activating the critical disclosure of the conventional motifs rigidly delimiting the basics of Puerto Rican identity formation and, simultaneously, emphasising its heteroclitic nature conceived as an idiosyncratic dynamics of constructiveness. In other words, deconstruction and construction are shown to be part and parcel of the same regenerative process. In brief, *The House on the Lagoon* could be defined

⁶ I assume the current status of Puerto Rico as rather problematic when labelled as a post-colonial country since, in view of its relation with the US, some authors still consider its situation as colonial or neo-colonial. The situation of the island in this regard is essentially insoluble in that it is presided by an important level of uncertainty - the majority of Puerto Ricans approve of the United States administrative and financial control as much as they rejected it in other social and cultural spheres- and by an undeniable ubiquity since most of its inhabitants are some way or another divided between the island and the United States. (Frances R. Aparicio, *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Art*. Houston: 1993, p.19).

in this respect as one of the finest examples of literary postmodernism with its conscious and disingenuous display of meaning creation and its relativistic approach to the notion of authority and legitimacy.

In the novel the postmodernist mode, mostly in a formally dialogic dimension, serves three main interdependent sites of meaning creation: ethnicity, historiography and gender, hinged by a common denominator, namely, the latent ambiguity and split of Puerto Rican national and cultural identity. In reference to ethnicity, the novel searches to assert the possibilities of critical voice of a minority group (Puerto Rican) within the English literary market and also offers a comprehensive insight into the multicultural basis upon which Puerto Rican society has been erected. Thus, all throughout the novel, there is a proliferation of allusions to the social clashes suffered by Puerto Ricans under contact with the predominant American cultural rule over the island, and also a constant emphasis is located on the conflictive dimensions of Puerto Rican multiethnic grounds. A whole range of paradoxes populate both dimensions of the ethnical conflict presented by the novel. In the first case to the admiration arose in Puerto Ricans by the American way of life, Ferré aggregates their shocking discovery of the racial segregation policies still operating in the American nation. Equally, the multiple ethnical layers overlapping and colluding in Puerto Rican society permits the author to initiate a systematic exploration of the ways through which, in a simultaneous manner, racial prejudices and unrecognised miscegenation go hand in hand.

Historiography constitutes one of the pillars for *The House on the Lagoon* to develop its dualistic pattern of narration as regards the struggling over what version of history will its protagonists make it to come to light. By making Quintin Mendizábal an advocate of a specific singular truth and Isabel an obstinate opponent to it, the narrative engages in a playful but crucial discussion of the power compressed in historiography and the writing process leading to it. Most remarkable is the articulate process that aids Ferré to braid a dialectics of revision and re-questioning of the “official histories” of the island that, eventually, favours the rethinking of Puerto Rican geographical and cultural borders. Rosario Ferré foregrounds through these topics the idea of national identity and the very concept of nation itself as matters subject to historical and cultural production, that is, arbitrarily delimited. Nevertheless, what is more relevant is that in the novel there is no a straight confrontation with official narratives as such, but most significantly, the principal narrator, Isabel drags the hegemonic voice of her husband towards a play of contradictions and opposites. Therefore, Rosario Ferré reworks traditional historiography by going endlessly through the original logocentrism vertebrating it. Rewriting history is doubtlessly a source of enormous possibilities both for literature and history itself, as is well illustrated throughout many postmodernist narratives. Postmodernism, in this sense, ponders favourably the possibilities opened to history with the help of new fictional versions of the events recreated. For

instance, authors such as Rosario Ferré resort to this particular angle of consideration to turn around the emphasis on the male dominant perspective contributing then to thaw out its pervasive absoluteness.

Last but not least, gender is without doubt an aspect closely related with both ethnicity and historiography categories mentioned so far since the novel establishes a forceful analogy between the building of Puerto Rican ethnical and national individualities and Puerto Rican women's struggle for personal growth and emancipation from a harsh patriarchal structure. Indeed, Ferré's narrative discourse in all her novelistic production is powerfully gendered not bridling herself, by so doing, from emitting an overt opinion about her views on feminist/female writing (Suzanne Hintz, 1995). Ferré has recurrently drawn her reviewers and critics' attention to her deep involvement with feminist theories and literary interpretations. She has openly stated her admiration for French critics such as Julia Kristeva or Hélène Cixous to whom she has repeatedly affirmed to feel deeply indebted. Most particularly, it is through the latter that she has come to a revision of the controversial concept of *l'écriture féminine*. In her own words, this notion must be conceived not literally with the implication that by *écriture féminine* one should accept the existence of a primeval natural essence that would qualify females to develop a divergent way of artistic expression and sensibility in comparison with men. Oppositely, Ferré seems more inclined to understand *l'écriture féminine* as a complex set of cultural conditionings that develop out of the contextual circumstances and the ideological scenarios upon which they are constructed. In this way, she proposes a sort of feminine writing characterised by an overt oppositional and playful nature, which manages to escape the restrictions of the governing patriarchal society by presenting the secret or excluded histories that the dominant historiographic discourses have recurrently ignored. The unearthing of these exiled voices prompts a peculiar dynamics to Ferré's narrative style since in contrast with the statistical dynamics of conventional historiography, the junctures opened through the familiar and individual contexts rendered by narratives such as *The House on the Lagoon*, destabilises its whole programmatic accuracy. Needless to say, this intersection of motives as much as the high concern awoken by generic issues have lately become commonplace in many feminist narratives either by mainland or island Puerto Ricans authors (and other (peripheral/border located authors), such as Judith Ortiz Cofer, Ana Lydia Vega, Aurora Levins Morales, etc. (Suzanne Bost, 2000)

Following this tripartite division exposed above, I have established a wider frame of analysis, intended to be symptomatic rather than paradigmatic or exemplary, where to appropriately insert these concepts in relation to the three contexts considered by Werner Sollors as relevant to the study of ethnic literature (1983). Thus, he considers the subsequent points,

1. The relationship of ethnic writers to the mainstream.
2. The relationship to class and dominance.

3. The relationship to Old World and history.

1. The relationship of ethnic writers to the mainstream.

Many literary critics have expressed their unfavourable views on the potential relations between postmodernism and ethnic literatures and / or multiculturalism conceiving the former as a project that subsumes all the pluralities, divergences and differences under a homogenising cloak (Fredric Jameson, 1992). Most particularly, experimentalism of a postmodernist kind tends to be misinterpreted as lacking a political agenda and, in consequence, it is considered as a mere conservative exercise of aesthetic playfulness. In this respect, an argument that has gained considerable support among the opponents to 'peripheral postmodernisms' refers to the deconstructionist fundaments that endorse postmodernism in its more general terms. To deconstruct, to claim the contingency of every human act and ideological construction could seem quite adequate when dealing with well anchored institutions and, most specifically, with those that have established themselves as self-legitimised centers from where social regulations and constraints emanate. Nevertheless, if similar demolishing principles are applied to oppressed and fragile social or human foundations the risks of dismantling their scarce roots of structure and coherence are too elevated to be readily assumed. By this logic, it is implied that to uproot a given identity one must possess a clear and distinctive one. Postcolonial societies and marginalised human groups feel understandably vulnerable in this context, and there is precisely where resides one of the main currents of contravention to postmodernist theoretical expansion.

However, what is at stake for Latin American postmodernists, according to Raymond Williams, is the search for the articulation of a revisionist and destabilising critical, political and social apparatus (19). Thus, these *ethnical* postmodernist literary attempts, as *The House on the Lagoon*, seem to be dynamised by a syncretic thrust that preserve individual ethnical experiences, social and political particulars and gender specific concerns whereas adopting a Western, mainstream mode of discourse that traces a provocative response against truth claims and essentialist conceptions of race, class, nation and gender, attitude that ultimately has represented the debacle of 'grand narratives' (Jean-François Lyotard, 1985). Such fictional endeavours constitute a representation of new cultural, hybrid ethnical and national contexts on the basis of the performative act embodied in the very process of writing whereby static organicist conceptions prove to be utterly ineffectual. Postmodernism is not, according to this position a mere nihilistic imposture that solely attempts at the recreation of the principles that have traditionally structured human societies. Far from that, authors such as Linda Hutcheon have consistently demonstrated the incandescent potential of postmodernist theories that have

served to inflame discussions on the nature of human ethnical and national identity.

Furthermore, the Caribbean context where “the cultural unity of the region has always been more an ideal of its progressive writers and political thinkers” (Williams, 93), seen across the range of its multifaceted backgrounds, becomes a discursive site that accounts for the pluridimensional and provisional ethos of a number of societies that resist the all-encompassing and unproblematising national nominalizations that disregard the multicultural complexities at their very core. As already referred, the multiethnic complex that constitutes most of the Caribbean countries pose a special case for analysis as regards the concepts of nation and ethnicity. The paradoxical juxtaposition of syncretic and analytic currents that quite frequently underline every social and cultural formation in Caribbean areas can be effectively visualised when filtered through the prism of postmodernism. Besides, the usage of postmodernist theories to the scrutiny of notions of identity does not automatically constitute the exile of ethical concerns that, in other spheres, can perfectly continue to be applied.

Therefore, by resorting to postmodernist aesthetics R. Ferré appropriates a subversive discourse that, as mentioned before, although traditionally related with mainstream white male authors, has lately proved to be a resourceful strategy in the hands of ethnic and / or female writers, drawing attention, by so doing, to the fragmentation and de-centering of their peripheral experiences. As suggested by the scholar Carlos Rincón, this relation between Postmodernism and Latin American writers gets reinforced since “the force of [these authors] alterity is constitutive of the “postmodern condition” itself, which is precisely the center’s loss of its status as such” (1995). In short, the adoption of Postmodernism as both a technique and a strategy by ethnic authors emphasises their literary creations as acts of self-affirmation of a literature and a society of shifting boundaries concomitant to social and political upheavals. *The House on the Lagoon* then, participates in the dismantling of the concept of national literature as an enclosed and static construct. On the same line, it seeks to expose multiculturalism as a diversifying experience of which the narrative structure itself can and should partake of.

Hence, different sections of this novel correspond either to the manuscript of the novel written by the protagonist and main narrator, Isabel, or to Quintín, her husband. Isabel grants meaning to the past and present individual or collective situations through a textual representation that reconstructs the concealed histories / stories of the diverse ethnical constituents of Puerto Rican population. In his turn, Quintín, undermines Isabel’s narrative by revealing some of her historical inaccuracies and by underlying the inappropriateness of some of her remarks as they could compromise their families’ reputation. He attempts to rewrite many of her stories, trying to provide alternative or more exact versions than those recounted by his wife and, constantly, he struggles to cast doubt upon Isabel grounds. Yet, his attempts end up most of the times in

absolute failure since he shows even stronger biases and more overt historical manipulations than those of which he accuses her wife⁷. We can find an instance of this dialectic process in Quintín's disagreement over Isabel's recount of the officially authorised shooting of some Nationalist cadets on Easter Sunday 1937 in the town of Ponce.

Isabel. "The Nationalists purposely sent their youngest cadets to march, as well as nurses and old men. There were no bazookas, rifles, or machine guns in sight in Ponce..." (128)

Quintín. "What troubled Quintín the most was Isabel's blatant disregard of history. [...] She described the Nationalist cadets as if they were martyrs. [...] This of course was inaccurate. People of all ages were part of the Nationalist cadets [and] if they could let themselves be murdered in cold blood, it was because they could kill in cold blood" (151).

Even if we, as readers, cannot really discern the plausible truth under these discrepant statements (if to do that is ever possible), there is no doubt about the potentiality in the surface of this postmodernist strategy concerning the detotalization of history (Hutcheon, 70). In this sense, Isabel goes back to the past to better contextualise the present and in order to open a new range of fictional possibilities whereas Quintín shows an overt incapacity for understanding the fictitious process of meaning-granting undertaken by Isabel in her novel. Quintín imputes Isabel of revising Puerto Rican history and the histories of their families for abstruse reasons to which he assigns a feminist origin or that he equates with Isabel's sympathy for the Puerto Rican independentist cause. Conscious of the threatening implications underlying Isabel's narrative, he simply dismisses her attempts by accusing her of performing a "twisting [of] the facts" (Barak, 37).

The internal acts of self-reflexiveness that vertebrate the novel point to what Linda Hutcheon has defined as "the postmodern paradox of anti-totalizing totalization in resolutely non-American novels such as *Midnight's Children*, *The Name of the Rose*, or *The White Hotel*, novels which structurally both install and subvert the teleology, closure and causality of narrative, both historical and fictive" (62). *The House on the Lagoon* could be, in this regard, closely connected with the narratives singularised by Hutcheon. History becomes in all of them an acknowledged artefact to be manipulated with all legitimacy and contrasted with versions of different and divergent nature. Ferré, on the other hand, does not necessarily privilege or identify with Isabel's visions. In fact, in different occasions the reader is witness to the doubtful ethics and arguments held by the protagonist. What is more, both Quintín and Isabel's ideological postures are depicted in the novel as generally unsatisfactory, and the characters that

⁷ Julie Barak also offers an alternative interpretation of the dualistic play of voices between Quintín and Isabel by considering that just the latter is to be read as author of the both versions presented in the novel, "Isabel unravels her own narrative technique by including such asides *inside* Quintín's sections" 933).

embodied them are destroyed or left stranded by their lack of awareness of the presence of the other within themselves. We can thus appreciate how Puerto Rican historical and social events appear before us as the result of postmodern provisionality and instability shaped through the partial opinions of its narrative figures that assume the task of recollecting the past and reconceptualising it into the present.

2. The relationship to class and dominance.

As Isabel and Quintín part ways over Puerto Rican historical and social concerns, the narrative lines bend toward a dynamics that help to transcend these particular issues and include them into larger problematic taxonomies concerning cultural and national identity. The palimpsestic array offered through the very materiality of the novel, it is also paralleled by the colluding historical versions of Isabel and Quintín. In this way, identity and ethnicity prove to be multifaceted constructions that lack a given or homogenous nomenclature.

As far as aspects of class and dominance are concerned, Isabel underlines the rigid structuring of ethnicity in the island and the equation of ethnical difference with social class. Thus, her family is subjected to an examination of the symbolic correlations between different ethnicities, their historically and socially assigned positions and the restraints imposed by this hierarchy of racial values in Puerto Rico twentieth century society. In *The House on the Lagoon* Rosario Ferré aims, resorting to postmodern ambivalence and self-reflexiveness, to transcend arbitrarily established discontinuities that has lead Puerto Rico higher social classes to an acceptance of moral hypocrisy as a licit paradigm of social and political difference and exclusion. The fusion of diverse European and African lineages in this American context is allegorically illustrated by the increasing degree of *mestizo* unions in the various branches of Isabel and Quintín's families. By so doing, Ferré demonstrates the absurdity of establishing single and monolithic standards of *Puertoricanness* in a country where hybridity and foreign descent are rooted at the very base of Puerto Rican cultural and historical ethos. No one, then, could legitimately lay claim of social and political privilege on the basis of historical or racial priority.

Several are the positions linked with class that Isabel points out in her recount. The prevalent one is that embodied by her Spanish father in law, Mendizábal, and her husband, both representative of a class of business aristocrats. They constantly emphasise the importance of the Spanish ethnical background in Puerto Rico highlighting its moral and ethic values, bravery, stoicism, patriotism, rigorous Catholicism and blood purity. Not naïvely these two characters are also depicted as passionate supporters of Puerto Rico statehood. The narrator satirises and despises this particular standpoint opposing the staticism and decadence ingrained in Spanish culture with the vital

performativity of Puerto Rican empowering plurality. Another similar viewpoint is that represented by the white Creole bourgeoisie of the island that tries to preserve its genealogical lines aseptically *unpolluted* from potential *mestizajes* through their obsessive attention to the so-called *Bloodline Books*. Statehood is also considered as a common aspiration for the members of this particular social group. Finally, Isabel ponderates another emergent stance to which she mainly identifies the female characters (regardless of their ethnicity) in the novel as well as herself. And this particular attitude represents a bent towards suppleness, acceptance, and even willingness to the transculturation of the diverse ethnicities of the island together with a longing for Puerto Rican independence. In this sense, Ferré both genders ethnical singularities and social concerns and the very narrating process that traces a pattern that attempts to surmount the traditional male hegemony over historiographic narratives.

Despite the seeming rigidity of these divergent positions and the stratification of class and power, Isabel persistently evidences the ironical ambiguities embedded in all of them. Thus, whereas Mendizábal proudly boasts about his Spanish genealogy as free of any Jewish or Moorish blood in it, he constantly seeks refuge into Petra's, the black servant, ailments and voodoo prayers. In her turn, her wife Rebeca, regardless of her progressist artistic and intellectual aspirations during her youth, becomes horrified when discovering that her son's girlfriend is a mulatta. And finally, Isabel shows how Quintín, an adherent to North-American values of freedom and democracy, can hardly avoid his resentment and rejection towards his mulatto own son product of his sexual encounter or rape with Carmelina Avilés, Petra's granddaughter.

Unfortunately, Ferré provides but a tenuous insight into the rest of social components of the island, and most specifically among lower classes. Thus, we do not really get a consistent image of the social or political concerns of Afro-Puerto Rican characters. Instead, apart from a rather sketched series of commonly held stereotypes such as sensuousness, ancestral rituals and beliefs and the spirit of fraternity among its members, in the end, we cannot discern if this essential part of the Puerto Rican community would ever play any role in a conscious construction of nationality and ethnicity. Just Carmelina embodies an element of hope for a dawn of new emancipatory expectatives for the most exploited sector of Puerto Rican society, black women, subjected to the double yoke of their race and gender.

As far as questions of dominance are concerned, as the novel opens up with the arrival of North-American political and propaganda forces, most of the comments on the political situation of the island are obviously focused on the US administration over Puerto Rico. Thus, Isabel satirises the exaltation and willingness of many Puerto Ricans to embrace traditional US values imposed through such diverse media as patriotism or mail-order shopping. More bitterly, Ferré deploys the argument that policies of black racial segregation was also a novel import coming from American racial prejudices towards the black

community, something that was alien to Puerto Rico before. Similarly, we witness some of the expedient measures of US leaders on the island, and how those Puerto Ricans under their orders can, as a result, become complicit with cruel repressions against their compatriots. Nevertheless, there is also an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of the fruitful flux initiated since then between the island and the mainland, and most specifically, in relation to education. Hence, most of the well-to-do characters in the novel have got their college degrees from North-American institutions. Equally, Carmelina just envisions an autonomous future for her in the US that she could barely achieve on her native island. But also characters such as Don Esteban Rosich embark on the opposite direction moving from the US to the benign atmosphere of the island.

3. The relationship to Old World [the United States] and History.

Up to this point I have already dealt with many aspects in the novel that, some way or another, are closely related with historical issues. Under this particular section I will attempt to further develop the analysis of Ferré's novel by focusing on some of the most prominent elements that make it pertinent in relation to this topic.

A relevant aspect is how the narrator makes her and her husband's families' function as microcosmic reflections of the wider Puerto Rican political and social situation. This strategy is not infrequent to many postmodern narratives, and most particularly to those produce in postcolonial contexts or those intended to (re)write them (*Midnight's Children*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). The individual and the collectivity, then, collude in a single maze that acknowledges the strong entanglements of these postcolonial populations with a context that as themselves has been estranged and appropriated from the outside.

In connection to this question we should acknowledge the metonymic association established between the symbol of the different houses erected in the novel, Isabel and Quintín's families and Puerto Rican evolving process of ethnical and national construction. Thus, the house built on the lagoon constitutes an amalgamation of American postcolonial, European Art Nouveau and Spanish colonial architectural styles, that is, art itself, as society stands in a *mestizo* hybrid pluralism against logocentric and monocultural discourses, crystallised representations of hegemonic cultures. The symbolic implications of the house can even be pushed further if taking into account that it has been built upon water, the fluid element par excellence, and that the departure of the black servants who occupied the very foundations of the construction, the cellar, causes the collapse of Mendizábal's heritage.

In connection to the relationship between Puerto Rico and the US, we can observe the difficulties encountered by Puerto Ricans to harmonise their

ambivalent national consciousness what can result in a *schizophrenic* splitting of identity (Baudrillard, Suzanne Bost, 2000). Thus, Puerto Rico could be simultaneously considered central and marginal as a marker of postmodern decentering suggesting the unstable relation of the subject to his/her own world. This fragmentation is revealed in *The House on the Lagoon* at the very core of Puerto Rican “moving between cultures” experience (2000) through characters such as Madeleine, Quintín’s mother, that unable to fit into the island society eventually opts for returning to the US, or through the bloody struggles among Puerto Ricans on determining the status of their island. As I have already mentioned, Isabel presents the pretensions of purity of Puerto Rican white high classes as ludicrous in view of the impossibility of disregarding the current mutual interdependence of the different ethnicities in this society. But, what attitude does the narrator adopt towards the ancient European metropolis and Africa?

Both continents are only recalled through the fictionalised memories handed down from the immigrant ancestors, Petra’s grandmother or Mendizábal, to their Puerto Rican born children. Through postmodern historiography *The House on The Lagoon* acquires history through remembrance, oblivion and imagination, process identified with the power of recollecting the past and the construction of the future. Then, Europe and Africa become no more than virtual sites of historical and personal empowerment as Africa for Petra or Spain for Mendizábal. But, on the whole, and most particularly as Europe is concerned, European characters are portrayed as decadent, insincere, morally corrupted or mimetic. For instance, the Check architect, Pavel is unable of creating original buildings of his own and he just imitates his master’s; the Russian ballet dancer and teacher, André Kerenski, gets sentimentally and professionally involved with one of her pupils paying no heed to the potential worth of better dancers. However, Isabel pronounces her more caustic critiques when referring to the husbands’ of Quintín’s two sisters, Patria and Libertad, viscounts from the Spanish royal Borbón dynasty. The indolence and idleness of their social class is reflected by their spending “most of their time in San Juan’s most exclusive boutiques, and charged everything to their father’s account” (252).

In short, the essential consequence of Rosario Ferré’s postmodernist discourse in *The House in the Lagoon* is social, historical as well as political. She foregrounds the fact that the primacy of hierarchies of values that privilege reality over invention, male perspectives over female, logocentric over peripheral voices could be overcome by a conscious act of postmodernist dismantling and reconstruction. This brings us to another relevant issue within the narrative, how Puerto Rico as an ethnical and cultural hybrid texture and physical and cultural border nation can develop itself into a textual forum in which Puerto Rico’s fate and the conflicting desires of its inhabitants are to be discussed. Thus, *The House on the Lagoon* integrates its characters’ scattered

identities, their experiences and discourses and, most importantly, it opposes them dialectically forcing, by so doing, a rethinking of Puerto Rican national and ethnical identities.

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