

Danza and the Signifying Process in Rosario Ferré's *Maldito amor*

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ABSTRACT: Rosario Ferré's 1986 novella *Maldito amor* takes its name from a famous Puerto Rican danza written toward the end of the 19th century by composer Juan Morel Campos, who had both African and Spanish heritage. This article explores the tradition of the danza, the significance of Ferré's use and mirroring of Morel Campos' danza in the narrative, as well as the signifying process she explores and manipulates in an effort to question official versions of Puerto Rican history. By using the composer's danza as a subtext for the structure and themes of the novel, *Maldito amor* creates another set of signifiers for how we consider this traditional piece of music. The title of the novel also demonstrates the ambivalent attitudes that Puerto Ricans often have toward the ruling elite on the island itself: the bourgeoisie function as both hegemonic power but are also oppressed under that of the United States. By re-writing history via the "Maldito amor" danza, the novella recognizes the constant chain of signifiers that constitutes reality, and adds a new and subversive one to include in the chain of discourse surrounding Puerto Rican history and identity.

KEYWORDS: Rosario Ferré, *Maldito amor*, Juan Morel Campos, Puerto Rico, Danza, Race

Music tends to resonate in a deeper region within human consciousness. A few lines from a well-loved song, long-forgotten, can induce a myriad of feelings, from lament to joy. Music without words tends to be especially powerful in this respect. American composer Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (1936), with its quiet notes that progress seemingly without change, for example, is universally recognized as a strikingly touching piece. Even if ignorant of the words Barber would actually use to describe the piece, the music's emotive depth is palpable. Sometimes the most beautifully touching pieces, however, become sullied because of their connotations. The theme from Tchaikovsky's masterpiece, *Romeo and Juliet* (1886), has obtained a level of cliché, and now accompanies sarcastic romantic scenes, often in commercials or zany sitcoms, like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* or *El Chavo del Ocho*. It is unfortunate that a piece so dense and nuanced has been converted into the object of ridicule and hilarity. The way in which cultural and popular impositions on a piece of music sully its effects exemplifies Lacan's readings and interpretations of Saussure's linguistic theory on the Signified and Signifier. In his 1957 essay "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," Lacan explains that "even a text highly charged with meaning can be reduced [...] to insignificant bagatelles, all that survives being mathematical algorithms that are, of course, without any meaning" (1293). By imposing language, or cultural constructions, onto true realities, the true meaning, or the Real, fades and even disappears beneath these signifiers. In the same way, a renowned piece of music's nuance and mystique often disappears beneath a heavy load of cultural and historical baggage. The following paper seeks to study one specific example of the loss of the signified in a Puerto Rican musical composition, and how Rosario Ferré's novella,

Maldito amor (1986), works to unearth the signified from the hegemonic signifiers underneath which it has been buried.

The novella *Maldito amor* takes its name from a popular danza, written by Juan Morel Campos (1857-1896), a composer who has come to be considered a symbol of Puerto Rican culture. Morel Campos originated from the same town as Ferré: Ponce, Puerto Rico. Ferré most likely grew up passing by his austere statue prominently located in the town's main plaza, and listening, dancing, even singing, to his well-loved danzas. Verey describes the cultural effect of the composer's work: "The danza of Morel Campos is saturated by the atmosphere of Ponce, and displays the defining qualities of that austere, provincial, sober, and defiant Ponce society of the 1880s" (Quoted in Díaz 65). Critics have commented on the intertextuality between this novella and other Puerto Rican foundational fictions as well as feminist narratives (Gutiérrez Mouat 1994), the social critique inherent in Ferré's use of multiple perspectives (Bustos Fernández 1994) and the way that female embodiment works to reconstitute reality in the narrative (Lagos 2010). Yet none have explored the fact that the novel overtly makes reference to Morel Campos' danza through its titles, subtitles, and allusions within the text, while at the same time it also structurally imitates the danza's format and themes, thereby re-signifying the cultural impositions placed upon it by the official history and its trite lyrics. I will begin by giving a brief history of Morel Campos, his musical creation and cultural context, and then continue with a detailed look at Ferré's novel within the context of the composer's danza, concluding with some final observations on the difficulties of defining Puerto Rican identity and the creation, and complication, of meaning.

Briefly summarized, Ferré's book narrates and complicates the

story of the supposedly illustrious founding father Don Ubaldino De La Valle of the town of Guamaní and his defense of the last *cañería*, or sugar mill, called the Central Justicia, from greedy American businessmen of the competing Central Ejemplo, who were in the process of overtaking the sugar economy in the decades following the Spanish-American War (1898). In the style of Akira Kurosawa's acclaimed film, *Rashomon* (1950), Ferré's narrative complicates the official version of history, as narrated by novelist Don Hermenegildo, whose character represents an obvious parody of the writers of Romantic foundational fictions of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The De La Valle history is told from a variety of perspectives which confound the reader's understanding of the story of the Don Ubaldino: ultimately it is the voices of two black women—Gloria and Titina—that unearth the realities behind Hermenegildo's misleading narrative. Over the course of the novella, the family secret is revealed: Don Ubaldino's father was not Spanish, as the official narratives recount, but rather has African heritage, which the family has taken great pains to hide.

Invaded by the Spaniard Ponce de León in 1509, Puerto Rico didn't break ties with Spain until almost four centuries later in 1898, at which point it fell subject to a different imperial power, that of the United States. A constant topic in current Puerto Rican politics is the island's relationship with the United States (García 1624). In the 19th century, while the majority of Spanish America was achieving independence and national autonomy, creating national narratives, or "foundational fictions" as Doris Sommer would call them, Puerto Rico seemed to lag behind. Sommer notes that, "Romantic novels go hand in hand with patriotic history in Latin America. The books fueled a desire for domestic happiness that runs over into dreams of national prosperity; and nation-building projects invested private passions with public purpose" (7). The development of the musical movement of the danza in the 1860s provided one opportunity for Puerto Ricans to join in the task of constructing a national identity, despite the fact that they were still subject to imperial Spain. Although Puerto Rico does have its writers of foundational narratives, such as the 19th century Romantic poet José Gautier Benítez (1851-1880), Ferré modeled her novella structurally after the Morel Campos danza, in part perhaps due to the fact that it resists easy categorization into Sommer's description of how other Latin American countries of the moment were constructing their national identities. In her prologue to *Maldito amor*, Ferré mentions three Puerto Rican foundational writers whom she appears to parody in the text through the portrayal of Don Hermenegildo, namely Benítez, as well as writer and advocate for independence Luis Lloréns Torres (1876-1944), and father of the Puerto Rican independence movement, José de Diego (1866-1918). Yet, significantly, her decision to model the text after Morel Campos' danza, and ridicule these writers through the character of Don Hermenegildo, delegitimizes these writers' claims on Puerto Rican national identity.

In a chapter entitled "Puerto Rico: The Rise and Fall of the Danza as National Music", Edgardo Díaz Díaz and Peter Manuel dis-

cuss in detail the historical and cultural context of the danza's evolution in 19th century Puerto Rico: because of Spanish restrictions on commerce, "in the 1860s anticolonialism was widespread [...] nationalism showed its pride in creole culture like the danza" (137). The danza combines popular music with European classical music, thus embodying the contradictions inherent to Puerto Rican identity (138). Juan Morel Campos was especially appealing to Puerto Ricans of all social strata because of his ability to combine styles of "ballroom ensembles, salon pianists, and humble street musicians" (140). Composer Héctor Campos Parsi described Morel Campos' music in the following way: "he used the danza as a great social leveller bringing to high society the picaresque rhythms of the people and to the people the rich harmonic conception and formal complexity of the salon danza. He was the great synthesizer of all the musical currents of the age" (317). Taking into account these observations on Morel Campos' eclectic creation of the danza, it becomes evident that his artwork was complex and profound. Indeed, the act of listening to a recording of Morel Campos' original piece has that visceral effect of inspiring emotion that many musical masterpieces share. What's more, the lack of signifiers leaves the piece subject to a variety of interpretations, depending on the listener's reception, something essential to a novel that "examina la posibilidad de construir mundos alternativos cuestionando el acto narrativo en sí" (Bustos Fernández 22).

Despite the cultural relevance and eclectic background of Morel Campos' influences, over time, his "Maldito amor" danza gradually lost its effects of nuance and profundity in the signifying process through the hegemonic claim to his music as a tool for national propaganda. A somewhat clichéd eight stanzas of lyrics, obviously imitating Romantic themes, were written to accompany his danza. Once one hears the danza with the words, it becomes almost impossible to disassociate the words from the piece. In this instance, the music was reduced to the Symbolic, to a forced meaning or category. In addition, the fact that these lyrics were written to undermine Afro-Puerto Rican Morel Campos' creation also points to deeper issues of racism and Eurocentrism in Puerto Rican society. A common Puerto Rican adage goes, "Todo el mundo es igual sin trato especial," which signifies the cultural tendency and pressure to ignore one another's racial and ethnic backgrounds. At first glance, this seems a noble ideal, but the problem lies in that Afro-Puerto Ricans often are pressured to undervalue and suppress their African heritage. This emphasis on an imagined ethnic sameness pushes mainstream Puerto Rican society to ignore the racial problems that exist in their country (Quiñones Rivera 163). This gives the imposition of lyrics on Morel Campos' piece greater cause for suspicion, because one supposes that what motivated it were the racial biases of the dominant and subjugating white and mestizo Puerto Rican race and their discrimination of Afro-Puerto Ricans. This fact, and what has become of his danza, is what leads us to the piece's relevance in Rosario Ferré's short novel.

The novella is divided into eight brief sections, which mirror

the format of the lyrics imposed on Morel Campos' danza, which was divided into eight stanzas. It seems that Ferré's tale seeks to sing Morel Campos' piece in narrative form. This assertion becomes even more plausible considering Díaz and Manuel's detailed description of the typical Morel Campos danza: almost all of his danzas share the same schematic structure, which the Ferré text mimics. In what follows, I will enumerate these sections of the "Maldito amor" danza, exploring their connections with the book of *Maldito amor*, and conclude with some observations on the significance of these parallels to Puerto Rican culture and society.

Morel Campos' danzas generally begin with "an eight bar *paseo*, repeated once, often in straight, unsyncopated [...] notes, with a sort of annunciatory character" (Díaz and Manuel 142). The first section of the song, then, is the most straightforward, transparent, and comprehensible. The first two chapters of Ferré's novel could be considered as textual interpretations of the *paseo* section of Morel Campos' piece. The first tells of the village of Guamaní, praising its natural beauty and cultural elitism, in the style of the Latin American romantic novelist. The second recounts a typical tragic romantic narrative of foundations: Doña Elvira, the *perfecta casada* suffers and dies because of her despotic husband, Don Julio, whose avarice and callous attitude toward her cause her to despair. Miraculously, don Ubaldino, the great founding father of Guamaní manages to be born before Doña Elvira expires, "clamando inútilmente por la extremaunción" (26). These two sections are told in the voice of Don Hermenegildo's romantic novel; his clichéd prose describes the well-known story of the ideal Puerto Rican: the one with *buen gusto*, who studied in Paris, is a devout Catholic, and dresses in the latest fashions. Like the beginning of Morel Campos' danza, these two chapters are predictable, mainstream, and familiar to the typical reader of the Spanish American novel: "nos apoyábamos en nuestra lucha diaria por hacer producir al máximo nuestras haciendas, nuestros hijos estudiaban en Europa y nuestras hijas aprendían las virtudes excelsas de la maternidad" (18). The women are what woman should be according to bourgeois standards: feminine and maternal. The same goes for the men, who are satisfactorily virile, described as strong fighters and shrewd businessmen. Here Hermenegildo quotes the Puerto Rican Romantic poet, "nuestro gran Gautier," clinching the fact that his narration pays tribute to national hegemonic pride. To make the parallel with the Morel Campos piece even more overt, in the second section, Ferré cites in its entirety the first stanza that had been written for his "Maldito amor":

Ya tu amor / es un pájaro sin voz,
ya tu amor / se perdió en mi corazón.
No sé por qué / fue marchita tu pasión
y por qué murió sin flor, / y por qué no ardió.

Just as the stanza was imposed on Morel Campos' creation, Don Hermenegildo's narration is being imposed on the cultural identity of the people of Guamaní. Sommer spoke of the need for the

romantic narrative in constructing national identity in 19th century national literatures: "Romantic passion [...] gave rhetoric for the hegemonic projects in Gramsci's sense of conquering the antagonist through mutual interest, or 'love,' rather than through coercion" (6). This is precisely what both the song lyrics and Don Hermenegildo's account recall: they represent an attempt to manufacture the consent of the masses, by enticing them to fall in love with their romantic narratives of national identity. Yet, this effort comes at a price—the Real is buried under the simplified constructions of the ruling class.

After the introductory *paseo* section of Morel Campos' danzas, the listener then encounters the "true body of the piece, in the form of two merengues" (Díaz and Manuel 142). This occurs in the second and third stanzas of the written lyrics for Morel Campos' piece, which are each repeated twice. What's more, these sections demonstrate striking parallels to sections three through six of Ferré's novel. In this section of the piece, the music suddenly becomes experimental and creative, breaking with the tone of the music that corresponds to the first section. A similar phenomenon occurs in the corresponding sections of the novel: Titina, the Afro-Puerto Rican slave from the De La Valle hacienda, interrupts Hermenegildo's illustrious narration with her *consulta*, telling him a story that leaves him "boquiabierto" (36). The lyrics of the stanza that correspond to the Titina chapter are as follows:

En sombra está, / sin morir, muriendo hoy,
y mañana sin cesar, / ni reír ni gozar.
En sombra estás, / en la fría sombra
que te escondes / y permite tu alentar,
trunco delirar.

The repetition of the word *sombra* relates literally and figuratively to Titina's monologue. *Sombra* can be translated as either "shadow" or "shade:" the lyrics refer to both the dark color of her skin as well as her ingenuous entreaty to Hermenegildo. Faithful to her master and mistress, Titina expects to be compensated for her loyal behavior, deluding herself into thinking that the pompous Don Hermenegildo will help her find justice. The chapter ends with Hermenegildo's judgments of Titina: he doubts the veracity of her tale and then romanticizes her as a Puerto Rican archetype, stripping away her subjectivity and the nuances of her identity (36). As a representative of hegemonic power, Hermenegildo does what has been done for centuries to placate the masses. In his reaction to her speech, he quickly converts her from a humanized to a narrativized figure: "[Titina] [e]stá igualita que antes. Ni una sola pasa blanca, ni un solo corresponde color ceniza salpica su densa secreta negra. Titina, la última esclava del pueblo, la criada sempiterna de los De la Valle. Titina la eterna" (37). These observations serve to mystify Titina as a human being, and her "dense black secret" imbues her with a sense of mystery, an aspect of otherness that was absent from the section where she was represented in the first person, in her own

words. Her voice fades amidst the imposition of Hermenegildo's signifying narration, stripping her of power. She is romanticized and depersonalized in his depiction of her as the eternal village slave. This image creates, for the expected bourgeois reader of Hermenegildo, a sense of comfort in the status quo: Afro-Puerto Ricans will maintain their subaltern status as other, never rising above their place, never shall they successfully demand justice; instead they shall remain comfortably in the *sombra* of their paler-skinned counterparts.

The stanza from "Maldito amor" that corresponds to Titina's monologue is repeated twice in Morel Campos' piece, for which its repeated stanza would appear to correspond to section four of *Maldito amor* the novella, entitled, "El desengaño." This section again takes the voice of Hermenegildo's epic style of narration and in it, he recounts the disenchantment of Don Julio Font, the owner of *Central Justicia*, the last sugar cane plantation not owned and operated by the Americans. Font realizes that his antiquated machines are no match for the American's expensive machines, which convert *melaço* into sugar in a matter of seconds (41). Don Julio's humiliating conversation with two rude American bankers, Mr. Durham and Mr. Irving, leave him realizing he will never be able to be independent while the Yankees are in town. As we find out toward the end of Ferré's novel, with Gloria's revelation, Don Julio had African heritage. If we read between the lines of this section in Hermenegildo's words, we can find the writer's subtle racist references toward the dark-skinned Julio. Several times he refers to don Julio's "enormous body":

Caminaba muy erguido, sacando pecho y moviendo con orgullo los hombros para destacar mejor su enorme altura. (40);

Había ensanchado el tórax en los últimos años y los trajes de hilo solían quedarle algo apretados, lo que destacaba aún más su enorme altura. (43);

Don Julio giró, como acorazado que se inclina hacia estribor, su enorme cuerpo hacia Mr. Irving, y se le quedó mirando con los ojos desorbitados. (44)

These quotes reveal Don Hermenegildo's racist inclinations: although in his narrative he never mentions Julio's racial background, here he clearly reveals his anti-African biases. For Hermenegildo, Julio is enormous and odd-looking in a professional suit, he is more like a battleship than a human being, and he has unreal eyes, which seem to bulge out of his skull. Using a technique akin to what he did to romanticize Titina, Hermenegildo also converts Don Julio into the Other, taking away his humanity and reducing him to the status of object. Again, in this chapter, a *sombra* underlies the narration, and its meaning is again twofold: the dark skin underlying Hermenegildo's racist depiction of Don Julio, and the darkness

brought to the village by the greedy and uncouth American businessmen. Hermenegildo's voice represents not only a hegemonic force, but at the same time, he forms part of a nation subject to the violence of colonialism: he tells the story of the overshadowing of Puerto Rican farmers by the Northern power. The imagery at the end of the chapter illustrates Hermenegildo, as representative of the Puerto Rican governing class, yet also humiliatingly defeated by the brutish Americans: "los hacendados de Guamaní se toparon con los Infantes de la Marina Norteamericana cerrándoles el paso" (45). The reader feels compelled to both condemn Hermenegildo as racist and sympathize with his plight at the American oppression of the island. Like the imposed lyrics of Morel Campos' song, the reader experiences a sense of ambivalence: he can neither "laugh nor enjoy" (to quote the lyrics), since Hermenegildo represents both oppressor and oppressed.

One might refer to chapters three and four of Ferré's novella as the *sombra* chapters, because of the corresponding lyrics imposed on Morel Campos' song: the text here deals both overtly and covertly with the topic of race and blackness. What's more, this section of Morel Campos' song is in the style of a *merengue*, a musical and dance movement that has strong African roots, mostly likely tracing back to Haiti and Madagascar (Austerlitz 1). In the same way that Hermenegildo seeks to hide Don Julio's African heritage, many Caribbean people often deny the African roots of merengue music. Again, Ferré utilizes the themes and format of her novella to demonstrate the nuances of Morel Campos' song. The novel represents here both the signified and signifier, as if a sort interminable Mobius strip, unable to separate the one aspect from the other. These uncanny parallels of chapters three and four to the merengue section of the danza demonstrate that the Morel Campos piece is not only intricately linked to its lyrics but also to Ferré's text.

The third stanza of Morel Campos' danza, which corresponds to the sixth and seventh sections of the novel ("La confesión" and "El rescate"), is in the musical form of a trio. In this section of the song, three voices sing three different melodies. This mixing of voices overshadows the lyrics due to the complication of the sounds. The lyrics are as follows:

¡Ay! No podrás / renacer del corazón,
no podrás / descansar del corazón.
Ya tu amor / sin morir se muere hoy
ya jamás verá la luz / sin saber por qué.

"La confesión," like Gloria's enquiry, begins in the first person: Aristides, the second son of the landowning De La Valle family, recounts his version of the events surrounding his brother Nicolás' death to Don Hermenegildo, falsely calling Nicolás a homosexual and a degenerate. It ends, as in Gloria's account, with a reaction and judgment from Hermenegildo, who decides that,

Aquella imagen de Nicolás como un degenerado y

de Ubaldino como un ser destruido, arrasado por la enfermedad y la desilusión, me resultó devastadora. Cuando Arístides terminó su relato tuve que cerrar los ojos para que no se me saltaran las lágrimas. Aquella historia me contaminaba, me hacía a mí también cómplice de la corrupción más vil, y me negué de plano a creerla. (59)

Just as the danza becomes complicated with the different singing voices, so does the clarity in Hermenegildo's mind surrounding the history of the De la Valle line with the appearance of Arístides' version of the story. If Hermenegildo were to believe the sordid history of the family of Guamaní's founding father, it would be devastating. He decides that it is better to close his eyes, ignore the truth. In the same way, while listening to the trio in the danza, the listener has no choice but to absorb the different sounds, the lyrics being impossible to decipher, the listener cannot find the signifiers and is forced to close the mind to reason. The phrase "No podrás" is repeated twice in this stanza: As we listen to both song and story, like Hermenegildo, we are forced to accept the fact that we cannot understand. As Arístides throws the official history, as well as Titina's version, into question, the reader begins to comprehend that she cannot know the truth, perhaps because there is no truth. In accordance with postmodernism, Ferré's novel argues in favor of a mentality of not knowing instead of the futile search for logic in the mixture of voices and sounds that compose the construction of reality. In her treatise on reader theory, *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski writes on the need to let go of theoretical baggage and let the written word "enchant" us. She writes that when one is enchanted by a text, "Time slows to a halt: you feel yourself caught in an eternal, unchanging present. Rather than having a sense of mastery over a text, you are at its mercy" (55). This illustrates the idea of *no poder*, as described in the danza as well as the novella. This novel has many voices, and as the story progresses, the reader, if passively enchanted, allows himself to be at the mercy of the different voices: Hermenegildo, Titina, Arístides, Laura and Gloria, all combine narratives to create a cacophony of sounds. The reader must choose between the arduous mental task of trying to keep the different accounts of the events straight or become hypnotized by the text, allowing herself to experience the confusion that the novel imparts, without trying to decipher an answer among the many questions the novel inspires.

The sixth section of the novel, "El rescate," corresponds to the repetition of the "No podrás" stanza of the danza. In his proud and confident prose, Hermenegildo briefly declares that he has decided to disbelieve Arístides' ignoble account of his family's past. He then goes on to narrate Don Ubaldino's glorious rescue of the Central Justicia, in which he finds the loophole necessary to put a stop to the North American businessmen's plan to buy up his land. Ubaldino and Hermenegildo return victorious to their little village where they celebrate with "ferias, cohetes y misas" (67). It's as if the previous chapter had never happened. Ubaldino continues in Hermene-

gildo's estimation as the heroic savior of Puerto Rican land, boldly humiliating the greedy Americans, and proudly clinging to Puerto Rican independence from American hegemony. The repetition of this stanza of the song is accompanied by a key change, giving the song a triumphant but also hackneyed feel, since the technique has been so overused in contemporary music. Like the song, this section of the novel seems too good to be true. After hearing all of Arístides' accusations and woes, the reader finds it almost incredible that Ubaldino was the amazingly benevolent landowner that Hermenegildo makes him out to be. If the novella indeed corresponds in form to Morel Campos' danza, the coincidence of the song's trite key change and Hermenegildo's purposeful ignorance of the subaltern voices of Guamaní function together, one might say, in harmony. The song's lyrics in this section say, "tu amor [...] jamás verá la luz / sin saber por qué," as readers we begin to understand that Hermenegildo most likely never will acknowledge the truth regarding Guamaní's history. Instead, he chooses to maintain the romantic narrative of Puerto Rico as a place where noble patriots boldly stand up to the North American pressures, in order to maintain their independence and self-sufficiency.

The penultimate section of the novel, entitled "El juramento," takes the voice of Doña Laura, who, from her death bed, confesses the truth to Don Hermenegildo: she believes either Don Julio or Arístides murdered her beloved Nicolás, and wishes to leave everything to his widow and son, Gloria and Nicolásito. This section, as well as the final one ("Homenaje a Morel Campos"), correspond to the final stanza of Morel Campos' piece, which repeats the lyrics of the first stanza of the song, yet here the music is changed into a minor key, creating a tone of lament and nostalgia in the music:

Sí, ya tu amor / es un pájaro sin voz,
ya tu amor / se perdió en mi corazón.
Sombra ya / para siempre lírica
en el ciego manantial / que anudó tu voz.

This section of the danza feels as if a non sequitur: after the triumphant key change, suddenly the music reverts to a melancholic final tone, ending in a minor key, which contrasts quite starkly with the buildup and climax of the first three stanzas. Yet, the title of the song, "Maldito amor," or "Damned Love," gives some indication for such an abruptly melancholic tone. The first three stanzas seem to be building up to a triumphant moment and the listener anticipates a major key change, representative of a glorious and joyous love, but his expectations are dashed. This abrupt change into the minor key represents the "damned" side of romance—how quickly an apparently lovely and perfect relationship can take a turn into something that is broken, *maldito*. A similar change in tone occurs at this point in the novel: the final two sections of the story contrast quite drastically with Hermenegildo's romantic account of Don Ubaldino's glorious accomplishments: the novel culminates in the apocalyptic bonfire of the usurped land of the Central Justicia. The

dissolution of the story commences with the voices of two key female characters: Doña Laura's bleakly sincere version of the events that took place in the violent family history is followed by the liberated voice of her daughter-in-law Gloria in the final chapter. María Inés Lagos wrote on the importance of the women's voices in this novel as agents of exposure, in that they expose the racism of the dominant class: "Las voces de las mujeres muestran cómo la clase dirigente ha contribuido a construir una comunidad en la cual sus ciudadanos han estado sujetos a un tipo de circulación social propugnada por los valores de un grupo que privilegia determinados rasgos o ciertos orígenes" (95). Laura's *juramento* indeed plays this type of a role in the story. The project to erase the African heritage in the De La Valle family line—represented by Don Hermenegildo, Don Ubaldino, and his snobbish aunts, as members of the racist and elite ruling class—suddenly becomes exposed by her deathbed confessions.

Laura's *juramento* breaks with the preceding tone of this novel in one particularly notable way: Don Hermenegildo's reaction to Laura's words. Laura boldly denounces Ubaldino and his family's racism and greed, even revealing that the great founding father had contracted syphilis and was mulatto (74-75). She gives an unabashedly gruesome account of Ubaldino's final illness: "exhibía impunemente sus vergüenzas por las ventanas y hacía sus necesidades encima de los butacones forrados de raso de la sala" (77). The reader here most likely anticipates the shock and horror with which the distinguished Don Hermenegildo will most likely react to this scathing account of his beloved foundational hero. Unfortunately, we are denied any knowledge of Hermenegildo's surprise: the section ends, again in Hermenegildo's words, however here he offers no judgment on Laura's dying words. He simply describes the scene and the entrance of Gloria in the room to tear the testament into pieces. Just as the final section of the danza seems to break in style with the previous ones, ending in a melancholic tune, Hermenegildo stops imposing his judgment on the De la Valle family. It is difficult to decide which is more disquieting: the accusations and negative descriptions of the De la Valle family, revealed by the lady of the house, or Hermenegildo's utter lack of reaction. This lack of reaction signals the impossibility of both the romanticisation and idealization of national historical narratives and that of absolutes in historiography. In these final two sections of the novella, the reader encounters a new way of being, a new order of narrating Puerto Rican historic and social realities, where women's voices are given primacy. In death, we are all equalized, as Laura observes, "la función de la muerte [es] nivelarnos a todos en nuestra última hora, obligarnos a reconocer que el coño y el carajo no tienen casta ni raza, y que, entre *feces et urinae*, todos somos iguales" (76). The sad letdown of the music in the final stanza of the danza corresponds to the feeling of defeat we can only assume that the (fictional) Hermenegildo must have felt: he can no longer in good conscience write his heroic version of Ubaldino's life.

Doris Sommer discussed the purpose of the Romantic nation-

building novels of Latin America: "Novels would teach the people about their history, about their barely formulated customs, and about ideas and feelings that have been modified by still unsung political and social events" (9). In other words, these novels would impose customs, feelings, and ideas about the nation's history. Hermenegildo sought to construct just such a novel, one in which the *guamaneños* memory could be molded into a unified narrative, as dictated by the ruling class. However, as the lyrics of the danza taunt, "Sombra ya / para siempre lírica:" because of Laura's disruption of Hermenegildo's narrative, his words will now fall into a lyrical shadow and disappear. In this way, the voice of the woman, Laura, finally triumphs over the written word of the hegemonic power, Hermenegildo.

Because it specifically mentions the composer's name in the title, the final section of the novel, "Homenaje a Morel Campos," appears to most obviously correspond to his danza. Yet, curiously, the text itself does something quite unexpected. Told entirely in the voice of Gloria, in colloquial language and full of slang, here we find a both a breakdown and manipulation of the signifying lyrics that were imposed on Morel Campos' signified/Real creation. For the first time in the novella, Hermenegildo is absent both as narrator and as physical presence: he neither speaks nor listens to anyone's account, but rather, in this section two black women address one another. In his article, "La 'loca del desván' y otros intertextos de *Maldito amor*," Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat claims that Ferré works with contradictions without trying to resolve them, an effect which complicates her texts. He states that in this way, "la imagen final de la nación puertorriqueña que proyecta *Maldito amor* no es redonda sino angular y refractada" (283). Indeed, the reader does encounter a variety of voices in the novella, and one might say that it ends with an "angular and refracted" image of the Puerto Rican nation, with the De la Valle family as microcosm of the island's society as a whole. However, this final section also provides something more than just fragmentation and plurality, and Morel Campos' danza serves to illuminate what really is occurring in the story's denouement. The final chapter promotes the possibility of a new order in Puerto Rican society via the women's ideological uprising against the cultural elites like Don Hermenegildo. Gloria tells Titina, "ese Guamaní arcádico que Don Hermenegildo tanto elogia en sus novelones románticos, no es otra cosa que un infierno, y la mayoría de los guamaneños mueren como moscas de tuberculosis, de uncinariasis y de inanición" (84). Gloria also exposes Ubaldino's faults, including the fact that he eventually sold out to the Americans to maintain his lavish lifestyle (83). Ubaldino's fragmented loyalties led to his destruction and justified Gloria and Titina burning down his sugar mill, which was supposed to be the pride of the Puerto Rican independence movement and symbol of national identity. The novel closes with Gloria entreating Titina to sing with her a revised version of the final stanza of the Morel Campos danza. Notice here the juxtaposition of the two different sets of lyrics:

Original version:

Ya tu amor / es un pájaro sin voz,
ya tu amor / se perdió en mi corazón.
No sé por qué / fue marchita tu pasión
y por qué no ardió.

Gloria's version:

Ya tu amor / es un pájaro *con* voz,
ya tu amor / *anidó* en mi corazón.
Ya sé por qué / *me consume* esta pasión
y por qué *ardió*. [emphases added]

These new lyrics more accurately emulate the tone of the original danza by Morel Campos, the version that the Afro-Puerto Rican composer created, before the trite lyrics were imposed onto its innovative sounds. Gloria celebrates her blackness here without shame, chastising Titina for acquiescing to the swindling landowning family, and the two sing for a new order of Puerto Rican society. Ferré could never erase the words that had been written for the danza, but creates different lyrics, thus giving the tune a new sense of meaning. Her novel works in signifiers. It begins with Lady Elvira's obsession with the hegemonic signifying lyrics to the song and closes with the bittersweet ending in which the Central Justicia is burned down and Gloria restructures the signifier in the new lyrics.

Significantly, a danza is a piece of music meant for collective movement, an embodiment of the rhythm and music. Lagos' article discusses the importance of the "corporalities" of this novella:

[L]a conciencia del propio cuerpo como objeto valorado o devaluado por la cultura, un hecho histórico y cultural, se relaciona con el sutil juego social que destaca, esconde o transforma la apariencia corporal, de manera que conforma no sólo la construcción y fragmentación de la identidad nacional sino también de la subjetividad individual. (90)

The fact that *Maldito amor* ends with two black women singing and dancing collectively completely disrupts the hegemonic order:

this final act between Gloria and Titina undermines the romantic nationalizing lyrics imposed by the dominant class ideology and demonstrates that these two women have no need for what patriarchy would require of them: dependence on a man for economic and social advancement. The postmodern wins out over the modern in this final scene. However, it has come at a price: the incineration of tradition embodied in the last vestige of Puerto Rican economic independence symbolized in the Central Justicia. Perhaps for this reason the danza as well as the novella end on an oddly minor key. The reader celebrates at Gloria and Titina's symbolic act but also may feel dismayed by this loss of patrimonial pride.

Rita Felski also discusses the importance of shock in literature: "the manicured nature of modern life, with its sugar-coated reassurances and its sweeping of unpleasant truths under the carpet, calls forth a desire to go eyeball to eyeball with the squalid and unpalatable elements of human experience. Shock, in this view, is a reaction to modernity" (121). Those in the ruling class tend to live in this type of saccharine reality, ignoring or even erasing the historic suffering of subaltern people groups. Ferré's novella takes the discourse of power and imbues it with a shocking moment of a new and embodied order of being, calling into question what society traditionally upheld as honorable. It disrupts the lyrics that the powers that be had imposed on Morel Campos' piece, and struggles to place it back in the hands of the too-often silenced Afro-Puerto Ricans.

Music is a form of artistic creation that resists cultural signifiers. Because of this, language imposed on music must be seen as a type of signifying process, in which the nuanced meaning becomes blurred, or even disappears. Lacan claims that with signification, the imposition of language, we are left only with a chain of signifiers, and an "incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier (1296). The case of Morel Campos' danza and the lyrics imposed on the music acutely demonstrates this loss of real meaning. Ferré's novel recognizes this imposition of power on the subaltern's creation. By using Morel Campos' danza as a subtext for the structure and themes of the novel, *Maldito amor* provides another set of signifiers with which to receive Juan Morel Campos' danza. The novel recognizes the constant chain of signifiers that constitutes reality, and offers a new and subversive version of history to include in the chain of discourse.

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