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# Pandora's Log: Charting the Evolving Literary Project of Rosario Ferré

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## Pandora's Log: Charting the Evolving Literary Project of Rosario Ferré

In her essay "La cocina de la escritura," published in 1982, Rosario Ferré describes her authorial project, her literary influences and her motivations for writing fiction. As part of this short autobiographical essay, she discusses the moment she embarked upon her career as a writer and the way she selected her initial literary theme. In choosing the subject of her first story, Ferré decided that she would focus upon an episode from the Puerto Rican past:

Pensé que lo mejor sería escoger una anécdota histórica; algo relacionado, por ejemplo, a lo que significó para nuestra burguesía el cambio de una sociedad agraria, basada en el monocultivo de la caña, a una sociedad urbana o industrial; así como la pérdida de ciertos valores que aquel cambio había conllevado a comienzos de siglo: el abandono de la tierra; el olvido de un código de comportamiento patriarcal, basado en la explotación, pero también a veces en ciertos principios de ética y de caridad cristiana sustituidos por un nuevo código mercantil y utilitario que nos llegó del norte; el surgimiento de una nueva clase profesional, con sede en los pueblos, que muy pronto desplazó a la antigua oligarquía cañera como clase dirigente. (141)

Ferré situates this episode at the beginning of her fiction-writing career, marking out as an explicit project the depiction in her novels and short stories of a particular process in Puerto Rican history: the story of cultural and social transition brought about by the American occupation of the island and the shift of power from a rural aristocracy to an urban professional class. The "anécdota histórica" that embodies these ideas became, according to Ferré, her first story, "La muñeca menor," published in 1972, ten years before "La cocina de la escritura."

Before examining "La muñeca menor" and its relation to "La cocina de la escritura" it is important to situate the passage cited above in its context in the essay. The first section, in which the passage appears, discusses women writers, their relationship with language, and their access to and subversion of the privileged space of writing. Ferré

pinpoints "el día de mi debut como escritora" (139) as a moment in which her theoretical analyses of the theme of women's writing took on the added weight of personal meaning. Seated in front of her typewriter, she pondered the injunctions of Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf to women in general and to women writers in particular. Thus, having chosen her theme, "nada menos que el mundo," and her style, "nada menos que un lenguaje absolutamente neutro y ecuánime" (141), she decided that the ideal material for her entry into the literary realm was precisely that "anécdota histórica" described at length above. For Ferré in "La cocina de la escritura" history was intimately linked to the initiation of a theoretical literary project present even before the moment in which she sat down at her typewriter, fingers poised, and decided to write.

At this point in the essay, however, Ferré describes her remembered self as wordless, uninspired, stymied: "Pasó una hora, pasaron dos, pasaron tres, sin que una sola idea cruzara el horizonte pavorosamente límpido de mi mente" (142). Her authorial silence was due—she says—to her inability to select an appropriate anecdote. It was only several days later, while visiting an elderly aunt, that Ferré heard the story that she recognized as the embodiment of her "anécdota histórica" and that she transformed into "La muñeca menor." Her initiation into the realm of fiction was twofold: in the first stage she theorized about writing, determining her style, her theme and the type of story she wanted to write. In order to fulfill her plan, she had to pass through a second stage, in which she turned to a practice of fiction emblemized by her aunt and the tale she heard from her. Finally, when Ferré read the completed story, she found that "todos mis cuidados habían sido en vano" (143); that is, she had written with rage, not cool tranquillity, and of typically "feminine" themes such as love and revenge, not of themes that "transcend" gender differences. She cast the completed story aside. Nonetheless, while she indicates the ways in which her story did not fall within the parameters of subject and style established by de Beauvoir and Woolf, her choice of "genre," the now-famous "anécdota histórica," remained intact. In selecting a historical anecdote as her literary material, Ferré discovered the thread that led her through the labyrinth of the fiction-writing process and enabled her to write "La muñeca menor."



Born from the uneasy marriage between literary and philosophical theories about women's writing and a family history narrated by a woman, "La muñeca menor" contains a type of history that situates itself in contrast to traditional historical writing.<sup>1</sup> Ferré's historical project is embodied in a narrative depicting the women of an aristocratic family fallen upon hard times, making it a gendered history. In "La muñeca menor" the two female characters are the aunt and niece of the plantation-owning family; the men in the story are the doctor who intentionally fails to cure the aunt's prawn bite and his son—also a doctor—who marries the niece, takes her to live in the city and sells off her inheritance. Ferré shows the ways in which certain women are both victims and survivors of the change from one value system to another. "La muñeca menor" represents her attempt to rescue aristocratic women from the oblivion to which traditional historical accounts have consigned them and to detail their abuse by the greedy urban professional men who represent the "nuevo código mercantil y utilitario" imported from the United States. The younger doctor exploits the very class he is displacing for economic gain, using his wife's aristocratic status to win professional success: "el médico se hizo millonario. Se había quedado con toda la clientela del pueblo, a quienes no les importaba pagar honorarios exorbitantes para poder ver de cerca a un miembro legítimo de la extinta aristocracia cañera" (15). In the end his abuse causes his wife to turn into the object he has also wronged—the doll made by her aunt, whose eyes he has gouged out and from which prawns swarm to engulf him in the story's final frightening image. In this way both aunt and niece avenge themselves upon the doctors, father and son, who have professionally and figuratively mistreated them. The men work upon the women's bodies, refusing to cure the aunt's prawn bite, placing the niece on display in the balcony to impress potential clients, pulling out the doll's/niece's eyes; so it is with their bodies that the women strike back, using the doll/niece as the source of the frenzied prawns which overwhelm the younger doctor. The men's abuse of the women in their personal relationships is inseparable from their economic exploitation of them.

Issues of gender relations and class tensions are intimately connected in "La muñeca menor." Ferré's story is clearly an attempt to bring to the surface gender and class issues as she rewrites the history of an era in the recent Puerto Rican past. Ferré initiates her writing career

with a coherent project of writing a fictional history of Puerto Rico that intends to inscribe issues of class and gender relations within history, a project later made explicit in "La cocina de la escritura." In 1986 Ferré published her second collection, *Maldito amor*, which marks another stage in her project of history and history-writing.<sup>2</sup> *Maldito amor* is a collection of four stories, composing what Ferré consistently refers to as a novel. All four pieces treat different periods of Puerto Rican history: the turn of the century and the power transition from the sugar-cane aristocracy to a professional middle class in "Maldito amor"; the ascendance of the bourgeoisie in "El regalo"; the industrialization of Puerto Rico in "Isolda en el espejo"; and Ferré's imaginative creation of an alternative, futuristic Puerto Rico fragmented by the struggle for independence in "La extraña muerte del capitancito Candelario." If "La cocina de la escritura" represents Ferré's efforts to recuperate her literary past as one marked by a historicizing impulse, *Maldito amor* would seem to be that purposeful engagement with a project of historical rewriting manifested in literature. At the same time, however, Ferré now challenges that very project, her own intentions of rewriting history into and through literature. Ferré's critique of her earlier authorial project and of the attempt to create a unified historical narrative is most clearly evident in the title story, "Maldito amor."<sup>3</sup> The story undertakes the task of questioning the privileged nature of historical discourse and embarks upon a thorough interrogation of both traditional and contestatory history.

"Maldito amor" opens as an unidentified, abstract voice narrates the history of the region of Guamaní and describes the utopia that existed before the arrival of political and commercial interests from the United States. Later we realize that this reminiscing voice is that of Hermenegildo, the narrator and author of a history of the De la Valle family whose voice apparently dominates the discourse of "Maldito amor." Significantly, the sections which this omniscient voice narrates are inside quotation marks, indicating that they are excerpted from a larger historical tract. Hermenegildo's project aims to construct a totalizing discourse about the past that will both incorporate and sustain his nostalgic vision of the vanished paradise he depicts. As he tells us, "en el pasado los guamaneros nos sentíamos orgullosos de nuestro pueblo y de nuestro valle. . . . Los habitantes de Guamaní amábamos nuestro pueblo y lo considerábamos, con razón, el pueblo más hermoso del



mundo" (9). He goes on to describe the fecundity of the land and the deep sense of community among the *guamaneños*, explicitly calling Guamaní a paradise several times. His description of a lost utopia forms the background for the more specific history of the De la Valle family, which for Hermenegildo symbolizes the glory days of the Puerto Rican landed aristocracy. His history is a tribute to the man whom he calls "nuestro ilustre prócer" (28), Ubaldino De la Valle, who saves his ancestral sugar cane plantation, the Central Justicia, from takeover attempts by bankers from the United States.

But Hermenegildo's attempts to construct a coherent, totalizing historical discourse centering around the heroic figure of De la Valle and to inscribe his nostalgia into that historical project are shattered from within the text of "Maldito amor." Alternative and contradictory voices seek him out and present their disparate views on the history he is writing. The first of these voices is that of Titina, a long-time servant of the De la Valles, who visits him as he writes to confront him with the scandals of the De la Valles which he has hitherto repressed, excusing them by saying, "estos desgraciados sucesos es mejor perdonarlos, eclipsarlos con las relaciones edificantes de aquellos gestos de los que nuestros próceres también han sido capaces" (29). In this way we see that what lies at the heart of Hermenegildo's nostalgia—which in turn both enables and impels him to write his history—is a gesture of repression, an evasion of the facts, if not the truth. By visiting him unannounced in the privileged space of his study, by invading the very room where his writing takes place and shape, Titina forces him to acknowledge "los desgraciados sucesos" that lie at the heart of the supposedly utopian history he is recording. Her act reveals the ideological nature of this discourse by demonstrating another point of view that speaks against the history of a paradise and of the "ilustres próceres" who inhabit it.

As if this were not enough to disrupt Hermenegildo's writing, various De la Valles proceed to visit him, again in his study, and to present their versions of the series of events having to do with the struggle between Ubaldino's sons, Arístides and Nicolás, and the three men's relationships with Gloria Camprubí—a mulata variously described as Ubaldino's nurse, Arístides's lover, Nicolás's wife and widow, insane, saintly, pure and promiscuous. The events which take place in the Central Justicia are the source of controversy not only for the family members themselves but also for Hermenegildo, the involuntary historian

of these "desgraciados sucesos" which he would have preferred to ignore, and even for readers of the text of "Maldito amor," since we are confronted just as Hermenegildo is with the question of which version of this history we should believe. Hermenegildo is finally reduced to being nothing more than a scribe. He compiles the competing stories, listening in turn to Arístides and to Laura, Ubaldino's widow, and tries to continue writing his "own" history of the family; but their accounts insistently return to his narrative, breaking up his homogeneous discourse about the family with their troubled tales of the conflicts which arose in the past and which still afflict the family. Hermenegildo cannot escape from the ways in which their argumentative, conflicting narratives work their way into and take over his historical project. His own narrative becomes contaminated from within, in much the same way that his hero, Ubaldino, is finally revealed by his wife Laura to have suffered from syphilis. Like Ubaldino's body decaying in life, Hermenegildo's text displays the course of its own infection even as he attempts to write it and as we read the incomplete version of "Maldito amor." Hermenegildo never does finish writing the story of the De la Valles as he wanted to tell it; instead, his text becomes the repository for the different versions the family members give him about their relationships, tales which thoroughly contradict his own nostalgic history.

Gloria's account is the one that most effectively acts to disrupt traditional historical discourse. Unlike the other stories, hers is not directed to Hermenegildo but to Titina, the ex-slave; hence her text does not even manage the most minimal incorporation into "history" as we have seen Hermenegildo try to establish it. Instead, she and her story remain on the margins as an addendum to Hermenegildo's history—or sentimental novel, because, as Gloria sarcastically points out, he is notorious for "su augusto despacho repujado en cuero donde vive desde hace años encerrado, escribiendo novelas sentimentales sobre los hacendados arruinados" (75). If Gloria's narrative is tacked on to the end, however, that also leaves her with the last word, a "word" which, in the form of Laura's controversial will, she promptly proceeds to rip to shreds. Harking back to Hermenegildo's elegiac introduction, which praised the lost glories of Guamaní, Gloria rewrites his utopian history as the tortured history of an impoverished, oppressed peasantry, saying, "ese Guamaní arcádico que Don Hermenegildo tanto elogia en sus novelones románticos, no es otra cosa que un infierno" (78). Further-



more, while Hermenegildo read the heroic narrative of Ubaldino's rescue of the Central Justicia from a U.S. conglomerate as a nationalist gesture, Gloria points out that Ubaldino spent his time in the Puerto Rican Senate embellishing his speeches with flourishes of nationalist rhetoric but voting against legislation that would have improved the lives of his own sugar cane workers. Finally, Gloria burns down the site of the De la Valle history itself when she destroys the sugar cane plantation. Her story and actions constitute the final blow to Hermenegildo's totalizing pretensions.

At the end of the book Ferré inserts four endnotes which seem intended to provide a historical background for some of the events of "Maldito amor." Two of the footnotes deal with Puerto Ricans of the nineteenth-century whose works she cites: the Romantic poet José Gautier Benítez and the composer Juan Morel Campos. The third and fourth describe a series of laws enacted in Puerto Rico in 1941. The notes would appear to be a gesture towards the insertion of history into Ferré's literary discourse. They present themselves as explicitly factual—Ferré even refers the reader to further textual sources at the end of the notes. Nonetheless, this brief history lesson is both incomplete (inasmuch as she does not provide notes for all the authors she cites nor for all the historical events clearly alluded to in the text) and marginalized. The notes appear at the end of the book, not at the end of the story, and although they are numbered, those numbers are not attached to particular moments in the story; that is, no footnote call numbers appear within the text of "Maldito amor" itself. Therefore we cannot even know when we are meant to read them. The attempts to insert history into the text of "Maldito amor" once again remain unfinished and provisional, intentionally haphazard, in a contradictory gesture that recalls the story's critique of Hermenegildo's historicizing intentions.

Ferré works in "Maldito amor" to disrupt the presuppositions upon which traditional written history is based through the presentation of Hermenegildo's inadequate writings. His project, as we have seen, was to construct a totalizing vision of the Puerto Rican past based on nostalgia for a way of life that has disappeared. More important, however, is that this is a distorted yet clearly related version of the very project Ferré had marked out as her own in "La cocina de la escritura." In that essay Ferré herself turns to a particular historical period now lost—the transition from a society dominated by a rural, plantation-owning



aristocracy to one ruled by commercial, mercantile, middle-class professional interests—through which the heroines of “La muñeca menor” suffer. “La muñeca menor” is intended as a return to and as a rewriting of that pivotal moment, now including the voices which histories such as Hermenegildo’s had intentionally left out. Ferré tried to produce a literary historical writing that would supplement traditional histories, adding the suppressed stories of aristocratic women to conventional versions of Puerto Rican history in order to complete a history that had excluded them. But in “Maldito amor” Ferré consciously dismantles the historical project of supplementarity embarked upon in “La muñeca menor” and detailed explicitly in “La cocina de la escritura.” She indirectly critiques her own earlier project of recuperating lost histories through the addition of layers of stories, since in “Maldito amor” each additional story leads not to truth but to further confusion. By stressing the ways in which Hermenegildo’s apparently seamless history excludes the “desgraciados sucesos” mentioned earlier, and by showing how the addition of these alternative accounts leads to indeterminacy and dispersion, Ferré emphasizes the inevitable shortcomings of any historical writing that lays a claim to totality and truth. She uses Hermenegildo both to satirize a nostalgia for a vanished lifestyle and, more importantly, to show the inadequacy of historical discourses, whether conventional or contestatory, which have pretensions to representation and representability. Ferré’s writing in “Maldito amor” now rejects the impulse towards homogeneity and totalization in historical discourse by incorporating divergent, contradictory versions which thwart that impulse at its source. Her new writing is one which continually pulls itself to pieces, refusing to offer us the features that would allow us to read it as history, incessantly writing and rewriting itself to unravel itself and, ultimately, leaving us with nothing more than a tangled heap of threads of a historical narrative. “Maldito amor” is Ferré’s attempt to come to terms with the authorial project detailed in “La cocina de la escritura.” While that essay established that project as being based on history, “Maldito amor” explicitly problematizes the viability of historical writing—even contestatory historical writing—as long as it is founded on the illusion of historical reconstitution.

Furthermore, if we take a closer look at “La cocina de la escritura,” we can see that even in that earlier text Ferré’s project of historical recuperation was already disassembling itself by raising questions

about the status of the "original" moment of Ferré's authorial project. In that essay Ferré proposes several versions of her "original" inspiration for writing and of the moment in which she began to write, privileged origins that are paradoxically put into question by their very multiplicity: there is her decision to obey the precepts set forth by Woolf and de Beauvoir, the point at which she defined herself as a feminist writer; there is her desire to expound upon such feminist themes through an "anécdota histórica" about Puerto Rican history, the point at which she defined herself as a Puerto Rican writer. But her efforts to put these dual self-definitions into play as she sat down at her typewriter resulted in literally nothing. Finally, there was her fateful visit to her aunt, who told her the notorious "anécdota histórica" which Ferré then shaped into "La muñeca menor." Moreover, Ferré's description of her initiation into the realm of literature ends not with her triumphant writing of "La muñeca menor," but with her discovery, upon rereading the story, that she has "betrayed" the ideals of feminism with which she embarked upon her authorial pursuit. Ferré's ambivalent reaction to the story displays the uneasy tension between two sets of motives—her desire to write as a feminist and her wish to write as a Puerto Rican author. At one moment the text fulfills Ferré's requirements, the next it falls far short of them, precisely because the avowed motivation for writing is always shifting. In fact, Ferré puts the story in a drawer after reading it; her failure to resolve the questions surrounding the story's origins and her reasons for writing it leads to her decision to lock the finished story away. Hence, her description of how she became a writer ends paradoxically in self-imposed silence. Through its search for the ever-changing origins of writing, "La cocina de la escritura" points towards its own failure even before Ferré embarks upon a conscious attempt in "Maldito amor" to critique her original historical project. The fact that "Maldito amor" is an effort to reexamine the question of the status of historical writing implies that Ferré came to see the problems inherent in the sort of recuperative project described in "La cocina de la escritura," and as a result engaged in a conscious critique of her previous literary production.

Where, then, does this leave Ferré's writing? To what type of literary ideology does she turn after having thoroughly debunked the project of historical recuperation through supplementarity—the addition of layers of alternative stories in order to achieve totality—which



she attempted to inscribe in "La muñeca menor"? How does she conceive her writing and her authorial persona at this juncture? A partial answer to some of these questions may be seen in her last published work, *Las dos Venecias*, which appeared in 1992. This is a hybrid work, mingling poetry, essays, short stories and autobiographical fragments. Having eradicated the possibility of a self-definition as a historical writer in "Maldito amor," Ferré moves away from that authorial project in *Las dos Venecias* and appears to turn towards the construction not so much of an authorial project but of an authorial persona.

Indeed, the first text in *Las dos Venecias* seems intended to work towards a recuperation of the self on Ferré's part. "Las dos Venecias" describes Ferré's mother as a woman torn by her husband from her paternal home and whose children inevitably desert her. Ferré in turn writes herself into this family history and into her mother's story by pointing out that she too left home, married and had children who also left her behind. She adds that her rescue from this sense of abandonment lay in her ability to write: "No fue hasta que comencé a escribir que aquel malestar comenzó a disiparse" (15). As a mother, her identity lies in her children; as a writer, her identity lies in her ability to manipulate words, to create and re-create voyages of abandonment and discovery. "Las dos Venecias" purports to be an autobiographical narrative about Ferré's childhood and her ambivalent relationship with her mother; but as we shall see below, other aspects of the book suggest that Ferré is actually problematizing the status of traditional autobiographical writing and the notion of the writer's self that such writing contains.

Although "Las dos Venecias" may invite its readers to take it at face value as Ferré's description of the differences between her mother's life and her own, later essays in the book demonstrate that Ferré is interested in voiding the conception of the self on which that comparison would be predicated. This awareness impels a return to and re-reading of the autobiographical stories in *Las dos Venecias*—the title piece and "Correspondencias"—in order to see Ferré's examination of the traditional subject of autobiography: the authorial self. As we shall see, Ferré begins the book with a text that masquerades as her autobiography, but which ultimately must be read as an effort to call into question the concept of the unitary self that sustains conventional autobiographical writing. The "autobiographical" stories indulge the expectations of the reader by claiming to put forth Ferré's life story and the true version



of her self, but by the end of the book Ferré has challenged those notions of autobiography and the authorial self to such an extent that "Las dos Venecias" and "Correspondencias" should be envisioned as efforts to put into play yet another in the series of authorial personas Ferré demonstrates throughout the book.

"Melografiadas," the section which concludes *Las dos Venecias*, contains several sections that perhaps constitute Ferré's most explicit comments on her theories of writing and her perception of herself as a writer. The entire section begins with four poems, one of which literally inscribes Ferré as a writer via the punning title, "Rosario de cuentos." Two short essays, "Epifanía del cuento" and "Recapitulaciones," both describe an author; in the former it is an abstract, anonymous "escritor," while in the latter it is Ferré's authorial self. In fact, the first paragraph of "Recapitulaciones" rewrites the beginning of "Epifanía del cuento," changing it from the third to the first person. "Epifanía del cuento" begins as follows:

El escritor escribe porque le tiene más miedo al silencio que a la palabra. Escribe porque nunca sabe lo que piensa hasta que lo escribe, hasta que formula su pensamiento en una secuencia ordenada sobre la página. En este sentido, puede decirse que la vida del escritor es una negación del postulado cartesiano "pienso, luego soy". El escritor dice, "escribo, luego pienso"; o mejor "no pienso, luego escribo". El día que deje de escribir el escritor dejará de pensar y repetirá con Vallejo, "Vámonos, pues, por eso, a comer yerba, carne de llanto, fruta de gemido, nuestra alma melancólica en conserva". (133)

The first paragraph of "Recapitulaciones" reads, in turn:

Escribo porque le tengo más miedo al silencio que a la palabra. Escribo porque nunca sé lo que pienso hasta que lo escribo, hasta que lo formulo en una secuencia ordenada sobre la página. En este sentido podría decir que mi vida ha sido una negación del postulado cartesiano "pienso, luego soy". Yo digo, "escribo, luego pienso"; o lo que quizá sea más cierto, "no pienso, luego escribo". El día que deje de escribir dejaré de pensar y diré con Vallejo: "Vámonos, pues, por eso, a comer yerba, carne de llanto, fruta de gemido, nuestra alma melancólica en conserva". (155)

"Recapitulaciones" repeats the first paragraph of "Epifanía del cuento," substituting the first person for the third. The alterations in the second

essay insert Ferré's "yo" directly into the text, turning her originally abstract statements about authorial motivations into apparently highly personal comments on her own literary career. As part of the process by which she transforms the generic "Epifanía del cuento" into what would seem to be a personal analysis of her writing in "Recapitulaciones," she shifts the emphasis of the second paragraph of the essay from the reception of fiction in "Epifanía del cuento" to her own motivation for producing it in "Recapitulaciones."

Nonetheless, Ferré does not use "Recapitulaciones" as a way to propose a theory of writing based merely on the personal. Her statements about her inner motivations, her anxieties, her insecurities and her fears may appear to point towards the traditional concept of the author as a subject inscribing her personality in and through her work. Yet given the specific form that those affirmations take, it is possible to read Ferré's declarations of authorial selfhood as ironic manipulations of a narrative "yo" whose referent remains in doubt. Throughout *Las dos Venecias* and particularly in "Melografiadas," Ferré tears apart the "yo" which narrates the autobiographies and essays through a series of displacements which create incessant doubles of the textual "yo." "Recapitulaciones" is in itself a doubled and doubling text, one which, as we saw, mirrors "Epifanía del cuento." When Ferré changes "el escritor" of "Epifanía del cuento" to "yo" in "Recapitulaciones," she does not so much affirm her personal right to the credo stated in those essays as she shows the mutability of linguistic markers of grammatical persons such as "yo" and "él." Ferré empties her "yo" of its traditional content as she demonstrates that the person narrating a text is potentially any voice and every voice. The "yo" of "Recapitulaciones" becomes detached from the conventional concept of the author's self, and the comments it makes about writing and authorship cannot be unproblematically attributed just to Ferré.

This process of destabilization of the "yo" occurs perhaps most notably in the piece which acts as an introduction to "Recapitulaciones," "La sombra y su eco." The very title alludes to the doubling of what is already a reflection, to secondary images that are never originary. "La sombra y su eco" begins with the narrator in front of a mirror, in conversation with an unnamed interlocutor who is pressing her to recount a dream. As the conversation unfolds, the narrator sees images from her past, scenes with her mother, taking place in the mirror. These scenes



are narrated in the present and future tenses, and the narrator expresses doubt as to whether she is seeing her mother or herself in the mirror. Her interlocutor, another doubling of the narrator, also questions the nature of the reflections, asking, "¿Será ella? ¿Estás absolutamente segura de que no eres tú?" (153). Finally, the narrator sees her image entering a church where her mother awaits, wearing a skirt that is "exactamente igual a mi falda, sólo que está inmóvil, tallada en mármol sobre la lápida. Me mira. Me mira como yo te miro" (154). Throughout the story the interlocutor urges, "cuéntame tu sueño" (151), but successfully elicits a response only with the variant, "cuéntame el enigma de tu sueño" (154), to which the narrator replies, "creo que ahora podré empezar a contarlo:" (154). The colon which ends the story leads to the first line of "Recapitulaciones" on the following page. In this way Ferré splits the narrator's "yo" between the shadow and the echo of the title, between the narrator and her reflection, between the reflected images of mother and daughter, between the daughter and the statue of her mother, and between the narrator and her interrogator. The fact that "La sombra y su eco" revisits the ground of "Las dos Venecias" and "Correspondencias" by describing the relationship between mother and daughter further emphasizes the problematic nature of the autobiographical modality used in the book. The story blurs the distinctions between the autobiographer and her subjects and reveals that "Las dos Venecias" and "Correspondencias" are never the purely autobiographical texts they claim to be.

These displacements of the narrative persona serve to introduce Ferré's statements about her writing in "Recapitulaciones" and to problematize them, as does the fact that "Recapitulaciones" is revealed to be one of the narrator's dreams as well as a distorted reflection of "Epifanía del cuento." Because the authorial self is continually fragmented by multiple doublings and displacements in "La sombra y su eco," the commentaries which that self makes in "Recapitulaciones" about her writing and her desire to be "autora de mi propia vida" acquire an ironic cast they would not otherwise have. Ferré's narrator may be the "autora de [su] propia vida," but the insistent doubling of the narrative self constantly puts into question the nature of that author and the constitution of that authorial voice as well as, indeed, the very notion of "one's own life." Ferré's claims to narrative authority destabi-



lize themselves because the "yo" attempting to make those claims is shown to be simultaneously multiple and contingent.

Ferré critiques the concept of the subjectivity of the author by on the one hand constructing an authorial self which claims to have access to authentic explanations for her writing and on the other hand consistently casting doubt upon the unity of that self. Women writers in particular have been called upon to explain their works by relating them to their own personalities and lives. Thus Ferré's efforts to dispel assumptions about the relationship of an authorial self to the texts which that self produces and by which it is produced are related to recent critical efforts to disrupt traditional notions about gendered autobiographical writing.<sup>4</sup> Working within a traditionally "female" genre of confessional writing, Ferré creates an authorial persona that pretends to be a representation of her self but that at the same time denies its own claims to a mimetic representation by questioning the assumptions upon which that self-portrayal is based. She answers conventional expectations about the creation of a female autobiographical self by offering her readers pieces that purport to be autobiographical and by making statements about her writing that relate it to her "propia vida" and to her psychological needs, saying, for example, "Escribo porque le tengo más miedo al silencio que a la palabra" (155). But any attempts to establish the unitary nature of the "yo" which narrates those statements are constantly thwarted by the doublings that that "yo" undergoes. It is a shadow and an echo, a disembodied voice evoking a dream. The "yo" in *Las dos Venecias* may be Ferré's authorial persona, but it is one that experiences a series of displacements and doublings until it is emptied of subjectivity and functions only as a vacant sign. She works against her own creation of an authorial self by pointing to the ways in which that self is a production of linguistic and literary devices. The assertions her literary "yo" makes about her life and writing are revealed to be narrative fragments with no more relation to a "true" self than the text-dependent voice which relates them.

Ferré's literary career began with the inscription in "La muñeca menor" of a gendered history based on class distinction, moved on to the recognition of the drawbacks inherent in any historical project which intends to lay claim to totality in "Maldito amor" and now in *Las dos Venecias* moves to represent a concept of the authorial self as sustained through a series of linguistic and textual manipulations. The texts in

*Las dos Venecias* call into question the statements they make about the status of her writing and her authorial self by putting into play a persona contradictorily characterized by its multiple doublings and displacements. Just as in "Maldito amor" Ferré denied the viability of historical writing, in *Las dos Venecias* she rejects the construction of an authoritative persona, leaving in its stead a dispersed, disjointed, shadowy "yo." In this, her latest conception of writing and authorship, Ferré offers her readers a series of fragments that continually work against the very assumptions about subjectivity that they pretend to advance.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Yvette López's article proved helpful in my examination of "La muñeca menor." Also useful are the essays by Carmen Vega Carney and María Inés Lagos-Pope as well as the bibliography compiled by Suzanne Steiner Hintz.

<sup>2</sup>In thinking about "Maldito amor," I have found useful the essay by María I. Acosta Cruz and the chapter on Ferré in Julio Ortega's book.

<sup>3</sup>This essay intends to trace the evolution of Ferré's literary project in her narrative works. It is possible to see the marks of this process in her works produced within other genres; however, undertaking an examination of Ferré's evolving literary project as it manifests itself in such works lies beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses strictly on her narrative production.

<sup>4</sup>Some critics who focus on the ways in which women autobiographers construct their textual selves as a response to and a critique of canonical autobiographical strategies are Sidonie Smith, Liz Stanley, Leigh Gilmore and Shari Benstock.

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