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# GOSSIP AND NATION IN ROSARIO FERRÉ'S *MALDITO AMOR*

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Rosario Ferré's 1986 novella *Maldito amor* has been widely interpreted as a feminist text. It is easy to see why: the novella, largely dominated by the florid account of Don Hermenegildo, a lawyer and historian who offers the "official" version of the De la Valle family's saga, ends with a radical act of subversion. Gloria, the family's long-suffering mulatto nurse, recounts a contradictory version of events as she goes about setting fire to the family's home, in the process destroying Hermenegildo's manuscripts and perhaps killing Hermenegildo himself. Gloria's narrative revisionism and her final act of arson have been read as a double blow against patriarchal master texts, and by extension against broader gender, class and race-based hierarchies. Marisel Moreno, for instance, describes Gloria's burning of the mill as representing "the final debunking" of Puerto Rico's foundational myth, an attempt to "rebel against the hegemonic order and patriarchal structures that the De la Valle family [...] comes to symbolize" (97). Gloria's and Hermenegildo's sparring accounts are thus conceived of in terms of an essential duality: one account triumphs over and replaces the other, in a narrative clash that reveals the contours of the power dynamics and tensions at play in Puerto Rican society.

Such readings, though valid and valuable, risk overlooking the refractory nature of *Maldito amor*, which advances not solely through the accounts of Hermenegildo and Gloria, but also through a plurality of other contradictory yet complementary tales told by various family members and associates. The text's narrative complexity can be understood, I suggest, by reading these diverging accounts as *gossip*, a practice that I take to be inherently and intimately concerned with revision and revelation or, one might say, with revision *through* revelation. All characters in *Maldito amor* reveal what they claim to be private truths about other characters; in so doing, they actively contradict the other characters' versions of events. One account does not simply substitute another, but rather, through gossip, establishes its place in a narrative lattice in which each character's account undermines and, crucially, is undermined by all others'. The driving force at work here is not simply a dismantling of master narratives, but rather an exploration of the essential precariousness of *all* narratives, carried out progressively but insistently via the gossip disclosed by all the characters, female and male alike.

This process is adversarial in nature: if, as Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat suggests, the De la Valle family members are engaged in a "perpetua guerra civil" (285), then gossip is their chief weapon. There is real power, both symbolic and practical, to the characters' words: by revealing what they know, or claim to know, about others, the characters of *Maldito amor* gain tangible advantages over one another, and not always in proportion to the agency and authority they might otherwise possess. Gossip in *Maldito amor* thus becomes a vital, desirable, and even necessary form of self-expression: a means of giving voice to one's own viewpoint, even, or especially, in the face of more securely established narratives. As such, gossip constitutes a potent leveling force and tool for dissent, allowing the challenging of narratives imposed by the powerful on the subordinated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In this, the novella is aligned with Raphael Dalleo's view of gossip as mediating a kind

Such readings of *Maldito amor* clearly resonate with feminist approaches to the text, and it is entirely fitting to read Ferré's deployment of gossip, a practice often seen as gendered, as a means of troubling master narratives, patriarchal or otherwise.<sup>2</sup> Still, *Maldito amor* goes further, using gossip as a means not just of questioning dominant narratives, but also of rendering a more fundamental epistemological uncertainty. Gossip promises new truths and the disruption of prior understandings; yet gossip is also partisan, inescapably (and often deliberately) colored and distorted by the perspectives it advances and the moral judgments it hands down. While gossip insists upon its own truthfulness, and demands credulousness of its audience, it cannot ultimately deliver the "real" or "true" insights that it promises. Instead of offering truth, it seduces its listener into complicity with the promise of the inside scoop, a promise that paradoxically gains power by leveraging the listener's presumed ignorance of the truth about the private lives of others. In this way, the text reminds its reader that both master narratives and the alternative tellings that strive to replace them are equally contingent: they cannot represent truth, just stand in its stead, and are therefore equally vulnerable to being displaced by new, more seductive perspectives.

Ferré's warning is particularly urgent, of course, in Puerto Rico, a nation perpetually on the brink of becoming whole, and yet unable for now, at least, to crystallize its different voices into a single coherent narrative regarding its national status and political identity. Indeed, there is no larger truth to be found in *Maldito amor*, no common narrative for the characters, in their fragmented perspectives and world-views, to share. In using the De la Valles as a metonym for the Puerto Rican *gran familia*, Ferré's gossip thus elaborates a failed epistemology of national significance. It stages, in other words, the failure, perhaps the *inevitable* failure, of Puerto Ricans to arrive at and agree upon a single common truth, and vividly renders an existential uncertainty that is both cause and symptom of the nation's inability to satisfactorily resolve its own status and identity.

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of "counterpublic" that allows the silenced or downtrodden to create a public sphere of their own.

<sup>2</sup>A preoccupation with gossip marks many of Ferré's other works, most clearly *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), in which the protagonist, Isabel, attempts to write her family's story, but in the process encounters layer upon layer of "gossip" and "malicious rumor." As in *Maldito amor*, gossip sparks a battle for narrative control: Isabel's words are read and corrected by her husband, Quintín, but her storytelling in turn serves as a mechanism for rebellion, denunciation, and finally emancipation. In *The Flight of the Swan* (2001), likewise, Ferré shows a metaphorical family unit, a Russian ballet troupe visiting Puerto Rico, torn apart by gossip. Masha, the narrator, states explicitly that she gained power through her insights into the private life of the troupe's leader: "I knew all of her secrets [...]. This knowledge gave me power, and the other dancers respected me for it," she insists (7). Ferré's short stories also explore the uses and risks of gossip: for instance, in "El collar de camándulas" the protagonist's erratic behavior is viewed in terms of the harm it could do to her husband's reputation (124). "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres," meanwhile, shows the degree to which women use gossip to mediate their relationships. Gossip also drives the plot of "La bella durmiente," in which a husband receives anonymous gossip about his wife along with the warning that "a una no le es suficiente ser decente, tiene ante todo que aparentarlo" (150). In "Isolda en el espejo," meanwhile, gossip becomes institutionalized: the wives of the town's bankers declare themselves to be "rectoras del decoro del pueblo" (191), and use gossip to enforce a "ley de la respetabilidad," and to financially and socially punish transgressors.

## Gossip and Power

Ferré conceived of *Maldito amor* as a tropical version of Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon*, a "película fabulosa," she told Walescka Pino-Ojeda, in which three accounts of a murder "cuentan lo mismo, pero desde un punto de vista completamente diferente y al final no se sabe quién tiene la razón" (82). Like *Rashomon*, the characters in Ferré's text tell and retell the same basic events, but with each version revising or casting doubt upon those that came before. Hermenegildo's account of the life of the De la Valle family patriarch, Ubaldino, is derailed by the entrance of the family housekeeper, Titina, who lets slip that the family killed Ubaldino's son, Nicolás, to keep him from giving away the family fortune. Next, Nicolás's younger brother, Arístides, tells Hermenegildo that Nicolás had been a homosexual forced into an unhappy marriage with Gloria; that he had been cuckolded both by Ubaldino and by Arístides himself; and that his death had been either a suicide, or an act of revenge by workmen subjected to his sexual advances. Arístides is followed by Laura, the wife of Don Ubaldino, who claims her purportedly chivalrous and aristocratic husband had actually been a syphilitic philanderer descended from a local black man, while Nicolás's marriage had been a sham, intended to shield Gloria from Arístides' lascivious advances. Finally, Gloria, one eye already on the gas-can, reveals that she and Nicolás had in fact been passionately in love; that Ubaldino's vaunted political career had been tainted by corruption; and that Nicolás's death was the result of either filicide or fratricide. Through this succession of contradictory accounts, Ferré said that she aimed to "producir lo que se llama un efecto dominó, en que la primera versión tumba la segunda y ésta a la tercera y al final no se puede determinar cuál ha sido la verdad porque todo termina en pregunta" (82). Just as in *Rashomon*, there is no overarching narrative authority, as it were, to determine for the reader the definitive version of events; besides a few basic facts, there is little upon which the characters agree.

As these tales unfold, it quickly becomes apparent that the text has strayed from the formal, hagiographic account intended by Don Hermenegildo, and has gone into a brash and scandalous realm more akin to a Latin American *telenovela* than to a fusty history book. Still, the action, with the possible exception of Gloria's final act of arson, takes place offstage, and is enacted through second- or third-hand retellings, rendered through multiple layers of prurient and obsessively detailed gossip about the lives of others. The tellers of these tales, moreover, are not content simply to describe a series of events; rather, they construct their stories according to the rhythms and cadences of gossip. Describing his brother, Arístides tells Hermenegildo that

debajo de su pose de redentor, de salvador magnánimo del pueblo, se ocultaba un bugarrón empedernido que, si bien por un lado le gustaba repartir tierras y regalarle casuchas a los pobres, por otro lado se acostaba con todos, fornicaba con todos: con los peones de corte y los del recogido, con los choferes de carro privado y los de carro público, con los horneros y los caldereros, con los mecánicos de grúa y los braceros de pala, cuanto hombre bien o mal parecido había en la Central vivía de rodillas frente a él. (150)

Arístides is not simply setting out the facts: he is thoroughly enjoying the act of telling them, and reveling in his ability to titillate his listener with specific and sordid details. In lingering on his brother's sexual transgressions, Arístides hews closely to the conventions of gossip. Gossip craves complicity, and through the juicy tidbits he offers, Arístides seeks not only to entertain and engage his listener, but also to seduce him into accepting the truthfulness of his version of events.

To the extent that Arístides succeeds, through gossip, in converting his listener into an accomplice or ally, he wins a narrative victory: in accepting Arístides' version of events, one

must necessarily reject other, contradictory accounts.<sup>3</sup> This is one of the key distinctions separating gossip from other forms of storytelling: it promises hidden truths about people that we believe we know—and each new “truth” comes at the expense of another view of them, of another version of events, of someone else’s story. What is more, the gossip that triumphs is not necessarily the most truthful, but rather the best-told, the most enticing. In this sense, the gossip staged in *Maldito amor* is not just revelatory, but also adversarial: the characters are well aware of the rival threads of gossip that swirl around them, to which Titina refers as “esa jauría de chismes que andan sueltos por el pueblo como perros realengos” (129), and explicitly attempt to grapple with, tame and control them, often through gossipy ad-hominem attacks on those who spread the tales. Talking about Gloria, Titina notes that “las malas lenguas la tienen pelada, y dicen que hasta está loca, y que es y que correntona con los hombres. Imagínese como nadie puede decir semejante cosa sobre la señora Gloria” (128). Hermenegildo, meanwhile, disparagingly notes that there have been rumors from unreliable sources, narrated “siempre por gente extraña y de poca confianza” (132), that have tainted the family’s reputation. Aristides, too, insists that “no será ella [Gloria] quien desate sobre el pueblo esa madeja de intrigas con que intenta hoy arruinarnos” (143).

This speaks, of course, to the source of gossip’s power: its ability to wreck reputations. The characters of *Maldito amor* are acutely aware of the image they present to the world, and acutely invest their energy in keeping their private transgressions out of the public sphere. Aristides, when the family’s good name is tarnished, dreams of “mudarme a vivir a la Capital, donde aún no hayan llegado noticias de nuestra deshonra y de nuestra vergüenza” (143). Laura, similarly, bemoans that early in her marriage she had been subjected to Ubaldino’s aunts’ never-ending gossip regarding “cuáles familias de Guamaní tenían raja y cuáles no” (169). She now counters the gossip by angrily telling Hermenegildo that the aunts’ own nephew was, in fact, a mulatto. Like Laura, all the characters seek to eradicate the gossip of others with new tales and to correct or negate threats to their reputation with gossip of their own. It is indicative of gossip’s place in the power dynamics of *Maldito amor*, too, that the characters generally prefer *not* to gossip. The information they share has long been known to them, but was hitherto kept private, in order to protect “nuestros apellidos” (142), Aristides claims, and surfaces only when the imminent death of Doña Laura threatens the characters’ individual interests. Gossip is ammunition, and characters use it sparingly, dipping into their stockpiled tales of private scandal only when it becomes necessary to counter threats or seize opportunities by unmasking or slandering one another.

The narrative clashes of the De la Valles do not, then, take place in a vacuum: rather, they have specific and significant consequences. Aristides’s lurid account of his brother’s sexual escapades is not simply backbiting, it is a calculated attempt to counter the suggestion that Nicolás was killed by his own family, with Aristides seeking to convince us instead that Nicolás’s insatiable sexual appetite led his abused employees to sabotage his airplane. This pattern, repeated throughout *Maldito amor* with gossip that initially seems trivial or merely titillating, proves to have far-reaching consequences. The revelation that Ubaldino’s father is black, for instance, is more than just a passing scandal: in hindsight, it explains why the family’s children were shunned by the local aristocracy and driven to socialize with American expatriates, thus paving the way for Americans to take over the family’s sugar mill. Similarly Titina’s gossip triggers Hermenegildo’s hunt for a will that promises to determine the mill’s future ownership, and sets off a chain of events that culminates with Gloria’s act of arson. Words, the novella

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<sup>3</sup>By violating his privacy and dragging his purported transgressions into the public sphere, Aristides also wins a more direct victory over his brother. There is an inherent power, beyond the shaping of narrative, in the revelation of things others would keep secret and in the exposure to scrutiny, moral judgment, and ridicule, of people’s private lives.

repeatedly demonstrates, have real power and real consequences; and in *Maldito amor* it is largely through gossip that such power is unleashed.

The power struggles thus staged and enacted through gossip often play out according to the gender dynamics noted in many critics' readings of Ferré's work. It is through gossip, after all, that the novel's female characters, most notably Gloria, but also Laura and arguably Titina, succeed in asserting their voices, their viewpoints, and their versions of the narrative.<sup>4</sup> This supports scholars' readings of *Maldito amor*, and Ferré's broader corpus, as mounting a strong feminist critique, one that, as Marisel Moreno asserts, "challenges and parodies the paternalistic canon" (83), and seeks to tear down patriarchal constructions of the Puerto Rican nation and its history.<sup>5</sup>

Read in this way, the gossip of *Maldito amor* can be seen as exemplifying what Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her pioneering study of the practice, calls "serious" gossip, a form, she posits, that "exists only as a function of intimacy", and "provides a resource for the subordinated ... a crucial means of self-expression, a crucial form of solidarity" (5). Such gossip is the mortar with which relationships are bound, the medium through which communication occurs and communities are constituted. Still, if the gossip deployed by Ferré's female characters is a resource for the subordinated, it is also remarkably similar to what Spacks terms "the worst kind of gossip," conniving and cynical sniping that "manifests interest in particulars but *not* in relationship: intimate information prized for its own sake, or for the power it provides," but which "does not serve the power of alliance" (43). Spacks reads gossip through a moral framework, and views these two forms as distinct; Ferré, however, has a more utilitarian conception of gossip as a complex and conflicted practice, capable of giving women a voice, but also, and often simultaneously, of serving to corrupt, to mislead, and to silence the voices of others.

Ferré's use of gossip can be read, then, as an aspect of the feminist thought that undoubtedly marks her novella, but such readings do not tell the whole story. Gossip, in *Maldito amor*, is not a fundamentally gendered practice: women may use gossip to assert their voice, but all the novella's characters gossip, men and women alike. The chatter of the housekeeper, Titina, is gossip in its purest and most conventionally feminine form; so too are the informal oral accounts of Gloria and Laura. But Arístides's sexual boasts and sniping at his debauched brother, though steeped in *machismo*, are equally recognizable as gossip. The same can be said of Hermenegildo's overwrought, faux-historical account, which is littered with asides about his subjects' private lives, up to and including accounts of their toilet habits: he notes of Ubaldino's

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<sup>4</sup>This use of gossip has been noted by other scholars. In an essay on Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison, Jane Lilienfeld states that gossip constitutes "an effective language for those who are silenced in the dominant culture," given that "Woolf believed that some white women's voices, often muffled in the family and by cultural practices and institutions, could through gossip break free of the control of official stories" (51).

<sup>5</sup>Lidia Santos, for instance, writes that Ferré's "novelas son una especie de reescritura del canon latinoamericano desde el punto de vista de la mujer" (955). Elsewhere, Cynthia Sloan develops Ferré's focus on "transgressing the phallogocentric perimeters of the dominant cultural constructions that have silenced women's voices" (35), while Elsa Pokorny discerns in Ferré's work an attempt to "deconstruct the mechanisms and myths of the dominant system, to appropriate the dominant voice to parody and undermine the epistemological foundations of phallogocen-trism" (76). Ferré tends to inflect her views on feminism with reflections on race and class: it is telling that *Maldito amor* gives space not just to Laura, the white matriarch, but also to Gloria, the mulatta nurse, and Titina, the black housekeeper. The overall effect, as Moreno notes, is not just to destabilize the patriarchy, but also to disrupt putative "familial unity and racial harmony" (83).

parents, for instance, that “las necesidades biológicas se hacían en una curiosa letrina aérea” (118). Gossip here is not, then, uniquely feminine, any more than it is uniquely oral or informal; the registers and rhetoric vary, but all the novella’s characters take pleasure in revealing personal details that others would prefer to keep private. Gossip thus emerges in the text as a truly democratic narrative form: men and women, rich and poor, white and black, are all equally “guilty” of gossiping. It is a practice available to and used by all, regardless of gender, race, or social class, to re-inscribe their stories and perspectives and, in the process, to seek to efface those of others.

Ferré’s conception of gossip as a narrative leveling process contrasts with the popular conception of the practice as “women’s talk,” the province of chattering housewives and servant-girls. It also goes beyond the position mapped out by Spacks, and largely followed by scholars such as Ned Schantz and Jane Lilienfeld, in which gossip is viewed as a practice that, though theoretically open to everyone, nonetheless remains heavily and perhaps inescapably gendered: “Women, even now, have more social freedom for such talk than men do—if only because several centuries’ stereotyping makes it seem ‘natural’ that they should band together to gossip,” Spacks writes (46). Indeed, she suggests, when we gossip, we gender ourselves: “Women or not, we have been lured into acting like the women of moralistic stereotypes: lured into the rewards and betrayals of speculative gossip” (169). Gossip itself may be open to anyone, she argues, but the weight of the practice’s cultural history makes an entirely gender-neutral reading unsustainable.

Ferré’s text clearly hints at the cultural stereotypes and gendered history of gossip; her depiction of Titina, especially, reflects the popular image of the female gossip. But by allowing gossip to seep into (or, more tellingly, to *emerge from*) the formal and masculine registers of Hermenegildo’s literary and historical account, and the forcefully macho speech of Aristides and Don Julio, Ferré challenges the notion that gossip is inevitably gendered. In this, *Maldito amor* aligns itself with Edgardo Cozarinsky, who in his 1973 essay “El relato indefendible” foreshadows Spacks’s later study of gossip, and offers a remarkable early rejection of the notion of gossip as a gendered practice. Studying the uses of gossip by Henry James, Jorge Luis Borges and Marcel Proust, Cozarinsky argues that while gossip has traditionally been perceived as a female practice, it is used, needed and even feared by all: an “actividad y lectura de un ocio que el hombre necesita y desprecia por necesitarlo, objeto de burla porque oscuramente es objeto de temor” (22). Similarly, in Ferré’s work, gossip is framed as something both disdainful and dangerous, to be kept at arm’s length, but also a tool used, by men and women alike, to unmask, reveal, denounce, reclaim or overpower. It is, after all, through gossip that the real action of *Maldito amor*, the struggle for narrative control, occurs.

Read in this way, the conflict between the male and female characters in *Maldito amor* is less sharply delineated than many scholars have assumed. The female interventions presented in the novella clearly do puncture and deflate the official, patriarchal account crafted by Hermenegildo, but the same might be said of Aristides’s attempt to correct the record regarding his brother’s private life, suggesting that such interventions are not necessarily based on gender alone. The female characters also compete with and undermine one another’s narratives just as much as they vie for narrative authority with Hermenegildo. Don Julio, for his part, seeks to silence his wife, Doña Elvira, by telling her that in their home, “las mujeres hablan cuando las gallinas mean” (121). He follows up his words with physical blows, but also with the humiliating reminder that “tan negreros habían sido los De la Valle como el resto de los hacendados de la comarca” (121), a slur that becomes gossip when recounted by Hermenegildo. The episode succeeds in forcing Elvira into a “foggy silence”, a sign that if gossip can be used to puncture patriarchal narratives, it can also be used to reassert and reinforce them. What ultimately emerges, then, is not simply a gendered dichotomy, but rather a more plural and atomized framework in which the characters are pitted one against the other. The unifying factor, it seems,

is not so much gender as it is the characters' abiding faith in gossip's power to reaffirm their stories and to reshape their lives.

### Gossip and Truth

This implies a significant break with what one might term the conventional reading of *Maldito amor*, which suggests that Gloria's incendiary final chapter, in supplanting Don Hermenegildo's narrative, describes the "actual" reality of the De la Valle family. Such a reading is both plausible and seductive: Gloria is, after all, in many ways the fulcrum upon which the entire family's saga turns, and by the time the novella concludes with her account, she has been alternately celebrated or maligned by most of the other characters. Having been used and abused throughout the preceding text, in the last chapter Gloria is finally no longer *acted upon*, but rather is granted the right to act for herself, and also to speak about her actions without Hermenegildo's mediation. It is almost with relief that the reader comes to accord to Gloria's testimony the weight of truth, and to accept it as the key to the puzzling contradictions that have preceded it.

This reading is one that Ferré's text seems actively to encourage. Consider, for instance, the handling of Hermenegildo's account in which he depicts the country's past according to Ferré's own characterization in her preface "Memorias de *Maldito amor*," as a "paraíso perdido, un mundo feudal y agrario, en el cual supuestamente no existían ni la injusticia ni el hambre" (112). This account, told by a man who is at once a lawyer, a historian, a biographer, and a journalist, represents four different facets of the "official" narrative of Puerto Rico's past. But the text repeatedly reveals gaps and obfuscations in Hermenegildo's version of events. He fails to mention, for example, that Don Julio Font is black, while consistently portraying him in a negative light. The reader can plausibly infer that he does so in a bid to mask his own racism. Similarly, Hermenegildo passes over Ubaldino's political transgressions, corruption, and philandering in silence, presumably in an attempt to protect his friend's good name. As the tale unfolds, however, the characters directly challenge Hermenegildo's authority. Laura warns, for instance, that a man could never understand her family's story. Finally, it falls to Gloria to offer a direct rebuttal and to expose what she claims to be the real Guamaní: "Ese Guamaní arcadio que Don Hermenegildo tanto elogia en sus novelones románticos, no es otra cosa que un infierno, y la mayoría de los guamaneños mueren como moscas de tuberculosis, de uncinariasis y de inanición" (181). Gloria's words are more grittily realistic in tone than Hermenegildo's romanticized telling; her act of arson might also lead the reader to assume that her anger is based on an honest grievance, for why else would she take such radical action?

The apparent privilege accorded to Gloria's account has led many critics to conclude that Gloria serves as a kind of authorial proxy, giving voice to Ferré's own views. Given Ferré's own feminism, it is likely true that it is with Gloria that her personal sympathies lie, and the same can be presumed of many of her readers. As Oralia Preble-Niemi notes, "each reader of the novella must make an individual decision about what the truth is in the various matters brought up by the dramatized narrators" (21), and amid the "polyphonic and heteroglossal" noise of *Maldito amor*, the reader will tend to trust the account of the character whose "class or ideological system more nearly conforms to his or her own" (21). But if such factors lend Gloria's account their weight and plausibility, they also serve to highlight its contingency. Gloria's account, for all its merits, derives its claim to truth-status not from any objective set of facts, but rather from a series of subjective judgments, and the potential congruence between her views and our own, or Ferré's, does not render those views necessarily more complete or truthful. No matter what the reader may think of her, Gloria has not nullified the other characters' accounts; she has simply communicated, like the other characters, her own unique and limited perspective, albeit in a



particularly dramatic way.

The reader should not be too quick to decide, then, that *Maldito amor*'s female voices offer the "true" version of the family's saga, or to read Gloria's words as somehow privileged or final. For one thing, as Paul Allatson notes, the story of the De la Valle family does not in fact end with *Maldito amor*—some family members reappear in other stories published alongside Ferré's novella, suggesting that the family narrative has survived Gloria's act of arson. Even the destruction of the sugar-mill is neither as dramatic an upheaval, nor as definitive a transfer of agency, as it might seem: Aristides has already decided to end the family's association with the property by selling it to the Americans. And while Ferré gives Gloria the last chance to shape the text's narrative, her final words are in fact adapted from the nineteenth-century Puerto Rican *danza* "Maldito amor," the same song crooned, in Hermenegildo's telling, by Ubaldino's mother two generations earlier. These borrowed words hint at Gloria's continuing entanglement in the family's tale, and suggest the impossibility of the clean break to which her narrative aspires.<sup>6</sup>

This is another reason to de-privilege Gloria's account and to view it as a commentary on, rather than a rupture with, the epistemological instability that has gone before. Gloria sees, more clearly than any other character, the fractures and contradictions which the De la Valles have hitherto concealed the past in order to uphold a sanitized version of the family narrative. By burning down the family home, she seeks to silence all those who, in speaking, have sought to establish the primacy of their own versions of events; in so doing, she hopes to establish her own version as the single definitive account.<sup>7</sup> But Gloria's violent actions are simply an amplification, an impassioned staging, of the same process found in every speaker's account: the drive to silence others and to assert the truth of their own viewpoint. Gloria's act of destruction, which affects not just the family home, but also the manuscripts in which Hermenegildo has recorded the family members' stories, is an attempt to impose a state of amnesia, to obliterate even the memory of the text's diverging accounts. Were Gloria's attempt to succeed, as George Handley notes, it would mean that Gloria's own "narrative would become History, a new master narrative" (76). This is the final victory that Gloria seeks; she fails to realize, however, that even if it were possible for her "ríos de bencina azul" to wash away the other characters and erase their accounts, then other alternative accounts, other gossip, would soon emerge to take their place. Simply asserting one narrative more forcefully or silencing conflicting voices more brutally, cannot confer the definitive epistemological closure that Gloria craves.

Read in this way, Gloria's actions can be seen as bringing to a head an epistemological anxiety that pervades the novella as a whole. The gossip that runs through *Maldito amor*, like all gossip, promises truth, and is explicitly concerned with asserting and elevating a particular account as the "true" version of events. As Laura declares at one point amidst her stories about her family, "lo único que quería era gritar, proclamar la verdad" (176). But in its very urgency,

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<sup>6</sup>María Inés Lagos discusses it in the following terms: "Pero si bien Gloria intenta acabar con el mundo del pasado precipitando el incendio y expresa su deseo de cambio alterando la letra de la canción que cantaba Elvira cuando se enamora de Julio Font, la canción—aunque modificándola—se sigue cantando, lo cual indica que ni el fuego puede borrar completamente la historia y la cultura de generaciones" (99).

<sup>7</sup>In this, she would be attempting a reversal of what is described in the influential essay "El país de cuatro pisos": "Si la sociedad puertorriqueña siempre ha sido una sociedad dividida en clases, y si, como afirmamos al principio, en toda sociedad dividida en clases coexisten dos culturas, la de los opresores y la de los oprimidos, y si lo que se conoce como 'cultura nacional' es generalmente la cultura de los opresores, entonces es forzoso reconocer que lo que en Puerto Rico siempre hemos entendido por 'cultura nacional' es la cultura producida por la clase de los hacendados y los profesionales" (18). Gloria's actions, here, would correspond to the attempt by the oppressed to impose their story, what González here refers to in terms of culture.

such an imperative betrays the fragility of its own promise, because the frantic pursuit of narrative primacy speaks to the multiplicity of “truths” that circulate, and the degree to which any given account’s popular acceptance is less a sign of its objective truth-status than of its teller’s victory in an ongoing battle for narrative control. Where each individual act of gossip promises the definitive inside scoop, taken in aggregate, the many conflicting tales of *Maldito amor* in fact throw into question the very possibility of definitive versions. As Julio Ortega writes, “la novela se borra a sí misma ... en un acto de radical negatividad” (91). As in *Rashomon*, there is no broader framework against which to evaluate the characters’ statements, nor direct access to the facts at hand; the reader is denied a simple way to determine what really happened. It is this double movement, promising truth while foregrounding the ultimate inaccessibility of such truth, that defines *Maldito amor*’s use of gossip.

The text’s foregrounding of the epistemological implications of gossip closely tracks Cozarinsky’s conception of gossip. Cozarinsky writes that “el chisme, ese relato que no osa decir su nombre, subvierte ante el narrador la ilusión realista, le descubre innumerables aspectos de una realidad que el hábito o la pereza habían dilapidado” (33). Cozarinsky’s premise is that gossip, even when ostensibly focused on trivial, everyday situations, serves to reveal or uncover new aspects of reality. By refracting a narrative into multiple parts and multiple perspectives, gossip allows texts to discover the plural realities masked, or rendered dilapidated, by our tiresome habit of perceiving reality as “una, precisa, tangible” (33).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is this very habit that the characters of *Maldito amor* seek to leverage in telling their tales: they count on our deep-seated desire for, or bias in favor of, a single coherent narrative, for it is this tendency that allows their own tales to supplant those of others, rather than simply being viewed as one viewpoint among many.

There are echoes here of the impetus that Cozarinsky traces in Proust’s work. For the French writer, Cozarinsky suggests, gossip proceeds “como las ciencias positivas en su combate por dominar los ‘datos’ y poseer una ‘verdad’” (24), that is, with nuggets of gossip serving as data points that Proust organizes into a coherent narrative. But there are alternative ways of conceiving of gossip, Cozarinsky notes. Henry James, by contrast, does not see knowledge acquired through gossip as necessarily cumulative; rather, Cozarinsky writes, James’s passion for gossip shapes and is shaped by his notion of the many-windowed “house of fiction” (29), the reader’s view of the landscape in which the house is set depends upon which window they look through, which is to say, whose viewpoint they follow. James’s works, Cozarinsky writes, are marked by a “centro ausente de la composición” (28), in that events cannot be directly accessed, but can only be seen obliquely through the idiosyncratic and fragmentary perspectives of the various characters.

Ferré’s characters in *Maldito amor* are like James’s, built around an absent center. The text refuses to intervene in their bickering by presenting stand-alone facts, nor does it rule on the truth-statuses of their conflicting accounts. But Ferré goes further than James. Those standing at the windows of James’s “house of fiction” might be presumed to make an honest, good-faith attempt to describe what they see outside; the discrepancies between their accounts primarily reflect the different frames through which they view the world. Ferré’s characters are similarly constrained by their varying viewpoints, by their failures of recollection, or by their naive

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<sup>8</sup>This is not the primary concern of Spacks’s study, and in this respect her views are not as fully developed as Cozarinsky’s. Still, Spacks notes that “much gossip delights by an aesthetic of surfaces. It dwells on specific personal particulars. People and their concerns preoccupy gossipers, by definition, but the special way in which they matter evolves from belief in the importance of the small particular” (15). In this, Spacks perhaps thinks of the kernel of information that hints at larger, hidden truths, the logical conclusion of which, one might argue, would be the shattering of Cozarinsky’s “ilusión realista.”

responses to what they see, but their accounts are also overtly adversarial, constructed in full awareness of the tales that came before and are underpinned by a self-serving calculation about how what they say will be perceived and used by others. James proposes the impossibility of reaching the truth; Ferré seems to agree, but adds that many speakers are not even trying to communicate the truth, and are instead lying or confabulating to suit their own prejudices and private goals. Ferré writes: “En *Maldito amor* [...] la literatura, el lenguaje mismo constituye el centro de la disputa por el poder que llevan a cabo los personajes. Todo lo que ellos cuentan es chisme, mentira, calumnia desatada, y sin embargo todo es cierto” (“Memorias” 112). James’s fragmented viewpoints are here recast as a narrative power struggle: every glimpse is not only incomplete, but also filtered and distorted according to the speaker’s own agenda.

Still, despite the lies and distortions, Ferré insists that “todo es cierto” (112). The key, it seems, is that *Maldito amor* is not a single puzzle to be solved. The reader’s goal is not to decide whether Gloria or Hermenegildo or any of the other characters are offering the “true” account. Rather, every speaker’s version is a puzzle of its own; a story with a kernel of private truth, which can be discerned despite, or even through, their calculated obfuscations and manipulations. Even deliberate falsehoods, in this sense, are true signals: nobody lies without a reason, and in their unspoken motivations can be traced a truth of sorts. Ferré’s key insight is that every story is told for a reason. The truth may not be directly accessible, but motives and systems of belief nonetheless leave traces in the stories we tell. The words each character speaks might not be *true*, but they are always revealing—less a transparent window on an objective reality than a point of entry into each character’s desires and what they want others to believe.

This is perhaps what Ferré means when she writes that her characters challenge Hermenegildo’s sweeping historical account by offering “la historia del puerto de Guamaní, donde todo cambia y no hay realidad segura” (“Memorias” 112). Hermenegildo’s account may be the “versión oficial” but *none* of the versions offered present the reader with a “realidad segura.” The female characters, in their marginalization, are perhaps more aware than Hermenegildo of this instability, but while they are able to use their gossip to reveal the inadequacy of Hermenegildo’s narrative, they are no more able than he to present a fixed and final version of the family’s tale, or to fully erase the countless versions of the tale that have gone before.

## Gossip and Nation

The contradictions and narrative clashes of *Maldito amor* should be understood as speaking to a national condition, with the De la Valles’ claim to be descended from Puerto Rico’s first governor, the conquistador Juan Ponce de León, standing as an invitation to read the family’s struggles as an allegory of the island’s own troubled history. This symbolism is particularly resonant given that Puerto Ricans have, for much of their history, used the metaphor of the “gran familia puertorriqueña” to portray their nation as a single happy family. Hermenegildo, early in *Maldito amor*, uses the words “gran familia” to describe the people of “buena cepa” of Guamaní; suggesting, perhaps, that Ferré intends for her reader to view the concept of the “gran familia” in the same class-filtered, elitist way that they read Hermenegildo’s other romantic but wrong-headed notions about his country’s culture and identity. As Gutiérrez Mouat, Moreno, Lidia Santos, María Acosta-Cruz and other scholars argue, Ferré’s project is to show the connection between neocolonial Puerto Rico and the political, erotic, and familial conflicts of the De la Valle clan, and by extension of all Puerto Rican families. Gutiérrez Mouat writes that “su visión es que cada familia puertorriqueña es un modelo a escala de una nación en perpetua guerra civil, dividida entre los proponentes de la asimilación a los Estados Unidos y los independentistas del bando opuesto” (285). What ties both the nation and its families together are

their shared past, their shared stories; but using fresh gossip to constantly oppose and call into question the others' accounts foregrounds the fundamental contradictions that fracture what should be common narratives, and insists on the precarious balance in which the "gran familia" rests.<sup>9</sup>

Ferré's problematization of the narrative foundations of the Puerto Rican "gran familia," in seeing its many foundational stories as willfully adversarial, rather than stable or seeking to maintain what Cozarinsky describes as the "ilusión realista," paradoxically underscores Ernest Renan's notion that forgetting is "un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation" (227). Renan sees nationhood as springing from disparate groups' willingness and ability to forget their differences and forge a common identity. As Homi Bhabha notes, Renan's act of forgetting is thus a collective assertion, a performance, of unity, of will-to-nationhood: "To be obliged to forget ... is the construction of a discourse on society that performs the problem of totalizing the people and unifying the national will", Bhabha explains (230). In this sense, the act of forgetting is a daily referendum, a constant reaffirmation of nationhood.

But gossip is inherently a narrative of remembering and rediscovering, of bringing to light what was hidden or at risk of being forgotten.<sup>10</sup> *Maldito amor* thus reveals Puerto Rico as a nation that has not yet achieved the kind of unity Bhabha invokes. Just as the De la Valles cannot agree about the details of their own family history, so Puerto Rico cannot arrive at a coherent and consensual view of itself. It cannot, in other words, agree on what to remember and what to forget. What's more, *Maldito amor* suggests that in this context forgetting becomes a *divisive* rather than a unifying act, not an outgrowth or path to national unity, but rather an amnesia unilaterally imposed by factions seeking to shape the nation's narrative to serve their own ends. Ubaldino's career as a nationalist politician leads him, Ferré writes, in her English translation of *Maldito amor*, to "practice a series of forgetting exercises to weaken his memory as much as possible" (83), allowing him to sidestep uncomfortable aspects of Puerto Rican reality.<sup>11</sup> This might seem a Renan-esque exercise in nation-building, but Gloria, in gossiping about Ubaldino's forgetfulness, suggests instead that it is the self-serving construction, by a corrupt politician, of a one-sided history from which the underprivileged are conveniently excluded.

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<sup>9</sup>The idea of destructive conflict within the idealized Puerto Rican *gran familia* is a recurring theme in Ferré's fiction. See, for instance, *The House on the Lagoon* (which, incidentally, also ends with the family's son Manuel burning down of the family home), in *The Flight of the Swan* (where the family is a metaphorical one, a ballet troupe), and the stories "De tu lado al paraíso" and "Amalia." As María Acosta-Cruz remarks: "this explosive end to the familiar allegory for the nation (the house) runs entirely parallel with Ferré's knack for blowing up the metaphorical house of Puerto Rican literature" (93).

<sup>10</sup>This act of bringing-to-light is divisive in its own right, of course, since it resurfaces and recalls narratives apparently erased or overwritten in the act of forging a single, unified narrative. Indeed, the revelatory aspect of gossip suggests that individual and group identities are never truly subsumed in the interest of the nation as a whole, but are merely concealed or suppressed: not lost, but latent. If the national narrative were truly inclusive and cohesive, if the act of forgetting were truly consensual and complete, then there would be no need for other stories to circulate or seek to re-inscribe themselves. Gossip, then, is both a cause and a symptom of social disunity: it challenges univocal narratives, and in doing so reveals the plurality of narratives that still percolate beneath the surface of an apparently unified society.

<sup>11</sup>There are important differences between *Maldito amor*, and Ferré's English translation, *Sweet Diamond Dust*. As Janice Jaffe notes, "in *Sweet Diamond Dust* Ferré does not alter the plot of the novella, yet in certain 'passages' a positive vision of Puerto Rico's future is expressed," and "in certain instances Ferré modifies the anti-Yankee tone of the Spanish text" (76).

If forgetting is potentially a path to national unity, then it is also a fraught and contested process. *Maldito amor* thus uses gossip to assert a larger point: that every historical fact, and perhaps much of what passes for knowledge, is the site of an epistemological battleground. If it is not seen as such, it is only because the battle has already been fought, and a given set of facts and interpretations has already triumphed. But if gossip is a means of challenging narratives, it also, in its ubiquity, comes to stand as a metaphor for the relentlessness of doubt itself. For Cozarinsky, “la ‘verdad’, que tanta dignidad confiere a la historia, es apenas la ausencia de contradicción entre las versiones recibidas de un hecho” (16). Ferré would agree: for every nugget of historical information, there are countless possible revisions and alternative versions, spoken or unspoken. If one cannot be sure about the story of a single family, then how can one possibly hope to establish the truth of long-ago events, even so-called historical facts?

Through gossip, *Maldito amor* reveals the epistemological instability of historical narrative, but offers no real alternative, nor much hope that an alternative is even possible. Gossip allows disenfranchised Puerto Ricans to challenge certain unsatisfactory historical accounts, and to shatter hegemonic views of the country's past into shifting and contradictory versions. But gossip does not provide a tool with which to distinguish or judge between these versions. The story that replaces or corrects a “master narrative” is not necessarily more complete or “true” simply for having challenged it, nor by virtue of its being told second. This is another reason to doubt Gloria: her fiery “solution” might bring some satisfaction on an individual level, the text implies, but one cannot resolve an entire nation's historical and epistemological anxiety with a can of gas. This is an intractable problem: the notion of a complete and lasting solution, like Gloria's attempt to end the family's story, is ultimately little more than a fantasy.

What emerges from the text is a peculiarly despondent and atomized vision of Puerto Rican nationhood, in which consensus and unity are unreachable chimeras. Such a view resonates, of course, with other readings of the island's troubled history. In “El país de cuatro pisos,” José Luis González claims that Puerto Ricans are worried, and with good reason, about “la persistente falta de consenso que exhibe nuestro pueblo por lo que toca a la futura y definitiva organización política del país, o sea al llamado ‘problema del status’. En ese sentido, se reconoce sin mayor reparo la realidad de un ‘pueblo dividido’” (25). Similarly, *Maldito amor* can be read as a meditation on the island's failed struggle to definitively resolve either its own identity or its relationship with the United States as a colonizing power. Ferré describes Puerto Rico as a “país esquisinfrénico con complejo de Hamlet” (“Memorias” 111), profoundly marked by its own uncertainty, its lack, in other words, of a “realidad segura.” The Hamlet complex of which Ferré speaks resonates with Mallarmé's description of Shakespeare's prince as “ce seigneur latent qui ne peut devenir” (300). Puerto Rico's status as a site of colonial and postcolonial epistemological struggles, Ferré suggests, forces an awareness of the limitations even of self-knowledge, and the island, in its uncertainty, is left inescapably torn between the drives for independence or statehood, to remain as it is or to challenge its status, to define itself through or against its colonial status. Like Hamlet, the island is ripe with its own potentiality, but remains hesitating, trapped between the many versions of its past, present, and future.

The tangled narratives and seething gossip of *Maldito amor* offer no solutions to this problem, but rather hold out a warning. In its reading as a feminist text, *Maldito amor* stands as a fable of wish fulfillment: the hypocrites unmasked, the patriarchal oppressor overthrown, the loose ends tied up, the maligned servant vindicated and triumphant. Through the seething gossip that runs through the text, however, Ferré problematizes and comments upon the very fantasy she appears to present and endorse: the apparent conclusiveness of the ending, and of Gloria's account, is revealed to be no more final or privileged than the accounts that have gone before. Similarly, Ferré seems to suggest, the profound and perhaps existential problems of the Puerto Rican nation do not, and cannot, admit to simple, neat solutions. The contradictions inherent in

Puerto Rican society are such, Ferré suggests, that no single viewpoint can adequately encompass the island's complex condition.

In this, Ferré anticipates, perhaps, the exhausted detente that Frances Negrón-Muntaner traces in Puerto Rico's more recent political life, with voters preferring to accept uncertainty and contingency rather than to commit to the thankless pursuit of definitive solutions. According to Negrón-Muntaner, "within this ambiguous space, there are undoubtedly tremendous conflicts, inequities, and frustrations," and "yet there is a place for many contradictory versions of community and self" (10). Ferré here also stands as a precursor of the recent intellectual and literary trend, identified by Acosta-Cruz, that has seen "newer generations of culture producers ... stake the claim that they are free from the monomaniacal search for national identity" (104). Such writers, Acosta-Cruz asserts, reject the "nationalist dictum" that literature should aspire to forge a coherent and unitary national identity, and instead come to embrace plural and contradictory viewpoints: "The island's paradoxical and conflicted feelings about dependency versus independence are the mix, the brew, the *burundanga* from which rise stories, themes, and images that power up the culture" (178). *Maldito amor*, in vividly tracing the consequences of that "monomaniacal search," highlights the tensions that gave rise to such sensibilities and the risks inherent in seeking to replace one story with another. There remains a value, of course, to asserting viewpoints that have been suppressed; but there are also dangers to doing so in the belief that a definitive or complete account of the island's past, or a roadmap for its future, can thereby emerge. Ultimately, every worldview, every story, stands in contradiction to every other; the stories and truths on which both families and nations are built, then, must inevitably be partial, fragile, inconclusive. The pursuit of a single coherent national identity, like the pursuit of a single objective truth, can never yield the yearned-for results: it is a fantasy, and one that all too easily spills over into obsession, fanaticism, or conflagration.

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