

ROSARIO FERRÉ'S *THE HOUSE ON THE LAGOON*: REPRESENTATIONS OF DOMINANT AND MARGINAL DISCOURSE

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The narrative voice of the protagonist, Isabel, in *The House on the Lagoon*, conceptualizes the ambivalent, fluid, and split Puerto Rican identity. Isabel represents the fragmented nationalism of a postcolonial commonwealth struggling with political and cultural ambiguity. Her retelling of the island's history provides an account of a nation that has never stood on its own. Born in Ponce, a town in the southern part of the island, Isabel's liberal discourse seems an appropriate and legitimate representation of the tension existing among the diverse citizens who call themselves Puerto Rican. In *The House on the Lagoon*, Rosario Ferré dismantles a dominant patriarchal society by allowing a "representative" voice to those who have been previously marginalized.

By the time Isabel marries Quintín, her bourgeois husband from San Juan, she is an orphan. The absence of parental authority places Isabel in what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call a "*non-place*" (Moreiras 35). She is a hybrid subject who oscillates between two worlds and is a part of neither. There is no place for Isabel; she is "both everywhere and nowhere" (Moreiras 35):

Being an orphan, on the other hand, and not having anyone but Quintín in the world was a point in my favor because it cast me in a vulnerable light. His parents could adopt me without reservation; I was to be a part of the Mendizabal clan and participate in all their activities. (Ferré 210)

Isabel's "adoption" by the Mendizabals is a symbol for Puerto Rico's attempt to unite and balance two cultures and two world views. This "in-betweenness" becomes Puerto Rico's only fixed identity.

Isabel's narration is unique due to Puerto Rico's free associated status with the United States. Her discourse represents the "structural doubleness" mentioned by Linda Hutcheon in "Circling the Down-

spout of Empire" (133). Her voice indicates "the paradoxical dualities of both post-modern critique and post-colonial double identity and history" (Hutcheon 133). First colonized by Spain, and later the United States, Puerto Rico's status is now that of a "commonwealth," which is a postmodern and postcolonial collage where an ambiguous past and present fuse into a pluralistic and indefinable national identity. The citizens were left in political limbo for 19 years between the Spanish-American War in 1898 and 1917 when the Jones Act signed by President Woodrow Wilson gave Puerto Ricans American citizenship. Quintín's grandfather, Arístides, is a symbol of U.S. domination in the island. He spoke perfect English at a time when hardly anyone in San Juan could speak English. His loyalty and pride in the United States were instilled in him by the American nuns who ran the school he attended: "The history of the United States was taught thoroughly at their school, yet Puerto Rican history was never mentioned. In the nun's view, the island *had* no history" (Ferré 91). Puerto Rico as a nation represents the history of the vanquished. Isabel tries to recover the past of a people that have ceased to have an identity.

Because of Puerto Rico's ambivalent status, Isabel's manuscript is socially, racially, and politically fragmented. Isabel faces the "transculturation" of her country as she attempts to rewrite history in the guise of hybridity under her own neoimperial voice. In *Between Two Waters*, Silvia Spitta defines "transculturation" as "the complex processes of adjustment and re-creation—cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal—that allow for new, vital, and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and the violence of colonial and neocolonial appropriations" (2). Yet, because hybridity today "has developed into a code word associated to a large extent with hegemonic politics" (Moreiras 289), then Isabel's manuscript is a "resurrection" of the same colonization she adamantly criticizes.

The notion of history's authenticity is perhaps the central theme of the novel. Isabel and Quintín get into continuous battles over Isabel's descriptions of their families. Memory becomes the weapon for crystallizing history because it allows the neocolonizer, now Isabel, to choose what to remember. The fact that Quintín believes that Isabel had "altered everything" and "was manipulating history for fiction's sake" (Ferre 71) suggests that not one, but both, have simply chosen what to remember and what to erase from their histories. Quintín represents the Eurocentric view of a dominant patriarchy. He is a byproduct of years of Spanish colonization followed by more than half a century of U.S. rule.¹ As Toral Aleman points out, Quintín

¹ "Quintín es heredero de esta tradición masculina de escritura (auto)

is heir to this masculine tradition of autobiographical writing identifying himself with Plutarch—for whom he has great admiration—and with the whole literary and cultural European tradition that includes historical figures like Alexander the Great (Toral Alemán 86). Quintín is unable to see beyond colonial representation. He firmly believes his wife “had unscrupulously plagiarized the historic material he had given her” (Ferre 72). Quintín doesn’t recognize that he constantly interrupts his wife’s work, discriminating against any other history that is not related to his ancestry.

Quintín’s comments on the margins of the manuscript suggest that history has been reinterpreted by the colonizer: “El habitante del Nuevo Mundo fue entonces reinterpretado o ‘releído’ por el discurso colonial donde el Otro racial y cultural es sinónimo de barbarie e inferioridad biológica y cultural” (Toral Alemán 87).² Quintín’s comments represent the notion that language does not automatically grant authority or authenticity for agency. Neither Quintín nor Isabel can represent the non-represented of their island’s history.

The irony is that Isabel fails to see she is inadvertently thinking like her husband, hence reinterpreting history. In “The Im/possibility of Politics: Subalternity, Modernity, Hegemony,” John Beverly notes that “one can derive the possibility of a new form of hegemony from the principle of multiculturalism” (57). Isabel negates “resentment of and resistance to inequality and discrimination as such” (Beverly 57), by failing to recognize her own limitations as a writer within the form of internal colonialism. Isabel is the voice of post-colonial guilt. In fear of Quintín, the symbol of America, Isabel feels guilty for what could have been as she struggles with the notion of Independence.

Isabel’s victimization as Quintín’s wife is a metaphor of the island’s commonwealth status. Isabel’s guilt is the guilt of all political parties, of a colonized island that does its best to create a national identity from a people without a history. Isabel’s trauma is in essence the “collective schizophrenia” (Ferré 359) of Puerto Rico’s political, cultural, and linguistic struggles:

The confusion as to whether we were Puerto Rican or American, whether we should speak English or Spanish, had gotten the better of us and turned our will to mush. That was why, when election time

biográfica identificándose con Plutarco —por quien siente gran admiración— y con toda una tradición literaria y cultural europea que incluye a figurás históricas como la del citado Alejandro Magno” (Toral Alemán 86).

² [The inhabitant of the new world was then reinterpreted or “reread” by the dominant colonial discourse where the racial and cultural Other is synonymous of barbaric, cultural, and biological inferiority] (Toral Aleman 87).

came around, half the country voted for statehood and half for commonwealth or independence—the country could not make up its mind what it wanted to be. (Ferré 360)

Instilled with pride and longing for autonomy, Isabel who is Puerto Rico in the way Quintín is the U.S., becomes complacent and passive with the advantages of the United States on the island. In “White Inuit Speaks: Contamination as Literary Strategy,” Diana Brydon notes, “in effect, then, ambivalence works to maintain the status quo” (137). The status quo will remain the same, a commonwealth status, until Puerto Rico decides what it wants to be. Isabel’s grey area is a fusion of polar binaries that are fluid themselves, hence, again, Puerto Rico’s commonwealth: “It would seem to suggest that action is futile; that individual value judgments are likely to cancel each other out; that one opinion is as good as another; that it would be futile and dishonest to choose one path above any other; that disinterested contemplation is superior to any attempt at action” (Brydon 137). Isabel’s views are ambivalent; she is the “politician” in limbo.

In her guilt, Isabel functions as the intermediary between the dominant and the marginalized cultures. From Ponce to San Juan, upper-middle class to elite, Isabel makes it possible to recount and understand the contradictions of her culture. Isabel is the *entre* mentioned by Derrida “that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (Bhabha 209). Homi Bhabha claims that a “Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (208). Isabel is that Third Space; she is the voice that differentiates and enunciates the Spanish, African, Indian, and American cultures that influence Puerto Rico.

Isabel’s unique hybridity allows for a double consciousness that permeates between the colonizer and the colonized. In her essay “The House on the Lagoon: Tensiones de un discurso de (re) composición de la identidad puertorriqueña a través de la historia y la lengua,” Irma López observes that Ferré expands the concept of interpretation:

El texto de Ferré, más que desechar o relegar la explicación masculina, amplía los márgenes de la problemática de la interpretación. ... La alternancia de dos voces y visiones distintas, pero justificadas desde la posición de quien las formula, manifiesta la continua consideración de la autora sobre el modo en que la historia ha sido y está siendo transmitida.³ (López 137)

³ Ferré’s text more than expels or relegates the masculine explanation; it amplifies the margins of the problematics of interpretation. ... The alternating of two voices and different visions, but justified from the position by which it is formulated, manifests

Though Isabel is the marginalized voice, she indulges in the advantages of San Juan's wealth, and as a result becomes aware of herself as an outsider in San Juan. Isabel is able to detach herself from biased notions defining race and social status. She has a special friendship with Petra that transcends the roles of master and servant. She is able to recognize Petra's contribution to the family: "I thanked Petra for everything she had done for us. Her name suited her well: Petra means rock, and for the many years I had known her, she had been the rock on which the house on the lagoon had stood" (Ferré 384). Petra is the loyal servant who keeps secrets and runs the house. She is the backbone of the family whose dedication and commitment get overlooked and unrecognized.

Petra Avilés is a symbol of a sect of the African diaspora that landed in the Caribbean. Petra, whose ancestors were brought to Puerto Rico as slaves from Angola, represents not only the image of slavery, but also the stratified racial and social structure that constitutes all of Latin America. She "couldn't understand why all the land on the island belonged to a few white *hacendados* dressed in white linen suits, with panama hats on their heads, when the rest of the population lived in abject poverty" (Ferré 59). Whereas Isabel's marriage represents U.S. control in Puerto Rico since 1952, Petra's relationship with Quintín represents Spain's rape of an enslaved culture for hundreds of years.

Abby is another hybrid character full of contradictions regarding identity politics. Abby claims she is an adamant *Independentista*, yet she also clung to the advantages of American influence on the island. The Sears catalogue suggests the unbreakable ties the island had already formed with the United States. Isabel recalls how wonderful it was to be able to order a Madame Alexander doll for Christmas, and how Abby "would read about the new revolving lawn sprinklers from Delaware, the pine-bark bird feeders from Maine, the redwood furniture from California..." (Ferre 182). Abby contradicts herself when she claims that Puerto Rico is "a different country from the United States, and asking to be admitted to the Union as a state wouldn't be fair to the U.S., or in the long run to us" (Ferré 183). At the same time, she cherishes "her American passport as if it were a jewel" (Ferré 183). Despite the technological advantages the commonwealth status brought the island, Abby remained firm with her *Independentista* ideals, because to her, commonwealth signifies floating in limbo. To homogenize the Caribbean as a whole places Puerto Rico in a historicized framework that is defined by a varied hegemony. Homi K. Bhabha suggests "we rethink our perspective on the identity of culture" and that "cultures are never unitary" (207). Puerto Rico is the

“in-between” United States and Latin America and its commonwealth status is what differentiates the island from other Spanish-speaking countries in the American hemisphere. *The House on the Lagoon* suggests that “many people believe that commonwealth is transitory” (Ferré 134) and that one day the island will have to choose between statehood and independence. Isabel states the polemics of Puerto Rico’s political status in this way:

The way I see it, our island is like a betrothed, always on the verge of marriage. If one day Puerto Rico becomes a state, it will have to accept English—the Language of her future husband—as its official language, not just because it’s the language of modernity and of progress but also because it’s the language of authority. If the island decides to remain single, on the other hand, it will probably mean backwardness and poverty. (Ferré 134)

The end of the novel suggests the road towards a revolution. Isabel finally emancipates from her husband, Quintín. Her escape symbolizes a racial and social emancipation of the oppressed under a dominant patriarchal society. The appearance of Manuel (Quintín’s son), with the AK 47 suggests the thirst for autonomy, nationality, and a cultural identity for Puerto Rico:

I left him there and quietly pushed out toward the lagoon. When I looked back at the shore, I could see the flames shooting out of the Art Nouveau windows. And there was Manuel standing guard on the golden terrace, machine gun at hip, watching the house on the lagoon burn to the ground. (Ferre 407)

The House on the Lagoon, Rosario Ferré’s first novel written in English, demonstrates the writer’s dual command of both English and Spanish. Isabel’s fluidity and ambivalence provide a closer look at the fusion of gender binaries and Puerto Rico’s hybridity in postcolonial times. Through Isabel, we immerse ourselves in the complexities of a beautiful culture that has struggled and continues to fight for the hope of one day having a national identity.

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the continuous consideration of the author about the way history has been and continues to be transmitted] (López 137).

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