


5-26-2017

# Monstrous Dolls: The Abject Body in Rosario Ferré's Works

Mackenzie Fraser  
*Linfield College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud_theses)

 Part of the [Latin American Literature Commons](#), [Latina/o Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Fraser, Mackenzie, "Monstrous Dolls: The Abject Body in Rosario Ferré's Works" (2017). *Senior Theses*. 17.  
[https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud\\_theses/17](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud_theses/17)

This Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@linfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@linfield.edu).

# Monstrous Dolls: The Abject Body in Rosario Ferré's Works

by Mackenzie Fraser

# Monstrous Dolls: The Abject Body in Rosario Ferré's Work

by Mackenzie Fraser

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts in English

Linfield College

26 May 2017

Approved by \_ *Signature redacted*

### THESIS COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS

Please read this document carefully before signing. If you have questions about any of these permissions, please contact the DigitalCommons Coordinator.

**Title of the Thesis:**

Monstrous Dolls: The Abject Body in Rosario Ferrer's Work

**Author's Name: (Last name, first name)**

Fraser, Mackenzie

**Advisor's Name**

Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt

DigitalCommons@Linfield is our web-based, open access-compliant institutional repository for digital content produced by Linfield faculty, students, staff, and their collaborators. It is a permanent archive. By placing your thesis in DigitalCommons@Linfield, it will be discoverable via Google Scholar and other search engines. Materials that are located in DigitalCommons@Linfield are freely accessible to the world; however, your copyright protects against unauthorized use of the content. Although you have certain rights and privileges with your copyright, there are also responsibilities. Please review the following statements and identify that you have read them by signing below. Some departments may choose to protect the work of their students because of continuing research. In these cases, the project is still posted in the repository but content will only be accessible by individuals who are part of the Linfield community.

**CHOOSE THE STATEMENT BELOW THAT DEFINES HOW YOU WANT TO SHARE YOUR THESIS. THE FIRST STATEMENT PROVIDES THE MOST ACCESS TO YOUR WORK; THE LAST STATEMENT PROVIDES THE LEAST ACCESS.**

*K.M.S.  
Confirmed  
via email*

I agree to make my thesis available to the Linfield College community and to the larger scholarly community upon its deposit in our permanent digital archive, DigitalCommons@Linfield, or its successor technology. My thesis will also be available in print at Nicholson Library and can be shared via interlibrary loan.

OR

I agree to make my thesis available only to the Linfield College community upon its deposit in our permanent digital archive, DigitalCommons@Linfield, or its successor technology. My thesis will also be available in print at Nicholson Library and can be shared via interlibrary loan.

OR

I agree to make my thesis available in print at Nicholson Library, including access for interlibrary loan.

OR

I agree to make my thesis available in print at Nicholson Library only.

**NOTICE OF ORIGINAL WORK AND USE OF COPYRIGHT-PROTECTED MATERIALS:**

If your work includes images that are not original works by you, you must include permissions from original content provider or the images will not be included in the repository. If your work includes videos, music, data sets, or other accompanying material that is not original work by you, the same copyright stipulations apply. If your work includes interviews, you must include a statement that you have the permission from the interviewees to make their interviews public. For information about obtaining permissions and sample forms, see <http://copyright.columbia.edu/copyright/permissions/>.

**NOTICE OF APPROVAL TO USE HUMAN SUBJECTS BY THE LINFIELD COLLEGE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH BOARD (IRB):**

If your research includes human subjects, you must include a letter of approval from the Linfield IRB. For more information, see <http://www.linfield.edu/irb/>.

**NOTICE OF SUBMITTED WORK AS POTENTIALLY CONSTITUTING AN EDUCATIONAL RECORD UNDER FERPA:**

Under FERPA (20 U.S.C. § 1232g), this work may constitute an educational record. By signing below, you acknowledge this fact and expressly consent to the use of this work according to the terms of this agreement.

**BY SIGNING THIS FORM, I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT ALL WORK CONTAINED IN THIS PAPER IS ORIGINAL WORK BY ME OR INCLUDES APPROPRIATE CITATIONS AND/OR PERMISSIONS WHEN CITING OR INCLUDING EXCERPTS OF WORK(S) BY OTHERS.**

**IF APPLICABLE, I HAVE INCLUDED AN APPROVAL LETTER FROM THE IRB TO USE HUMAN SUBJECTS.**

Signature <sup>6</sup> *Signature redacted* Date 05/25/17

Printed Name RESHMI DUTT-BALLERSTADT

Approved by Faculty Advisor *Signature redacted* Date May 24, 2017

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	3
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	4
Chapter 2: A Hatred That Smiles in “The Youngest Doll”.....	15
Chapter 3: A Terror That Dissembles in <i>The House on the Lagoon</i> .....	28
Chapter 4: Conclusion.....	54
Works Consulted.....	57
Notes.....	59

# Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the endless support of my Honors Thesis Committee. Professor Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt, thank you for always challenging me to dig deeper, consider all angles in reflection, and to let my inner Bad Girl out. Your courage and fearlessness never cease to amaze me. Professor Barbara Seidman, thank you for your constant support in both my academic and personal aspirations. You have always been such a wonderful role model to me with your intelligence, grace, and selflessness. Finally, Profesora Tania Carrasquillo Hernández, I cannot thank you enough for everything you have done for me at Linfield and beyond. Not only do you take the time out of your day to edit my papers in not just one, but two languages, but you also encourage me to step outside my comfort zone and be the best person I can be. Debido a usted, tengo la confianza para cumplir todos mis sueños.

Furthermore, I am grateful to each of the professors within the English, Gender Studies, and Spanish departments for making me a better writer, student, and global citizen—this thesis is my ultimate synthesis of all the incredible and eye-opening lessons each of YOU have taught me throughout my four years at Linfield, and I would not be here presenting today without your positive influence in my academic career. I would also like to express my eternal gratitude to Linfield College for creating an academically challenging yet supportive environment that made this thesis project possible for me.

Finally, thank you to my friends and family that have put up with me whining about this thesis since October. I cannot begin to express my thanks adequately, so I will not even attempt it here: thank you, I love you all more than words can say.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. . . . Unflinchingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.

—Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

I write to build myself word by word, to banish my terror of silence; I write as a speaking, human mask. . . . I write so as to reinvent myself, to convince myself that what I love will endure. But my urge to write is also destructive, an attempt to annihilate myself and the world. Words are infinitely wise and, like all mothers, like nature herself, they know when to destroy what is worn out or corrupt so that life may be rebuilt on new foundations. . . . This destructive urge that moves me to write is tied to my need to hate, my need for vengeance. I write so as to avenge myself against reality and against myself; I write to give permanence to what hurts me and to what tempts me. I believe that deep wounds and harsh insults alone might someday release within me all the creative forces available to human expression, a belief which implies, after all, that I love the world passionately.

—Rosario Ferré, *The Writer's Kitchen*

In this Honors Thesis project, I examine two literary texts, “The Youngest Doll” (1991) and *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), by Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré (1938-2016) with attention to her depiction of the abject female body as a figure analyzed by both theories of gender and the subaltern. Using these critical frameworks as well as my own textual analysis, I argue that Ferré offers a postcolonial feminist critique of the double oppression—patriarchal and colonial—operating upon her female Puerto Rican characters. Yet these women also turn this abjection into transgression, allowing Ferré to expose the paradoxes of female subjectivity as they mobilize the subversive power of the Other against their oppressors. This power manifests in their abjection, which allows these Othered



women to work creatively within the confines of the patriarchal and colonial legacies in Puerto Rico to gain agency and destabilize the hegemony.

The phenomenon of abjection highlighted in Julia Kristeva's critical work *Powers of Horror* (1980) provides insight into the roots of patriarchal and colonial subjugation in Western society. While the verb "to abject" signifies a casting off of something or someone, a rejection that entails an element of debasement, Kristeva elaborates on how "the abject" in noun form does not fit neatly into either category of subject or object; rather, the abject "is [that which is] radically excluded" and exists in "the place where meaning collapses" (2). As such, the abject figure "disturbs identity, system, order...does not respect borders, positions, rules...[and resides in] the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Within this space of abjection exists a paradoxically loathed yet desired manifestation of the "monstrous" within the self whose existence annihilates the meaning ascribed to the self culturally. Accordingly, the self also attempts (never with complete success) to violently separate from its abject state in order to exist, to *be* in the social order. In this way, the abject itself resides where binaries delineating self and Other, order and chaos, life and death, known and unknown, collapse and prove themselves, rather than immutable, to be in reality quite illegible. Located in psychoanalytic theory on the edges of primal repression and the sublime, "the abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments" by "tak[ing] the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away" (15). Even though the self must reject what is abject in order to enter into the conventional symbolic order of culture, on the other hand, the abject can never be excluded completely, as "that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life" (Creed 9). Thus, abjection's threat resides in its ever-present beckoning of the self to enter the space where meaning breaks down, a

fascinating desire which incites fear of annihilation in the self, which can only exist through meaning. Confrontation with the abject produces revulsion and even trauma, as it involves the resurgence into awareness of what has been repressed and exiled from the conscious ego—grounding self as animalistic, unacceptable, taboo, and grotesque. The abject body regularly represents this powerful threat to meaning and self, seen most obviously in the horrified and uneasy reaction a corpse elicits. Other commonly known examples of the abject reside in food, waste, decay, excretion, and the maternal body: Kristeva’s identification of the “maternal figure” as abject rests upon its “polluting” phases—menstruation and childbirth—that evoke both repulsion and attraction.

Kristeva’s critical framework of abjection receives further feminist extrapolation in the work of Barbara Creed, author of *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993). Creed coins that term in relation to women’s portrayal in horror films. She argues that, though much emphasis has been placed on women as victims of predominantly male monsters, little analysis exists of woman-as-monster. Creed’s label “monstrous-feminine,” avoids the oversimplified binary of “female monster” as a mere reversal of “male monster.” Her term underscores the “importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity,” since “the reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his” (3). By way of Kristeva’s analysis of abjection, Creed contends that patriarchy defines femininity as the abject Other in order to define and sustain itself, citing as evidence the fact that “all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (1). In Creed’s analysis, horror films depicting the monstrous-feminine present women become as “biological freaks whose bodies

represent a fearful and threatening form of sexuality” (6). Though Creed and Kristeva develop complex psychoanalytic reasoning to explain the repressive response of patriarchy to the female sexual threat figured in such images as the *vagina dentata* or “toothed vagina,” the basic connection drawn from femininity to monstrosity to abjection will suffice to examine the use of feminine abjection in the fiction of Rosario Ferré.

Explaining the origins of patriarchal ambivalence toward the mysterious female body has been the work of numerous feminist theorists, including historian Gerda Lerner who, in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), argues that both men and women founded and continue to maintain patriarchal systems by reifying the economic power represented in female sexuality. Lerner contends that in hunter-gatherer communities, women’s skills “must have been as manifold as those of men and certainly as essential” (43). Further, female reproductive abilities “had power over life and death” in “primitive conditions” where infant survival depended wholly on the quality of the mother’s care (40). Lerner theorizes that, in “observing the dramatic and mysterious power of the female,” men in these early societies likely recognized that “women’s mothering and nurturing activities, associated with their self-sufficiency in good fathering, and their sense of competence in many, varied life-essential skills...[became perceived] as a source of strength and, probably, magic power” (44). Herein lies the connection to the monstrous feminine and the abject as variations of an ambiguous, threatening, and powerful female body, Lerner dates the historical creation of patriarchy over 2500 years ago and theorizes that male effort to control “the labor of women as *reproducers*” acted as the first form of private property, which Frederic Engels associated with the emergence of patrilineal inheritance lines (212). Movement away from more egalitarian hunter-gatherer groups

in favor of agrarian communities created a rise in tribal warfare and a consequent need for the reproduction of children as workers and warriors; in turn, female reproductive labor underwent reification and became subject to male authority and management of female sexuality and the female body, with women's fertility reduced to a commodity in economic exchange according to expanding rules of property ownership and transfer (52). Here, Lerner's analysis parallels Kristeva's own discussion of men's "fear of the archaic mother [which] turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power" (Kristeva 77). Though Lerner stresses that no single cause can explain completely the creation of patriarchy, at the core of her argument is the idea that women's reproductive powers differentiated them from men, simultaneously elevating her as magical, dehumanizing her as commodity, and abjecting her as Other.

Feminist analysis of oppressive systems such as patriarchy have also attended to its intersections with other marginalizing structures. Lerner examines at length patriarchy's intersections with racial subjugation when she argues that "enslavement of women, combining both racism and sexism, preceded the formation of classes and class oppression" since, "in its ultimate origin, 'difference' as a distinguishing mark between the conquered and the conquerors was based on the first clearly observable difference, that between the sexes" (213-214). In objectifying women's bodies as a site of economic exchange, "men had learned how to assert and exercise power over people slightly different from themselves" (214). In this manner, Lerner theorizes that men gained "the knowledge necessary to elevate 'difference' of whatever kind into a criterion for dominance" (214). Though based on biological sex binaries initially, these differences then expanded to encompass race, ethnicity, class, and more with the advent of agriculture, private property, and territory wars. Thus, the historical subjugation of women and racialized Others stems from a common impulse to read

difference as justification to subdue and exploit the ambiguous power difference seemed to bestow.

Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of empire's inferiorizing of the colonial subaltern extends Lerner's argument beyond gender: "Everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference" (as qtd by de Kock 45). In her groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak investigates whether postcolonial subjects, and specifically those who are most marginalized within that category can truly achieve voice given the aftereffects of colonization. She points out the hypocrisy of Western, white postcolonial theorists who attempt to grant such "subalterns" a space to express their distinct subjectivities within what amounts to an academic re-inscription of colonial subordination to the defining event of colonization and one identity as victims. Spivak observes that, when intellectuals attempt to speak for subalterns rather than allowing them to speak for themselves, subaltern subjects are robbed of an opportunity to develop a cultural identity of their own apart from the status of imperial victims. She contends that postcolonial studies must prioritize the voices of the most marginalized to allow a new voice to assume its own shape. Postcolonial scholars must confront difference on all fronts and validate alternative forms of discourse even as they accept that they will never fully understand the subaltern perspective. Here, the subaltern state mirrors that of the abject in some ways, namely in its ambiguous, unknowable, and excluded qualities: qualities for which the dominant discourse has no available discourse. Though rejected as equals by the empire for their racial and cultural difference, the imperialist imagination demonstrates both fascination and revulsion with the subaltern. Again, this rings of the abject body's strange power over the self; just as the Other's racial and cultural

difference disturbs the hegemonic power structure, so, too, does the abject when, as a representation of repulsive difference yet fascinating reflection of self, it threatens systems of meaning. By abjecting subalterns and subaltern women specifically, the hegemony precariously maintains its power while simultaneously acknowledging and fearing the ability of the abject to deconstruct their very existence.

Within her literary works, Rosario Ferré<sup>1</sup> explores the power of abjection to create spaces in which Othered female characters exercise power against patriarchal colonialist elites. In her early work, Ferré focuses on feminist resistance mounted by female characters who, though subjugated in some way, ultimately avenge their marginality. Ferré belongs to the group of Latina authors termed the Post-Boom who, in the 1980s, consciously sought to redress the exclusionary, elitist Boom literary movement in Latin America of the 1960s-1970s peopled by Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa. Ferré, Isabel Allende, Luisa Valenzuela, Giannina Braschi, Cristina Peri Rossi, and Elena Poniatowska, set out to write themselves as well as women's voices into their respective national histories through their fiction. In *El coloquio de las perras* (1991), Ferré directly critiques her male peers, "whose female characters always play secondary roles....The antifeminist prejudice is hidden but still present in all the Boom writers, and it surprised me that no one had pointed this out" (Ferré 102). Ferré's female characters helped to fill in this gap in Latin American literature; she created women who "seemed admirable to [her] because of the courage of their struggle to succeed in life" (92). Ferré differentiates between feminine literature, which she defines as any work written by a woman, and feminist literature, which she describes as that in which a woman explicitly searches for her identity (Hintz 17-18). In Ferré's view, "a feminist writer chooses to seek a new role for women through the literature she creates," a

theory she has put into practice. In fact, her criticism still stands as the most articulate and developed feminist critical stance in Latin American literary studies today. Her female characters, like their feminist creator, search for and release their repressed identities between the pages of a novel or poem or story and, in turn, find power intended to infuse their women readers.

While Ferré spent much of her career exposing patriarchal society through irony, magic realism, and vengeful feminist characters, she also employed these same tactics to reflect upon and critique the colonial history and legacy of Puerto Rico. For Ferré, feminist literature combines autobiography and fiction and reclaims the irony for which Boom writers were renowned to express female anger against the patriarchy (Hintz 34). In this way, she proves her strong and raw connection to her work, leading readers to believe that pieces of her and her island reside in each character she writes. Though she thought of herself as a Latin American feminist writer because, as a female author, she sought to uncouple her identity from the patriarchal binaries suppressing it, there is no denying the postcolonial aspects of her work as well. She recognized that her subjectivity emerged from a doubly colonized space given Puerto Rico's ongoing imperialistic condition under Spanish, then American hegemony. Her work addresses the sharp economic, social, political, and racial divides in Puerto Rican culture that developed during Spanish colonization and have been added to by its becoming a U.S. territory. Additionally, Ferré interrogates her own complicity in Puerto Rico's social, racial, and economic class divisions and problematizes her privilege as an elite by letting readers into that world so as to demystify it. Further, she highlights the global interplay of island categories of race and hybridity by creating characters who are considered White on the island, yet Brown on the U.S. mainland. In doing so, fundamentally Ferré examines what it means to be Puerto

Rican with works that cross generations, classes, races, parties, and even continents to extend the reach of her subversive agenda. Ferré's literary works provide a space for the alternative, Othered, abjected voices of Puerto Rican history<sup>2</sup> as she rewrites the master narrative which has historically silenced them. The ambiguous status of Puerto Rico as neither a nation nor a state, but an unincorporated U.S. territory echoes that of the abject body, a theme Ferré subtly develops throughout her work by aligning the island with her abject female characters.

As if tackling feminist and postcolonial concerns in her writing is not enough, Ferré has also self-translated much of her work from Spanish to English and vice versa<sup>3</sup>. Writing as a bilingual, bicultural author, Ferré has enacted her postcolonial feminism in her writing process. What started as a small translation project to gain greater distribution in the rest of the world turned into a controversial and telling journey in exploring the linguistic and cultural hybridity of her own identity. After first translating her novel *Maldito amor* (1985) and later several of her stories from *Papeles de Pandora* (1976), she admitted that “it surprised me how much the text changed in translation. It was almost like writing a different book, and the process intrigued me” (Ferré 97). She describes how, in the process of translating each of work, “one became a different person in each language and saw the world in a different way” (97). As a native-born Puerto Rican and a citizen of the United States educated in America, Ferré acknowledges this hybrid identity when she writes in both Spanish and English, sometimes even at the same time, as in the work published originally in both languages, *Duelo de lenguaje/Language Duel* (2002).

During her lifetime, she travelled back and forth and revealed in her *Memoir* that, while writing *La casa de la laguna* in Puerto Rico in 1992, she realized that “would not have been able to write it if I had not lived in the United States for the



previous eight years. The temporal distance allowed me to see more clearly the reality of my own country, and to work with issues that were both emotionally charged, and also too close to me” (103). Yet conversely, she admits: “If I had stayed in the United States, I would not have been able to write it either; in other words, I had to return to the Island to write the novel” (103-104). Of hybrid subjects such as herself, she writes:

When you return to your place of origin after a long period of time, you bring back the life you left behind, projecting it into the life you now lead. It is a constant double exposure; you live simultaneously in the present and the past.... We are two at the same time: the person we took with us when we left, and the person we found when we returned.  
(104)

As a writer, Ferré expresses these multiple identities in her subversive work through her female characters. For Ferré, feminist literature combines autobiography and fiction to address female anger directed at the patriarchy (Hintz 34). With each page, Ferré herself also transgresses: as a woman working in a traditionally male artistic sphere; as an upper-middle class elite critiquing the island government; as a Latina author writing in English alongside Spanish; as a Puerto Rican author exposing her island’s deep colonial and racist roots in its history with both Spain and the United States; and, finally, as a woman who dares to write not only her voice but also those of other marginalized figures into the master narrative.

Through her various female characters, specifically those in her short story “The Youngest Doll” (1991) and her novel *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), Ferré depicts how females, particularly those belonging to doubly marginalized groups, must channel their creativity in subversive, even abject, forms to challenge the

hegemonies that oppress them. By evoking the monstrous feminine within the destructive version of magical realism, Ferré destabilizes patriarchal “norms,” including those defining “reality” itself. In “The Youngest Doll,” for example, an aging aunt is confined to spinsterhood in her family’s decaying sugarcane plantation due to “an angry river prawn” bite and a greedy male doctor. She creates dolls as her sole means of expressing her identity as well as her own anger. Similarly, the narrator of *The House on the Lagoon*, Isabel Monfort, demonstrates her creative side when she pens a personalized account of her and her husband’s families over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, allowing her imagination to weave them together with secret stories passed down through “marginalized” women, like the Afro-Puerto Rican family servant, Petra Avilés, the novel’s exemplar of the monstrous-feminine. Both the doll-maker and the story-teller draw upon abjection to disrupt the binaries that have oppressed them and, in so doing, ultimately enact a “feminine” revenge on the oppressive males in their lives. Here, Ferré utilizes the metaphor of the monstrous doll to symbolize the profound oppression of women within the patriarchal colonialist structure. Additionally, she employs the same image but in a violent sense to subvert the stereotypes of the submissive female, one that is weak and incapable of rebellion. In this way, Ferré demonstrates how women, particularly subaltern women, must work within this marginalized space and use their subjugated status to ultimately defend their identities, unite as a force, and achieve autonomy. Through these female characters that transgress patriarchal and colonial norms, Ferré destroys expectations of femininity and the subaltern, representing how silence does not always signify an absence of power; on the contrary, it can work as a tool for female subversion in a patriarchal and imperialist world.

## Chapter 2

### A Hatred That Smiles in “The Youngest Doll”

Rosario Ferré’s short story “The Youngest Doll” first appeared in Spanish as “La muñeca menor” in the inaugural edition of the literary magazine *Zona de carga y descarga* in 1972; it was translated by Ferré and her colleague Diana Vélez in 1991. It narrates the life of a woman known only as “the aunt” who subtly combats patriarchal and colonial values along with her nieces through the creation and deployment of her homemade, secretly monstrous dolls. Ferré situates the story at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on an *hacienda azucarera*, illustrating both the antiquated Spanish *sacarocracia* (sugarcane aristocracy) that had stratified Puerto Rican social classes for centuries as well as the emerging capitalist class that resulted from U.S. colonization in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though each empire imposed different economic systems on the island, both dehumanized women within their power structure, a tenet exhibited in the marginalized status of the unmarried aunt—a member of the former *sacarocracia*—and her niece—who marries into the new haute bourgeoisie. While these characters enjoy many privileges as members of the former upper class, they still face oppression as women in a patriarchal society and, with the advent of U.S. colonial presence added to Spanish racialized hierarchy, as Brown women in a society valorizing Whiteness. The aunt, crippled by an invasive injury in adolescence, and her niece, imprisoned within a repressive marriage, become silent victims of this multi-faceted oppression; yet it is precisely through this abjection as the monstrous-feminine and colonial Other that the aunt and her niece respectively gain power, and can creatively and subtly avenge themselves through the violent dolls. Although these women appear trapped within this peripheric world, they prove capable of asserting

their agency within a repressively static social system through the transgressive abjection of their monstrous dolls.

The narrative unfolds at a dynamic time in Puerto Rican history: at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the United States had only recently annexed the island and thereby disrupted the hegemonic power of the sugarcane aristocrats (*los sacarócratas*) with the imposition of U.S. sociopolitical and economic systems. This economic system, however, also built upon the patriarchal hierarchy of the past that had simultaneously oppressed those in the working class and the heiresses of the sugarcane-aristocracy, who were expected to be elegant, docile, and above all silent ladies. “The Youngest Doll” weaves this historical moment into the narration of the life of “the maiden aunt” protagonist, a woman who subtly subverts these restrictive expectations by transforming into a monstrous-feminine, abject figure. The story begins with the young woman “facing the canefields” from her porch, where she passes her days near the river that forms part of the *hacienda azucarera* of her bourgeois family (Ferré 1). Her youth is cut short when, during a swim in the river one day, “she felt a sharp bite in her calf” from “an angry river prawn” (1). This event abruptly alters the course of her life, as the wound she suffers defies treatment and unfits her for marriage. Thus, she can no longer comply with the gender expectations of her class—get married, procreate, and raise a family of her own in an era when upper-class families sought to marry their daughters to members of the same aristocratic class so as to sustain its reach and power—the exchange economy in women about which Lerner wrote in *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Speaking in terms of the patriarchal gender binary, the prawn’s bite robs the young woman both of her femininity and her chance at “female” success within the *sacarocracia*, effectively pushing her to the margins as a “failed” woman.

Yet what proves most unsettling about this development is the way her wound quickly becomes a site of monstrosity and abjection. Once the doctor “concluded that the prawn had worked its way into the soft flesh of her calf and had nestled there to grow,” he administers a faulty treatment that only causes “the ulcer [to grow] even larger” (1). The narrator later reveals that this situation could have been resolved easily if the doctor had simply removed the strange animal from her leg. His inexplicable act of omission prevents her from exploring a reality outside of the *hacienda* and seems to deny her an identity apart from her physical condition. While the woman, who “had been very beautiful,” had “resigned herself to living with the prawn permanently curled up in her calf,” the doctor becomes rich by visiting her monthly for the rest of her life (1-2). The aunt, who is transformed by the greedy doctor into a representation of the monstrous-feminine when the ulcer becomes “covered with a slimy, stonelike substance that couldn’t be removed without endangering the whole leg,” and she is forced to “[drag] her monstrous leg around the house” for the rest of her life (2). The aunt, in “resign[ing] herself to living with the prawn permanently curled up in her calf,” becomes part-human, part-prawn, an ambiguous in-between; later, the narrator describes how the “huge ulcer which oozed a perfumed sperm from the tip of its greenish scales” housed “the constant movement of the creature’s antennae,” emphasizing a parasitic relationship between the two beings that now co-inhabit one body (4). Thus, “stripped...of all vanity,” she exists as more monster than female, “lock[ing] herself up in her house, refusing to see any suitors” (1, 2). In this way, the prawn bite that never heals abjects her from the elite *sacarocracia*, as her monstrosity prevents her from ever complying with its feminine standards. Her abjection functions both bodily in the repulsive waste excreted from

her wound and symbolically in her ambiguous status as a threatening monstrous-feminine figure, pushing the aunt further into the margins of society.

While the aunt's abjection devalues her as monstrous-feminine, however, at the same time it offers an escape from the repressively static expectations of her gender and class. Though the river prawn appears to imprison her within the privacy of the decaying *hacienda* and to rob her of her femininity, her "monstrous leg" also frees her from conforming to the feminine expectations of her society (2). In this manner, the aunt can live how she likes without societal judgment at not having a husband, children, or beauty. For instance, when the narrator describes how the "aroma of a ripe sweetsop...oozed from her leg when it was at rest," this seemingly grotesque detail can also suggest the scent of autoerotic pleasure (2). Further, the source of this odor is ambiguous, as the narrator merely acknowledges that her nieces would "furtively lift the starched ruffle of her skirt so as to sniff" what lies under it (2). Here, the ripe fruit symbolizes the sexuality of the maiden aunt whose own sexual pleasure does not depend solely on heteronormative partnering. By knowing her own body enough to pleasure herself and generate the scents of female ejaculation and vaginal fluids), the aunt dispels the myth of single female asexuality, deconstructs the virgin/whore dichotomy as one dependent on male participation in and imposition on female sexuality, and highlights this idea as wholly constructed by patriarchal values. Although initially the male doctor placed her within these supposed sexual constraints by consciously failing to cure her, the aunt subverts this violent patriarchal act by discovering her own body and sexuality, and subtly exploring and even self-satisfying her sexual desires.

Further, the oozing scent of rotting fruit combined with the sugary smell of a sweetsop creates an abject image that both fascinates and repulses readers with its

ambiguity—as does the feminine body and female sexuality within a patriarchal framework. Gerda Lerner argues that single women in patriarchal societies who “withhold heterosexual services...are declassed” and fall under the “gender definition of sexual ‘deviance’...as ‘not respectable,’” which explains how the “vast majority of single women are, by definition, marginal” in traditional societies (215, 216). The aunt, a single woman not by choice but by the doctor’s malpractice, appears unsexed when she does not comply with gender expectations. However, she has also escaped the exchange system of marriage which commodifies and objectifies female sexuality as male assets to trade for material advantage. As no one’s sexual property but her own due to the prawn bite, the aunt disrupts ‘femininity’ as familial asset, another cause for her abjection. By writing off the aunt as an asexual being because she lacks a male partner not only omits any possibility of queer identification, but also negates her right to control her own body outside of the male gaze. Yet while the patriarchal society pities the aunt for being a “failed” single woman, in reality, the prawn’s bite allows her to subtly challenge these patriarchal norms through her abjection as monstrous and to explore her sexuality labeled by society as deviant. Thus, it is not that the aunt cannot achieve ‘true womanhood,’ but rather that she *does not desire* to comply with these degrading restrictions. The ensuing ambiguity threatens patriarchal systems of meaning which devalue, fear, and abject “uncooperative” female bodies.

The aunt’s aging from attractive girl to superfluous female with a monstrous leg also represents Ferré’s postcolonial insights into the effects on the *sacarocracia*, specifically its women, as well as the transition of Puerto Rico from a Spanish colony to a territory of the United States. With the passage of time, the antiquated *hacienda* on which the aunt and her family reside begin to reflect a declining decadence that mirrors the physical deterioration of the aunt. The narrator describes how, “in those

days, the family was nearly ruined; they lived surrounded by a past that was breaking up around them with the same impassive musicality with which the crystal chandelier crumbled on the frayed embroidered linen cloth of the dining-room table” (2). The decline of the dominant class is embodied as well in the aunt’s own lack of reproductive energy; she produces dolls, not offspring. As a result of her own physical deterioration, the aunt must remain within the *casona* that disintegrates alongside her and, as a female, she does not inherit the ancestral estate; it goes from father to brother, whose “ward” she remains. She thus appears oppressed, as she spends her days confined to the private sphere of the house where she cares for her nieces (a traditionally female occupation) and dedicates her life to making dolls (a traditionally feminine toy). According to patriarchal norms, she occupies her time with an acceptable domestic role, as raising her nieces mimics motherhood. The narrator affirms her “maternal nature,” noting that “her nieces adored her,” which “earn[s] her the respect and admiration of the whole family,” especially when she starts to make her amazing lifelike dolls (2). This activity reflects the influence of gender stereotypes, as playing with dolls socializes and conditions girls to practice their femininity and develop their “maternal instincts.” Making the dolls permits her to reclaim her status as a woman who affirms patriarchal gender binaries by cultivating these same values in her nieces.

This very act of surface validation for gender norms operates ironically to parody female reproductive service to patriarchy and women’s own complicity in sustaining its norms. For the family, each new doll’s “birth...was always cause for a ritual celebration,” although, after years of refining her art, “the aunt sat down in her rocking chair facing the canefields and hardly ever got up again” (2-3). Limited in this way, the aunt depends physically on the help of her relatives to live and make the



dolls. As a result of the river prawn's bite or, more pointedly, the devastating exploitation of her condition by the doctor, her body becomes immobile, similar to her dolls who depend on others to move them. In her article, Yvette López sustains that "los objetos de lujo que son las muñecas del cuento prefiguran la inmovilidad del mundo de la mujer, a quien se identifica con ese objeto estático, de adorno, que es cada muñeca que elabora la tía" ("the objects of luxury represented by the dolls in this story foreshadow the immobility of the world of women, who identify with this static object of adornment that is each doll the aunt makes") (50). In this context, the static state of the aunt symbolically transforms her into a doll that "es un juguete o un elemento decorativo [que] pertenece al mundo infantil femenino y es metáfora de la mujer" or "is a toy or a decorative element that pertains to the infantile feminine world and is a metaphor for women" (50). In seeming a static doll herself, she presumably does not control her own body and lacks agency over her future. In this manner, the dolls not only represent the marginalization of she who makes them, but also the passivity of the upper-class ladies whom her nieces will grow up to become within the deteriorating hegemonic *clase azucarera*.

These dolls also represent the U.S. colonial 'White-washing' of the nieces as a new generation of colonial subjects despite their economic privileges. While the narrator describes how, "at first they were just plain dolls, with cottony stuffing from the gourd tree in the garden and stray buttons sewn on for eyes," she reveals that, "as time passed, though, she began to refine her craft more and more" (2). Using materials brought to her from town, the aunt would "[come] out of her stupor" and create dolls that mirrored her nieces exactly, except in skin tone (3). In each doll, "the porcelain of the hands and face was always translucent; it had an ivory tint to it that formed a great contrast with the curdled whiteness of the bisque faces" (3). Tellingly,

the last doll the aunt gave to each niece on her wedding day “looked less transparent than those of the old; they had the consistency of skim milk” (4). Every doll also had “the same bow, wide and white and trembling like the breast of a dove” (4).

Whiteness overwhelms these descriptions, as the dolls get paler and paler as the girls grow older. And the whiter the doll, the more refined she is considered, a parallel that mirrors the racializing impact of U.S. colonization in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which added yet another layer of racial complexity to the already Spain-divided island. One could see the whitening as in keeping with the girls’ approach to marriageability—an asset in the Puerto Rican “Marriage Books” that tracked family blood lines to ensure racial purity. The young nieces grow up in this new colonial space and must now assimilate to the cultural, linguistic, economic, and racial values of the new imperial power to maintain their privileged status. In this way, the dolls represent not only domesticated femininity, but also White versions of the nieces themselves. In making the dolls, the aunt would “make a wax mask of the child’s face, covering it with plaster on both sides, like a living face sheathed in two dead ones” (3). This eerie simile brings to mind the abject image of the corpse as threatening the living self’s symbolic existence. Here, too, the dolls as alternate White representations of the nieces pose a threat to the retention of their individual identities. Further, the fact that none of the nieces are given names reinforces the idea that they have been groomed out of individuality already by the system. In the aforementioned image, the dead faces are those that have been colonized, assimilated, and White-washed while the living face symbolizes the colonial subject’s true identity.

On the other hand, making the dolls also functions as a subtly subversive act, as the aunt’s “hobby” complies with patriarchal expectations, yet it ultimately fractures them from the inside out with her last, most monstrous doll. The catalyst for

this event arrives in the form of the doctor's son, "who had just returned from studying medicine up *north*" when he accompanies his father on a visit to see "the prawn that [had] been paying for [his] education these twenty years" (emphasis mine, 4). Here, the doctor's son represents both a patriarchal and colonizing force, continuing the violent legacy of his father when, "from then on it was the young doctor who visited the old aunt every month" (4-5). His outfits consist of "a pair of brightly polished shoes, a starched collar, and an ostentatious tiepin of extravagant poor taste"; this, in conjunction with his American education, signifies his *nouveau riche*, a contrast in social and economic status with the aunt's family on its deteriorating *hacienda*. What with U.S. colonization well under way in Puerto Rico, the young doctor represents the "New Money," capitalist generation that is both supporting and engaging itself through that change. In contrast, the *sacarocracia* as symbolized by the world of the aunt sees its young women—the "nieces" in this story—married away from the antiquated *hacienda*. Eventually the youngest, "intrigued by [the young doctor's] drowsy profile, . . . deathly curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like," marries him and leaves the *hacienda* as well (5). Her new husband moves them into "town, in a square house that made one think of a cement block," but still compels her to boast her membership to the former *sacarocracia* and, in doing so, improve his own social status. In town, he displays her like an object of adornment when he makes her "sit out on the balcony, so that passersby would be sure to see that he had married into society" (5). While her husband insists on promoting the lie that he is "a genuine member of the extinct sugarcane aristocracy up close," the niece's reality begins to mimic that of a doll, as she, like her aunt, also becomes immobile, physically and figuratively, and again at the hands of an exploitative physician (6). As López argues, in this moment "el joven médico y su

padre son figuras con funciones que convergen en un mismo significado: son los violadores, los que degradan” or “the young doctor’s and his father’s functions converge under the same significance: they are the rapists, those who degrade” (57). Both have rendered the aunt and her niece as object bodies at the doctors’ disposal. Together, the women represent the two possibilities that their class permits them: a female dependent without a husband, children, and beauty whose lack of femininity denies her agency or a matron with a husband and beauty whose acknowledged femininity still lacks agency.

Although this narrative locks the aunt into a circumscribed existence, it also permits her the unexpected revenge that begins the moment she gifts the final doll to her about-to-be-married niece. Over the course of the niece’s married life, this feminine toy transforms into an emblem of abjection that permits both women to avenge themselves together by transgressing the authority of the doctors who have victimized them. The doll represents a union between their female identities:

On her wedding day, as she was about to leave the house, the youngest was surprised to find that the doll the aunt had given her as a wedding present was *warm*. As she slipped her arm around her waist, she examined her attentively, but quickly forgot about it, so amazed was she at the excellence of the craft. The doll’s face and hands were made of the most delicate Mikado porcelain, and in her half-open and slightly sad smile she recognized *her full set of baby teeth*. There was also another notable detail: the aunt had embedded *her diamond eardrops* in the doll’s pupils. (emphasis mine, Ferré 6)

The immobility of the doll is merely artificial, as its actual living status surfaces when the diamond eardrops come to life. At the end of the story, the aunt’s merging with

the niece is evident when the doctor's patients "would sit beside her" and "notice a strange scent that would involuntarily make them think of a slowly oozing sweetsop" (6). As Cynthia Sloan argues, this fusion between the two women "allows for the [older woman's] resurrection of her deep-seated anger and frustration. It is the only means available to her to denounce the injustices that have been perpetrated against the women of her family" (40). United within this feminine, infantile and immobile symbol of the doll, these female characters join together and reclaim their agency. The women silently take advantage of the younger doctor's assumption that they are submissive to subvert his expectations of femininity by rendering them ghoulish. Like the dolls, the youngest niece miraculously defies time by keeping "the same firm, porcelained skin" that she had had when the doctor "had called on her at the big house on the plantation" (Ferré 6). Despite her seemingly ageless beauty, however, one night he notices that her heart sounds like "a distant swish of water" and that "her chest wasn't moving" (6). When he goes to examine her with a stethoscope, "*the doll* lifted up her eyelids, and out of the empty sockets of her eyes came the frenzied antennae of all those prawns" (emphasis mine, 6). Evidently, something monstrous has invaded the traditional feminine stereotype that led him to marry her in the first place. The fusion of the aunt, niece and doll produces something ugly and violent. In her article, Carmen Rivera suggests that Ferré employs this image of "the rotting doll...as a metaphor of the anger and frustration that are consuming [seemingly conventional] women inside" (96). Similarly, the metaphor of the doll as filled with honey testifies to the idea that honey or "feminine sweetness" can become as violent as the sting of the bees that produce it. The girl's toy parody of herself—the doll—transforms, in a feminist twist on magical realism, into a violent tool that "allows

women to rebel against the roles imposed by society and to use their passivity as a weapon” (96).

In “The Youngest Doll,” the subversion of the patriarchy is subtle and silent, yet never loses its violent impact. Throughout the story, Ferré’s female characters hardly speak but eventually act with great power and certainty. Although it appears as though patriarchal and colonial society, exemplified by the doctors, have robbed them of their agency by reducing them into dependent, silent figures, the doll demonstrates how “el personaje pasivo se convierte en el agente, el que hace cosas” (“the passive character turns into the agent, that which acts”) (López 56). The end of the story, while magical and gothic, confirms that female rage has slowly and silently reversed their passivity. They use the façade of a doll behind which to turn “their mute and passive behavior [into] weapons against those who impose such silence and traditional roles on them” (Rivera 101). In this way, the broader subjugation of Puerto Rican female elites within the sugar cane aristocracy as passive decorative objects meant only for marriage and procreation is avenged by turning the female body itself from coveted possession to powerful site of repudiation. As a monstrous-feminine figure, the doll-woman becomes an abject body that simultaneously horrifies and fascinates, fixing the male gaze of the doctor. By blurring the boundaries between what is feminine and what is monstrous, the doll collapses the separation between what is human and what is inanimate and destroys societal confidence about what is “reality.” The ambiguous nature of this monstrous doll provokes “a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles” and thus solidifies its abject status (Kristeva 4). The aunt’s revenge “draws attention to the fragility of the law”—laws of meaning created by patriarchal and imperial forces designed to differentiate between hegemonic power and inferior Others (4). In this regard, the river prawns that stream from the doll’s

eyes and attack the doctor do not even represent the largest threat; rather, it is the doll, whose abjection marginalizes her as monstrous and Other yet also allows her a space to break free from gender and colonial confinements.

### Chapter 3

## A Terror That Dissembles in *The House on the Lagoon*

Marked as her first work published in English in 1995 and later translated into Spanish by Rosario Ferré herself in 1997, her novel *The House on the Lagoon* follows six generations of family history through the eyes of narrator Isabel Monfort, who appears to write an historical account of her family as well as that of her husband, Quintín Mendizábal. Reflecting on her life as an upper-middle class Puerto Rican woman, Isabel represents the dually privileged and subjugated status of women like her within the confines of the antiquated *sacarocracia* and U.S. colonization on the island. Though unable to express her identity aloud, Isabel uses her account as her source of agency and, later, revenge against Quintín as well as other men who have similarly silenced the women in their families. Further, her manuscript serves a double purpose in highlighting moments of abjection and subtle opportunities for agency within that silence.

While at first the novel appears to recreate the issues raised in “The Youngest Doll,” Ferré expands her focus from the *criollo* protagonists Isabel and her mother-in-law Rebecca to include a postcolonial subject—Petra Avilés. The postcolonial vision of the novel addresses the complex power relations in the life of Petra, an Afro-Puerto Rican woman whose role as a servant for three generations in the Mendizábal household proves crucial to understanding the intersectionality of oppressive systems at work in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Puerto Rico. Though Isabel’s control of the narration further highlights Petra’s marginalization as a lower-class Black woman and as a subaltern, her inclusion alone demonstrates Ferré’s attempt to reveal the intersections between patriarchal and colonial forces as they converge in the figure of Petra. Further, this inclusion grows as the novel progresses, as Isabel slowly realizes that White women



worsen their own subjugation when they oppress women of lower social status to raise their own within patriarchal and colonial structures. However, Ferré also reveals how women like Isabel use their abjection as monstrous dolls to seek violent revenge on their oppressors. They and the subalterns they acknowledge may all appear outwardly submissive—colonized and subjugated both similarly and dissimilarly under these colonial and patriarchal influences—Isabel, her mother-in-law Rebecca, and Petra ultimately exert power through their abjection that destabilizes the hegemony's repression of their identities.

From the beginning of *The House on the Lagoon*, its unconventional form signals a break from normal historical accounts with its ambiguous structure through which Isabel interjects marginalized perspectives in the familiar Boom-era family sagas made famous by Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez. In those sections dominated by her own voice, Isabel narrates the nonlinear novel in first person, switching between longer chapters split into eight parts that she dedicates to recounting the Monfort-Mendizábal family history, and shorter sections written in italics that represent her retrospective musings after finishing the manuscript. While she never directly addresses readers in second person, Isabel indirectly acknowledges their presence in these shorter sections, which function as asides to readers: both sections combine to make the current manuscript in the readers' hands. In the first of these italicized sections, Isabel explains her reasoning for writing at all: her "original purpose was to interweave the woof of my memories with the warp of Quintín's recollections, but what I finally wrote was something very different" (Ferré 6). Here, the novel also mimics the confidential tone of a diary, a medium which notably served as one of the earliest acceptable forms of female self-expression, since it operated within the private sphere which patriarchy relegates women. In her own critical

feminist theory, Ferré contends that “women's literature is also more subversive than men's because it often delves into forbidden zones—areas bordering on the irrational, madness, love and death—zones that our rational and utilitarian society makes it dangerous to recognize” (*The Writer's Kitchen* 242). Accordingly, Isabel's writing conveys the abject condition of her female characters' lives through the novel's blending of genres and subversive themes that decenter the Puerto Rican master narrative represented—literally—by her loudly protesting husband, Quintín.

Additionally, many of the stories related by Isabel stem from gossip, second- and third-hand accounts, memory, and imagination—stereotypically female modes of communication—yet she depicts them all as valid forms of knowing. At one point, she writes of her book that “Quintín, of course, would deny these stories about his father if he ever read them. I admit they're no better than hearsay” (34). Here, Isabel highlights the patriarchal degradation of female perspectives in favor of an “objective,” male truth which reinforces their hegemonic power. Not only does Isabel voice the Othered, female perspective in her work, but she also makes readers question their own experiences of truth, conveying abjection through ambiguous stories that resist identification as fact or fiction. Historian Gerda Lerner explains the source of such abjection in the way patriarchal standards of intellectual thought have meant that women “have learned to mistrust their own experience and devalue it.” Thus, “women's knowledge becomes mere ‘intuition,’ women's talk becomes ‘gossip.’” Lerner connects this patriarchal devaluing of female insights into their own experiences as akin to that of minorities, arguing that “women, like the poor, the subordinate, the marginals, have close knowledge of ambiguity, of feelings mixed with thought, of value judgments coloring abstractions.” These perspectives become

abjected by the hegemony as a means of purifying those at the center from these inferior lenses of experience (224).

Colonizing forces employ the same strategies to impose certain “truths” on colonized subjects to control their experiences, limit their agency, and silence their voices. In *Abjection and Representation*, scholar Rina Arya examines social abjection as rooted in the “fear of the other-in-the-self that we want to expel” (7). She explains how this fear “may be displaced on to individuals and groups in society who are on the fringes and are stigmatized because their differences are not understood.” These figures represent a threat to hegemonic subjects in their Otherness and are thus coded as “abject, lowly and despicable and...are ‘cast away’” into marginalization. While social abjection works actively and violently to silence marginalized voices, Spivak reminds liberal elites that attempting to speak *for* these subjects also constitutes as a form of violence. Instead of reproducing textual versions colonial structures by trying to articulate the subaltern’s situation for others, Spivak urges a front-loading of the subaltern voice itself on its own terms. Not only does this action celebrate difference rather than devalue it, but it also allows these subjects to reclaim agency. By integrating imagination and historical fiction with subaltern and abjected perspectives, Isabel’s manuscript challenges patriarchal and colonial ideas of truth as universally held and experienced, allowing a space for abjection to disturb both psychic and social hegemonic meaning through the novel’s form.

Within the novel, the threat posed by elevating the abject feminine and Other into narrative dominance is best exemplified through Quintín, who, part-way through the book, finds Isabel’s manuscript and begins to challenge her accounts with his own contrasting version of family and Puerto Rican history. First he begins by adding margin notes that get narrativized in these sections which are italicized (like Isabel’s

notes to the reader) and are written in third-person omniscient; since Isabel deconstructs the barrier between reader and text within the first few pages by acknowledging her continued role as author, it can be inferred that Quintín's sections also fall under her authorship. This not only causes readers to reevaluate Isabel's reliability and their definitions of truth, but also effectively abjects the text itself. Here again, author Arya elaborates on the connection between literature and the abject. In following Julia Kristeva's own theories, Arya argues that "the task of the writer is to make [the abject] manifest" in their work (156). She goes on to assert that "literature does not impose prohibitions," but rather it engages in that which is prohibited to transgress societal norms and reveal their fragility. In this way, literature has the unique ability to take the "reader *through* an experience of abjection in both content and style" (original italics 158). Taking *The House on the Lagoon* as an example, the style of the novel combines journal-like sections with historical summaries, merging genres in a way that both confuses and delights readers in its contradictory and intimate nature; further, the transgressive content of the novel contributes to its abjection, as it deals with violence, sex, greed as well as the construction of gender and race, evoking, as Arya posits "a sense of repulsion in the reader, who feels drawn in but is simultaneously repulsed." In this vein, Isabel's ambiguously truthful account unveils the patriarchal and colonial construction of meaning and universal truth by causing readers to feel unstable from the beginning.

For his part, Quintín's reaction (as narrated by Isabel) further aligns him with the patriarchal and colonial forces attempting to abject all other versions of truth. Incensed by her contrasting perspective of shared events, Quintín claims that Isabel "had altered everything. She was manipulating history for fiction's sake" (71). As a businessman with a degree in history, Quintín contends that "history is one of

fiction's most important quarries...imagination being the other important source" (71). Though what he reads makes him "uncomfortable" and "uneasy," Quintín comforts himself by degrading her work when he claims that "what Isabel had written was absurd; it was impossible to take seriously," effectively discounting all she has written as lies (71, 72, 75). He admits that "literature wasn't ethical enough for him... There was always a nucleus of truth and it was wrong to alter it. That was why Quintín didn't consider writing a serious occupation, like science or history" (72). Underneath this seemingly benign critique of aesthetic taste lies a more insidious association with and later degradation of literature as associated with the mysterious female and the racial Other. Untamable fiction, which is by definition untrue, becomes female and Other, while science and history, associated with civilization, become objective truths. By writing her novel in an unconventional form and aligning it with the abject, Ferré questions patriarchal and colonial notions of truth and history, and instead places value on minority and female voices as well as Othered, "female" qualities such as imagination, memory, emotion, and art—deemed as lesser by these imposing forces.

### **The Return of the Monstrous-Feminine**

Among its modes of abjection is Isabel's identification of the family's own monstrous dolls. The most prominent is Rebecca Arrigoitia, Quintín's mother, whose subtle revenge on patriarchy upon her death contributes to her abject status. Rebecca, descended from upper-class Italian-American and Spanish immigrants, epitomizes female oppression within *la sacarocracia* at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and seems a more extensive variation on the final niece in "The Youngest Doll." As a child, Rebecca's father spoiled her, buying her everything she ever wanted as a sign of their family's high socioeconomic status. Yet, in exchange, "he expected her to obey him

in all things. She became a virtual prisoner; he never let her do anything on her own” (Lagoon 96). Her father did not allow her to attend university and made her “stay home and help [her mother] with the housework” (97). During these early stagnant years, Rebecca stoked her independent spirit, swearing “that one day she would gain her freedom and fly to all parts of the world,” as to her, “every woman should be a republic unto herself.” With these independent aspirations, adolescent Rebecca appeared ready to break out of her ivory tower and take on the world.

Later on, in their search for an acceptable husband for 16-year-old Rebecca, her parents choose Buenaventura Mendizábal, a Spanish merchant and self-made man newly arrived on the island, now a U.S. colony. Like the youngest niece in the earlier story, Rebecca marries Buenaventura based on appearances: “she wanted a true monarch, one who could subdue her with a single glance. A sovereign with shoulders spread like infantry battalions, strong cavalry thighs, and eyes so blue they made you want to sail out to sea. A real commander in chief, who would raise her slumbering regiments at a command” (27-28). The military diction in this description subordinates Rebecca with its violent and conquering tone, one that continues when Isabel elaborates on how Rebecca wanted

a prince who longed for the whole of her: her marzipan throat and her cream-puff shoulders, her coconut-custard breasts, her dainty rice-and-cinnamon feet, and her delicate ginger pussy; one who would eat her, lick her, nip her, and drink her, and then grind her into powdered sugar in his arms. (28)

Not only do these passages foreshadow the violence of their marriage, but it also contains several white dessert images, emphasizing Rebecca as a product of the upper-class White *criollo sacarocracia* as well as objectifying her as a delicate and

virginal food item meant to entice and be consumed by her husband. Rebecca appears as the ideal woman: beautiful with “her golden curls” and light skin, submissive to her parents’ and husband’s wills, and elegant given her *criollo* riches (27). However, her perfectly feminine exterior proves fragile, as Isabel forebodingly reveals that, after the marriage, “not a trace would be left of the porcelain doll her parents kept hidden in her silk-lined boudoir at the end of the bedroom corridor” (28). One might argue that Rebecca and the doll become one and the same as she relocates to her husband’s world.

As a girl, Rebecca felt trapped within the confines of her socioeconomic class, and this entrapment only worsens in marriage. Though Rebecca enjoys vast privileges such as the freedom to write poetry, dance, and entertain her avant-garde friends almost every night, Buenaventura’s abuse of her greatly limits her self-expression. Soon after their wedding, Rebecca begins to feel “more and more estranged from her husband...[when she] discovered that he didn’t like poetry and hated ballet,” art forms associated with feminine tastes assume abject dimensions in her household (46). Soon Buenaventura begins to take away her agency and her independent activities, and transforms her into his doll, requiring Rebecca “to be at his side at all formal receptions for Spanish dignitaries and for goodwill ambassadors from other European countries” (50). Rebecca spirals into unhappiness when Buenaventura disregards key aspects of her identity, “refus[ing] to let her meet with her artist friends” and prohibiting her from hosting her “poetry readings, concerts, and dance recitals” (51). By not allowing Rebecca to express herself and disregarding art itself as worthless and feminine, Buenaventura maintains their home as a “Temple of Commerce and Diplomacy where [he] reigned supreme.” At one point, Rebecca, “terrified of his outbursts,” attempts to leave Buenaventura, but finds out soon after

that she is pregnant with their first child (Quintín) and returns, ensnared by patriarchal norms which ostracize and impoverish divorced women with children (52). Although originally “she didn’t want children” and considered herself “a free spirit,” Rebecca resigns herself to motherhood but, in a trade-off with Buenaventura, she resumes her artistic endeavors and regains some agency in the process (39). Afraid of losing his upper-class status with Rebecca gone, Buenaventura begs her to return, granting her partial freedom to resume her artist life in exchange for her subservience as his wife.

Yet what little power she holds is soon ripped away when, at one of her artist’s soirees, Buenaventura severely beats Rebecca for performing a semi-nude dance. During the dance, she “took off each of her seven veils and was almost stark naked, except for the golden goblets” covering her breasts (65). Though to Rebecca and her friends, this dance paid homage to a beautiful art form, when Buenaventura “saw Rebecca, he didn’t say a word. He simply took off his cordovan belt, livid with rage, and flogged her until she fell unconscious to the floor” (65). Afterward, Rebecca went through life “like a broken doll, dressed in one of her flowing gauze gowns, and wouldn’t say a word,” becoming “silent and withdrawn,” having “lost touch with reality” ever since (66). This horrific event not only changed Rebecca permanently, but also scarred seven-year-old Quintín, whose “mother’s naked body remained etched in his mind all his life.” Hidden in the shadows, Quintín observed everything and watched as Rebecca’s “purple veils fell to the floor one by one, until a single streak of gauze covered her golden pubis. Quintín was both fascinated and terrified by what he saw.” In this moment, Rebecca’s body becomes a site of profound abjection; as a woman daring to reveal her body in public, she disrupts feminine expectations and threatens to break down societal norms. While the violent reaction of Buenaventura stems from a dual attraction to and fear before the threat of a woman in



control of her own body, Quintín's horrified reaction recalls Kristeva's theories of the maternal body as the initial site of abjection. In this way, Quintín doubly abjects his mother's broken, naked body: both in response to her violent wounds and to her maternal body exposed in such a demeaning way.

Yet this act of abjection becomes the base on which Rebecca is able to build her revenge undetected. While initially Rebecca did not want children, soon after Buenaventura beats her she "found that she was pregnant again, and was surprisingly submissive" (68). Entrapped by three subsequent pregnancies, Rebecca seemed "reconciled to her fate. But she was exhausted. She put away her dancing shoes and her poetry books and slowly faded from view" (69). Here, she appears oppressed by her husband's harsh re-imposition of patriarchal constraints on her behavior yet, in reality, Rebecca had pieced her doll exterior back together and set herself on her next performance—that of "being the perfect wife" (119). Forced to put aside her dreams of being a poet and dance in favor of Buenaventura's doll-like wife and mother to his children, Rebecca determined that her only option in seeking revenge was to "be a rebel by being obedient; in fact, absolute obedience can be the most perfect kind of rebellion." Years later, Isabel notes that Rebecca had spent her life "obey[ing] Buenaventura and liv[ing] the spartan life he had imposed on her, but when I met her she was tired of playing the martyr....She wanted to enjoy life" (214). Once Buenaventura died, Rebecca finally began to express her anger after decades of abuse and oppression at the hands of her husband and the socioeconomic class conventions that obligated her to stay with him. In her final appearance in Chapter 26 (aptly entitled "Rebecca's Revenge"), Rebecca, now a widow, inherited the position of acting president of the family business Mendizábal & Company. Though Buenaventura "had always believed in the law of primogeniture," Rebecca had other

ideas; upon her death, Rebecca split the company shares equally among all four of her children, citing that they must vote among themselves on its next president rather than willing the presidency to Quintín, the oldest son (266). Though Quintín had pleaded with her to give him the presidency, reasoning that she would “be doing Father’s bidding and at the same time you’ll be assuring the company’s future,” Rebecca appeared to heed her son’s advice, but at the last minute did the exact opposite by splitting the company evenly among his offspring (267). In avenging herself against Buenaventura, months dead at this point, Rebecca spent almost all his money, sent his company into debt, and indirectly ruined the lives of her children, as her son Ignacio eventually committed suicide after failing the company as its elected president, in essence, Rebecca’s own willfulness effectively divided her family.

Here, Rebecca’s status as a monstrous doll is revealed; though on the outside, she appeared the perfect wife and even the ideal woman, her unexpected revenge “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 4). Her “hatred that smiles” proved worse than “a friend who stabs you”—as a presumably loving wife and mother she metaphorically stabbed her family, abjecting her from them and society. Yet in this abject position as a vindictive mother, wife, doll, and finally corpse, Rebecca regained the agency she once had and found power after all. The question remains as to how positive this power was: after being beaten by Buenaventura, Rebecca internalized the patriarchal warning that the only way to maintain her high socioeconomic status as the wife of a successful business owner was to perform as the perfect criollo wife. Though this meant submission to her husband’s desires, it also entailed a degree of violence toward other women, namely women of color and those of the lower classes, to ensure her own lifestyle. Lerner puts Rebecca’s actions in a broader context when she notes that the “system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of

women...by a variety of means.” In Rebecca’s case, that involved “the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining ‘respectability’ and ‘deviance’ according to women’s sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women” (217). For example, by constantly putting Isabel down as of inferior class status and by belittling Petra with her racist abuse, Rebecca elevated herself within the patriarchal and colonial structures to which she had aligned herself, a position most evident when she admitted that “she liked being married to [Buenaventura] because he was a powerful man,” though he abuses her throughout their marriage (54). The irony behind Rebecca’s violent actions toward other women, of course, resided in the fact that she could never reach equal status with male elites within these systems of oppression as a woman herself. Though she might attempt to gain his respect, Buenaventura never saw her as a fully autonomous human due to his patriarchal values. Further, in the U.S., she would be seen as Brown, not White, making her a racial minority similar to Petra, who is Black in both spaces. Because of the supposed power she gained from putting down other women, Rebecca transformed herself into a monstrous doll internally diseased by an abject, violent revenge that ultimately destroyed her family.

Another monstrous doll within the novel is Isabel herself; although, in the bold telling of her family saga and personal story she seeks to change the feminine legacy that threatens to swallow her as Rebecca had been swallowed. Born to upper-middle-class *criollo* parents, Isabel was raised principally by her paternal grandmother, Abby, as her mother Carmita gambled her life away and her father eventually committed suicide, both as indirect consequences of an event which marked Isabel’s first experience with abjection. She describes how, when she was three years old,

“something dreadful happened which I’ve never been able to forget”: Carmita’s traumatic abortion through the coercive interference of her own mother. Isabel remembers “playing with her dolls under the terebinth tree...[when] I heard her cry out. I dropped my dolls...and flung open the bathroom door” (81-82). There, she found her mother, whom Abby once described as “a Raggedy Ann doll,” collapsed “on the floor unconscious; a pool of blood lay on the white tiles like lacquer” (142, 82). Isabel recalls “feeling both excited and afraid” at discovering the maternal betrayal behind Carmita’s later infertility and the reality of her own body’s potential reproductive horrors (86). In this scene, Carmita abjects quite literally the fetus inside her in order to keep the promise to her mother to limit her pregnancies to one (a promise demanded because of the older woman’s own abjection by six pregnancies in seven years that broke both her body and her spirit). This image of Carmita also undone by pregnancy haunts Isabel, who describes her as subsequently “liv[ing] in a perpetual mist. She wouldn’t let me kiss or embrace her, because I reminded her of the dead baby” (87). This abjection destroys Carmita, who spirals into a deep depression from which she never emerges and which also casts a shadow over Isabel’s life. She, too, remains haunted by the dead baby, whom she holds “responsible for my hidden wound” (81). Through this wound festering in her imagination as she becomes an abject figure herself, forever infected by a terrifying proof of the “monstrous” female body.

Death seems to be a constant companion in Isabel’s life: not only does she witness her mother’s abortion but she also experiences the trauma of her father’s suicide during her college years. Isabel remembers that, after he hung himself with a Sears garden hose, she “saw him first. I ran down the stairs and out into the street, terrified” (202). Following her graduation, Isabel also watched Abby die slowly from

old age: she herself finds the beloved woman dead, “lying in bed, her wedding linen perfectly ironed around her” (204). Isabel also concludes that she had “had to put Carmita in an asylum” when taking care of the deeply depressed woman had subjected the younger woman daily to further examples of her mother’s intensifying abjection: for example, she had to bathe her mother every morning “because she woke up covered in excrement.” Isabel’s sustained exposure to the abject also makes her comfortable with it as a pervasive aspect of the human condition, unlike Quintín, who seems to repudiate horrific moments in his life. Instead, she consistently embodies the abject within her manuscript in ways that build the forms of revenge she takes against Quintín, both literally and textually.

After graduating from Vassar College in New York and “tak[ing] every course I could in Spanish literature,” Isabel returns to the island with the intention of becoming a writer, but soon puts her passion aside to marry Quintín (202). Though at the beginning of their marriage, the young couple appear happy, Quintín soon obligates her to integrate herself into the Mendizábal family—a requirement which threatens her very identity. While Isabel is White by island standards with her red hair and light skin, well-educated and bilingual, as well as middle-class, she describes how her “inheritance was negligible next to the kind of money the Mendizábals had, and they probably would have preferred that Quintín marry a girl from one of San Juan’s old, established families” (209). Additionally, she writes how Rebecca and Buenaventura thought her “overeducated and far too Americanized” to be a model wife for their son. Evidently, her lower-class status and implied feminist leanings make Isabel an unsatisfactory bride in their eyes, forcing Isabel to work twice as hard to prove otherwise by performing the role of the perfect Mendizábal wife. This entailed putting aside her writing, attending all formal family functions, and

remaining silent in the face of Buenaventura and Rebecca—essentially, becoming the doll Rebecca once was.

Eager to fit in, Isabel remains silent at many key points during the novel, constrained by the conventions of her class and gender as well as her cultural complicity in subjugating women of color. Shortly after the couple moves into the house on the lagoon, Buenaventura takes Isabel on several boat rides across the water to Lucumí Beach where “there were usually several black women waiting for us on shore....[T]hey seldom spoke” (212). Later, she notices that “some of the black children coming out of [the local] school had gray-blue eyes like Buenaventura.” When she questions Quintín about this, she learns that “his father sometimes liked taking the black women of Lucumí to the beach, where he made love to them on the sand for a few dollars” (213). Though Isabel professes to the reader her disgust with Buenaventura’s actions; however, she remains silent about it to her spouse and she never reveals Buenaventura’s prostitution of these poor, Black women until she writes her manuscript. Isabel’s confession of silence or lack of action in the face of ongoing racism and sexism permeates her narration. One glaring example of Isabel’s “sins of omission” occurs when the Mendizábal family rejects Ignacio’s courtship of Esmeralda Márquez because, as Quintín explains, “she’s part black” and his parents would never allow an interracial marriage (232). Isabel, though incensed at this stance, “was too afraid to say anything” and remained silent on the issue, watching instead as Ignacio’s broken heart begins the downward spiral of his future. Though she depicts herself and most of the women in their families as victims, Isabel initially glosses over their role in the racism, sexism, and violence rampant in their own homes that contributes to the patriarchal and colonial subjugation and ultimately the abjection of the women of color in the novel.

Nor do the consequences escape her own immediate family. This racist pattern eerily repeats itself years later when her own son, Manuel, wants to date Esmeralda's daughter Coral. Quintín shares his parents' racism, as he forbids the relationship on the grounds that "she's part black....And *that's* why you can't marry Coral" (original italics 346). He goes on to say that Mendizábal blood "doesn't have a drop of Arab, Jewish or black blood in it" and he plans to keep it that way by ensuring a "white marriage" for his son. Here, Isabel finds her voice: desperate to save her son from Ignacio's sad fate, she pleads with Quintín to support the couple, but her words fail to move Quintín, in part because of her years of accommodating his tyranny. Coral herself condemns Isabel: "I know all about you, Isabel, and your 'liberal' ideas....But this house, the life you lead, is a complete contradiction of them....You're nothing but a sellout and a sham!" (353). Coral throws Isabel's White silence before racial injustice within her own sphere of influence in her face, asserting that Isabel's armchair sympathy constitutes as a form of violence itself. By failing to act against the racism of Buenaventura, Rebecca, Quintín, and even her grandmother Abby, Isabel becomes complicit in the cycles of colonial and patriarchal oppression that continue to subordinate women of color below White women. However, as the novel continues, Isabel begins to align herself more and more with abject women such as Petra in an attempt to recognize and utilize her own privilege to break this violent cycle.

It is not until much later, after Buenaventura and Rebecca have both died, Quintín starts a successful company apart from the family business, and Isabel has given birth to their son, Manuel, that all appears well. She even admits that her "life was blessed in many ways. I had a beautiful son and a magnificent house. I could read and write as much as I wanted" (300). Yet just moments after this, she writes that she

“never felt truly happy,” a feeling that only increases after Isabel discovers several secrets about Quintín through Petra. After Ignacio’s suicide in the wake of a broken heart and the bankruptcy of Mendizábal & Company, Petra discloses to Isabel that, in the struggles over Esmeralda, he had reached out to Quintín for help in resisting his parents, but was harshly refused. Later, she also discovers that Quintín had also raped Petra’s great-granddaughter Carmelina on one of their family trips to Lucumí Beach—this revelation is made when she finds Petra holding “a beautiful mulatto baby on her lap” nine months later (318). Isabel overhears Petra crooning to the baby that he “got [his] skin from the Avilés side of the family and your eyes from the Mendizábals.” When she confronted Quintín, he admits his betrayal and they adopt the baby as their own, naming him Willie. It is during this time that Isabel comes to the realization that “Quintín was a scoundrel and I should leave him. But what was I to do without money and with a newborn child? The only thing I could do was wait” (292). With this terrible knowledge, Isabel forces herself to play the role of content wife, a performance which comes at great cost to her identity: “little by little, I became a different person. I had lost my old spunk and could stand up to Quintín less and less” (398). When Quintín hurled abuse at her, Isabel “listened with bowed head,” and “was so afraid of him I went around on tiptoe.” In an ugly echo of her mother’s trauma, he warns her that “if you get pregnant a second time, I’ll have to ask you to get an abortion” and she accepts his word as final (301). Another key measure of her powerlessness is that she “wasn’t writing anymore and that also depressed me.” These descriptions demonstrate the shell of a person Isabel had become under Quintín and the restrictive patriarchal family he imposed on her, rendering her silent and docile in response.



Ultimately, these awful revelations fuel Isabel's transformation from a submissive to a monstrous doll who, with the help of Petra, uses her abjection to gain power and avenge herself against Quintín. As she narrates Quintín and his family's history of transgressions into, she describes how her now-weaponized abjection haunts him as he reads her account. In his view, Isabel "revealed secrets he wouldn't have whispered to anyone," yet his initial shame and embarrassment at her stories demonstrates the power her words hold over him from the beginning (107). At every turn, her abjection of his family threatens to break down his carefully constructed authority, including his conviction that "there was a true and a false, a right and a wrong." He admits that "Isabel was different, though. 'Nothing is true, nothing is false, everything is the color of the glass you're looking through' was one of her favorite sayings" (106). What he used perceive as petty differences in tastes between husband and wife begins to take a serious turn in Isabel's manuscript, as Quintín's growing paranoia over her writing demonstrates. In another effort at patriarchal dismissal, he initially denigrates the "fictionalizing" she is undertaking, regarding it as a lesser—and misleading—narrative construction than historical writing (in keeping with his own master's degree work in history). Though at first, he attempts to write off her work as mediocre gossip hiding behind novelistic license, once he begins to recognize the threat to his family's reputation that it poses, he decides to "help Isabel write the perfect novel" by editing, revising, and correcting her "errors" and "misrepresentations" (188). This meddling with her text drives Isabel to expose more of the treachery, lies, and violence in their family histories and within their own marriage. In doing so, Isabel keeps moving away from the circle of female elites with whom she has been associated as a Mendizábal in the patriarchal and colonial power structure.

By continuing to write the novel and thereby defy Quintín's interference, Isabel knowable, doll exterior must give way in his mind to a revelation of her unknowable, ambiguous monstrous-feminine interior. Through fiction, Isabel moves into a space of abjection where she finds power and revenge. Quintín recognizes the threat this poses to his power, citing that "she was all innocence, all guileless spontaneity on the surface, and underneath, this terrible hate, churning. The intensity of her emotions, the violence she [was] capable of, seeped through her words like a deadly poison" (193). As the novel continues, Quintín "began to worry that he was in some kind of danger...[But] as long as the novel wasn't published, she couldn't hurt his reputation and she certainly couldn't hurt him physically. Or could she?" (294). While he had thought of his marriage as a happy one and believed he knew his wife before, Quintín now begins to doubt everything as Isabel draws him closer and closer to the abject space she creates to expose the poetic reality of Puerto Rican history as embodied in their family tragedies. He even tries desperately to suppress Isabel-the-abject by his manuscript interpolations, his physical and mental health begin to deteriorate with the effort, as "he complained of pains in his chest" and his doctor tells him to "avoid undue stress if he wanted to live" (325). But when Quintín discontinues reading the novel, "not knowing what Isabel had written made him feel as if he were sinking into the mangrove swamp, as if he were losing his grip on reality" (327). The threat of abjection proves too much for Quintín and once again he searches for the manuscript (Isabel's having hidden it from him more than once), only to fail this time, as she has hidden it with Petra, a final declaration of her alignment with the Other, a woman who is both monstrous-feminine and subaltern. He finally confronts Isabel directly by telling her that if he cannot find the text and she publishes it, he will kill her, to which she replies "You'll *never* find it! ...I'll kill *you* first" (original italics

375). This murderous Isabel contrasts dramatically with the earlier Isabel who proclaimed: “I hate violence—I’m not a violent person at all, and this kind of thing horrifies me” (183). Having released her voice and her vision at last, Isabel has embraced her monstrous self, no longer a doll at all before Quintín’s effort to reimpose her oppression.

Isabel’s ultimate abjection lies in her final act of revenge against Quintín: complicity in his death. Fleeing the house on the lagoon with her adopted son Willie, she attempts to escape the abuse of her husband and the violence of her biological son Manuel, who had recently joined the violent Communist group AK-47 that seeks a Castro-style revolution in Puerto Rico. Her escape plans are partially foiled when Quintín returns home unexpectedly and Isabel, playing the doll by “pretend[ing] that nothing was the matter,” hides the fact that she had already packed her and Willie’s luggage into a boat waiting for them on the lagoon (403). That same night, AK-47 breaks into their home in an attack on Quintín led by a hooded Manuel, causing Quintín to turn to the boat as their collective escape. He quickly discovers their luggage and violently confronts Isabel for planning to leave him, attempting to strike and beat her into submission. From the bottom of the boat, Isabel recalls a litany of her abject moments in their marriage and finds the will to enact her revenge:

Slowly I got up from where I had fallen on my knees....I swung the boat around and pushed down full-throttle. The boat lurched forward as we raced back under the terrace. Quintín was facing me, about to strike me again. He never saw the iron beam approaching. It hit the back of his head, and he fell forward into the mangroves. I cut the engine, slowed the boat, and looked on with an almost surreal awareness. Quintín lay motionless off the starboard side, floating

facedown in the water, half lying on the mangrove roots. Then I saw  
the crabs moving slowly toward him. (407)

In murdering Quintín, Isabel embraces her abject status by deconstructing the various that enacted it. She does so by subverting feminine expectations and class hierarchies, muddling the moral line between justice and injustice by fighting violence with violence, and accepting her own ambiguous moral character. She writes her most aggressive move into her novel, thus clarifying what she meant in the introduction by saying it had become something far different from what she originally imagined for her narrative. Crabs, a metaphor for African slaves in the Caribbean, devour Quintín's corpse in another vile image that evokes abjection and goes so far as to symbolize the revenge of the enslaved over their White European masters and an empowering of that abjection into another version of the monstrous. With Quintín dead and the house on the lagoon burning around them, Isabel can finally make her escape from the patriarchal chains that have both subjugated her and obligated her to subjugate others. Through a reinvention of her abject status, Isabel ultimately achieves a newfound freedom.

The monstrous doll who lurks in the margins throughout the entire and functions as a shadow version of Isabel reveals herself in Petra, the Mendizábals' servant, whose subaltern abjection stems from both patriarchal and colonial structures. Though born free, Petra's parents were slaves descended from an Angolan precursor. Isabel writes of Petra that "she was strong as an ox....She was six feet tall and her skin wasn't a watered-down chocolate but a deep onyx black" (58). From the beginning, Petra's body represents a site of difference and Otherness in the house on the lagoon, where femininity is delicate, submissive, small, and decoratively doll-like: the intersection of her race and gender make her a monstrous-feminine Other from the

get-go. Further, Petra comes to signify magic and witchcraft starting when Quintín's father Buenaventura first meets her after he twists his ankle on the side of a road. Though no one is around to help him, suddenly, Petra appears and, after wrapping his foot in some "yarana leaves," disappears, leaving him with a mysteriously healed foot (63). The very next day, Buenaventura gives orders to "find the tall black medicine woman and bring her to him," making her his personal servant. In this position, Petra "took care of his clothes, polished his shoes, cooked him special dishes, and would have kissed the ground he walked on had he asked her to. She worshipped him like a god." Thus, Buenaventura rewards the woman who healed him by reducing her to a servant who waits on him hand and foot as a White savior. For her part, Rebecca "didn't even notice when Buenaventura brought Petra Avilés to work for them at the house," rendering Petra invisible by ignoring her and assigning her the most menial tasks (58). This develops into a racist and jealous hatred for Petra, whose company Buenaventura favors over his wife's, that leads the mistress of the household to restrict Petra's visibility and further accentuate her Otherness.

Though she is taken from her home to live in the mansion's cellar, Petra never loses touch with her culture or her family and gradually abjects their "pure" space with her very presence. After moving in, Petra builds "an altar to Elegguá, her favorite saint, behind the door of her room" to continue worshipping the idol "known among blacks on the island as 'He who is more than God'" (63-64). Not only does Petra ascribe to a non-Christian religion, but her association with magic becomes more pronounced when Isabel notes that "the walls of her room were lined with bottles and jars filled with strange potions and herbal unguents" (238). She continues to note that Petra "boiled all kinds of roots which she said had magical powers," further aligning her with witchcraft and *santería*, ambiguous powers feared by both

patriarchal and colonial forces for their subversive threat to Western ways of “knowing” the world. Rebecca blames Petra rather than her husband for his generally racist attraction to the servant, asserting that “from the moment she arrived at the house Petra had wielded an inexplicable power over Buenaventura...Rebecca sensed this, and she tried to get rid of Petra, but it was useless” (75). Try as she might by abusing her with lowly house chores and degrading rhetoric, Rebecca cannot fully eject her from the house or her husband’s mind, making Petra a hauntingly abject figure who erodes Rebecca’s hegemonic status as a White female elite. At several points throughout the novel, Quintín makes reference to Petra as a monster, describing how she “had entrenched herself in the cellar like a monstrous spider, and from there spun a web of malicious rumor which eventually enveloped the whole family” (74-75). This darkly horrific image disrupts the impressive exterior of the house on the lagoon, underscores how Petra threatens to expose its secrets as a spider weaves its designs hidden from sight in the nooks and crannies of homes. Furthermore, just like the spider entices its prey with a web then sneakily paralyzes it with venom while gradually consuming it alive, Petra avenges herself almost imperceptibly against the Mendizábal family. Ironically, Quintín, who in childhood revered Petra as a surrogate mother, now aligns her with the abject as a liar and a terrifying carnivore, missing just how much he has become, by his own brutal actions, “a fly, caught in Petra’s web” (249).

Oppressed as she may seem, Petra does find power in her abjection as an Othered, monstrous-feminine, subaltern figure. Relegated to the house’s cellar, Petra comes to serve literally and figuratively as the foundation of the house on the lagoon as well as the unseen keeper of all its secrets. To Isabel, Petra’s domain in “the cellar gave the house much of its mystery, the feeling that events weren’t always what they

seemed but could have unexpected echoes and repercussions” (235). When Petra finally reveals to Isabel Quintín’s treachery in raping her great-grandchild, Isabel remembers how “Petra sat there silent as the Sphinx. She didn’t admit anything, but she didn’t deny my accusations. ‘There are secrets in the Mendizábal family you know nothing about, my child’” (292). Her ambiguity and unknowability attract Isabel in a clear inversion of the threat she posed to Rebecca and especially Quintín, as he believes Isabel to be “under Petra’s spell” and that the manuscript itself is “the result of Petra’s sorcery” (293). Though this appears to be an easy out for Quintín to blame his wife’s insubordination on the poor Black woman, perhaps there is some merit in this analysis, which gives credit to Petra’s agency as well. While Quintín holds that Isabel “was Petra’s ally, and they were writing the manuscript together in order to destroy him,” another reading suggests that Petra used Isabel, a woman of higher status with more resources than herself, to get her revenge by revealing the family secrets and gaining her sympathy so as to influence the narrative she is writing (374). At one point, Quintín even wonders at the “mysterious force [which] seemed to be driving [Isabel]. Could Petra be behind all this?” (249). Yet he resists the full import of such a reading, since his patriarchal and colonial outlook prefers Petra-the-victim, incapable of amassing the power it would take to harm him. It lies beyond his imagination to see the power she gains within her abjection. This underestimating of Petra’s reach also allows her the opportunity to work her own revenge against the dynasty that has subjugated her.

The connection between Spivak’s theory of the subaltern and Kristeva’s theory of the abject lies in intersectionality. Spivak describes the doubly subjugated status of subaltern women, contending that, “within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced” (41). Here, Spivak

goes on to highlight how “the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant” regardless of race, class, etc. In this vein, she hypothesizes that “if, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more deeply in *shadow*” (italics added). The image of the shadow describes the psychic import of the abject as exposing what lurks unseen, hidden, unacknowledged, and threatening—like Petra, the monstrous spider. Though here, Spivak implied being pushed to the shadow as marginalizing and degrading, the nuanced metaphor of the shadow connects to the abject and can be paradoxically seen as a place of subjugation and of power. In *The House on the Lagoon*, Petra embodies this ambiguity between a disempowered and destabilizing subject, a subaltern and an abject figure. While a first reading of Buenaventura bringing her to work for him appears to be a kidnapping and enslavement of sorts, it also begs the question: did Petra go willingly and with a plan? Isabel touches on this subject, writing that “Petra was poor....Petra knew she wasn’t worth anything, but she meant one day to have Buenaventura’s heart” (63). As the novel progresses, it seems as though she achieves this goal when Buenaventura dies in her arms. Though Buenaventura, who recently fractured his hip, believes “Petra was giving him medicinal teas” and “rubbing [him] with cow-udder unguent and magic snake oil she had prepared...to make him better,” the true cause of his death remains open-ended (258). Though Isabel tries to give Petra space in the narrative and, in so doing, create space for her marginalized voice, Petra’s sections are still narrated by a White, upper-class woman, though one who is careful not to speak for her or presume her innermost subjectivity. Hence, Spivak’s conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak while elites continue to view them as victims. Our inability to ever fully know Petra’s truth makes her the ultimate abject figure in the novel as well as the most powerful monstrous doll. Her subtle revenge



even goes unmentioned, as Willie, her great-great-grandson makes impure the Mendizábal's formerly White bloodline with his *mulato* identity and effectively threatens the greater power of the hegemony to construct meaning and marginalize Others based on race, class, and gender.

While Rebecca and Isabel represent monstrous dolls seeking revenge against the patriarchal *sacarocracia*, Petra's ultimate revenge stems from her abjection as fueled by both patriarchal and colonial subjugation. In including Petra's character in the novel, Ferré takes her critique of the *sacarocracia* one step further and attempts to address the layers of oppression historically imposed upon Afro-Puerto Rican women on the island. Although their oppression varies depending on time period, class, and race, Rebecca, Isabel and Petra do share a gender identity which unites them to some extent against the men who have suppressed them all in the house on the lagoon. By employing a certain degree of passivity and outward submissiveness, each of these women utilize their doll-like appearance to subtly and, later, violently upend societal expectations. Through their abjection as monstrous dolls, they silently avenge themselves and regain power within a patriarchal and colonial structure.

## Chapter 4 Conclusion

By embracing the monstrous feminine and Other as well as revealing the abject throughout her works, Rosario Ferré utilizes the resulting uncertainty as a representation of the marginalized voice which has been excluded from patriarchal and colonial discourse since the beginning of time. Through her various female characters in “The Youngest Doll” and *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré depicts how females belonging to both privileged and marginalized groups must channel their creativity to be heard and even avenged within patriarchal and colonial society. In turn, they gain agency through their abjection as violent, monstrous women. With her outwardly submissive yet inwardly transgressive Othered and monstrous-feminine characters, Ferré effectively dismantles gender expectations as well as subaltern categorizations to validate the power of the abject as a threat to patriarchal and colonial imperatives.

My analysis of abjection as applied to Ferré’s works offers a new reading into the dialogue surround her feminist works as well as a more profound psychoanalytical critique of the ambiguous status of Puerto Rico itself. As neither a nation nor a state, but an unincorporated U.S. territory, the island’s position echoes that of the abject body, a theme Ferré subtly develops throughout her work by aligning Puerto Rico with her abject female characters. Keeping in mind the historical context and present realities of colonization in Puerto Rico, Ferré creates characters that mirror the island’s search for identity by offering diverse perspectives to illustrate the complex issues of the island as a modern-day colony. Her literature addresses the sharp economic, social, political, linguistic, and racial divides in Puerto Rico that carried

over from Spanish colonization and were only reinforced once the island became a U.S. territory. While Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917, they still do not hold the right to vote in presidential elections, yet are eligible for the draft and must obey the U.S. constitution and laws above their own installed government. In this way, many Puerto Ricans and politicians see the island as a U.S. colony—one used to boost both the U.S. economy and army.

By declaring Puerto Rico a Commonwealth in 1952, the U.S. has effectively delayed its decolonization of Puerto Rico ever since. Though several bills have been introduced in the U.S. Congress over the years proposing Puerto Rican independence or statehood, none have passed, leaving Puerto Rico in a constant state of colonial limbo—one that has remained for 500 years under two different empires. Throughout the island's relationship with the U.S., both peaceful protests and violent uprisings have all attempted to force some sort of change, either for statehood or independence, though so far none have prevailed. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Puerto Rican Congress has held four plebiscites in an attempt to resolve the island's ambiguous status. In June 2017, a fifth plebiscite will be held, this time with only two options—Statehood and Independence/Free Association—and will eliminate for the first time the third option of remaining a Commonwealth. However, these referendums have no actual power and the U.S. government is not obligated to honor the results, further contributing to the colonial relationship between the two countries. As recent as June 2016, the United Nations has urged the U.S. to advance the decolonization process of Puerto Rico and grant them independence from their currently indeterminate status as a nation-state.

In creating abject female characters such as the aunt and Petra, who are also more connected to the land and depicted as part-animal, part-human, Ferré develops a

subtle connection between these women and their island, leading readers to infer a connection between their statuses. If the women are abjected by society—rejected as ambiguous, monstrous, Other, threatening in their difference—then so, too, is Puerto Rico. Through her work, Ferré reveals not only the patriarchal and colonial forces at work in the subjugation of her female characters, but also within the island in and of itself. In this way, I offer the critical lens of abjection as a useful tool for analyzing the women in Ferré’s work and highlighting the systems of oppression that silence these women and their nation.

## Works Consulted

- Arya, Rina. *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Biasetti, Giada. "El poder subversivo de *La casa de la laguna* y *La niña blanca y los pájaros sin pies*: La centralización de la periferia." *Hispania* 94.1 (2011): 35-49. Web. 10 April 2016.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.
- de Kock, Leon. "Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*. 23(3) 1992: 29-47. Web. 19 April 2017.
- Duany, Jorge. "Nation on the Move: The Construction of Cultural Identities in Puerto Rico and the Diaspora." *American Ethnologist* 27.1 (2000): 5-30. Web. 28 October 2016.
- Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Kristeva: On the Abject." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. 31 January 2011. Purdue UP. 19 April 2017.
- Ferré, Rosario. *Memoir*. Translated by Suzanne Hintz and Benigno Trigo. Bucknell UP, 2015.
- . *The House on the Lagoon*. Penguin Books, 1995.
- . *The Youngest Doll*. U of Nebraska P, 1991.
- Ferré, Rosario and Diana L. Vélez. "The Writer's Kitchen." *Feminist Studies*, 12.2 (1986):227–242. Web. 16 April 2016.
- Filer, Malva E. "Polifonía y Contrapunto: La Crónica Histórica En 'Maldito Amor' y 'The House on the Lagoon.'" *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 49.2 (1996): 318-328. Web. 15 May 2017.
- Hintz, Suzanne S. *A Search for Identity in the Narrative of Rosario Ferré: Toward a Definition of Latin American Feminist Criticism*. Catholic U of America P, 1993.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 1980. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1982.
- Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford UP, 1986.
- López, Yvette. "La muñeca menor: Ceremonias y transformaciones en un cuento de Rosario Ferré." *Explicación de textos literarios* 11.1 (1982-83): 49-58. Web. 28 April 2016.
- Rivera, Carmen S. "Porcelain Face / Rotten Flesh: The Doll in *Papeles de Pandora*." *Chasqui* 23.2 (1994): 95–101. Web. 1 May 2016.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, 1993.

- Sambolín, Aurora. *The Phenomenon of Self-Translation in Puerto Rican and Puerto Rican U.S. Diaspora literature written by women: The cases of Esmeralda Santiago's América's Dream (1996) and Rosario Ferré's The House on the Lagoon (1995), from a postcolonial perspective*. Dissertation, University of Manchester, 2015.
- Sloan, Cynthia A. "Caricature, Parody, and Dolls: How to Play at Deconstructing and (re)constructing Female Identity in Rosario Ferré's *Papeles de Pandora*." *Pacific Coast Philology* 35.1 (2000): 35–48. Web. 30 April 2016.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Literature." *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard UP, 1999.
- . "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Can the Subaltern Speak: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris, Columbia UP, 2010, 22-78.
- Strehle, Susan. "House of Paper: Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*." *Transnational Women's Fiction: Unsettling Home and Homeland*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. 77-101.
- Vélez, Diana L. "Power and the Text: Rebellion in Rosario Ferré's *Papeles de Pandora*." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 17.1 (1984): 70–80. Web. 1 May 2016.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Ferré, who was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1938 (almost twenty years after the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed granting women suffrage) and died in San Juan, Puerto Rico on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016 (at the height of what is now deemed the Third Wave Feminist movement), lived during a time of great trials and triumphs for feminist causes. Due to her upper-class privilege, as her father served as the third Governor of Puerto Rico, Ferré had the opportunity to attend high school in Massachusetts and later graduated from Manhattanville College in New York where she achieved her Bachelor of Arts degree in French and English literatures. Always an avid reader, Ferré reflects in her *Memoir* that she “never would have become a writer if, in 1960, I had not left Ponce and moved to San Juan” (79). In that year, she married Benigno Trigo and, throughout the next few years, bore three children and became a full-time mother and homemaker.

Although Ferré put her professional career on hold to take care of her family, she never stopped reading and even describes how, while she and her close friend and cousin, Olga Nolla, “changed [their children’s] diapers, we would talk about the four volumes we had read by Arnold J. Toynbee” (87). One of the many books she read during this time was Betty Friedan’s 1963 work, *The Feminine Mystique*. Already versed in feminist prose from her college years, Ferré quickly made connections between her unfulfilling life as an upper-middle class homemaker in Puerto Rico and the unrealized potential of the suburban American housewives Friedan discussed. This book, along with her growing dissatisfaction with the static role her patriarchal society had imposed upon her, led Ferré to reevaluate her life and begin taking steps to find her true identity. Still married, but now more aware of her life within a patriarchal social structure, in 1970 Ferré decided to attend several Spanish literature classes at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. Here, she found solace among fellow scholars who would engage her in respectful dialogues surrounding literature, politics, and everyday life. Her writing career began in this academic space, where she worked with a group of writers (including her cousin Olga) to publish the literary journal *Zona. Carga y descarga*. They published the first volume in 1972 and, over the next three years of the magazine’s existence, Ferré developed not only her writing style but also her political ideologies.

At the time, she and her peers were reading writers who advocated for Puerto Rico’s independence and, in her words, she “became aware of our political situation and decided that independence was the only solution to our problems” (Ferré 83). When Ferré published an editorial in *Zona* coming out in favor of independence and aligning herself with the Popular Democratic Party, many people, including members of her family, were outraged at this blatant opposition to her father, who was not only the Governor but also the founder of the New Progressive Party in favor of annexation. The literary magazine, known for publishing work from up and coming Puerto Rican authors, was labeled as radical, erotic, and even anarchist within the more traditional society. Her husband also disapproved of her involvement with *Zona* and her serious interest in starting a literary career. Despite her husband’s conservatism attitude and her own commitment to mothering her children, Ferré earned a master’s degree in Latin American literature by taking sometimes only one course per semester from UPR. Ferré also gained financial independence after her mother’s death when she inherited her estate, granting her the opportunity to divorce her husband and pursue a career in writing. Since then, Ferré remarried twice, lived for periods of time in Mexico and the United States, received her doctorate in Latin American literature at the University of Maryland, and wrote numerous works of fiction and nonfiction, poetry, and literary essays in both Spanish and English that have achieved worldwide renown.

<sup>2</sup> Considered by many scholars, politicians, and citizens as a modern-day colony, Puerto Rico (Spanish for “Rich Port”) was colonized initially by Christopher Columbus and his Spanish *conquistadores* in 1493. Yet long before Columbus “discovered” the island, several indigenous groups—namely the Taíno—had already been inhabiting what they called Borikén or Borinquen (“Land of the Noble Lord”) for centuries. For the purposes of this project, the historical context covered begins in 1898, the year when Spanish colonization ended and U.S. rule began. During the Spanish-American War, the U.S. invaded Puerto Rico on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1898, and, once the war ended, Spain relinquished their control over Puerto Rico in the Treaty of Paris. In 1900, Puerto Rico became an unincorporated U.S. territory that was ruled largely by the U.S. military. The subsequent Foraker Act of 1900 served to maintain the island’s disguised colonial status by installing a U.S.-run, civilian popular government as well as a non-

---

voting Congressional representative. That act also established free commerce between the colony and the U.S., and, most importantly, overturned the 500 Acres Law. Under Spanish rule, this law restricted the amount of land one could own, yet this new nullification “paved the way for U.S. sugar cane industries which, after the Foraker Act, transformed the Puerto Rican agricultural economy into a sugar monoculture” (Sambolín 19). This act not only transformed the landscape of the island, but also the economy by installing “new tariffs [that] forced a great number of Puerto Rican sugar plantation owners to go into bankruptcy or to sell their plantations to bigger companies” (Sambolín 19). The new industrial sugar mills that followed disrupted the old Spanish hacienda system, resulting in a change of power from the Spanish-descended sugar barons to a new class of U.S. government capitalists. Prior to this change, the sugarcane system functioned as the base of the Puerto Rican economy, funded by Puerto Rican-born European descendants with roots in the south and north of Spain (*criollos*). Puerto Rico’s annexation by the United States endangered the hegemonic power of the sugarcane aristocrats (*los sacarócratas*) complicit with the exploitation of labor on which their own status relied by superimposing U.S. sociopolitical and economic systems on the island. The dollar replaced Puerto Rican currency, causing the *hacendados* to lose their fortunes and face the loss of their power base. This event caused a crisis within the *criollos*, who had been maintaining their power on the basis of the success of that socioeconomic, political, and patriarchal system on their *haciendas* for centuries. For her part, Ferré addresses the social turmoil that accompanied these economic and political changes in Puerto Rico through literary characters who fall on all sides of the *sacarocracia* and therefore must all navigate the ensuing social consequences.

<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning, Ferré’s life in Puerto Rico was deeply intertwined with the influence of the United States; not only did both of her parents study in the U.S., but her father, the third Governor of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico from 1969-73, supported the political party that wanted Puerto Rico to become a U.S. state. Throughout her childhood, he imparted on his children that “learning to speak English like an American, without an accent, was very important for success in life” (Hintz 13). His own business success with the Porto Rico Cement Company founded by his father before him was largely a result of the U.S. government, which built much of the Roosevelt Roads Naval Base of WWII with Ferré’s cement.