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TRANSINSULAR

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# FAMILY MATTERS: REVISITING *LA GRAN FAMILIA PUERTORRIQUEÑA* IN THE WORKS OF ROSARIO FERRÉ AND JUDITH ORTÍZ COFER

Marisel Moreno

ABSTRACT

This essay argues for the recognition of a Puerto Rican 'transinsular' canon, one that reflects the transnational character of this population. I focus on key works by representative figures from each side of the divide, Rosario Ferré's *Maldito amor* and Judith Ortíz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*, in order to demonstrate how women's insular and stateside literatures are linked by their interrogation of the foundational myth of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*. My comparative approach aims to show that traditional criteria used to determine canonicity on the island has been rendered obsolete by the reality of transmigration. [Keywords: Puerto Rican literature, U.S. Puerto Rican literature, diaspora literature, Latina authors, canon, Rosario Ferré, Judith Ortiz Cofer]

*Hay muchos Puerto Ricos, unidos por una cinta de Moebius que entra y sale de nuestra variada conciencia nacional. El Puerto Rico del que se da testimonio en la literatura producida en la Isla es muy distinto del que se produce en el continente. Ninguno es más o menos auténtico; la combinación de los dos es lo importante, porque da la imagen completa de nuestro pueblo.*

—Rosario Ferré ("Mientras" 113)

"AT ITS INCEPTION NATIONAL CULTURE IS REALLY LITERARY in nature," asserts critic Gregory Jusdanis, reminding us that literary canons are a central instrument in the construction of the nation (1991: xi). Canonicity, or the process through which texts are classified as either dispensable or indispensable to the national project, has significant bearing on a work's ability to survive. In the case of Puerto Rican literature, the canon that was consolidated on the Island during the twentieth century reflected the Hispanophilia and patriarchal values that the cultural and political elites defended as cornerstones of the nation. Deployed against the perceived threat of American influence on the Island, the canon's symbolic role as national bulwark was geared toward generating a sense of unity among Puerto Ricans. The sense of consensus and cohesion generated by the canon, as Juan Gelpí asserts, was mainly achieved by privileging totalizing metaphors such as the family and the house (1993: 5).

The cultural myth of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, the great Puerto Rican family, thus emerged as a predominant narrative grounded on principles of exclusion. Women, blacks, and more recently, Puerto Rican migrants in the U.S., have all been marginalized and symbolically excluded from the national imaginary as a result of this myth. This essay examines selected narratives by two key Puerto Rican authors, Rosario Ferré and Judith Ortíz Cofer, who represent insular and diaspora literary traditions respectively. Situating Ferré's *Maldito amor* (1986) as a counterpoint to Ortíz Cofer's *Silent Dancing* (1990), we seek to demonstrate how these texts challenge hegemonic views of the nation, particularly through their interrogation of patriarchal cultural myths. Focusing on the critique that these narratives put forth of la gran familia, this essay demonstrates how the links between Puerto Rican women's literature in and outside the Island signal the existence of a Puerto Rican transinsular literary corpus. In order to better contextualize our analysis, we'll begin with a general discussion about the Puerto Rican canon, its relationship to the cultural myth of la gran familia, and possible strategies to move beyond the limitations inherent to the practice of canonicity, such as the recognition of what we call a Puerto Rican transinsular literature. In addition, this essay delves into the role that female authors on both sides have played in challenging their respective canons through feminist representations of the family/nation, a preoccupation that constitutes a sort of literary "contact zone," as exemplified in our analysis of *Maldito amor* and *Silent Dancing*.

**The Puerto Rican Canon and la gran familia puertorriqueña**

An analysis of the role that female authors on the Island and the U.S. mainland have played in the development of Puerto Rican literature must take into account how their works dialogue, question, and challenge the literary canon. Jusdanis reminds us that "The canon is a publicly available body of writing, representative of certain national and social interests," while anthologies are also "a valuable source for an inquiry into the canon" because they reflect "the canonical texts of a particular period" (Jusdanis 1991: 66). A case in point is Francisco Manrique Cabrera's *Historia de la literatura puertorriqueña* (1956), a text that for many years occupied a privileged status as the Island's official canon, and which symbolically played the role of national constitution, as critic Efraín Barradas suggests (2003: 30). In his illuminating study of Historia, he suggests that it was Cabrera's strong sense of *hispanismo*, which he shared with many of his contemporaries, what ultimately led to "unjust" silences and exclusions from his text (2003: 30). This sense of hispanismo that has prevailed throughout Puerto Rican literary history is firmly linked to the metanarrative of la gran familia puertorriqueña, as will be shown below.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE THAT FEMALE AUTHORS ON THE ISLAND AND THE U.S. MAINLAND HAVE PLAYED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE MUST TAKE INTO ACCOUNT HOW THEIR WORKS DIALOGUE, QUESTION, AND CHALLENGE THE LITERARY CANON.

The foundational myth of la gran familia puertorriqueña, deployed by the Generation of 1930 as a weapon against the threat of Americanization, emphasized the harmonious coexistence of different groups under a unified nation, the exaltation of the Island's past under Spanish rule, and the authority of a benevolent father figure who depended on the submissiveness of others to maintain his control. Frances Aparicio has observed that "the patriarchal icon of the gran familia puertorriqueña has emerged historically during times of crisis against the colonial presence of the United States. Puerto Rican bourgeois writers have invoked an ideal past that never truly materialized, by locating social harmony and *convivencia* within a specific historical time and space (Ponce, the haciendas, and pre-1898)" (1998: 6). The pivotal role this myth has played in the nation-building project of Island intellectuals is evinced in the degree to which it recurs in the works of canonical authors such as Tomás Blanco, Antonio S. Pedreira, and René Marqués, to name a few (1998: 6).

It was in the 1970s that the metanarrative of la gran familia was finally placed under scrutiny as marginalized segments of the population, such as women and homosexual authors, began to question its assumptions and to challenge the paternalistic canon (Gelpí 1993: 36).[1] Authors such as Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega, Magali García Ramis, Carmen Lugo Filippi, and Olga Nolla are some of the pioneer female authors who have systematically questioned both this foundational myth and the canonical works it inspired. By unveiling the national fictions it has produced, their works often propose a more complex and nuanced articulation of the nation-family.

IN FACT, THE RELATIVE INVISIBILITY OF U.S. PUERTO RICAN LITERARY PRODUCTION ON THE ISLAND SERVES AS PROOF THAT THE MYTH HAS PARTLY SUCCEEDED IN DELINEATING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE NATION BASED ON TERRITORIAL, LINGUISTIC, AND CULTURAL GROUNDS.

Because the myth of la gran familia was characterized by "Hispanophilia, anti-Americanism, racism, androcentrism, homophobia, and more recently xenophobia," and remained a cornerstone of Puerto Rican nationalist discourse throughout the twentieth century, it has led to the exclusion of minorities from the national fold (Duany 2002: 24). In the last few decades, the myth has been revitalized to exclude diasporic communities from the Island's national imaginary (Duany 2002; Aparicio 1998). In fact, the relative invisibility of U.S. Puerto Rican literary production on the Island serves as proof that the myth has partly succeeded in delineating the boundaries of the nation based on territorial, linguistic, and cultural grounds.

Jusdanis's (1991: 47) assertion that "language has been considered the expression of a nation's individuality" pertinently applies to the case of Puerto Rico, where the Island's colonial status has turned Spanish into a national bulwark against American cultural infiltration. The hispanismo that is at the core of Puerto Rican identity discourses has relied on linguistic nationalism as the main criteria behind the insular canon, and therefore has typically eschewed the literature written on the U.S. mainland.[2] Aparicio elucidates the role that hispanismo has played in Puerto Rican cultural politics when she states:

> **[. . .] the conflicting views currently voiced concerning Puerto Rican literature in the United States written in English and about the diaspora community that produces it are excellent examples of how this hispanophilia informs controversies around**

**Puerto Rican identity. The discourse of resistance against U.S. colonialism that has emerged on the Island has led, ironically, to a static, fixed, and preterite construct of puertorricanness that excludes and silences those "other" Puerto Ricans of the diaspora. (1998: 6)**

The exclusion of diaspora literature, mainly written in English or a mixture of Spanish and English, is a product of the strong association that exists between language, literature, and nation. The tenets behind canonicity on the Island, therefore, guarantee that only works in Spanish be recognized as "high" literature, while works written in English or Spanglish—typically viewed as culturally "corrupt"—are relegated to the category of "popular" literature. Since the very existence of high art is contingent upon the existence of popular art, as Jusdanis points out, the devaluation of the English-written diasporic corpus as "lesser than" insular works written in Spanish constitutes one of the mechanisms through which the elite sectors have defined the nation against the Other that the diasporic Puerto Rican represents (1991: 63).

NEVERTHELESS, WHILE NOT GARNERING THE SAME DEGREE OF ATTENTION AS OTHER MINORITY LITERATURES, U.S. LATINO/A WRITERS AND CRITICS HAVE RECOGNIZED THE PIONEERING ROLE THAT U.S. PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE HAS PLAYED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LATINO/A LITERATURE.

**The Other Side of the Family: U.S. Puerto Rican Literature**

Hispanismo has defined the linguistic and geographical contours of the national canon. Therefore, the literature produced by Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland has mostly remained outside the boundaries of the national.[3] However, the emergence of a solid literary and artistic tradition by Puerto Ricans outside the Island, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, has prompted the questioning and reconsideration of the official criteria behind canonicity. While Cabrera's *Historia* has been supplanted by more recent official literary histories, these tend to abide and to perpetuate the canonical principles (i.e., hispanismo) delineated in Cabrera's text (Barradas 2003: 24). For this reason, U.S. Puerto Rican literature—a corpus that falls

squarely within two literary traditions—remains marginal to both the Puerto Rican and the U.S. canons. On the one hand, the decades-old production of the diaspora is not typically viewed as part of the Island's national canon (Flores 2000; Duany 2002; Aparicio 2006; Acosta-Belén 2006).[4] And on the other hand, its classification as "minority" or "ethnic" literature has precluded its full incorporation into Anglo-American letters. This "uneven integration" into Anglo-American literature is evinced in the fact that, as Aparicio points out, it has "not achieved the visibility and recognition comparable to that of African-American or even Chicano/a literature in the U.S. context" (2006: 80).

Nevertheless, while not garnering the same degree of attention as other minority literatures, U.S. Latino/a writers and critics have recognized the pioneering role that U.S. Puerto Rican literature has played in the development of Latino/a literature. Foundational texts such as Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) and *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975), published by Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, are considered milestones of not only U.S. Puerto Rican, but of U.S. Latino/a literature as well (Kanellos 1997: 327). Moreover, the incorporation of U.S. Puerto Rican authors alongside Anglo-American canonical figures in U.S. anthologies signals an increasing, albeit limited, aperture toward the recognition of minority authors as part of the Anglo-American literary landscape. Gestures such as these, Aparicio reminds us, should not be undermined due to "their potential for transforming the literary canon" (2006: 81).[5]

Nations are fluid, and so are the canons that mirror them. This is becoming increasingly evident in the case of U.S. Puerto Rican literature, which has been traditionally denied entrance into the Island canon. Recently, scholars on both sides have engaged in symbolic and literary gestures that seek to lessen the distance between the two camps.[6] Although some progress has been made, the hurdles that remain to be overcome are proof that "literary canons can be revised, though not without a struggle" (Jusdanis 1991: 60).

Situated within the context of the controversy that surrounds Puerto Rican identity politics, this study proposes an alternate approach to the study of Puerto Rican literature inside and outside the Island. It seeks to transcend the boundaries that have traditionally defined the Puerto Rican canon in order to reflect the transnational character of this population. Pertinent to our discussion is Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton's definition of transnationalism as "the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement," which allows us to conceptualize the idea of a Puerto Rican nation and identity in broader terms (1998: 1). Jorge Duany's groundbreaking study *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move* advances this view in stating that, "as Puerto Ricans move back and forth between the two countries, territorially grounded definitions of national identity become less relevant, while transnational identities acquire greater prominence" (2002: 2). In fact, at a time when half of the Puerto Rican population resides in the continental U.S., it is imperative to recognize the key role that the diaspora plays in the construction of a Puerto Rican national imaginary (Duany 2002: 5).

The mobile livelihood of a number of Puerto Rican authors has destabilized the traditional criteria, such as language and location, used to distinguish insular from diaspora authors. The fact that a key figure such as poet Víctor Hernández Cruz now writes in English from the Island "is making Puerto Rican literatures on the Island and on the mainland less clearly differentiated while it also represents a challenge to

the traditional homologies between the Puerto Rican literary canon and the Spanish language" (Aparicio 2006: 79). Hernández Cruz, a central voice of the diaspora since the 1960s and 1970s, has published works in Spanish and English and now commutes between Morocco and Puerto Rico. Expanding the national canon in order to encompass works produced in and outside the Island—in Spanish, English, or Spanglish—would therefore serve to mirror the cultural transformations undergone by Puerto Rican society in the last century, as Hernández Cruz's case illustrates.

**Transinsular Literature and the Expansion of the Canon**

In examining key narratives by an Island-based and a U.S.-based female writer—Rosario Ferré's *Maldito amor* and Judith Ortíz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*—this essay challenges the tendency to separate these two branches of Puerto Rican literature based on their linguistic, formal, discursive, and thematic divergences, and instead seeks to highlight the connections that exist between them.[7] This type of comparative and transnational approach is modeled on what Aparicio deems "a greater need for transnational studies between what is Latin American and what is U.S. Latino" (2003: 17).[8] Identifying the links present in the narratives of women authors from both sides allows us to recognize these continuities as literary "contact zones," to borrow and expand on the concept coined by Mary Louise Pratt.[9] The existence of literary "contact zones" such as the presence of shared cultural myths, thus forces us to rethink the traditional division between insular and diaspora literature. Rather than focusing on maintaining monolithic definitions and static boundaries that presumably safeguard the so-called integrity and cohesion of each corpus, it is time to recognize these two bodies of literature as part and parcel of a transinsular Puerto Rican literary tradition. The notion of a transinsular literature, firmly grounded on the acknowledgement of existing literary "contact zones," implies a shift away from the Island-centered criteria (perhaps a vestige of the *insularismo* alluded to by Pedreira) that has traditionally defined Puerto Rican letters. Recognizing the need to incorporate the works of diaspora authors within a unifying transinsular corpus will allow us to transcend some of the anachronistic criteria that have failed to take into account the transnational reality of the Puerto Rican population.[10]

While the concept of a transinsular literature clearly challenges traditional conceptions of art on the Island, it also questions prevailing views among scholars of U.S. Puerto Rican letters regarding the positionality of insular vis-à-vis diaspora literature. On the one hand, the argument in favor of viewing diaspora literature as part and parcel of the Puerto Rican literary tradition has been put forth by critics such as Edna Acosta-Belén, who has argued for the need to revise the Puerto Rican canon (1992: 984). Similarly, Juan Flores and Efraín Barradas have proposed expanding the concept of "nation" in order to include the diaspora. Barradas emphasizes this point when he observes: "Esto me lleva a la tercera posición, la que defiendo y la que afirma que la literatura de los puertorriqueños en los Estados Unidos es parte integral, recalco, de la literatura puertorriqueña" (1998: 27).

On the other hand, there has been some degree of resistance among U.S.-based writers and critics to link diaspora production to the Island as a gesture of cultural affirmation. A telling example is the re-appropriation of the pejorative label "Nuyorican" by diaspora writers in the 1970s, which was "meant to differentiate those Puerto Ricans born or raised in the United States from those living in Puerto Rico" and was grounded in their "shared working-class realities

and experiences of poverty and racism" (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 2006: 192). This sense of distance between writers from both sides has also been echoed by pioneer female author Nicholasa Mohr, who, in her essay, "Puerto Rican Writers in the U.S., Puerto Rican Writers in Puerto Rico: A Separation Beyond Language," reacts against the rejection felt by diaspora writers at the hands of their counterparts on the Island. More recently, critic Lisa Sánchez González (2001: 20) dismisses the idea of "tethering Boricua literature to either 'Puerto Rico' or 'America' as an act of 'nationalist signification'" because this position fails to account for the "in-betweenness" that characterizes this corpus. Sánchez González convincingly states that forcing diaspora literature to fit within the parameters and ideological frameworks of either of these two canons potentially hinders our understanding of their hybrid nature.

THIS SENSE OF DISTANCE BETWEEN WRITERS FROM BOTH SIDES HAS ALSO BEEN ECHOED BY PIONEER FEMALE AUTHOR NICHOLASA MOHR, WHO, IN HER ESSAY, "PUERTO RICAN WRITERS IN THE U.S., PUERTO RICAN WRITERS IN PUERTO RICO: A SEPARATION BEYOND LANGUAGE," REACTS AGAINST THE REJECTION FELT BY DIASPORA WRITERS AT THE HANDS OF THEIR COUNTERPARTS ON THE ISLAND.

However, acknowledging the "in-betweenness" of diaspora literature *and* its continuity to both the Island and the U.S. literary traditions are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, recognizing the ties that bind these two branches of Puerto Rican literature, while acknowledging their individuality, does not imply that diaspora literature ought to be subsumed under the insular canon. Rather than debating whether it should be considered or not an "extension" of the insular corpus, the concept of a Puerto Rican transinsular literature implies the leveled and equal positionality of insular and diaspora letters.

**Contested Genealogies: Female Authors on the Island and the U.S. Mainland**

In his *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico*, Juan Gelpí decries one of the most blatant omissions that has prevailed throughout most of Puerto Rican literary history; that is, the systematic exclusion of women authors from the canon (1993: 3). This absence from official literary histories, a fate also shared by blacks and other minorities, is firmly cemented on the rhetoric of paternalism that envelops the cult of la gran familia. The subordinate position of women and children to a dominant father figure, a hierarchical structure that consolidated sexism as inherent to the character of the Puerto Rican nation, has thus been replicated in the terrain of culture. In other words, the silencing of women became pivotal to the defense of the nation among the white male elites, who condemned the more active role that women began to play in Puerto Rican society as a result of industrialization. Viewing these changes as another manifestation of American cultural infiltration, male authors in the 1940s and 1950s deployed the myth as a strategy of resistance against U.S. colonialism (Acosta Belén 1979: 94).[11]

The advent of feminist and Civil Rights movements in the U.S. mainland during the 1960s and 1970s had powerful repercussions on the Island, where young male and female writers openly began to question the androcentrism and racism behind la gran familia. This period marked the official entrance of women authors into the Puerto Rican literary landscape. Of particular importance was the periodical *Zona de carga y descarga* (1972–75) under the direction of Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla, which provided an alternative literary space for counter-canonical expression. The publication of *Zona*, along with Ferré's *Papeles de Pandora* (1976) and Magali García Ramis's *La familia de todos nosotros* (1976) marked the official entrance of female prose writers into the Island's literary circles, a trend that would reach unprecedented proportions in the following decades.

The 1980s and 1990s, in fact, witnessed a "boom" for Puerto Rican women writers. Authors such as Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega, Olga Nolla, Carmen Lugo Filippi, and Magali García Ramis, among others, published works that exemplified what came to be known as "nueva narrativa," a new direction in Puerto Rican letters that challenged the paternalistic canon by "reflecting on how larger discursive structures and cultural texts mediate gender, race, class, and ethnic identities" (Aparicio 1998: xvi).[12] In *Literatura y paternalismo*, Gelpí demonstrates how Ferré's and Vega's counter-canonical stance signaled a rupture with the paternalist tradition on the Island that solidified their location outside the canon (1993: 136). While their position as "outsiders" was accurate at that particular historical juncture, their present status as canonized figures is widely recognized (Aparicio 1998; Acosta-Belén 1986; Hernández 2007). The seemingly paradoxical inclusion of counter-canonical authors as part of the establishment, thus attests to the malleable and fluid texture of literary canons.

Perhaps no single Puerto Rican female author has tested the boundaries of the canon to the extent that Rosario Ferré has since her writing career began thirty years ago. For instance, in *Maldito amor* Ferré challenges and parodies the paternalistic canon through its systematic questioning of the myth of la gran familia puertorriqueña (Gelpí 1993: 157).[13] The novel's dismantling of most of the core tenets of this foundational myth—familial unity and racial harmony under a white/European benevolent father figure—allows it to be read as a counter-narrative to the Puerto Rican canon that challenges the paradigm of the nation-family. Moreover, her recent decision to write and publish novels in English, in an effort to reinvent herself "as a transnational writer in order to increase her Anglo audience," has

refueled the debate surrounding language and identity politics on the Island, where Spanish still embodies the essence of the nation (Aparicio 2006: 86). As a canonical author, Ferré's use of English hints at the possibility of a "bilingual" Puerto Rican canon. While it may be too early to measure the impact that her decision will have on Puerto Rican letters, the strong reaction it has provoked among critics on both sides—language purists on the Island and those who condemn her for trying to pass as a "Latina" author on the U.S. mainland—reminds us of how slippery the terrain of cultural identity can be for canonized and marginalized writers alike.[14]

FINDING THEMSELVES EXCLUDED BY BOTH THE ANGLO MIDDLE-CLASS FEMINISM AND THE MASCULINIST RHETORIC OF LATINO MOVEMENTS, U.S. PUERTO RICAN AND OTHER LATINA AUTHORS ASSUMED AN OPPOSITIONAL STANCE AGAINST THESE DISCOURSES.

The last two decades of the twentieth century marked the flourishing of Puerto Rican women's prose narrative, not only on the Island, but also in the diaspora, where several female authors gained recognition as key figures of the U.S. Puerto Rican and the U.S. Latina/o canons. Much like their counterparts on the Island, the Civil Rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s had a profound impact on female authors in the diaspora. Finding themselves excluded by both the Anglo middle-class feminism and the masculinist rhetoric of Latino movements, U.S. Puerto Rican and other Latina authors assumed an oppositional stance against these discourses. In doing so, they began "to forge and articulate a feminist consciousness and a collective sense of struggle based on their experiences as members of diverse individual nationalities, as well as on their collective panethnic and cross-border identities as Latinas and women of color" (Acosta-Belén and Bose 2000: 1114).

While U.S. Puerto Rican narrative reached a highpoint during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of social movements, most of this production was male-centered and perpetuated misogynist stereotypes of women.[15] The first female author to irrupt into the patriarchal U.S. Puerto Rican literary scene was Nicholasa Mohr, who in 1973 published her first novel *Nilda*. Mohr maintained an active publishing career throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the latter considered a pivotal decade for Latina literature,[16] yet it was not until the 1990s that a true explosion in U.S. Puerto Rican narrative took place. The works of figures such as Judith Ortíz Cofer, Esmeralda Santiago, Alba Ambert, and Aurora Levins Morales emerged as part of a "new

Latina narrative," to borrow the term from Ellen McCracken, which assumed an oppositional stance against the patriarchal Latino and U.S. Puerto Rican canons. Among these, perhaps Judith Ortíz Cofer has enjoyed wider visibility due to the recognition she has garnered as a poet within Anglo-American letters. *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* is Ortíz Cofer's first "creative non-fiction," a work that traces the development of an immigrant child as she travels back and forth between Puerto Rico and the continental U.S.

Our focus on Ferré's *Maldito amor* and Ortíz Cofer's *Silent Dancing* stems from various connections between the authors and these particular works. For instance, both Ferré and Ortíz Cofer represent two of the pioneer female voices to openly challenge the patriarchal canons of the Island and the diaspora, respectively. They also cultivated poetry early in their careers but have since then favored prose as their main means of expression. In addition, *Maldito amor* and *Silent Dancing* are the first "short novels"[17] by these authors, published during the "boom" of Puerto Rican women's narrative in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite formal and linguistic differences, both texts are structured around the metaphors of the house and family that destabilize hegemonic views of the nation, particularly through their interrogation of the myth of la gran familia puertorriqueña. By focusing on Ferré and Ortíz Cofer, this essay aims to provide a model for future comparative studies of insular and stateside Puerto Rican women authors, who according to Suzanne Bost "share a unique perspective on feminism that defines gender in terms of their decentered cultural experiences" (2000: 191).[18] As she puts it, "These writers all belong to the first generation of self-proclaimed "feminist" writers from Puerto Rico, emerging after the 1970s, and they cross an analysis of gender and sexuality with their analyses of nationality, race, and culture" (2000: 191).

### Ferré and Ortíz Cofer: Reimagining the Family

The myth of la gran familia puertorriqueña—the foundational nation-building narrative that has framed literary, social, cultural, and political Puerto Rican nationalist discourses throughout most of the twentieth century—represents a primary axis upon which Rosario Ferré's *Maldito amor* and Judith Ortíz Cofer's *Silent Dancing* develop their feminist constructions of the nation. Although the degree to which each text engages in a dialogue with the metanarrative of la gran familia varies, both works, consciously or unconsciously, question hegemonic constructions of the Puerto Rican nation that have been informed by this myth. The preoccupation that these two texts display with regard to the representation of the nation, each from an equally valid context and location, thus constitutes a crucial link between them.

While much has been written about the presence of the metanarrative of la gran familia in insular literary production, its effects on diaspora literature have yet to be scrutinized by scholars in the field. The lack of studies about how this myth is translated from the Island to the U.S. mainland could be partly explained by the tendency to separate these two branches of Puerto Rican literature. This has led some U.S.-based academics to reject insular-centered critical approaches to the study of U.S. Puerto Rican literature, while it has also led some Island-based critics to deny the connections between these two literary bodies.

The myth of la gran familia, however, has played a central role in U.S. Puerto Rican women's literature because it remained an anchoring device in the diaspora's collective imaginary. While the myth was mostly deployed on the Island by the Generation of 1930, it remained a key instrument in the advancement of insular

cultural nationalism for decades. For instance, Governor Luis Muñoz Marín's populist ideology was cemented on this image, as Gelpí suggests: "Desde su surgimiento hasta su avatar más reciente—el populismo desarrollista de los años cuarenta, cincuenta y sesenta—ese discurso ha tenido una metáfora privilegiada: la equiparación de Puerto Rico con una gran familia" (1993: 22). These decades coincide with Muñoz Marín's industrialization campaign, "Operation Bootstrap," and its cultural counterpart, "Operation Serenity." Arlene Dávila has noted that the latter "aimed to provide a sense of spiritual balance to a society threatened by the rapid social change caused by the new economic policies" and that it "marked an important moment in the development of Puerto Rico's cultural nationalism, involving a romanticization and purification of culture by reference to an idealized past" (1997: 34). It is this return to a glorified past which links this particular sociopolitical juncture with la gran familia in order to portray an image of national unity. Because the reactivation of this metanarrative overlaps with the Great Migration, a period during the 1950s when "the largest number of Puerto Ricans left the Island and settled in the United States," the myth remained a cornerstone of Puerto Rican identity in the diaspora, as the narratives of U.S. Puerto Rican authors illustrate (Torres-Padilla and Rivera 2008: 5).

*SILENT DANCING* DISMANTLES THE PATERNALISM UNDERLYING THE CORE TENETS OF UNITY AND RACIAL HARMONY UNDER A BENEVOLENT FATHER FIGURE, THUS OFFERING A COUNTER-NARRATIVE TO HEGEMONIC VIEWS OF THE NATION-FAMILY.

The translocation of la gran familia to the cultural and literary terrain of the diaspora is evident in Ortíz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*, where the portrayal of a divided family stands against the ideal paradigm of the national family. *Silent Dancing* dismantles the paternalism underlying the core tenets of unity and racial harmony under a benevolent father figure, thus offering a counter-narrative to hegemonic views of the nation-family. In contrast to Ferré's *Maldito amor*, however, the geographical, linguistic, and cultural fissures the family experiences as a result of migration further complicate territorially and linguistically grounded views of the nation. In the end, the presence of the Island as a cultural point of reference, along with the pivotal role of the metaphorical nation-family in Ortíz Cofer's text, forces us to rethink how familial ties between the Island and the diaspora are asserted in many of the narratives by U.S. Puerto Rican women authors.

The rejection that many Puerto Rican migrants and those born or raised on the U.S. mainland have experienced when they return to the Island speaks about the cultural distance between these two segments of the Puerto Rican population. As pointed out at the beginning of this essay, the exclusion of diaspora Puerto Ricans from the Island's collective imaginary is mainly a result of the linguistic nationalism that prevails on the Island. Because the myth of la gran familia is deeply rooted in hispanismo, those segments of the population that do not fit under this model tend to be excluded from the nation-family and viewed as "inauthentic" Puerto Ricans.

THE PREVALENCE OF THE TROPE OF "FAMILY" IN THE SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES OF U.S. PUERTO RICAN WOMEN AUTHORS, SUCH AS *SILENT DANCING*, SEEMS TO CHALLENGE THE EXCLUSION OF THE DIASPORIC SUBJECT BY SYMBOLICALLY REINSERTING HERSELF WITHIN THE PUERTO RICAN FAMILY.

Those in the diaspora, however, in many instances feel and see themselves as Puerto Ricans. Ortíz Cofer asserts, for instance, "I am not confused about my cultural identity. I know what I am because my *puertorricanness* was not awarded to me: it is part of me; it cannot be legislated out" (2000: 113). The prevalence of the trope of "family" in the semi-autobiographical narratives of U.S. Puerto Rican women authors, such as *Silent Dancing*, seems to challenge the exclusion of the diasporic subject by symbolically reinserting herself within the Puerto Rican family.[19] This sense of belonging is evident when Ortíz Cofer admits: "in my mind, I have never abandoned the Island of my birth, or perhaps that obsession called 'the Island' has never left me. It is the subject of much of my writing" (2000: 105).

The degree to which many of these narratives have been written from an Island-centered perspective, that is, the extent to which they focus on life on the Island and its history, indicates an impulse to retrace both family and diaspora roots back to their homeland. Suzanne Bost hints at this when she asserts that "the number of writers who affirm their ties to the island challenge any binary opposition between island and mainland (2000: 191). The central role that the Island and its history plays in *Silent Dancing* is explicitly revealed in the following segment, when

an adult narrator reflects on her yearly visits to her mother back on the Island: "I planned to request stories about the town and its old people, something we both enjoyed for different reasons: [My mother] likes recalling the old days, and I have an insatiable curiosity about the history and the people of the Island which have become prominent features in my work" (Ortíz Cofer 1990: 153). Consequently, the interest that this and other texts by U.S. Puerto Rican female authors display regarding Island history, myths, and culture has resulted in the recuperation of silenced chapters of Puerto Rican history (such as the history of migration), as well as the recovery of insular folklore that in some cases have been virtually erased from the Island's collective memory.

Gelpí's assertion that *la casa* represents the fundamental space of the great Puerto Rican family is reflected in the central role that it has traditionally played in Puerto Rican letters, especially in the works of female authors, who are contesting the patriarchal order that this location has come to symbolize.[20] While *Maldito amor* and *Silent Dancing* also focus on the role of the house, there are significant discrepancies in the way that each text depicts this space. These differences not only reflect socioeconomic divisions between these authors, but perhaps more importantly, they are indicative of the distinct way in which women authors on the Island and the diaspora have engaged in dialogue with their respective literary traditions in order to subvert symbols of patriarchal domination.

In *Maldito amor*, the De la Valle's family estate is a reminder of the superior economic and political position that the family has occupied in Guamaní. As epicenter of power, it serves to uphold the patriarchal values associated with la gran familia, and thus the nation. Life in the hacienda is depicted as oppressive for women since the beginning of the novel, when newly married doña Elvira is forced by her husband don Julio to a life of isolation, subservience, and domestic violence. This cycle of subordination will continue throughout the novel as other female characters, including doña Laura, are trapped in a life of physical and psychological confinement by the strict gender and class norms that dictate their place in society. As critics have pointed out, the last scene, where Gloria is about to set the De la Valle's house on fire after doña Laura's death, represents the symbolic destruction of the high bourgeoisie's patriarchal values associated with the nation-family.

The portrayal of la casa in *Silent Dancing* shares some connections with, but also differs from, the house/hacienda in Ferré's novel. The first chapter's title, "Casa," points to the role that the home plays as a space that defines the parameters of womanhood in traditional Puerto Rican society. The chapter's references to the kitchen and rockers, symbolic of women's prescribed roles as homemakers and mothers, further emphasize the expectation that women remain "inside" their private world, as in *Maldito amor*, while men's masculinity is expected to be cultivated and reinforced outside the home, in the public realm.

The association between home/feminine and street/masculine has contributed to the gendering of spaces, imbuing particular localities with specific meanings. For instance, the idea of "home" can connote various meanings that range from privacy and protection to confinement and submission. *Silent Dancing*, however, resignifies la casa by underscoring the potential function of this space as a source of female empowerment. The chapter's depiction of women relatives gathered for mid-afternoon coffee and storytelling speaks to the positive value ascribed to the home in this text:

**[. . .] we loved best the quiet hours in the afternoon when the men were still at work and the boys had gone to play serious basketball at the park. Then Mamá's house belonged only to us women. The aroma of coffee perking in the kitchen, the mesmerizing creaks and groans of the rockers, and the women telling their lives in *cuentos* are forever woven into the fabric of my imagination, braided like my hair that day I felt my grandmother's hands teaching me about strength, her voice convincing me of the power of story-telling. (Ortíz Cofer 1990: 19)**

The absence of men in the house during the workday renders it a feminine space, one characterized by warmth, love, and companionship, as opposed to the prestige, hatred, and violence associated with the De la Valle's house. The grandmother's house is where they listen to each other tell *cuentos*, "the morality and cautionary tales told by the women in [her] family for generations" (Ortíz Cofer 1990: 15).[21] It is within the backdrop of the house that women teach each other how to be strong and how to survive in a patriarchal world, subverting the stereotype of the submissive woman and rebelling against patriarchy through storytelling.

THE STRONG PRESENCE OF AN ISLAND-CENTERED IMAGINARY AMONG DIASPORA AUTHORS REPRESENTS AN AFFIRMATION OF THEIR CULTURAL BACKGROUND THAT FORCES US TO REASSESS THE 'AUTHENTIC' (ISLAND) / 'INAUTHENTIC' (U.S.-BASED) DICHOTOMY THAT HAS TRADITIONALLY DEFINED PUERTO RICAN LITERARY STUDIES.

One such story is the tale of María Sabida, which taught Ortíz Cofer "how to use the power of words to conquer her fears" (2000: 75). The act of narrating this story about female empowerment, however, has much broader implications in that it signals a desire to reconnect with the culture of origin. In telling the tale of Maria Sabida, which can be traced back to Puerto Rico's oral folklore at the turn of the century, Ortíz Cofer virtually rescues a piece of popular wisdom from oblivion.[22] This tale exemplifies the tendency among U.S. Puerto Rican female authors to delve into insular history, myths, and folklore as they examine their personal histories. The

strong presence of an Island-centered imaginary among diaspora authors represents an affirmation of their cultural background that forces us to reassess the 'authentic' (Island) / 'inauthentic' (U.S.-based) dichotomy that has traditionally defined Puerto Rican literary studies.

Another critique in which *Maldito amor* and *Silent Dancing* both engage revolves around the authority of the "benevolent" father figure upon which the myth of la gran familia has been built. In some cases, the texts offer negative portrayals of patriarchal figures that serve to highlight the violence inherent in structures of male domination. For instance in *Maldito amor*, the De la Valle's original patriarch, don Julio, is depicted as a violent and greedy man who controls his wife doña Elvira through physical abuse. In a telling scene, after doña Elvira learns that a former slave of her father had lost his arm working at the sugar mill, she rebukes her husband's actions: "Si no puedes devolverle a ese hombre su brazo, al menos haz que por el resto de su vida se le pague una renta. Y añadió que el accidente había sido culpa suya, por dejar a Don Casildo, que era un hombre mayor, a cargo del funcionamiento de las masas" (Ferré 1994: 24). Don Julio's reaction to what he considered an affront on her part, reveals the verbal and physical violence to which his wife was subjected. As the narrator recounts, he screamed "[e]n esta casa las mujeres hablan cuando las gallinas mean, y te prohíbo que en adelante vuelvas a meter las narices en lo que no te importa. Y mientras seguía golpeándola a diestra y siniestra, aseguraba que tan negreros habían sido los De la Valle como el resto de los hacendados de la comarca (1994: 25). As a result, doña Elvira "se hundió en un silencio de niebla," from which she never managed to escape (1994: 25).

In other cases, Ferré and Ortíz Cofer question patriarchal authority by showing how female characters undermine that power in striving to rebel against dominant societal norms. Among the various examples of female rebellion against patriarchy in *Maldito amor*, doña Laura's refusal to have intercourse with her syphilitic husband don Ubaldino represents one of the most blatant challenges to patriarchal domination. Unlike doña Elvira, who silently endures her husband's physical abuse, doña Laura adopts a firm stance against a different kind of physical abuse, that is, the possibility of contracting syphilis from Don Ubaldino. As she explains:

> **Nos preparábamos ya Ubaldino y yo a enfrentarnos a una vejez relativamente serena, premio de una vida ordenada y sin sobresaltos, cuando hice un descubrimiento aterrador. En sus correrías políticas por la Capital, Ubaldino había contraído sífilis y yo, aterrada de que la espina dorsal se me desintegrara o el cuerpo se me brotara de pústulas, me negué a tener más relaciones sexuales con él. (Ferré 1994: 74)**

Doña Laura's decision not to have sexual relations with her husband constitutes an act of defiance against the expectation of female sexual submissiveness. Interestingly, repressed female sexuality, expected of "decent" women, and mostly constituted as an expression of women's oppression, here becomes the weapon of doña Laura's liberation. By denying her husband access to her body, she claims her right to live a healthy life. More importantly, however, her decision punishes her philandering husband by rejecting the double standard that privileges male sexuality in patriarchal Puerto Rican society.

*Silent Dancing* presents a parallel form of defiance when the narrator-protagonist tells the story of her grandmother, Mamá, in the chapter titled "More Room," which I have analyzed elsewhere. According to the narrator, Mamá's way of letting her

husband know that she was expecting was to ask him to build an additional room in the house. After having her eight child, and realizing that if she had any more children she would be "a chronically ill woman," she asked her husband to build another room (1990: 27). Once finished with what he thought would be yet another baby room, she told him "Good, it's for you" (1990: 28). Similar to doña Laura, Mamá challenges the ideal of submission, specifically sexual compliance that defines womanhood in patriarchal societies. The main difference, however, lies in the fact that Mamá continues to love her husband and sees her decision as a form of self-sacrifice for the sake of her family. While doña Laura and Mamá both claim the right to control their bodies in order to preserve their health, these women's experiences lead them to assume contrasting postures regarding their marriages.

The defiance of patriarchal authority takes multiple shapes in Ferré's and Ortíz Cofer's texts, where women are observed engaging in both major and minor acts of rebellion. Take for example doña Laura's testament in *Maldito amor*, a speech act that allows her to defy the patriarchal and Eurocentric social order that the De la Valle family represents. In this document, she overrides the authority of her husband don Ubaldino—embodied in his testament—by disowning her own children and designating her friend Gloria and her son Nicolasito as the legal heirs of Central Justicia. The symbolic erasure of don Ubaldino's will constitutes an affront to dominant society on several dimensions. First, doña Laura undermines patriarchal authority and disrupts its natural order by revoking her son Arístides's right to inherit the Central, and in turn, appointing a woman and a child as the new rightful owners. Second, designating Gloria as the Central's proprietor symbolically destabilizes class boundaries by placing a woman of lower social status at the center. And finally, and perhaps more importantly, Gloria's mulatto identity serves to destabilize the socio-racial order that privileges white/Eurocentric roots while denying or erasing African influences.

THE DEFIANCE OF PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY TAKES MULTIPLE SHAPES IN FERRÉ'S AND ORTÍZ COFER'S TEXTS, WHERE WOMEN ARE OBSERVED ENGAGING IN BOTH MAJOR AND MINOR ACTS OF REBELLION.

Doña Laura is aware that the execution of her testament would have the effect of distorting the paradigm of la gran familia by subverting the racial, class, and gender precepts upon which it stands. The bold statement doña Laura makes by naming Gloria her successor is further emphasized by the ambivalent position that the latter occupies within the family. The novel depicts Gloria as an object of desire for the three De la Valle men; she is Arístides's and possibly don Ubaldino's lover, as well as Nicolás's wife. She also plays a central role in

the family as don Ubaldino's caregiver, doña Laura's friend and confidant, and the mother of Nicolasito, the youngest heir to the family's fortune. Despite the multiple roles that Gloria plays in this context, she remains marginalized and is never fully accepted as an integral member of the family.

In contrast to doña Laura's blatant defiance of her late husband's last words, the mother of the narrator-protagonist in *Silent Dancing* tends to engage in minor, daily acts of defiance against her husband's authority. These are facilitated by his long absences due to his career in the U.S. Navy, which leads to the family's constant shuttling back-and-forth between Puerto Rico and New Jersey. The narrative emphasizes the toll that his absences take on his sense of control as head of the family. Despite the fact that his wife tends to subscribe to the ideal of the Puerto Rican submissive wife—she follows his decisions and fears his judgment—there are instances in the text that illustrate her defiance of his authority, particularly with regards to the defense of Puerto Rican cultural practices when they are in New Jersey.

For instance, his obsession to move the family out of the barrio leads the narrator-protagonist's father to forbid them "to form bonds with the place or with the people who lived there" (1990: 90). Because his obsession is to "assimilate," to become integrated in the Anglo-American community of Paterson, the father imposes a lifestyle of isolation on his family. One way in which the narrator's mother challenges his authority is by refusing to cook Puerto Rican dishes with food products that she is unable to read. Although her husband prefers that she go to the supermarket, she always opts to buy her ingredients at La Bodega, a small Puerto Rican grocery store. Their excursions to the store during weekdays, when her husband is away at the Navy Yard, constitute an act of defiance at multiple levels. As the narrator explains, "We would linger at La Bodega, for it was there that mother breathed best, taking in the familiar aromas of the foods she knew from Mamá's kitchen, and it was also there that she got to speak to the other women of El Building without violating outright Father's dictates against fraternizing with our neighbors" (1990: 91). Therefore, the act of cooking, typically associated with the realm of the feminine, is transformed into a weapon against both her husband's authority and the ideology of cultural assimilation that he represents. It is through these daily acts of rebellion that the narrator's mother exemplifies how women in patriarchal societies are not only victims, but constantly engage in strategies of defiance against the system of masculine domination.

In addition to unveiling the violence behind patriarchy and disclosing strategies of defiance against male authority, both *Maldito amor* and *Silent Dancing* question the myth of la gran familia by showing the multiple fissures that undermine its iconic image of unity and harmony. In Ferré's novel, racial, class, and political divisions among family members disrupt this image in order to illustrate how the Puerto Rican nation is divided along these lines. The novel challenges and parodies the symbolic white/Hispanic patriarchal figure that is at the center of la gran familia by casting doubt on don Ubaldino's and his family's claims to *limpieza de sangre* (bloodline purity). Despite the fact that don Hermenegildo's narrative emphasizes the family's European ancestry in tracing the roots of the town's hero, don Ubaldino, doña Laura's testimony later in the novel ultimately unveils the fiction behind his efforts to whiten the family. In contrast to don Hermenegildo's claim that don Ubaldino's father, don Julio, was "un español prestigioso" (1994: 19), at her deathbed doña Laura confesses what she had learned from Gloria. According to doña Laura,

**Doña Elvira, educada en París entre algodones de seda, se había enamorado de un negro. Era por eso, entonces me di cuenta, que mientras en la casa abundaban los retratos de Doña Elvira no había un solo óleo, silueta o daguerrotipo del pobre Don Julio. (1994: 75)**

Once doña Laura discloses the secret of don Julio's blackness, the source of the De la Valle's anxiety over their racial lineage becomes evident. Because his African descent is considered a threat to their legitimacy and power, particularly that of the town's "white" hero don Ubaldino, it needs to remain concealed. Don Ubaldino's and his aunts' anxiety over protecting the image of their family's Spanish roots is noticed by doña Laura, whom initially could not understand their obsession when she married don Ubaldino (1994: 71). Their preoccupation is evinced in a series of symbolic "erasures" of don Julio from the family genealogy. On the one hand, the conspicuous absence of images of don Julio around the house is emblematic of the family's effort to conceal their shame regarding the interracial relationship between (white) doña Elvira and (black) don Julio, as well as the subsequent embarrassment behind don Ubaldino's mixed racial heritage. On the other hand, and perhaps more significant, is the total removal of don Julio's name from the family pedigree, achieved through the substitution of "Font," his last name, by "De la Valle," his wife's maiden name. Ironically, the act of privileging the maternal over the paternal name as a way to safeguard the family's social status ultimately undermines their status. The artificial deletion of any traces of don Ubaldino's paternal genealogy in the end has the effect of "bastardizing" the family. In a traditional society such as Puerto Rico, where social legitimacy is maintained through patriarchal bloodlines, the paradoxical nature of this act bluntly exposes the racism that is at the core of Puerto Rican society's quest for whitening, or *blanqueamiento*.[23]

ALTHOUGH RACE ALSO SURFACES IN *SILENT DANCING* TO CALL INTO QUESTION THE IDEAL OF LA GRAN FAMILIA, IT DOES NOT PLAY SUCH A PROMINENT ROLE AS IN FERRÉ'S NOVEL.

Although race also surfaces in *Silent Dancing* to call into question the ideal of la gran familia, it does not play such a prominent role as in Ferré's novel. The first allusion to race emerges in regards to the distinct backgrounds of the narrator's parents. Describing their wedding picture she remarks: "His light brown curls frame his cherubic, well-scrubbed face; his pale, scholarly appearance contrasts with his bride's sultry beauty, dark skin and sensuous features" (1990: 38). Despite the fact that their families represent two opposite sides of the racial spectrum, the narrator admits that her mother was eventually "accepted by a good family of strict Spaniards

whose name was old and respected, though their fortune had been lost long before [the narrator's] birth" (1990: 18). Although her father's European background is mentioned just in passing, it is worth noting that it represents a key point of contact with *Maldito amor*, given that both texts evoke the anxiety of an already declining European elite who sought to protect itself by excluding the Other from the family.

The fact that her young mother has to be "accepted"—she does not naturally belong due to her racial difference—speaks to the taboo surrounding interracial relations in early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, also a central issue in Ferré's novel. Referring to the inverse situation in which a white woman establishes a relationship with a black man, Aparicio points out that "any sort of sexual intercourse between a 'proper' young lady and a man outside her class sector and racially darker is still taboo, for it supposedly disrupts the social order and the limpieza de sangre boundaries necessary to secure class stability" (1998: 57). Although this observation reflects the specific power differentials that emerge between white/female and black/male, such as Elvira and Julio's relationship, it nevertheless underscores the phobia that interracial mixing has traditionally provoked among the white, upper-class sectors of Puerto Rican society.

In contrast to the positive welcome the narrator's mother received, the story of her father's sister, Aunt Felícita, represents a more palpable example of the profound racial divisions that prevailed at the time. According to rumors the narrator-protagonist heard during her childhood, Aunt Felícita fell madly in love with a young black man when she was sixteen years old. When he approached her father to ask for his blessing, "the old man pulled out his machete and threatened to cut Felícita's suitor in half [. . .]. He then beat both his daughter and wife (for raising a slut), and put them under house-arrest" (1990: 43). The man's violent reaction to the young couple and to his wife underscores the threat that interracial mixing poses to a social order bounded by the codes of racial purity. As Ania Loomba explains,

> **The fear of cultural and racial pollution prompts the most hysterical dogmas about racial difference and sexual behaviours because it suggests the instability of 'race' as a category. Sexuality is thus a means for the maintenance or erosion of racial difference. Women on both sides of the colonial divide demarcate both the innermost sanctums of race, culture and nation, as well as the porous frontiers through which these are penetrated. (1998: 159)**

Felícita's defiance of racial and cultural norms thus marks her as a "porous frontier," the vehicle through which her family's *pureza de sangre* is eroded. Because her attraction for a black man is construed as sexual deviance (she's labeled as *puta*), it also reinforces the stereotype of sexual excess typically ascribed to blacks. The anxiety that this violent scene unveils not only questions the ideal of racial harmony embedded in la gran familia, but also serves to dismantle the benevolent father figure that lies at the center of this foundational myth.

While Felícita's story exposes the violence hidden under the guise of paternalism, her story also reveals how blacks and women rebel against patriarchal authority. As the narrator recounts, "The result of his actions was an elopement in which half the town collaborated, raising money for the star-crossed lovers and helping them secure transportation and airline tickets to New York. Felícita left one night and did not return for many years after her father's death" (1990: 43). The lovers' elopement, and the town's complicity, constitutes an act of defiance against a rigidly structured

system that has relied on violence to preserve white patriarchal authority. The lovers' move to New York is significant because, although it seems to gloss over the racial divisions and prejudice that also existed in the U.S. mainland, it suggests that distance from her father and her close-knit Puerto Rican rural community makes it possible for this interracial couple to survive.

The social taboo that their interracial relationship represents is evident in the aura of secrecy that surrounds Felícita's story, much like the silence that envelops don Julio's racial identity in *Maldito amor*. Similar to doña Laura, who remained unaware of the interracial relationship between doña Elvira and don Julio, the narrator-protagonist admits that she had to piece "[Felícita's] story together over the years" because it was not an open topic of discussion (1994: 42). While the silence regarding Felícita's past is a reflection of the race politics of the times, it can also be explained as a result of the shame that its possibly incestuous nature provoked. The text suggests that perhaps the young black man was also the son of Felícita's father, a Spaniard who always kept black mistresses and fathered numerous illegitimate children. In this way, his daughter's relationship not only threatened the family's pureza de sangre, but it also jeopardized its lineage due to its potentially incestuous nature. Regardless of the reasons behind his violent behavior, the fact remains that the father's actions unveil the racial fissures and the double standards of the times, thus undermining the myth of la gran familia.

FERRÉ'S FOCUS ON CLASS AND POLITICAL DIVISIONS AND ORTÍZ COFER'S EMPHASIS ON MIGRATION COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER TO SHOW THE PLURAL WAYS IN WHICH LA GRAN FAMILIA ALWAYS WAS, AND BECAME INCREASINGLY DIVIDED THROUGHOUT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

The aura of unity and harmony that allegedly characterized la gran familia has been systematically questioned in the revisionist works of writers and historians beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. Renowned historian Fernando Picó, for instance, states that the profound divisions that characterized the Island's social fabric at the end of the nineteenth century prevented the articulation of a uniform society, contrary to the claims of the Island's intellectual and political elite (1988: 203). Internal fissures within the family went beyond issues of race, as

*Maldito amor* and *Silent Dancing* demonstrate. Ferré's focus on class and political divisions and Ortíz Cofer's emphasis on migration complement each other to show the plural ways in which la gran familia always was, and became increasingly divided throughout the twentieth century.

The central role that class plays as a mechanism of exclusion from la gran familia in *Maldito amor* is evident in the fact that doña Laura's middle-class background as the daughter of an immigrant merchant posits a challenge to her relationship with don Ubaldino. As she explains, "al enterarse de nuestro noviazgo Doña Emilia y Doña Estéfana se opusieron terminantemente a nuestro matrimonio, porque según ellas mis apellidos no eran lo suficientemente encumbrados para casarme con un De la Valle" (1994: 71). Because she is perceived as a threat to the family's prestige, she is never fully accepted by her husband's aunts, who were members of the landowning aristocracy. Ironically, it is precisely doña Laura's marginal position within the family that allows her to be critical and rebel against the hegemonic (pre-capitalist, Hispanophile, patriarchal, racist, and classist) order that the De la Valle clan symbolizes. For instance, she is the first to denounce the family's racism and to call attention to the reality of *mestizaje* that other members try to deny (Bustos Fernández 1994: 27). Her confession to don Hermenegildo regarding don Julio's African roots and her husband's mixed racial background constitutes a crucial way in which doña Laura challenges the De la Valle's legitimacy and privileged social status.

While critics have analyzed the impact of class and race on the structure of the family, particularly in relation to the characters of doña Laura and Gloria, respectively, the crucial intersection of race, gender, class, and politics, embodied in Gloria, has received less attention. It is no coincidence that Gloria is mostly defined by her sexuality, which mirrors traditional views of the *mulata* in Puerto Rican culture. Ferré, however, deploys the traditional stereotype of the hypersexual mulata[25] to emphasize the political divisions that undermine the image of la gran familia. It could be argued that Gloria's characterization as object of desire of all the De la Valle men functions as an allegory of how the Puerto Rican people—mostly lower/middle-class mestizo majority—has been courted by the three main political parties in their quest for power. She becomes the "prize" for which the De la Valle men must compete in order to prove their masculinity, and in that sense, her role is defined as the catalyst that sets in motion the power struggle waged between don Ubaldino, Nicolás, and Arístides.

In the novel, Gloria is originally defined as Arístides's lover, although readers later learn that she married Nicolás, the De la Valles's firstborn and future owner of Central Justicia. After Gloria becomes pregnant with Nicolasito, the text suggests that she was also don Ubaldino's lover and that the child could be his. The conflict that emerges regarding Gloria's ambiguous position within the family—always as object of desire—underscores the hatred that develops between the three men. As the narrative implies, Arístides's hatred for his brother Nicolás—certainly fueled by the latter's marriage to Gloria—leads him to assassinate his own brother by staging the airplane accident that takes Nicolás's life.

However, the love triangle that develops in the novel admits another reading: it signals Gloria's symbolic role as pawn of politics. For example, the struggle for Gloria unveils the political strife between the pro-statehood and pro-independence camps that Arístides and Nicolás represent, respectively. While Arístides learns English and embraces the capitalist way—underscored by his plan to sell the Central Justicia

to U.S. investors—Nicolás's anti-American stance echoes that of his father don Ubaldino, a representative of the *criollo* landowning elite.

The family's fragmentation along political lines mirrors the partisan divisions that emerged after the 1898 U.S. invasion and the ensuing Americanization and modernization campaigns. As a result of these historical events, the Puerto Rican nation became initially divided between those who favored and those who opposed U.S. control of the Island. Don Ubaldino, who belongs to the latter group, represents the oppositional landowning class, which sought to maintain its power in the midst of American domination. Don Ubaldino's refusal to sell his Central Justicia, the last criollo-owned sugar mill in Guamaní, symbolizes the landowning elite's futile struggle to retain their power amidst the structural transformations that followed the American invasion, and which threatened to collapse the semi-feudal agrarian system that was implemented under Spanish colonial rule.

BECAUSE THE TREATMENT OF MIGRATION AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS ON LA GRAN FAMILIA HAS REMAINED LIMITED IN THE PRODUCTION OF ISLAND AUTHORS, DIASPORA LITERATURE IS INDISPENSABLE TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THIS PHENOMENON.

The novel's portrayal of the various political postures that the members of the De la Valle family assume constitutes yet another dimension of the heterogeneity that the Generation of 1930 tried to conceal under the myth of the nation-family. *Maldito amor*'s closing scene, in which Gloria tears up doña Laura's testament and gets ready to set the De la Valle house on fire while don Hermenegildo and possibly Arístides are still inside, represents the final debunking of the foundational myth of la gran familia puertorriqueña. By rejecting doña Laura's last wish that she and Nicolasito inherit the family property, this act of agency allows Gloria to rebel against the hegemonic order and patriarchal structures that the De la Valle family, including doña Laura, comes to symbolize. Gloria's final act of incinerating the house thus symbolizes her rebellion and her need to destroy any traces of the white elite-controlled agrarian system that cemented her exclusion from the nation-family.

While race, class, and gender divisions are also integral to the portrayal of the Puerto Rican family in *Silent Dancing*, one of the most significant contributions of this text is to unveil yet another fracture within the family: the internal divisions caused by the diaspora. Because the treatment of migration and its repercussions on

la gran familia has remained limited in the production of Island authors, diaspora literature is indispensable to our understanding of this phenomenon. Ortíz Cofer's (semi-) autobiographical perspective in *Silent Dancing* offers a unique opportunity to delve into the phenomenon of return migration, recently foregrounded in Juan Flores's *The Diaspora Strikes Back:* Caribeño *Tales of Learning and Turning* (2009), and to examine how this experience provides an optic through which to gauge prevailing attitudes vis-à-vis migration on the Island.

Most U.S. Puerto Rican narratives by both male and female authors tend to expose the toll that migration takes on individuals, families, and society, while focusing on their experience outside the Island. More often than not, these works emphasize the everyday challenges faced by migrants in their effort to survive in their adopted society. While adapting to their new reality is typically portrayed as a confusing and painful process, in most cases, migration itself—the physical displacement from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland and/or vice versa—is not depicted as a recurring experience. In this sense, *Silent Dancing* offers a unique perspective not only of Puerto Rican migration, but also of return migration, a phenomenon that has not received enough critical attention among scholars of Puerto Rican studies until recently.

Delving deeper into this topic is of critical importance because as Flores asserts, "The drama of migratory 'counter-streams' and the life experience of migrants settling back or paying visits to their countries of origin and ancestral homelands is endemic to the contemporary period, and promises to grow in frequency and intensity in the foreseeable future" (2009: 33). Because the narrator-protagonist has to constantly renegotiate her identity as she moves back-and-forth between the Island and the U.S. mainland, her observations reveal the complex dynamics that have emerged between people on the Island and those in the diaspora in the decades following the Great Migration. Paradoxically, as her own experience shows, while the insular community has tended to emphasize the distance between them and their counterparts in the U.S. mainland, the latter has sought to reassert the bonds that tie them to their homeland.

THE IDENTITY CRISIS THAT ENSUES CRYSTALLIZES THE DILEMMA TYPICALLY FACED BY RETURN MIGRANTS UPON ENCOUNTERING LINGUISTIC PREJUDICE.

The role that language plays in *Silent Dancing* reflects its crucial significance as marker of cultural identity as conceived from an Island-centered perspective. The strong Hispanophilia that is at the center of nationalist discourses of identity has precluded the open acceptance of non-Spanish speaking individuals within the symbolic Puerto Rican family. The obstacle that linguistic nationalism poses as

"othering" device is evident in the anxiety that the narrator-protagonist experiences as she is constantly forced to master either Spanish or English every time she relocates between Puerto Rico and New Jersey. The identity crisis that ensues crystallizes the dilemma typically faced by return migrants upon encountering linguistic prejudice. As she explains, "As a Navy brat, shuttling between New Jersey and the pueblo, I was constantly made to feel like an oddball by my peers, who made fun of my two-way accent: a Spanish accent when I spoke English; and, when I spoke Spanish, I was told that I sounded like a 'Gringa.' Being the outsiders had already turned my brother and me into cultural chameleons [. . .]" (1990: 17). Language therefore represents a key cultural marker that triggers her exclusion from dominant society in each context. By signaling her "difference," the text underscores the linguistic, territorial, and cultural fissures that have divided Puerto Ricans as a result of the diaspora. In showing how the narrator asserts her Puerto Rican identity despite her accent, *Silent Dancing* unveils and questions the Hispanophilia behind la gran familia.

The narrator's own sense of displacement is a driving force throughout the text that propels her interest in exploring the idea of otherness, mainly through her interest in "all the eccentrics and 'crazies' of [the] pueblo" (1990: 17). As she explains, "Their weirdness was a measuring stick I used in my serious quest for a definition of 'normal'" (1990: 17). The presence of characters in the text that seem to exist in the fringes of society—María la Loca, María Sabida, Marina, Salvatore, and Providencia—attest to the protagonist's fascination with exploring otherness. While language is one of the main factors that make her feel like a "turista" in her homeland, her difference is also a product of their socioeconomic standing. Her unique situation is evident in the way she is treated by the teacher when she is back in Puerto Rico. According to the narrator,

> I soon found myself crowned "teacher's pet" without much effort on my part. I was a privileged child in her eyes simply because I lived in "Nueva York," and because my father was in the Navy. His name was an old one in our pueblo, associated with once-upon-a-time landed people and long-gone money. Status is judged by unique standards in a culture where, by definition, everyone is a second-class citizen. Remembrance of past glory is as good as titles and money. Old families living in decrepit old houses rank over factory workers living in modern comfort in cement houses—all the same. (1990: 56)

While the aura of "privilege" that envelops her and her father's family is partly explained by their upper-class origins—another link with the De la Valle's in *Maldito amor*—it is also a product of her experience as a migrant. The fact that migration is simultaneously perceived as an advantage and a disadvantage, as her experiences illustrate, speaks to the ambiguity surrounding the image of the returnee, who can face both admiration and resentment in the home country (Flores 2009: 164). The experiences of the narrator-protagonist in *Silent Dancing* illustrate the bi-directional cultural flows between home and host societies, both of which are integral elements of the Puerto Rican national imaginary. In the end, one of *Silent Dancing*'s major contributions is due to the fact that the narrator's unyielding sense of puertorriqueñidad provides insight into "a new or different way of being of that identity" that commonly emerges as a result of the return diaspora cycle (Flores 2009: 144).

**Conclusion**

Today, despite an active pattern of circular migration, many Puerto Ricans on the Island continue to see themselves as different from those who live in the diaspora. The separation between these communities is reflected in the way that their literatures are conceived of as distinct literary corpuses. While it is necessary to acknowledge the characteristics that define each of these literary bodies, it is also important to recognize the links that exist between them. The systematic undermining of these connections by Island-based intellectuals ultimately reinforces the perception of a separation between Puerto Ricans on both sides of the divide. The literary canon, therefore, has been a pivotal mechanism used to defend traditional views of the nation that rely on linguistic and territorial criteria to define Puerto Rican identity. This static view of the nation has promoted the symbolic exclusion of diasporic communities from the Island's collective imaginary. Given the transnational makeup of the Puerto Rican population, traditional views of the nation have been rendered obsolete. Now more than ever, it has become necessary to broaden the criteria used for canonicity and to recognize the emergence of a Puerto Rican transinsular literary tradition, one that equally values insular and diaspora literatures without subordinating one to the other.

THE NARRATIVE'S FOCUS ON DISPLACEMENT AND THE EMERGENCE OF A HYBRID PUERTO RICAN SELF ULTIMATELY SERVES TO DESTABILIZE STATIC CONCEPTS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY, THUS BROADENING THE DEFINITION OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE PUERTO RICAN.

Through an analysis of Rosario Ferré's *Maldito amor* and Judith Ortíz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*, this essay shows the links that can be found between the narratives of insular and mainland women authors, connections that allow us to speak of a Puerto Rican transinsular corpus. As this essay shows, the foundational myth of la gran familia puertorriqueña provides an axis for these authors' critiques of patriarchal views of the nation-family. *Maldito amor* directly engages with this national metanarrative and subverts the ideal of a unified family by showing how la gran familia is profoundly divided across racial, class, gender, and political lines. In addition, this text questions the benevolent father figure at the center of the myth by unveiling the role that violence plays in cementing his power.

*Silent Dancing* also engages in a dialogue with the myth of la gran familia and challenges some of its main precepts. Similar to *Maldito amor*, this semi-autobiographical text illustrates how issues of race, class, and gender affect the Puerto Rican nation-family. More importantly, perhaps, this text addresses how migration represents another dimension of the multi-layered ruptures that subvert the ideal of la gran familia. The narrative's focus on displacement and the emergence of a hybrid Puerto Rican self ultimately serves to destabilize static concepts of national identity, thus broadening the definition of what it means to be Puerto Rican. The narrator's focus on the family, the Island, and its collective myths and histories, underscores her desire to reclaim a space within the nation-family.

As Duany asserts, "In Puerto Rico and elsewhere, creative writers often set the broad parameters for the public debate on cultural identities" (2002: 21). Literature has been a powerful instrument for the construction of a hybrid diasporic Puerto Rican identity, but it has also demonstrated—at least in the case of women authors—that cultural myths continue to play an important role outside the Island. Literary canons can be a powerful mechanism of exclusion, as well as of inclusion. Rethinking the Puerto Rican canon in terms of its *transinsularity* will transform the traditional standards we have used to define, and thus delimit, the nation-family.

NOTES

1 In his groundbreaking study *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto* Rico, Juan Gelpí asserts that the omission of women writers from the Island's canon, with the exception of poet Julia de Burgos, is illustrative of the exclusion generated by the paternalism that characterized Puerto Rican literary history until the 1960s and 1970s (1993: 3).

2 Linguistic prejudice continues to be an obstacle for the acceptance of U.S. Puerto Rican literature on the Island, according to Duany, who claims that "even today many local scholars and creative writers deride Puerto Ricans in the diaspora because they cannot speak Spanish well or conduct themselves in a proper Puerto Rican fashion" (2002: 29).

3 Regarding Cabrera's posture in *Historia* vis-à-vis diaspora literature, Barradas explains: "Por ello en sus palabras se puede entrever una concepción de la literatura nacional que no daría cabida dentro del canon a una literatura puertorriqueña que no fuera la de la Isla. Para él la *Historia*… es para los puertorriqueños que están fuera de la Isla un recurso para curar la nostalgia por la patria perdida y sólo eso. Pero lo creado fuera de la Isla —productos que todavía no existían en números considerables, pero sí existía— no tendrá entrada al canon" (2003: 30).

4 Jorge Duany points out that the marginal status occupied by U.S. Puerto Rican literature on the Island is evident in the fact that "no Puerto Rican writer currently living in the United States and writing in English is now included in the Island's official curriculum at the elementary and high school levels. Very few are taught in elective courses at local universities. Neither Spanish nor English departments have made these authors required reading, largely because of their hybrid, bilingual writings" (2002: 30).

5 Pedro Pietri and Tato Laviera appeared in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Aparicio 2006: 81) and Judith Ortíz Cofer has been anthologized in *Norton* and *Oxford* (Kevane 2000: 115).

6 "Slowly but surely," states Duany, "Puerto Rican academics on the Island and the mainland have begun an important rapprochement based on mutual respect and tolerance" (2002: 31).

7 Acosta-Belén and Santiago explain that, "The demographic reality and the transnational commuting nature of Puerto Rican migration have helped lessen the sense of separation between Island and US Puerto Ricans, but there has been a propensity to focus on their differences rather than on the issues that might bring both communities closer together. One of the first sectors to point to the separation between these communities was the writers" (2006: 186).

8 There is a general lack of comparative studies between insular and diaspora Puerto Rican literatures. This essay follows on the footsteps of critics who have sought to bridge the schism between these two literary corpuses, including Fernández Olmos 1989–90), Aparicio (2006) and Bost (2000).

9 Mary Louise Pratt coined the term "contact zone" to refer to "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other" (1992: 6). More recently, critic Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (2000: 38) has utilized the term in her study to reflect on the postcolonial and neocolonial cultural exchanges that are taking place among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans throughout the Caribbean region and the continental U.S.

10 The concept of a transinsular literature is an umbrella term that encompasses both the literature produced on the Island and on the U.S. mainland, departing from the recognition of "contact zones" between them. Unlike Aparicio's notion of "transnational" texts, which she defines as "those that circulate across national borders, specifically between Puerto Rico and the United States," the concept of a transinsular literature does

not necessarily imply the bi-directional flow of these texts (2006: 83).

[11] For an analysis of the role and portrayal of women in Puerto Rican literature, consult Acosta-Belén (1979).

[12] Male authors such as Luis Rafael Sánchez, Manuel Ramos Otero, and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá are also central figures of the "nueva narrativa."

[13] Rosario Ferré's rupture with the paternalist canon is explained by Gelpí (1993).

[14] For a detailed analysis of the debate surrounding Ferré's use of English, please see Aparicio (2006).

[15] Some examples of these male-centered narratives are Piri Thomas's foundational novel *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Nicky Cruz's *Run Baby Run* (1968) and Edwin Torres's *Carlito's Way* (1975).

[16] See Ortega and Saporta Sternbach (1989).

[17] While *Maldito amor* has been described as both a short novel and a long story, *Silent Dancing* is technically considered a hybrid of genres that include story, essay, poetry, fiction and autobiography.

[18] To date, Bost (2000) remains one of the few studies to link and compare the literature of Puerto Rican women authors from the Island and the U.S. mainland. As previously noted, most critical and scholarly research has traditionally focused on either literary corpus and has seldom delved into the continuities that exist between them. One notable exception that points toward the possible reversal of this practice is the inclusion of a study about Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* in the most recently published critical anthology on U.S. Puerto Rican literature (see Torres-Padilla and Rivera 2008).

[19] While the central role of autobiography in U.S. Puerto Rican literature is beyond the scope of the present study, it is important to underscore its prevalence in the narratives of female authors. The preference for this genre signals a desire to assert their protagonists' Puerto Rican identity by cementing their experiences both on the Island and the diaspora.

[20] The metaphor of the house is present in a number of texts by Puerto Rican authors from both sides, for instance: Magali García Ramis's *Felices días, Tio Sergio* (1986), Ana Lydia Vega's "El baúl de Miss Florence" (1991), Olga Nolla's *El manuscrito de Miramar* (1998), Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* (1995) and *Eccentric Neighborhoods* (1998), Judith Ortíz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun* (1991), and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993), to name a few.

[21] Kevane and Heredia have stressed the role that storytelling has played as "one common technique that is shaping the form of contemporary Latina literature" (2000: 8). Because this oral tradition is "specifically tied to cultural heritage," it represents yet another strategy used by Latina authors, including U.S. Puerto Ricans, to assert their ties to their cultures of origin and thus claim their space within their respective "national families."

[22] Two versions of the tale of María Sabida appear in *Folklore Portorriqueño: cuentos y adivinanzas recogidos de la tradición oral* (1926) by Rafael Ramírez de Arellano, an Island intellectual who compiled volumes of Puerto Rican folktales, riddles, and songs, in an effort to preserve the Island's tradition. A more recent version of the story emerged in the summer of 2001, when New York-based Pregones Touring Puerto Rican Theatre performed the *Ballad of María Sabida*, an adaptation based on Ortíz Cofer's version of the tale. Although the implications of the tale's translocation from the literary to the theatrical realm have yet to be explored, the revival of this Island-based myth among communities in the diaspora forces us to rethink the role that U.S. Puerto Ricans are playing in the recuperation and perpetuation of insular folklore.

[23] *Maldito amor*, therefore, works as an allegory of the whitening campaign launched by

Puerto Rican intellectuals in the 1930s to define the nation. The novel not only provides an alternative black/African paternal figure, but also emphasizes the racist politics that underlie the discourse of intellectuals such as Tomás Blanco (*El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico*, 1942) and Antonio S. Pedreira (*Insularismo*, 1934), who claimed their authority as paternal figures of the nation.

24 In *Silent Dancing*, the mother's acceptance within her husband's Spanish family is partly explained by the fact that she married at an early age, while she was still "an unspotted lamb" and her innocence (i.e., virginity) was valued above her race.

25 The connection between blackness and sexuality is a widespread phenomenon according to Ania Loomba, who states: "The sexuality of black men and especially that of black women 'becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general.' Thus black women are constructed in terms of animals, lesbians and prostitutes; conversely the deviant sexuality of white women is understood by analogies with blackness" (1998: 160). Frances Aparicio explores the representation of these images in Puerto Rican music, where "the African-derived sensuality, dangerous promiscuity, and voluptuosity will characterize the discourse about the plena, about Afro-Puerto Rican music in general, and analogously, about the mulatta and black woman" (1998: 10).

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