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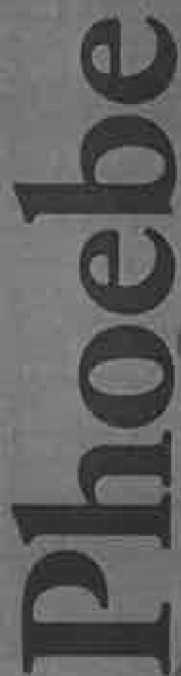

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"Latino, U.S.A." Statehooding Puerto Rico in Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*

Elena Machado Sáez

During the 1990s, Rosario Ferré began publishing in English at the same time she shifted her support to statehood as the ideal political future for Puerto Rico. Written in the midst of Ferré's shifting affiliations, *The House on the Lagoon* (1995) is consequently infused with these controversial authorial and political moves. This essay examines three main thematic levels of political engagement in Ferré's novel. First, is the location of Ferre's novel within the U.S. literary canon, and by extension, Puerto Rican history within the sphere of U.S. history. Out of the intersection of these spaces and histories evolves a second thematic trend, a "statehood aesthetic" establishing marriage as the metaphorical solution for the political relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. The marriage metaphor ultimately leads to a radical conceptualization of statehood; *The House on the Lagoon* imagines and identifies Puerto Rico as part of a U.S. Latino population and market rather than as subsumed into a hegemonic American culture.

The House on the Lagoon may be read as a narrative that plots the history of Puerto Rican politics alongside the author's own trajectory. The novel defines the political scene in Puerto Rico as indivisible from the island's relationship to the United States, in particular, its political status as an "associated free state." The main political parties in Puerto Rico are indeed categorized according to their support for a specific political status: the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño, which advocates independence from the U.S., the Partido Popular Democrático which seeks to maintain the status-quo, and the Partido Nuevo Progresista, which aims to make Puerto Rico the fifty-first state of the United States. My timeline for the novel's historical context begins in 1972, the year Rosario Ferré announced that after campaigning in 1968 for Govemor Luis Ferré, her pro-statehood father, she was now switching to the left and in support of the independence movement in Puerto Rico. Fast forward then to 1998, when the author published an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, revealing that she planned to vote for statehood in the next Puerto Rican plebiscite. Her article, entitled "Puerto Rico, USA," was criticized by the islands' leftist intellectuals not only for advocating statehood but also for its assertion that Puerto Ricans were "more American than John Wayne" (A21).[1]

Emerging out of this personal context, *The House on the Lagoon* has a special place in Ferré's prolific writing career. Certainly, the selection of the novel as a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award in the U.S. demonstrates the success of Ferré's statehooding aesthetic, since the award officially recognizes the novel as "American literature." Taking shape as historical fiction, the novel expands the literary and linguistic borders of the U.S. and Puerto Rico by positioning itself as a literary descendant of one of the American canon's indisputable members, William Faulkner, superficially mirroring the plot of *Absalom! Absalom!* I decipher these

unexpected textual references and Ferré's desire for statehood within her novel by turning to the use of marriage as metaphor within *The House on the Lagoon* as a metaphor for the neocolonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.[2]

The plot of Ferré's novel revolves around the voices of Isabel Monfort and Quintín Mendizabal as they rewrite eachother's family histories. *The House on the Lagoon* blurs the lines between the personal and the public as these narratives take on a larger significance, competing over historical truths in the sphere of Puerto Rican politics. The novel itself exhibits this battle of narrative production, alternating between the voices of Quintín and Isabel, husband and wife, each making claims about the line between history and fiction. With the marriage struggle center-stage, *The House on the Lagoon* explores a gendered revision of Puerto Rican history and identity. At the same time, this revisionist impulse also focuses on the political history of Puerto Rico as an associated free state and its relationship with the United States. Ferré's novel goes on to rewrite the borders of the Americas such that Puerto Rican history becomes defined as part of U.S. history. This move is not only representative of what I call the fiction's "statehood aesthetic," but also a desire to shift or relocate Puerto Rico's status from being exclusively (culturally, politically, geographically) Caribbean to being U.S. Latino.

In *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré reformulates the historical and literary borders of both Puerto Rico and the U.S. via a statehood aesthetic that relies upon the location of Latinos within the United States as both a bilingual population and a market category. Isabel's diary forms the bulk of the novel and the character herself imagines publishing it under the same title, even doing so in English in order to reach a wider audience. Ferré's novel spans the histories of the U.S. and Puerto Rico while also commenting on the effects of the marketplace upon literary production; the ending of the novel presents Isabel as a Puerto Rican author seeking to publish within the Latino market. As a result, the plot of *The House on the Lagoon* not only rewrites the linguistic and historical borders of the Americas but also seeks to expand the concept of *Latinidad.*

The novel establishes its literary lineage through the outward or apparent parallels with *Absalom! Absalom!*'s plot: this occurs on two levels: structural and thematic. On the structural level, there exists the similarity in the names of the main male reading-narrating character, Quentin in *Absalom! Absalom!* and Quintín in *The House on the Lagoon*. The patriarchs in both novels are figured in analogous terms of social rank and behavior. Faulkner's Sutpen and Ferré's Buenaventura are both foreigner-strangers with a fuzzy history; they both build plantations in a swamp-lagoon with the help of architects (a nameless Frenchman and Pavel, respectively), and while each attempts to establish a respectable life by marrying an aristocratic woman, they are nonetheless depicted as crude and cruel. Both novels also cursorily acknowledge the population of blacks who are subjugated, whether by slavery or servitude, in order to maintain the stability of the patriarch's power and

plantation. Finally, both of the novels culminate in the burning down of the plantation houses by the patriarch's children. In, *Absalom! Absalom!* the fire is attributed to Sutpen's illegitimate daughter, while in Ferré's novel, it is Quintín's legitimate son who is responsible for the destruction of the house on the lagoon.

In addition to the coincidences in setting and narrative events, there are also two main themes that preoccupy both *Absalom! Absalom!* and *The House on the Lagoon*. The first is that of writing history and the various layers of reading involved in producing history. For instance, in Faulkner's novel, Quentin is asked by Miss Coldfield to write the history of her family. In the course of doing so, Quentin reads letters by his father, Rosa Coldfield and Charles Bon that narrate Sutpen's life. However, Quentin is not the only reader; so is Shreve, his roommate, not to mention ourselves, the reading audience. Ultimately, Quentin is reading and narrating the history of the South through the story of Sutpen and its multiple narrators. This theme is repeated in Ferré's text: Isabel is asked by her grandmother Abby to write the story of their family. Isabel extends her writing mission to include her husband Quintín's family history, tracing Puerto Rico's history through that of the Monfort and Medizabal families. Accordingly, Isabel's manuscript cites July 4, 1917, marking both Buenaventura's arrival in Puerto Rico and the granting of American citizenship to Puerto Ricans, as the founding year of the family history. As we read Isabel's novel, likewise entitled *The House on the Lagoon* (another layer), so does Quintín. Once he suspects that Isabel knows he's reading the manuscript, Quintín begins to make notes in the margins, thus switching to the role of the writer. Upon reading Isabel's story with its version of Puerto Rican history, Quintín the historian feels obligated to make corrections.

The second theme linking the two novels is the project of constructing a family lineage. The stories read and written in both novels center upon family histories, and contain an obsessive compulsion to prove the legitimacy and purity of the family tree. The narratives of both novels bear the burden of this proof, exhibiting the contradictions, ambivalences and conflicts within (and perhaps even the impossibility of) such a project. In *Absalom! Absalom!*, Sutpen builds the plantation and marries a respectable woman, all to give him the credibility of a gentleman's life and past. Nevertheless, several gaps in the narrative point to the fictions on which his lineage is based, in particular Sutpen's assertion that he was born in West Virginia at a time when the state itself had not even existed (Faulkner 179). The repetition and overlapping of stories, and attempts to go into the past to fill in such gaps, allude to the anxiety fueling the narrative's quest for a pure, white lineage. It is worth noting that at the end of the novel there are several pages containing a chronology of the novel's events and genealogy.

Isabel's narrative in *The House on the Lagoon*, is similarly concerned with tracing a lineage back to European ancestry. The novel even opens with the picture of a family tree already haunted by question marks. The most obvious example for the concern of the legitimacy of roots lies in Buenaventura's famed

parchment. When Buenaventura arrives from Spain, he carries with him an old parchment that claims he is the descendant of Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru. Based on this documentation of the Mendizabal's lineage, Quintín forbids his son Manuel from marrying Coral, a mulatta. Citing the Bloodline books, Quintín asserts that their lineage is clean of Jewish, Islamic, and black blood. And yet, when Buenaventura mimics and makes fun of the Spanish nobles who marry his daughters, Isabel wonders "if Buenaventura's legendary parchment with his family tree on it—which he had supposedly brought with him from Valdeverdeja—as well as his coat of arms—had all been a hoax" and if he was "really of humble origin" (Ferré 253).

What then do we make of the superficial parallels drawn with that of *Absalom! Absalom!*'s narrative and thematic concerns? By situating itself as a rewriting of Faulkner's novel, *The House on the Lagoon* invites the reader to formulate another family tree. In this case, the literary family tree links an eminent American author with a Puerto Rican one, thereby figuring Puerto Rican literature as an offshoot of the American literary canon. Such a literary lineage implies a shared literary and political history with similar concerns regarding the formulation of historical narratives. Thus, the linking of *The House on the Lagoon* with *Absalom! Absalom!* represents a formulation of a statehood aesthetic, and the incorporation of Puerto Rico's literature and history within that of the United States. In addition, Ferré's novel also seeks to open up the category of "American." The parallels between these two novels point to Puerto Rico as a site of U.S. history and literature.

Nevertheless, *The House on the Lagoon* simultaneously interrogates and calls into question this ostensible statehooding project. In particular, the metaphor of marriage within *The House on the Lagoon* allows us to complicate its own impulse towards statehooding, and Puerto Rican literature by extension, through the allusion to Faulkner's work. Marriage is the organizing system of the novel, as evidenced by the double narrative through which Quintín and Isabel's marriage emerges, with Isabel writing her account of the family history while Quintín reads along, questioning the validity of her narrative and inserting his own commentary. Their marriage is consequently depicted as a tension between alternative histories, ideologies and memories. Moreover, the main characters' marriage, and the institution of marriage itself, serves as a metaphor for the conflict and tension between the United States and Puerto Rico.

Before narrating the story about her romance with her husband, Isabel makes this precise connection in the chapter entitled "Vassar College":

> The way I see it, our island is like a betrothed, always on the verge of marriage. If one day Puerto Rico becomes a state, it will have to accept English—the language of her future husband—as its official language, not just because it's the language of modernity

> and of progress, but also because it's the language of authority. If the island decides to remain single, on the other hand, it will probably mean backwardness and poverty. (184)

By equating commonwealth status with that of an engagement, Isabel posits statehood, or marriage, as a "natural" step for Puerto Rico. For Isabel, the institution of marriage ideally reflects the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. In addition, this marriage brings with it a linguistic responsibility: statehood implies the acceptance of English as the official language. The language that Isabel chooses to write in reflects her assertion that only English can be the language of authority, the language in which she will formulate her own historical narrative. Isabel's strong pro-statehood sentiments are expressly articulated via a traditional and conservative concept of marriage. By following the logic of Isabel's marriage metaphor and comparing it to the novel's overall representation of marriage itself, the novel's political affiliations and "statehood aesthetic" take on a certain ambivalence.

Aside from the marriage of Quintín and Isabel, the two other main or predominant relationships are that of Quintín's parents, Buenaventura and Rebecca, and Isabel's grandparents, Gabriela and Vincenzo. Through these characters, the narrative consistently portrays the institution of marriage as oppressive to women. For instance, after her marriage to Buenaventura, Rebecca attempts to continue her life as a free spirit within her circle of artistic friends by holding regular literary soirées. Following Quintín's birth, Buenaventura finds Rebecca performing the part of Salomé, naked, for her fellow artists. Buenaventura whips her, and Rebecca emerges from the experience as a "broken doll." Following the beating, "Rebecca bore her frequent pregnancies patiently, reconciled to her fate...She put away her dancing shoes and her poetry books and slowly faded from view" (69). Even in a loving relationship, like that of Abuela Gabriela and Abuelo Vincenzo, marital "duties" debilitate women: "For six years in a row she had a baby every year" (83). In the seventh year of their marriage, Gabriela refuses to continue having children, choosing to "fall out of favor with God rather than lose her inner peace"(83). Her marriage experience prompts her to relay the following warning to her daughters: "two babies are a powerful link in the iron chain with which men tie women down and make them their prisoners" (85).

Although Isabel asserts that the solution to Puerto Rico's Commonwealth status must be a wedding, meaning statehood, the novel certainly does not depict marriage as the most desirable of relationships. Furthermore, Isabel's marriage challenges her own viewpoint regarding Puerto Rico's political status. The last chapter of *The House on the Lagoon* not only presents the violent conclusion of Isabel's marriage, but Puerto Rico's political scene also begins to mirror her own personal crises. During the course of her marriage, Isabel follows Quintín's orders, slowly becoming more and more passive in the relationship. After she gives birth

to her son Manuel, Quintín orders Isabel to tie her tubes and she complies. Isabel's newfound interest "in keeping the peace rather than whipping up controversies" is also reflected by Puerto Rico's passivity in the public sphere. Isabel describes the seventies as a time when "the national obsession…seemed to be in remission, and politics ceased to be the seed of angry arguments" (329). The alignment of Isabel's emotional state with that of Puerto Rico identifies Isabel as the embodiment of Puerto Rico within this marriage metaphor.

While Isabel's marriage takes a downturn at the end of the novel, a political struggle is also ensuing over the upcoming plebiscite in Puerto Rico. Hence, the conflicts within the family continue to resemble similar political tensions in the public sphere. Once Quintín finds that Manuel has joined a radical Independentista group, AK 47, and organized a strike against Quintín, he disinherits both Manuel and his adopted son, Willie. Even though Isabel disagrees with such a gesture, she signs the will at Quintín's request, later explaining that she "was so afraid of Quintín I didn't dare open my mouth" (373). Despite Isabel's inability to defend her sons or take action, the events in Puerto Rico's public arena foreshadow an escalation of violence within Quintín and Isabel's marriage. As the date for the plebiscite approaches, a political crisis arises via the resurgence of interest in the status of Puerto Rico as a commonwealth. Not only do radical groups like AK47 use violence to exact social change, but the Puerto Rican government also attempts to strike fear into voters by shooting student protesters and harassing Independentista sympathizers. Quintín's status and behavior consequently mirrors that of the government authorities, using brutal tactics to maintain control and power.

When the Commonwealth party wins the plebiscite, the pro-statehood governor announces that the results form "a declaration of war" (297). Quintín takes these words literally and begins stocking an arsenal of arms in the basement. At the same time, Isabel safeguards her own weapon, her novel, leaving it with Petra, the family's life-long servant. When Quintín decides that he wants to institutionalize Willie due to his constant epileptic convulsions, Isabel finally decides to leave her husband and end the marriage. The same night that Isabel plans an intricate escape, her rebel son Manuel decides to burn down the house on the lagoon and Quintín and Isabel, along with an unconscious Willie, are released by Manuel and the Independentistas, the final face-off occurring as they escape on the boat. As a manuscript falls out of the box Willie had carried out of the house, Isabel realizes that the novel she had given to Petra has been safeguarded by Willie after Petra's death. Quintín, seeing the manuscript, begins to beat Isabel for disobeying his orders to burn the novel. Seeing her "life unreel before [her] like a film," remembering the countless acts of violence Quintín has perpetrated, Isabel grabs hold of the boat's steering wheel and directs it so that Quintín is struck in the head by a steel beam and killed before he can strike her again (407). Following this metaphor of marriage, statehood figures as a dangerous relationship not only for Puerto Rico, but for the United States as well. Isabel's final rebellion and murder of

Quíntin point to the threat the statehooded (and wed) Puerto Rico would pose to the U.S.

The House on the Lagoon, through its portrayal of two powerful upper class families, relates a history of Puerto Rico. What do we, as readers, then make of this text's move for inclusion into the American literary canon, via its relation to Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* ? How does such an inclusion correlate with the marriage metaphor presented in the text as the logic behind US-PR relations? If the novel indeed argues for statehooding itself, along with Puerto Rican literature as a whole, how is this reconciled with the negative depiction of marriage as the statehooding of Puerto Rican women? With the violent ending of *The House on the Lagoon* novels, those written by both Ferré and Isabel, it appears that statehood status is being redefined. To quote Isabel, "With the difficulty Congress was having retaining English as the official language of the United States, I thought, letting a Spanish-speaking territory become a state would be like letting a fox into the chicken coop" (390-1). Ferré thus reconceives statehood as a radical solution to neocolonialism.[3] Puerto Rico, by choosing statehood, has the potential to transform the culture and population of the United States, specifically by challenging the monolinguistic lingual construction of American identity.[4] In this sense, Ferré's literary allusions to Faulkner's work point to the statehooding of Puerto Rican literature as a challenge to the cultural and linguistic borders of the United States' literary canon.

This reading is, however, problematized by the events narrated in the last section of Ferré's novel, specifically, the aftermath of Quintín's murder. Willie and Isabel move to Florida, where the "warm waters glimmering like a sapphire around San Juan" and the "graceful palm trees swaying like winged angels" haunt Isabel. Despite her obvious longing for Puerto Rico, Isabel feels "no desire to go back to the island" (380). Isabel's perspective on her novel takes on a different meaning when considered alongside this nostalgia and self-imposed exile. Isabel explains, "My novel is about personal freedom, Quintín, not about political freedom...It's about my independence from you" (386). Isabel rejects Quintín's label of the novel as an "Independentista manifesto" by affirming the personal as nonpolitical (386). Thus, *The House on the Lagoon* does not offer a definitive conclusion to the struggle between statehood and independence. Rather, the ending of the novel and Isabel's exile from Puerto Rico represent a withdrawal from Puerto Rican politics. Ferré's novel consequently offers a personal and literary solution. Fiction emerges as a means of escape, absolution, or resolution of political struggle. *The House on the Lagoon* both engages and withdraws from Puerto Rican politics, in an attempt to expand the borders of Puerto Rican and U.S. literature.

Though Isabel affirms the personal as nonpolitical, it is nevertheless possible to view *The House on the Lagoon* as formulating the expansion of Puerto Rican and U.S. literary borders in the hopes of identifying (with) a specific population: Latinos. The withdrawal from Puerto Rican politics represents a

movement towards the U.S. mainland and Latinos. Isabel writes the last section of the novel, three years after Quintín's death, but she is no longer writing from Puerto Rico: she finishes her novel in Florida. Isabel also expresses a desire to publish the novel in the U.S. despite her fear that "publishing it may have dire results, but a tale, like life itself, isn't finished until it is heard by an understanding heart" (380). The novel's own structure allows for the conflation here of Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* with Isabel's same-titled text. In turn, the shift in setting from Puerto Rico to Florida blurs the fiction-reality border of the novel(s). *The House on the Lagoon* will be published in the U.S. and read by an "understanding" audience that presumably will be able to read in English since that is the idiomatic form both Isabel and Ferré's novels take. The movement towards this audience implies a rejection as well. The "dire results" of publishing seem tied to the reaction of an audience lacking in understanding, island Puerto Ricans, who see the author's choice of English for the novel as a betrayal to the community.[5]

Indeed, the novel's literary statehooding of Puerto Rico also denotes Rosario Ferré's self-positioning as a *Latina*, rather than solely a Puerto Rican writer. Returning to the linguistic uniqueness of *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré's decision to write and publish in English has often been criticized as an inherently political decision serving the aims of the Statehood party. While *The House on the Lagoon* certainly encourages this superficial reading, I would like to complicate this analysis by noting that this movement towards "Puerto Rico, U.S.A." is linked to the formulation of island Puerto Ricans *as* Latinos and therefore marks an important moment in Rosario Ferré's literary career: a shift towards marketing herself as a Latina writer. Isabel's novel points to 1917, the year Puerto Ricans were given American citizenship, as both the initiating moment for the family and Puerto Rican history. Consequently, *The House on the Lagoon* identifies island Puerto Ricans as *already* Latinos *because* they are U.S. citizens.

The formulation of Puerto Ricans as Latinos would not only make them one of the largest and most influential Latino populations, but also reshape the linguistic composition of Latinos in the United States. Isabel's commentary on statehood as a solution to Puerto Rico's commonwealth status alludes to the potential threat such a Latino population could present to the U.S.: "With the difficulty Congress was having retaining English as the official language of the United States, I thought, letting a Spanish-speaking territory become a state would be like letting a fox into the chicken coop" (390-1). Here the radical nature of statehood is presented solely in linguistic terms; it is the inclusion of a non-English speaking territory that will transform monolingual American culture.[6] Isabel not only redefines statehood radically, but also names the Spanish language as a defining aspect of Puerto Rican culture and identity. In doing so, *The House on the Lagoon* is again forging a link between the island population of Puerto Rico and mainland U.S. Latinos.

Due to the novel's positioning within the timeline of Ferré's political affiliations, it is possible to read her subsequent writings through *The House on the*

Lagoon in order to further develop Ferré's conception of Latina/o identity. I would then juxtapose *The House on the Lagoon* alongside two New York Times articles about Rosario Ferré's views on statehood and writing in English, "Puerto Rico, U.S.A" and "Bilingual Author Finds Something in Translation." Published in March of 1998, Ferré argues for statehood in "Puerto Rico, U.S.A." by stating that "Puerto Ricans have been Americans since 1898," thereby conflating the political status of Puerto Rico as a colony with the status of its islanders as American citizens (A21). Since citizenship was not actually granted to Puerto Ricans until 1917, Ferré uses the colonial status of Puerto Rico as the determining factor of their American identity. According to Ferré, however, the affirmation of Puerto Rican's "American-ness," does not entail a process of assimilation or the disappearance of Puerto Rican culture or language. Rather, the integrity of Puerto Rican culture is assured by the presence of mainland U.S. Latinos, which Ferré notes "are the fastest growing minority in the United States" (A21). For the author, the presence of an ever-growing Latino community secures the existence of a "multicultural America [in which] we won't lose our culture" (A21). The loss of culture is inextricably linked to a loss of language. The prevention of this loss is not simply guaranteed by a multicultural America but by a multilingual America, an America that is mainly multilingual as a result of a Latino presence.[7] Ferré defines the Latino population not only as American citizens but also as *Spanish-speaking* American citizens, thereby drawing a further parallel between the Puerto Rican island population and the U.S. mainland Latinos.

Is this linguistic connection an innovative reconception of Latino and Puerto Rican identity? "Bilingual Author Finds Something in Translation," a New York Times interview from September 1998, which appeared a couple of months after Ferré's article, contains similar references to a multicultural America and bilingual Latinos. However, these references are used to explain Rosario Ferré's linguistic switch in writing *The House on the Lagoon.* In the interview, Ferré explains her decision to write in English as "purely practical" since it allows her "to get better distribution of her work and thus reach a wider audience" (E2). This wider audience includes "Hispanic readers [who] thank her for writing in English because they say they have long forgotten their Spanish" (E2). While she "admonishes them to hold on to their native tongue," a contradiction emerges between the U.S. of *The House on the Lagoon* and the U.S. that Ferré constructs in these articles: the image of a monolingual empire whose borders must be challenged versus the image of a multicultural and therefore multilingual nation that can serve as a safe haven.

The paradoxical representation of the U.S. results from the multiple locations of Latino identity. *The House on the Lagoon* represents Ferré's attempt to engage and differentiate these multiple spaces, while endeavoring to draw connections between island Puerto Ricans and mainland U.S. Latinos through the character of Isabel, an upper class Puerto Rican and highly literate woman. It is Isabel who serves as the representative of Puerto Rico, and her character seems

to point to two contradictory impulses: the impulse towards independence as seen through her violent rebellion against her husband Quintín,and on the other, an impulse towards statehood, realized by her choice to leave Puerto Rico and settle in Florida. How are these impulses reconciled? As I noted before, the ending of the novel turns toward an apolitical aesthetic resolution. This aesthetic is derived from a literary project and in Isabel's decision to publish the novel so that "it is heard by an understanding heart" (Ferré 380). The "understanding audience" is a new audience, one that would not be available if Isabel published in Puerto Rico, or if she published in Spanish. That audience is the mainland U.S. Latino community. Thus, another contradiction emerges regarding the defining aspects of Latinos: are they mainly a Spanish-speaking community, as the statehooding aesthetic seems to suggest by defining Puerto Ricans as Latinos, *or* are they predominantly English-speaking in accordance with this allusion to the understanding U.S. audience?[8]

It is perhaps this very difficulty in defining the Latino community and its language that informs the novel's conclusion, fraught with nostalgia for the island of Puerto Rico and for the "warm waters glimmering like a sapphire around San Juan" (380). If Isabel has the capacity to connect with a Latino reading audience and thereby bring to them a story of a family as a history of Puerto Rico, this potential for linking the spaces of the U.S. and Puerto Rico, and by extension the Latino and Puerto Rican communities, is offset by the isolation to which Isabel escapes. Isabel resides in Florida, in the United States, but more specifically she lives on an island: "We tock refuge in a small hotel on Anastasia, a narrow island on the peninsula's western coast which appealed to us because of its peaceful atmosphere" (379). While reminiscing about Puerto Rico, Isabel stares "at the pale cold Atlantic and at the desolate beach, with its solitary pine tree undulating in the wind" (380). Isabel is not only disconnected from Puerto Rico but she is isolated, alone and without a community in Florida. Her creation, the novel, stands as an attempt to reconcile the tension she herself embodies, a conflict reflected as she remains inert looking at the "comforting" Atlantic, watching the "tranquil surface of the water" and imagining "the eternal struggle to eat and escape being eaten [which] went on beneath its surface" (380).

The final image in *The House on the Lagoon* is of Isabel nostalgically reading the layers of the ocean, imagining the violent battle of survival that remains hidden by the tranquil surface of the Atlantic. Along with Isabel's hibernation, a stage of pre-publication comes with this description of consumption that terrifies her and yet is the source of Isabel's imaginings. Isabel's isolation and longing represents a further development of Latino identity, this time on U.S. rather than Puerto Rican soil. The formulation of *Latinidad* here is linked to a fear of and Puerto Rican soil. The formulation of *Latinidad* here is linked to a fear of and fascination with the workings of the very market Isabel's novel will enter, and be consumed by.[9] Throughout the novel, Isabel alludes to the existence of this capitalist market as a means of statehooding Puerto Rico and its culture. Indeed, Quintín accuses her of

repeatedly including historically inaccurate "facts." These criticisms are mainly directed at Isabel's insistence on locating the appearance of globalization[10] much earlier than historically accepted (according to Quintín). For example, Isabel's description of Buenaventura's arrival in Puerto Rico on July 4th suggests that the globalization of American culture was already evident there in 1917. As Buenaventura walks along the streets of San Juan, he sees the Fourth of July celebrations, noting the Americana decorating the streets, and he even eats a hotdog. Quintín criticizes Isabel's historical representation: "Isabel had made some inexcusable mistakes. Some of them were silly; for example, pretending there were hot-dog stands in 1917, and that Buenaventura had eaten a hot dog on the day he arrived in San Juan. Quintín laughed again. No one knew for sure when hot dogs had arrived on the island, but he doubted it was before the Second World War" (73).

Quintín seeks to decipher these purported historical inaccuracies as indicative of Isabel's motive for writing her novel: "She had consciously altered the facts of history to serve her story" (74). Isabel's motivation to write her novel is continually coupled with her obsessive writing of the process of globalization into a pre-global history. For example, Quintín complains that "when Isabel talked about San Juan Bay, she was describing the way it looks now, polluted by the huge tourist liners that visit the city daily, not the way it appeared in 1937" (149). Isabel's market imaginings at the close of *The House on the Lagoon* therefore represent a concern throughout the novel with globalization and Puerto Rican identity. This infusion of globalization into Puerto Rican history is a facet of the statehood aesthetic as articulated by the novel. Isabel depicts American culture and consumerism as inextricably tied to Puerto Rican identity by situating globalization as the organizing structure for Puerto Rican history and projecting that connection into a time when the political status as a territory did not yet "officially" bring this cohesion of cultures about.

Furthermore, the statehooding of Puerto Rico through the globalization of American culture points towards the construction of Latino identity itself as a market-based concept. When Isabel describes the importance of the Sears catalogue within Puerto Rico during the forties and fifties, she also depicts the Latino community primarily as consumers, a community created by the United States market.[11] As a result, "Sears wasn't a place, it was a state of mind" that provided Puerto Ricans with another identity, one that separated them from their Caribbean neighbors: "We weren't like Haiti or the Dominican Republic, where people still hadn't heard of the telephone" (181-2). Isabel repeatedly associates Puerto Rican access to the Sears catalogue in terms of providing economic equality; it was "thanks to the Sears catalogue we had the same access as the people of Kansas and Louisiana to the latest inventions" (182). Hence, this other identity, associated with progress and access to the American products, is that of the Latino consumer.

Puerto Ricans are Latinos then, not only because of their American citizenship but also because of their participation within the U.S. capitalist market as both consumers and a market that is consumed by American multinational corporations. By recognizing Latino identity as a targeted market group, the political affiliations of independence and statehood become irrelevant, or superceded by this larger, encompassing category. Isabel points to the Sears catalogue as the one activity that unites Puerto Ricans of all political parties:

> There was a Sears catalogue in every middle-class home in Ponce at that time. Like most families on the island, ours was divided politically... But we all liked to browse through the Sears catalogue. Having it at hand was reassuring—proof that Puerto Rico was an inseparable part of the United States. (181-2)

As Latinos, Puerto Ricans are statehooded via the U.S. market economy. Within this context of the Latino as a market identity, Isabel's final declaration that her novel is not sympathetic to the Independentista party takes on another significance. The withdrawal from Puerto Rican politics within the novel is associated with a shift in social context, from that of colonialism to globalization. *The House of the Lagoon* points to the opposition between independence and statehood as an outdated conceptualization of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. Puerto Rico and its place within the U.S. global market have already called into question this political binary. At the end of the novel, Isabel points to the Atlantic as a metaphor for the market, imagining beyond the appearance of tranquil water a power struggle purely in terms of consumption. By comparison, the binary of independence and statehood relies upon the imagining of a relationship between a big fish (US) and the little one (PR). Isabel's metaphor erases these differences in power and size, emphasizing that all those enclosed by the market's waters are equally subject to eating the other and being consumed themselves.

The novel's theorization of Latino identity via the global market reiterates the movement away from Puerto Rico and its political debate between independence and statehood. As Latinos, Puerto Ricans are no longer a commonwealth or colony, and presumably, the market enables them to have equal footing with the United States via their "buying power." *The House on the Lagoon*, however, seems to problematize this value as it simultaneously statehoods Puerto Rico into the United States via its *Latinidad*. While the Sears catalogue initiates Puerto Rico into the "wonderful world" of U.S. capitalism, the effects of globalization bring with it "a lot more besides" (181). Within the narration of the Monfort family history, Isabel ties the appearance of an American market within Puerto Rico to the self-destruction of her family. It is U.S. tourism that brings the hotel to Ponce where Carmita, Isabel's mother, gambles away the family's life savings, putting the Monfort family into serious debt. While Isabel remarks, "it was Carmita's gambling [that] finally did him

in," her father's suicide is also directly connected to the success of the Sears catalogue (200). Carlos's death is at the hands of the U.S. market: Abby "found him hanging from the rafters in the attic, her shiny new garden hose from Sears tied around his neck" (201).

The ambivalence within *The House on the Lagoon* focuses on the construction of Latino identity. The text demonstrates an awareness of the Latino community as a category within the US global market, and at the same time exhibits a desire to locate the potential for resistance within the system of globalization. Perhaps ironically, the language of globalization, English, becomes the site of this very resistance. The story of Ermelinda's education, as narrated by Isabel, illustrates the "accidental" empowerment the Puerto Rican population received when Commissioner Easton decreed that English be taught in all public schools. The institution of English as a public language not only forms part of the spread of U.S. language and culture but also promotes the development of Puerto Ricans as Latinos, and as a bilingual population. Ermelinda embodies the potential threat of such a bilingual population since her ability to read in English allows her to also read the layers of exploitation within the U.S. market. Looking through an American magazine, she sees an advertisement for Saks Fifth Avenue and realizes that the model "was wearing the very same negligee she and her little sisters had finished only three weeks before, for which Mr. Turnbill paid her mother exactly fifty cents" (213). Seeing that the negligee was being sold on the market for fifty dollars, Ermelinda convinces her mother to stop working for the factory and organizes a garment industry union for the seamstresses. Nevertheless, the recurring and contradictory descriptions of Latinos as either Spanish-speakers or English-speakers foreground the text's difficulty in locating a truly bilingual Latino subject, such as the singularly unique Ermelinda, within the context of globalization.

The House on the Lagoon points to an interrogation of the Latino community's radical power, and the potential transformation of U.S. culture. Throughout the text, the globalization of American culture is linked to the globalization of its language, English. As the novel indicates that the formation of Latino community is inextricably tied to the context of globalization and the U.S. market, likewise, *The House on the Lagoon* situates itself as a product of this interaction and exchange in terms of language and identity. Both Isabel and Ferré choose to publish their works in English, as a means of reaching an understanding audience. Consequently, these two fictional texts exhibit the market's successful classification and dissemination of English as the official global language. Moreover, the narrative of *The House on the Lagoon* continually emphasizes its context of globalization, defining the Latino community as consumers within the market and as a marketing category. The choice to publish in the United States, on the part of Isabel and Ferré, consequently reaffirms the position of the novel as a product shaped by the U.S. market. Indeed, the marketing of *The House on the Lagoon* as U.S. Latino literature, within the fictional narrative as well as the "real"

publishing market, highlights the realization and importance of the "Latino" as a market category within U.S. capitalism.[12]

Quintín's accusation or critique of Isabel's novel calls attention to this intersection of language, writing and globalization:

> Would she have written her manuscript in English if she didn't think English was important? If she had written her novel in Spanish and published it in Puerto Rico, why, only a handful of people would have read it! But if she published it in the United States, thousands would read it. (151)

The question of language and authorial intent remains unanswered for Isabel. At the end of the novel, Isabel lies in wait, isolated, hibernating. In turn, the manuscript she writes is fraught with a conflicting desire to expand the literary and political borders of the United States, while fearing "being eaten" and disappearing within the global marketplace. The aesthetics of statehooding within the narrative primarily aim to link the United States and Puerto Rican history, and Puerto Ricans with mainland U.S. Latinos. Nevertheless, Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* remains deeply ambivalent about the form in which it seeks to make these connections. The contradictions within the aesthetic project of statehooding Puerto Rico stem from the language it uses to imagine and formulate a new America, as well as the market the text will or has entered. *The House on the Lagoon*'s narrative tension alludes to the challenges facing a Latino text due to its location within the U.S. capitalist market and the concomitant implications for Latino identity, language, authorship and audience.

End Notes:

1. One of the main criticisms of Rosario Ferré's pro-Statehood declaration was offered by another Puerto Rican writer, Ana Lydia Vega in her article entitled "Carta Abierta a Pandora" (1998).
2. The concept of "lite-colonial," which Juan Flores describes in *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* (2000), is particularly useful in regards to the contemporary development of this relationship. More specifically, Flores uses the term "lite-colonial" to provide a sense of how colonialism continues to structure U.S.—Puerto Rico relations and yet with a difference, indicating a shift from a colonialism defined by production to one "grounded on consumption" (38). In essence, neocolonialism is moving between the primacy of the nation-state to that of the market, without completely diluting the power of either.
3. Ferré is not the only person to conceive of statehood radically. For an alternate definition of "radical statehood," consider Juan Duchesne Winter's *La Política de la Caricia* where he articulates a "Manifesto Radical de la Estadidad."
4. This perspective is one that is repeated within the field of Latino Studies, in particular by Ilan Stavans. In *The Hispanic Condition* (2001), Stavans describes Latinos as "yesterday's victim and tomorrow's conquistadors," who will exact the revenge of Montezuma, "the unhurried process of the penetration of and exertion of influence on the United States" (5).
5. Even Ferré's decision to translate her earlier Spanish-language works into English has garnered criticism. In *Rosario Ferré: A Search for Identity*, Suzanne S. Hintz characterizes the English translations, "The Youngest Doll" and *Sweet Diamond Dust*, as betrayals of their original Spanish versions. In particular, Hintz argues that the translations lacked the radical feminist tone of the early writings via a "softening" of sexually

explicit language or the removal of obscenities altogether. In addition, Hintz notes that the anti-American tone of these works has also been diffused and even more interestingly, supplanted by specifics regarding the "U.S. commercial brand names" that the characters purchase or consume (182). Further along in this essay, I will also be commenting on the representation of Puerto Rican politics and the significance of the U.S. market within *The House on the Lagoon.*

6. In the prologue to *The Hispanic Condition*, Ilan Stavans describes a dream in which he imagines this very future of the Americas, with Latino bilinguality resulting in the "dismantl[ing] of all North American borders" (xv).

7. Ilan Stavans describes Hispanic culture in the U.S. as comprised of many cultures that are "linguistically tied together". Whether this linguistic tie is Spanish or Spanglish, Stavans argues that Latinos as a group aim to "cure" American society of its monolingualism (11).

8. This question of language and Latino identity has been discussed by numerous Latino Studies critics, such as Ilan Stavans and Gustavo Pérez Firmat. In *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (2001), Arlene Dávila also provides an interesting analysis of how Latino identity and its linguistic parameters are shaped by the media.

9. The linking of fear and fascination with the processes of consumption is also aptly alluded to in Juan Flores' reading of the "infamous Madonna incident." In *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, Flores explains the public furor over Madonna's "suggestively pass[ing] the Puerto Rican flag between her legs" at a concert in relation to the "crass and ubiquitous commodification" of the flag, rather than an outcry of patriotic nationalism (31-2).

10. I define globalization and globalism here as an intensified form of capitalism that, with the development of new technologies in the 1970's and 1980's, has led to an increased and uneven global flow of products and culture. Obviously an enormous bibliography on globalization exists; my ideas have been particularly influenced by *Empire*, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

11. Both Juan Flores and Gustavo Pérez Firmat refer to consumption as a defining facet of Latino identity as they focus on two different populations, Puerto Ricans and Cuban-Americans, respectively. Juan Flores is specifically concerned with the "constitutive role played by translocal consumption practices in the forging of contemporary cultural identities" (46).

12. Rosario Ferré is often included within critical works and anthologies devoted to U.S. Latino literature. For example, in *"Saddling la Gringa": Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers*, Ferré is discussed alongside such canonical Latina writers as Dolores Prida, Cristina Garcia, Nicholasa Mohr and Esmeralda Santiago. The commentary by Julia Alvarez gracing the cover of *The House on the Lagoon (*1995 edition) further exemplifies Ferré's canonization as a U.S. Latina writer.

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