

**House, Factory, Beauty Salon, Brothel:
Space, Gender and Sexuality in Puerto Rican Literature and Film**

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Romance Languages and Literatures: Spanish)
in The University of Michigan
2009

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people whose guidance, support, and friendship have been indispensable for the completion of this dissertation. First among them is Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, a mentor whose erudition, thoughtfulness, generosity, persistent enthusiasm and dedication to the project have been instrumental at every stage of the writing process, from the conceptualization to the final revisions. He has showed me how to be an exemplary teacher, a rigorous intellectual, and a positive, supportive advisor, and I am deeply grateful.

Similarly, Jossianna Arroyo has been a constant source of support and encouragement, of thoughtful comments and constructive ideas. Like her, Jarrod Hayes and Maria Coterá embraced the project and took it in directions that have enriched it immensely.

A number of people outside of the dissertation committee deserve my recognition and thanks. Luis Figueroa has stood by me, and has followed the development of this project with enthusiasm and persistence. I am grateful for the stimulating conversations, for his faith and patience. At the University of Michigan, Catherine Benamou and Lucia Saks offered courses and provided a space for a dialogue on film studies that helped me expand the discussion of Puerto Rican cinema in the dissertation. The friendship of Raquel Vega-Durán, Mariam Colón, Andrea Dewees, Danny Méndez, Jessica Piney, Dani

Arroyo, and Jesal Parekh, among many other current and former graduate students, has been the source of a continuous exchange of ideas and of necessary moments of distraction. In Connecticut, I am grateful to Anne Lambright and Guillermo Irizarry for their consistent care and interest in my work, for their generous advice and warm friendship. Gustavo Remedi has been a thoughtful and challenging mentor and interlocutor for years, and I deeply appreciate his support. Pablo Delano, Maurice Wade, Janet Bauer, Angel Rivera, and Odette Casamayor have provided a space that made me feel like part of a community in a process that could otherwise seem quite lonely. Thank you.

I give special thanks to the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, and to the Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan, for providing the intellectual space and resources for the completion of this dissertation, including an RLL Research Fellowship, a One-Term Fellowship, and summer funds that allowed me to travel to Puerto Rico and to complete the necessary research. I also thank Trinity College for the Terry Fellowship for graduate education and for a year-long Graduate Fellowship that gave me additional time to write and revise the project.

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ABSTRACT

This project focuses on the ways in which contemporary Puerto Rican authors and film directors construct and creatively negotiate women's feminist agency in a variety of spaces, from the family house traditionally associated with national unity, to beauty salons, factories and brothels that have contested the cultural nationalist discourse. My central argument is that, in the process of challenging traditional images of femininity, the protagonists of the short stories, novels and films that I analyze also transform, gender and politicize the spaces that they inhabit, to propose alternatives to the spatial tropes associated with the construction of Puerto Rican national discourse.

The study takes as a starting point the family house, the spatial aspect of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, dominated by a traditional patriarchal figure. Chapter I situates the dissertation in the historical context of Puerto Rico of the mid-twentieth century and positions it within recent studies on the politics of space and feminist geography. Chapter II analyzes how, through the politization of space, Puerto Rican artists like Rosario Ferré, Magali García Ramis, Jacobo Morales and Paco López negotiate the association of the house with cultural nationalist discourse.

Chapter III studies texts that appropriate the space of the factory both as an instrument of official discourse, and as a space of opposition from which Puerto Rican

working women like Luisa Capetillo and Dominga de la Cruz have staged a resistance to marginalizing practices and discourses.

By analyzing texts by Carmen Lugo Filippi, Mayra Santos-Febres and Sonia Fritz, in Chapter IV I argue that the gendering and the queering of the beauty salon through gender performativity, desire and the gaze disrupt cultural nationalist ideas of heteronormativity and propose alternatives to the configuration of the national family.

Finally, Chapter V focuses on the space of the brothel, demonstrating how, in the work of Rosario Ferré, Manuel Ramos Otero, Efraín López Neris and Mayra Santos-Febres, the patriarchal figure is de-centered by the Afro-Puerto Rican prostitute Isabel la Negra, who challenges previous representations not only of gender and sexuality, but also of racial and class identifications.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Gender, sexuality and space have had a complex and often contradictory relationship within Puerto Rican cultural nationalist discourse and with the official representation of the Puerto Rican nation. While in the 1950s, at the height of the construction of the cultural nationalist model, women were called upon to uphold and reproduce its economic and cultural pillars (projects such as Operation Bootstrap and the community modernization inspired by the films of DIVEDCO), they were systematically marginalized and discouraged from seeking leadership roles in the emerging national imaginary. This was accomplished by limiting the depictions of women to images of housewives, mothers and daughters, supportive of the social project of their male counterparts, reproached and punished when they strayed from the social roles deemed acceptable for them. These representations had a prominent spatial dimension, as the domestic space remained the women's domain (hence the abundance of literary and cinematic works set in rural and urban family homes).

The feminism of the 1970s enabled a counterdiscourse that used space as one of its main, albeit rarely analyzed, technologies of resistance and subversion of women's role in cultural nationalism. For almost four decades writers and film directors like Rosario Ferré, Magali García Ramis, Carmen Lugo Filippi, Sonia Fritz and Ana María

García, among others, have strategically and creatively “misplaced” their female characters from the domestic space to a series of other spaces, and, from these spaces, have questioned the cohesion and the uniformity of the patriarchal aspect of cultural nationalist discourse. This project focuses on the ways in which contemporary Puerto Rican authors and directors construct and negotiate feminist agency in a variety of spaces, from the family house traditionally associated with Puerto Rican national unity, to beauty salons, factories and brothels that have a problematic relationship with national discourses. My central argument is that, in the process of challenging traditional images of femininity, the protagonists of the short stories, novels and films that I analyze also transform and politicize the spaces that they inhabit to propose alternatives to the spatial tropes associated with the construction of Puerto Rican cultural nationalist discourse.

As suggested above, Puerto Rican national debates have traditionally engaged issues of gender and sexuality through the prism of a masculine and patriarchal national discourse, most evident in the literary works of the Generation of the 1930s and present in Puerto Rican cultural productions throughout the 20th century (Acosta-Belén, Solá, Ostolaza Bey). By examining spatial tropes, my dissertation reassesses women’s attempts to reconfigure the relationship between nation, gender and sexuality in Puerto Rican literary and cinematic discourse. It benefits from historiography that uncovers Puerto Rican women’s prominent social role since the 19th century. It also engages critical work on the creative and political changes in contemporary women’s literature, as in studies of the body in a variety of contexts, from the place of the body in different

urban settings to its possibility as an instrument of resistance to patriarchy and colonialism, and as a technology for making claims to independence.

My project makes an important contribution to the fields of Latin American and Caribbean literary and film studies, gender studies and feminist theory, as well as ethnic and national identities in colonial and postcolonial settings, by introducing the politics of space, a topic that has not received much critical attention in Puerto Rican theory and criticism, to the study of Puerto Rican cultural production. It offers an innovative approach to the study of gender, sexuality and national discourse in the Hispanic Caribbean, by introducing space as an analytical category with which to approach their relationship. In this sense, the project adds a new dimension to the field of Puerto Rican, and more broadly, Caribbean literary and cultural analysis, as well as studies of nationalism, gender and sexuality.

Furthermore, my work introduces the colonial/postcolonial Caribbean to the field of Feminist Geography and makes it part of the conversation on the relationship between gender and space. Feminist and cultural geographers like Doreen Massey, Rosemary Hennessy, Gillian Rose and Jon Binnie have explored the construction of gender and sexuality in relation to space in the context of different geographical areas, from the UK to the Middle East and Asia. In contrast, Latin America and the Caribbean have consistently been neglected in this analysis. In this sense, by introducing Caribbean cultural production and Latin American thought to the concerns of feminist and cultural geographers, my study recasts their understanding of nation and territory by discussing the space of the island-nation, and of Puerto Rico as a neo-colonial space that enables a

rethinking of the question of gender in relation to migration and diaspora. It also expands cultural geographers' limited discussion of race to encompass Caribbean racial constructions and their intersections with questions of sexuality, masculinity and patriarchal discourses and practices.

In addition to the fields of Caribbean Studies and feminist geography, my project also makes an innovative contribution to the field of Latina/o Studies. It engages in a critical dialogue with Latina feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga who have written about the space of the border/la frontera, by introducing the analysis of multiple spatial tropes as sites of the negotiation of gender, sexuality and patriarchal relations of power. It addresses questions of the construction of race, including the work of theorists like Silvio Torres Saillant, by demonstrating how race intersects with gender and sexuality to construct national and transnational identities. It also engages with questions of the construction of national and diasporic Latino imaginaries in the work of critics like Antonio Benítez Rojo, who have discussed the Caribbean in terms of its capacity to serve as a heterogeneous geographic and cultural bridge between Latin America and the United States through performance and common dynamics. My project engages in dialogues with these critics by bringing into the conversation the issue of space and the way that women have challenged their marginalization in the Puerto Rican neocolonial context by critiquing the dominant tropes of the spaces representative of the Puerto Rican nation. In the context of the limited critical literature on space in Puerto Rican cultural studies, I build on José Luis González's and on Juan Gelpí's studies of the

house as a symbol of the “national family,” especially the latter critic’s analysis of the crisis of patriarchy and colonialism on the island.

Historical Context

This study is foregrounded by a specific historical, geographical and social setting, out of which the literary and cinematic texts analyzed here emerge, and which they help construct, critique and rethink. It is framed by the establishment of the Estado Libre Asociado (Free Associated State, also known as the Commonwealth), Puerto Rico’s political status in its colonial relation to the United States, and its assertion of cultural nationalism and the myth of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* (the Great Puerto Rican Family) as its dominant discourse.

Puerto Rican national debates have engaged the issue of gender and sexuality in different forms and to varying extents throughout the 20th century. The writers of the generation of the 1930s, in particular, had rearticulated earlier discussions of the origins and the constitution of the Puerto Rican nation that, in some instances, harked back to the turn of the 19th century (Scarano, “Jibaro Masquerade”). In doing so, they paid little attention to gender and sexuality, and when they did, it was for the purpose of reaffirming a masculine, heterosexual vision of the national imaginary. For most of them, the woman’s role was domestic, a wife and a mother, whereas professional women were perceived as a threat to virility, the quality that these intellectuals saw as intrinsic to *la puertorriqueñidad*. The figure that best exemplifies the masculine discourse on nation and gender in the 1930s is Antonio S. Pedreira, who claims that the most a woman could

do for her nation is to be “la perfecta dueña de casa” (Pedreira 95), determining social and gender roles, and delimiting the space that a woman was to occupy.

The two decades following Pedreira’s 1934 book were a time of profound political changes that set the stage for the redefinition of Puerto Rico’s national identity in relation to the United States. The dilemma of independence vs. statehood, which had preoccupied intellectuals and politicians since the U.S. invasion of the island in 1898, was seemingly resolved with a third alternative that tried to accommodate the concerns of both sides of the political debate. Puerto Rico’s status as Estado Libre Asociado was formalized and proclaimed on July 25, 1952 by Luis Muñoz Marín, the leader of the Popular Democratic Party (PPD, or Partido Popular Democrático) and the first elected governor of the island. The conditions that redefined Puerto Rico’s relationship to the United States were an attempt at finding a middle ground between the supporters of independence and of statehood, in a situation in which Puerto Rico had no independent government, while at the same time continued to identify as a nation different from that of the metropolis. As Jorge Duany notes, this accommodating arrangement was characterized by a series of contradictions:

Although Puerto Ricans elect a resident commissioner to Congress, they don’t have their voting representatives or senators in Washington. Even though Puerto Ricans cannot vote for the president of the United States, they are bound to serve in the U.S. armed forces like any other citizens. While island residents do not pay federal taxes, they qualify for most federally funded programs, including nutritional assistance and welfare benefits. Such contradictory elements may well warrant the term ‘postcolonial colony’ to describe Puerto Rico’s problematic relationship with the United States (Duany *The Puerto Rican Nation* 123).

The status of the Estado Libre Asociado was rationalized and justified through discourses and practices of cultural, rather than constitutional nationalism, which the PPD

put forth as a viable model that would reconcile Puerto Rico's national identity with its lack of political sovereignty. As supporters of this political philosophy,

Cultural nationalists emphasize a unique history, culture, language, and geography as the essence of the nation, but unlike political nationalists, they do not necessarily advocate the creation of a sovereign state to embody their ideas. Rather, cultural nationalists typically proclaim the spiritual autonomy of their nation by commemorating their heritage, celebrating their rituals, rescuing their traditions, and educating the people (Duany *The Puerto Rican Nation* 123-4).

Muñoz's Puerto Rican cultural nationalism reconciled national identity with political dependence, and in so doing became a populist project that generated "mitos integradores para unas generaciones empeñadas en asumir de una vez por todas la modernidad [...] el desarrollo, la industrialización, la auto-determinación política respecto a los centros mundiales, la armonía social y racial y la identidad nacional" (Álvarez-Curbelo, "El discurso" 16). These ideals were part of a populist discourse wherein "La mediación del líder carismático, la ilusión de participación y los mitos de una identidad colectiva compartida aseguraban, así, la paz y el orden nacional" (Rodríguez Castro 101), overlooking the fact that many of the conditions that enabled the construction and the reproduction of that national identity would only be possible by means of the legal power to approve laws, a power that Puerto Rico couldn't always maintain under the new colonial arrangement.

One of the central social pillars of cultural nationalism was the concept of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, or the Great Puerto Rican Family. The concept was not a novelty in the social and political discourse of the middle decades of the 20th century. In fact, it dates back to the late 19th century, when it was first used as a resource in the discourse of liberal professionals and a significant faction of large landowners (*hacendados*) seeking

political autonomy within the context of Spanish colonialism (Cubano-Iguina, Scarano, “Liberal Pacts”). As Frances Aparicio explains, the Great Puerto Rican Family trope “was later activated as a strategic response to the economic and social displacement suffered by them after 1898, precisely as U.S. absentee capitalism began to buy and merchandize the sugar production process previously controlled by this sector” (Aparicio 5). The hacendados “summoned up the image of the patriarchal dynamics that structured the hacienda in the past [thus constructing] a homogenized discourse of unity, harmony, and most important, *convivencia*” (Aparicio 6). By proposing a schematic model of Puerto Rican society dominated by “Creole landowners as benevolent father figures and subsistence farmers as their grateful peons, [the concept] obscures important conflicts and tensions within nineteenth-century coffee and sugar plantations” (Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation* 20). Following this trend, during the 1940s and 1950s the PPD appropriated the concept and transformed it into the founding myth of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism. With the help of institutions like the Institute for Puerto Rican Culture, *la gran familia puertorriqueña* became a model of national unity and cohesion that conveniently neglected to recognize and address racial, gender, class and other hierarchies in Puerto Rican society. As one example, following similar trends in much of Latin America (Miller 1-26), the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture “defined the essence of contemporary Puerto Rican culture as the harmonious integration of aboriginal, Spanish, and African traditions, prior to the U.S. invasion of the island” (Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation* 130), a model that excluded a number of other influences and elements, like those of the United States or of the early Puerto Rican migration to the mainland. It is this

notion of unity and cohesion, and its effort to maintain and disguise social hierarchies, that the authors and the film directors analyzed in this study would address, challenge and rethink in their literary and cinematic texts.

In addition to the model of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, another pillar of the Estado Libre Asociado was Operación Manos a la Obra, reframed as Operation Bootstrap for its other intended audience of American businessmen. An economic program instituted in the late 1940s and intended to transform Puerto Rican society and economy, Operation Bootstrap

began in 1947 and relied on U.S. capital and markets. U.S. corporations borrowed money from the Commonwealth (which in turn sold bonds in the U.S. municipal funds markets) and invested in labor-intensive manufacturing. These factories bought raw materials from abroad, processed or assembled the products in Puerto Rico, and then sold their products in continental markets. Operations tended to be labor-intensive, paid significantly lower wages than those earned by U.S. workers, and enjoyed almost full tax exemptions (Meléndez 7).

An additional element of Operation Bootstrap was the silent, yet widespread facilitation of the emigration of Puerto Rico's "excess population" to the United States – workers who were unable to find employment on the island and were encouraged to look for one in factories or farms on the mainland. This policy set the stage for the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to New York and later to other parts of the U.S. While at first Operation Bootstrap was highly successful in creating better-paying, more stable jobs than in seasonal agriculture, in part by facilitating the emigration of Puerto Ricans to the United States, its success only lasted a few decades, until owners realized that they could make bigger profits by transferring their factories to locations in Latin America and Asia, where their production cost would be even lower. As Meléndez explains, in the 1970s Puerto

Rico's Gross National Product "declined sharply, the unemployment rate almost doubled, and income levels stagnated. Many factories closed their operations in Puerto Rico and moved to other low-wage countries" (Meléndez 7). The failure of Operation Bootstrap, and, many would argue, of some of the founding concepts of the Estado Libre Asociado, resulted in a crisis that inspired intellectuals, artists and social critics to rethink the core principles of cultural nationalism and of its model of Puerto Rican national identity.

The literary and intellectual context during the years marked by the institutionalization of cultural nationalism and the Estado Libre Asociado in Puerto Rico was also a time of transitions between what literary critics have more recently identified as two distinct generations of artists and authors – that of the 1950s and that of the 1970s, to which most of the writers analyzed in this dissertation belong.

Among the most prominent writers of the Generación del 50 were José Luis González, Pedro Juan Soto, Abelardo Díaz Alfaro, Emilio Díaz Valcárcel and René Marqués – a group of storytellers and playwrights still dominated by male voices and patriarchal attitudes. They created some of their most important work in the context of multiple social transitions, "cambios provocados por el reformismo político y social del Partido Popular, la creación del Estado Libre Asociado, la industrialización de la isla, la ruina del sector agrícola, y la creciente anexión económica y agresión cultural norteamericana" (Acosta-Belén, "En torno" 220). While many of these authors were welcomed and incorporated in the institutionalization and the construction of the cultural

nationalist model through their participation in initiatives like DIVEDCO¹, they also felt a profound concern with the society that, in their view, left behind the values and the principles that they knew. Among the main themes of these authors' work were "la ruralía desplazada y agonizante, el mundo enajenante que surge con la industrialización y urbanización de la isla, la emigración masiva de los puertorriqueños a los Estados Unidos y el creciente poder asimilista de los Estados Unidos" (Acosta-Belén, "En torno" 221).

Through the 1950s, the traditional image of women in the Puerto Rican literary canon continued to be the result of patriarchal views of social relations, which sought to make women a productive instrument in the developing cultural nationalist project. In literary and cinematic discourse, the dominant cultural nationalist politics of gender often translated into situations in which a female character, often that of a young single woman or a wife, either assumes her reproductive role in the Puerto Rican nation, or betrays it, and is consequently condemned and punished for it. During this period, for example, René Marqués, one of the proclaimed patriarchs of Puerto Rican national literature, lamented women's increased social participation, expressing a preoccupation with "la

¹ The purpose of La División de Educación de la Comunidad (The Division for Community Development), one of the most ambitious and successful projects of cultural nationalism, was to educate and integrate Puerto Ricans, especially those living in rural zones, into the national project. Starting in 1949 and into the 1970s, DIVEDCO, whose members included Jack Delano, Amílcar Tirado, Pedro Juan Soto, and René Marqués, among many others, produced over 112 short and feature films, most of them with unprofessional actors, addressing issues of community development and modernization. (*Fundación nacional para la cultural popular*). Together with the films, the organization helped develop many other arts, like the making of silk-screens, posters, music, and others. DIVEDCO is undoubtedly the project that has made the most important contribution to the development of Puerto Rican cinema in the 20th century, as it not only resulted in the production of a large body of cinematic work, but was also responsible for professional training of future filmmakers and for popularizing cinema on the island.

docilidad del hombre – triste figura del ex-pater familias – ante el avance progresivo de la mujer en todas las esferas en que él era una vez -- ¡nostálgico pasado! – dueño y señor” (Marqués, *Puertorriqueño dócil*, 171). The women in Marqués’s plays *La carreta* and *Los soles truncos* respond to the author’s concern, as they personify the loss of traditional patriarchal values. Juanita’s prostitution and her claim that “no hay dinero sucio ni dinero limpio. Hay dinero” (Marqués *La carreta* 124) marks the loss not only of her honor, but also that of her family, again alluding to *la gran familia puertorriqueña*. Conversely, Inés, the protagonist of *Los soles truncos*, burns down the family house in an effort to preserve it in time, and thus projects and reproduces the sentiments of her author’s generation – a nostalgia for a lost past and for its paternal figure. Inés gives an impression of fatalism and desperation that points to the author’s lament for the loss of the Spanish colonial past and of patriarchy – the sisters, the last remnants of the patriarch and everything that he stood for, burn together with the house.

Other literary and cinematic examples of this patriarchal attitude can be found in “La cautiva” by Pedro Juan Soto and in Orzábal Quintana’s film *Maruja*.² “La cautiva” and *Maruja* both have melodramatic elements and didactic purposes, depicting “unacceptable” female gender and sexual behavior for which the protagonists are unequivocally punished. The young woman in Soto’s short story is forced into exile because of her relationship with a married man, while Maruja’s death is a symbolic reminder that transgression of gender norms, especially when accompanied by sexual

² Orzábal Quintana is an Argentine director whose depiction of Puerto Rican female sexuality could raise questions about the perception of Caribbean women in the rest of Latin America and, in a sense, about Latin American “tropicalism.”

liberation, has no place in the national imaginary. As another significant example, René Marqués's 1959 anthology *Cuentos puertorriqueños de hoy* includes short stories by eight male writers (including the editor himself) and no female writers.

The transition from this patriarchal depiction of gender and sexuality to the feminist standpoint of the writers and artists of the Generación del 70 was gradual and conditioned by a series of social and political circumstances. The changes that occurred in the 1950s and the 1960s, and to which Puerto Rican artists and authors responded, were not only those that took place on the island, but in the broader historical context in which they were living:

Durante los años del 60 tuvieron lugar una serie de eventos históricos a nivel mundial que, junto a la realidad sociopolítica e histórica de Puerto Rico, contribuyeron a moldear la conciencia literaria de los jóvenes literatos de la Generación del 70, tales como la Revolución Cubana y su ideología socialista, las protestas en contra del reclutamiento militar obligatorio, la guerra de Vietnam, la denuncia de los hippies en contra de la injusticia social y de ideas arcaicas que dividen al género humano en jerarquías sociales, el resurgimiento del movimiento feminista y, en la literatura, la nueva revolución literaria hispanoamericana bautizada como el "Boom." Todos esos factores históricos, sociales y culturales contribuyeron [...] en moldear la conciencia intelectual y literaria de los escritores de la nueva literatura puertorriqueña (Palmer-López, "Rosario Ferré").

All these factors inspired Puerto Rican authors and intellectuals to rethink the national identity proposed by the philosophy of cultural nationalism and to discover new hierarchies and axes of identity that affected their everyday life as women, Afro-Puerto Ricans, queer citizens, or members of the working class, or who identified themselves with one or more of these categories. As a consequence, topics like "la falsa moralidad burguesa [y] la crisis política y económica del Estado Libre Asociado," (Acosta-Belén, "En torno" 224) and "[el] feminismo, la negritud, y la homosexualidad" (Acosta-Belén,

“En torno” 226) started to dominate the literary, cinematic and artistic production. In contrast to the 1950s, there were many more women among the authors of the Generación del 70, as now “Puerto Rican feminists, like feminists throughout the world, faced the critical challenge of articulating feminist concerns alongside issues of national liberation” (Meléndez 11) – a situation that was even more exacerbated in Puerto Rico due to its complex colonial relationship to the United States. Authors like Rosario Ferré, Carmen Lugo Filippi, and Manuel Ramos Otero, among others, belong to the group of artists of this generation that deemed it imperative to rethink the way in which the Puerto Rican official political discourse addressed the issues of gender and sexuality in relation to national identity.

In “The Rough Edges of Puerto Rican Identities,” Duany notes that critics of the cultural nationalist model of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* have pointed out the gender and sexual hierarchies embedded in that model. He claims that, “thinking along the fringes of Puerto Ricanness helps scholars move away from the traditional portraits of a homogeneous national character or fixed essence that might be defended and preserved at all odds” (Duany, “Rough Edges” 178). He goes on to analyze the variety of ways in which scholars of gender and sexuality (Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, Magali Roy-Féquiére, Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, among others) have problematized the patriarchal foundations of the Puerto Rican national model. By pointing out how, in recent years, “feminists have interrogated the dominant nationalist discourse for its exclusion or subordination of women” (Duany, “Rough Edges” 183) and the practices that “have tended to shun nonwhite and lower-class women from their nationalist

discourse” (Duany, “Rough Edges” 183), Duany recognizes and critiques the dominance of the patriarchal characteristics of the Puerto Rican national model by emphasizing the exclusions that it allows and the critiques that have recently been voiced against these omissions.

Gender, Sexuality and the Puerto Rican Nation

As Duany suggests in the article mentioned above, since the 1970s there has been an increased interest in the issues of gender and sexuality in Puerto Rican literary and cultural criticism. In contemporary feminist studies, Yamila Azize Vargas has emphasized the importance of the new historiography emerging in the 1970s-1980s that began to uncover the prominent social role that women have had in Puerto Rico since the end of the 19th century, recognizing both the obstacles and the achievements of the feminist movement on the island (Azize Vargas 22-24). Similarly, María M. Solá has examined the creative and political changes evident in contemporary women’s literature on the island. Among the issues that she discusses is the approach to the body – the body reviled, invisible or marginalized in traditional patriarchal discourse, in contrast to the power and the possibility of the body, characterized by the desire for independence and recognition. One of the most important questions that Solá poses is that of the relationship between gender, sexuality and literature, and the creative possibility of literature “que se escribe con el cuerpo” (Solá “Para que lean” 46) to reinvent and transform the roles and the places of women in the Puerto Rican national and literary space. In another essay, the same author focuses on what she calls “el signo mujer” (Solá

“Ángel, arpía” 201) and approaches the analysis of feminine roles in Puerto Rican literature through the dichotomy of angel-arpía, focusing on these tropes throughout the origins and rise of feminist thought in terms of the ways that female characters challenge and subvert traditional submissive feminine roles. These issues remain relevant for critics like Diana Vélez, who emphasizes Puerto Rican women writer’s capacity to violate patriarchal codes and to offer a feminist rewriting of history and of the national imaginary (Vélez 3-4). The work of these and other feminist literary and cultural scholars is what enables Aurea María Sotomayor to argue that, “El discurso masculino ha dejado de dictarle pautas a la escritura femenina. En palabras más sencillas, las mujeres han comenzado a escribir por boca propia” (Sotomayor, *Hilo* 51), referring to both literature and criticism.

More recent examples of feminist literary criticism have examined the relationship between the writing subject, the position of the female characters, and their historical context, and have gone as far as taking a critical and self-reflexive look at feminist cultural criticism itself (Sotomayor, *Hilo*). In her study of the female characters in Puerto Rican short stories, Carmen Montañez emphasizes this relationship, noting that female authors have enabled “una rebelión contra la forma tradicional de contar la historia. [...] A las autoras no les interesa fijarse en las figuras que se destacan en la historia, sino que exponen la historia desde la visión de seres marginados” (Montañez 20), rewriting history from the standpoint of women, valorizing their experiences and contributions, “con el propósito de insertar, a través del personaje femenino, a la mujer como ente indispensable, y especialmente, la presencia de la mujer en la historia [con] el

propósito de revisar el orden social y económico que las excluyó” (Montañez 38).

Similarly, Carmen Rivera examines the intersection between gender, history and the national literary canon through the work of female Puerto Rican writers in the U.S., recognizing the variety of experiences (of origins, identification, language) that their texts depict and through which they “author/ize their own voices at the margins and at the center of the printed page” (Rivera xviii-xix).

This desire to insert women in the narrative of national history has resulted in a series of studies of women’s journals and autobiographies. In one such study, Aileen Schmidt examines women’s autobiographical writing at the intersection of history and subjectivity, claiming that Puerto Rican and Cuban autobiographical texts are not simple feminine confessional narratives, but have important social and cultural functions:

La escritura se convierte en una práctica contestataria, en una toma de poder para la protagonista-narradora quien, desde la voluntad de su consciencia, asume control de su vida y decide interpretarla, rompiendo las barreras literarias y culturales de su género. Narrarse es una afirmación de poder” (Schmidt 36).

These are only some of the recent studies in Puerto Rican feminist literary criticism that indicate the trend towards valorizing women’s experiences and interpretations as integral parts of the island’s and the diaspora’s history.

In addition to tracing the development and the growth of the Puerto Rican feminist movement, critics have also addressed issues that stand at the intersection of nation and gender, such as race, class, law, labor, and masculinity, among many others. The relationship between race, gender and nation from a historical perspective has been the topic of Eileen Suárez Findlay’s *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-18920*. In literary criticism, Marie Ramos Rosado’s study of

black women in Puerto Rican literature remains one of the most comprehensive works, even though her analysis of key texts like Rosario Ferré's "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres" remains problematic, in that the author argues that, instead of subverting certain racial hierarchies, Isabel la Negra "internaliza la ideología de la clase dominante" (Ramos Rosado 241) and assumes values like "el blanquamiento y la corrupción, valores de la burguesía decadente" (Ramos Rosado 243), neglecting the ways in which the story inverts positions of power and ends in a feminine, homoerotic fusion, resisting and rejecting patriarchal domination.

A number of more recent studies have engaged the problem of race in Puerto Rican society from different perspectives. A case in point is Mayra Santos-Febres's *Sobre piel y papel*, a third of which is dedicated exclusively to the issues of racial stereotyping, marginalization and power hierarchies in contemporary Puerto Rican culture. In essays like "Por boca propia," "¿Ser una negra pública?" and "Raza en la cultura puertorriqueña" Santos-Febres discusses questions of the normativity and privilege of whiteness, through which "al blanco nunca se le nombra" (Santos-Febres, *Sobre piel* 63), proposes a critique of Negritude for presenting a stereotypical, one-dimensional image of Puerto Ricans of African descent, and argues for the need for "una presencia pública lo suficientemente valorada y visible como para que dicha presencia nombre y revalorice a la raza por sí misma" (Santos-Febres, *Sobre piel* 74).

The intersection of gender and class is another topic that figures prominently in Puerto Rican cultural production, from literature and cinema to salsa music and reggaetón. One critic that has paid a great deal of attention to the question of class as it

relates to gender is Alice Colón Warren. Her studies of the feminization of poverty and on the social position of women under the Estado Libre Asociado have helped understand the socioeconomic context in which women in contemporary Puerto Rico have to negotiate gender roles with issues of race, class, employment and rights.

The topic of rights is closely related to two other issues that affect gender and sexuality in Puerto Rico, and that are relevant for the analysis of Puerto Rican cultural production. The first one, law, has been addressed by feminist critics like Irma Rivera Lassén, whose collection of documents on Puerto Rican feminism provides a valuable resource for the study of gender, nation and the law, and by Margarita Ostolaza Bey, whose work on sexual politics and ELA raises similar questions of the relationship between gender, sexuality and political institutions. Very much related to the question of law are also María de Fátima Barceló Miller's studies of women's voting rights and the suffrage movement in Puerto Rico, as well as Alice Colón Warren and Elsa Planell Larrinaga's examination of the issue of abortion, one that has been particularly important given the island's history of forced sterilization and violation of female reproductive rights.

The second issue related to law and rights is that of labor and the changing perceptions and domains of women's work. María del Carmen Baerga's historical writing on the participation of women in the textile industry and Marixsa Alicea's examination of the relationship between work, gender, transnationalism and community, are among the most elucidating studies on the relationship between gender and labor in Puerto Rico.

Even though homosexuality is still marginalized in many Puerto Rican social contexts, there is a growing literature addressing Puerto Rican social relations and cultural production from the standpoint of sexuality, such as the theoretical and critical work of Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, and Rubén Ríos Ávila. On the other hand, a topic related to sexuality, and which has yet to be studied extensively, is that of masculinity. Rafael Ramírez's *Dime capitán: Reflexiones sobre la masculinidad* addresses the issue of masculinity in relation to issues like power, machismo and homosexuality, and remains one of very few studies that question the normativity of the masculine gender and of heterosexuality. *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora*, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes's exploration of homosexuality and Puerto Rican literature, is a rare comprehensive study of gender and sexuality in relation to patriarchy and national identity among Puerto Ricans in the diaspora.

Puerto Rican Cinema and National Discourse: Industry and Criticism

This dissertation combines the analysis of literary texts with that of films, which calls for a brief discussion of the Puerto Rican film industry and of the still limited criticism produced and published on the island. The scholarly work devoted to the study of Puerto Rican cinema, even though still insufficient, gains momentum in the 1990s, thanks to a small number of film critics and historians like Kino García, Luis Trelles Plazaola, and María Cristina Rodríguez, inspired by a revival of the Puerto Rican film industry made possible in part by governmental policies that expanded the possibilities of

funding for domestic projects in the second half of the 1980s.³ These critics' exploration of the Puerto Rican film history, of the representation of the island in foreign cinematic productions, as well as their copious reviews of foreign and domestic films, festival events and retrospectives, form the foundations of a body of literature for the study of Puerto Rican cinema. Similarly, the publication of book-length historical overviews, journal articles, catalogues and festival booklets during the same period offers an important contribution to the study of the Puerto Rican film industry.

The first comprehensive history of Puerto Rican cinema was written by Joaquín “Kino” García in 1989. Even though the overview it offers is quite brief, so far it is the only history of the Puerto Rican film industry published anywhere. Kino García's *Cine puertorriqueño: Filmografía, fuentes y referencias* (1997), is another valuable resource, a national filmography of sorts, which provides scholars and researchers, as well as general audiences, with production, distribution and exhibition information, and offers stills and brief summaries of hundreds of Puerto Rican films from different genres and periods. The filmography begins with Rafael Colorado's long-lost 1912 documentary pieces (García 1-6), and ends in the 1990s, when films like *La guagua aérea* and *Linda Sara*, with their high production cost and value, signified a hope for a revival of Puerto Rican film (García 88-89). These two books, exemplary of García's work as a film historian, have set the stage for further research and film criticism in Puerto Rico.

³ The 1985 Ley de Sociedades Especiales provided economic incentives for private investment in the island's film industry and encouraged the participation of Puerto Rican banks through credits and other incentives. Similarly, the 1994 creation of the Fondo de Cine de Puerto Rico became one of the most important initiatives for financial support for the production of feature films on the island (Trelles Plazaola *Ante el lente* 99-100).

García's work has benefited from the research of film scholars like Luis Trelles Plazaola, arguably the most prolific of the film historians and critics concerned with the development of cinema in and beyond Puerto Rico. Trelles's early work focuses on the study of female directors, and has resulted in two important volumes: *Cine y mujer en América Latina: directoras de largometrajes* (1991) and *Nostalgias y rebeldías: Cinco directoras latinoamericanas de cine en Europa* (1992). In his 1996 book *Imágenes cambiantes: Descubrimiento, conquista y colonización de la América Hispana vista por el cine de ficción y largometraje* he analyzes the treatment and the colonial discourses of dozens of films from Spain, Argentina, Mexico, Cuba, Perú, Venezuela, Great Britain, France and Germany, pointing to the ways that historical circumstances and colonial experience influence the cinematographic representation of the past. Even though the book focuses on textual analysis much more than on historical context and theoretical frameworks, and in spite of the fact that, due to a lack of Puerto Rican films dealing with the subject of colonization⁴, there were no Puerto Rican productions included in its chapters, it is an important achievement in Puerto Rico's literature on film history and criticism, and contributes to the construction of a film industry by expanding the scholarly body of work.

⁴ This was true until the 2006 release of *El cimarrón* (dir. Iván Daniel Ortiz), the first Puerto Rican film set in the Spanish colonial period, and the first to emphasize its historical significance. It uses the conventions of melodrama and romance to address issues of race, power, slavery and revolt.

Trelles Plazaola's only book that exclusively addresses the representation of Puerto Rico and analyzes a significant number of foreign and Puerto Rican films⁵ is *Ante el lente extranjero: Puerto Rico visto por los cineastas de afuera* (2000). The book is divided in four main parts, which chronologically study the representation of the island, whether as a setting or as used as a shooting location without being identified as Puerto Rico, in foreign and domestic films made with foreign capital or crew. The value of the book lies not only in its elucidating discourse analysis of films that use Puerto Rico as part of the plot or as a location, but also in that, by providing a chronological overview of foreign film industries' presence on the island, he also addresses and critiques the United States and the Puerto Rican governments' lack of consistent and cohesive policies promoting the development of a Puerto Rican national film industry. This situation has led to the need to make co-productions with foreign capital, in which Puerto Rican writers, directors and actors have little control over the way that the island and its population are represented. He points out that "con demasiada frecuencia, Puerto Rico sigue siendo un lugar fácilmente intercambiable y su verdadera identidad, tan definida, antigua y caracterizada, se pierde para el cine" (Trelles, *Ante el lente*, 102). Even though at first sight it might seem that with these words Trelles Plazaola is reproducing and projecting the image of a unified and cohesive Puerto Rican identity, what he is in fact

⁵ Trelles includes in the category of foreign filmmakers ("cineastas de afuera") a wide range of filmmakers, from Frank Kerr, the director of the US production *Undercurrent* (1999), as well as directors who had migrated to Puerto Rico and had spent the majority of their lives on the island, such as Jack Delano (*Los peloteros*, 1952) and Óscar Orzábal Quintana, who made *Maruja* in 1959 (Trelles Plazaola, *Ante el lente*).

doing is critiquing the island's exploitation by foreign filmmakers who tend to use it only as an exotic exterior or as a generic "Latin American" setting.

Ironically, Banco Popular's publication titled *Idilio Tropical*, an edited collection of essays on Puerto Rican cinema whose title references the island's use as a tropical location, in fact does much to dispel the image of Puerto Rico as an exotic site, and methodically presents evidence to the contrary. The picture that emerges is rather that of a place with a developing film industry and talented professionals skilled at scriptwriting, editing, directing and acting. In the collection's introduction, Silvia Álvarez Curbelo addresses the appeal and the social impact of cinema since its inception, considers the ways in which cinema enriched the discourse of modernity and progress, and rethinks the real and the symbolic significance of the space of movie theaters:

Las salas de cine transformaron la fisonomía de las ciudades en Puerto Rico. Se convirtieron en espacios de modernidad que rivalizaban con las sedes públicas tradicionales: las plazas, las iglesias y los teatros. En las próximas décadas [post-WWI] los edificios para cine presentaron propuestas arquitectónicas novedosas que se alienaron junto a las vetustas construcciones del centro de ciudades y pueblos. La presencia del cine dinamizó los barrios urbanos y modificó las rutinas de todos (Álvarez Curbelo, "Pasión" 3).

This popular and national cultural impact is only one of the themes discussed in the seven essays that compose the collection, which addresses issues previously neglected in Puerto Rican film history and criticism, such as the tradition of animation and experimental cinema.

Idilio Tropical is exemplary of another type of resource that has emerged to document and analyze the developing film industry in Puerto Rico, namely projects that collect articles on different aspects of Puerto Rican cinema, in the absence of monographs

and author books on specific topics, beyond historical overviews like those of Kino García and Luis Trelles. Another such project is Raul Ríos Díaz's and Francisco González's *Dominio de la imagen: hacia una industria de cine en Puerto Rico* (2000). The editors begin with the premise that much remains to be done in order for a mature Puerto Rican film industry to exist, and proceed to ask, "¿Qué hace falta para hacer realidad la gran ilusión de una industria de cine puertorriqueña?" (F. González 7). The book compiles interviews with directors, distributors and producers, and gradually constructs an image of the realities and the problems that the Puerto Rican film industry faces in its struggle to develop and expand. A project that uses a similar interview approach and that addresses some of the same issues in the case of Puerto Rican filmmakers in the United States is Ana María García's *Made in the U.S.A.*

One of the figures that have contributed the most to the collection and preservation of Puerto Rican cinema on the island is scriptwriter, director and actor Roberto Ramos-Perea. The National Theater and Cinema Archive (Archivo nacional de teatro y cine), which he chairs, contains the most significant collection of Puerto Rican films, plays and literature on film and theater. In addition, the Archive's Bulletin, whose publication he also supervises, systematically has featured articles on Puerto Rican cinema, from historical documents such as early film announcements (*Boletín* No.1) to artist filmographies and film criticism (*Boletín* No. 3).

Other contributions to the archive and literature on Puerto Rican cinema include collections and catalogues like that of the Archive of the Moving Image (El archivo de imágenes en movimiento), the catalogue and screening schedule of the CineSanJuan

Festival, or the publication of Jacobo Morales's script of his celebrated film *Linda Sara*, which includes a diary that the director kept while shooting the film, and which provides insights into the process and the difficulties of being a director in Puerto Rico, from casting to the limited funding that obliged him to complete the film in 25 days (Morales 24).

The literature that addresses the development of Latin American cinema more broadly hardly ever includes Puerto Rico on the cinematographic horizon. Michael Martin's *New Latin American Cinema* is the collection that has devoted the most space and attention to Puerto Rican film, as in Frances Negrón-Muntaner's unique exploration of women's film and video production on the island. In contrast, other important books like Deborah Shaw's *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market* focuses on Mexico, Cuba and Brazil, while *Magical Reels*, one of the canonical books on Latin American cinema, discusses Puerto Rico only briefly, recognizing that the island "has witnessed the growth of a sophisticated film culture in recent years, escaping from the stereotypes imposed by US cinema of the 1920s onwards which projected the island as a site of tropical romance" (King 228). The discussion of the Puerto Rican film industry is grouped together with the development of cinema in Central America, in a final chapter that seems to encompass "the others," the countries and regions whose film industries do not merit independent sections of the book. This final chapter offers a rather general overview of both Puerto Rican and Central American film. In the case of Puerto Rico, the two main feature films that emerged after the 1970s trend towards a "critical, national, documentary movement" (King 230), *Isabel la Negra* (1979) and *Dios*

los cría (1980) are discussed briefly in a single paragraph, pointing out the lack of commercial success of the former and barely noting the release of the latter: “Jacobo Morales’s *Dios los cría* (*God Makes Them*, 1980) was much more assured, offering five vignettes of middle-class Puerto Rican life, receiving widespread critical acclaim” (King 230). This is only one example of the insufficiency of scholarly work on Puerto Rican cinema beyond the island’s borders, even in relation to acclaimed directors like Jacobo Morales, Ana María García or Sonia Fritz. Even though Puerto Rican cinema has much in common with the development of the cinematic industry in other Caribbean and Latin American countries, and in spite of the fact that, most notably since the 1950s onward it has systematically addressed social and cultural issues ranging from community formation and modernization⁶ to the legacy of slavery and colonization, studies of Latin American cinema outside Puerto Rico tend to acknowledge its existence only briefly, and, with few exceptions⁷, rarely embark on thematic or stylistic explorations of Puerto Rican national cinema. The chapters that follow intend help to fill that gap by addressing the issues of space, gender and nation in a variety of fiction, documentary and short films that offer critical perspectives on the power relations that construct the Puerto Rican national imaginary.

⁶ See Jack Delano in *Idilio Tropical* and Rafael Cabrera Collazo, “La DIVEDCO y el cine en el Puerto Rico de los cincuenta.”

⁷ See for example Catherine Benamou’s analysis of *La Gran Fiesta* in *Cineaste* 16.4 (1988): 47-50.

Feminist Geographies, Space and Gender: Analytical Framework

The analysis of gender and sexuality through the prism of space requires an engagement with feminist geography and the politics of space, the literature on which has grown steadily during the past two decades. This study responds, on the hand, to recent feminist geographers' conceptualizations of the relationship between space and issues of gender, patriarchy, knowledge, and the everyday, and on the other, to a traditional Puerto Rican cultural nationalist imaginary that envisions the nation as cohesive and uniform, particularly as it relates to gender, sexuality and patriarchal discourse.

While traditional geography assumed a distinctly masculinist perspective on the analysis of space – descriptive, objectifying and empirical – since the late 1980s feminist geographers have attempted to rethink, from an oppositional standpoint, the power relations and the constant negotiations that occur in everyday spaces. While the field has seen the publication of a growing number of studies on topics ranging from the construction of gendered spaces to sexuality and the city, it wasn't until about twenty years ago that the foundational literature of feminist geography began to emerge. The early 1990s saw the publication of innovative works on the relationship between gender and the cultural production of space. Among these were Rosemary Hennessy's *Material Feminism* (1993), which analyzed the feminine subject as political, in relation to other axes of identity. Gillian Rose's *Feminism and Geography* (1993) critiqued the neglect with which the field of geography and space has treated gender, sexuality and patriarchal relations of power. Doreen Massey's *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) argued that space is always gendered, and offered a novel way to rethink traditionally gendered dualisms

like private/public, local/universal, etc. Since then, theories of space have addressed issues of nation and gender (Sharp 1996), the cultural production of gendered spaces (Duncan 1996, Valentine 1996), as well as the relationship between gender and pleasure in specific spaces, such as the beauty salon (Black 2004).

In spite of the great contributions that these works have made to the fields of both feminist studies and geography, they are subject to a number of criticisms that the present study takes into consideration. The most important of these critiques is that, with very few exceptions, the studies named above have been situated in the West, with explicit focus on the UK. They have not paid sufficient critical attention to areas where gender's relation to space has been historically and socially contingent upon factors such as colonial domination, the legacy of slavery or racial diversity, as is the case of Puerto Rico. Consequently, I not only analyze the gendered construction of space and the relations of power that take place in the house, the factory, the beauty salon, and the brothel, as represented in literary and cinematic works by Puerto Rican authors, but also attempt to rethink the relevance, as well as the limitations, of feminist geography for the analysis of Hispanic Caribbean cultural production.

Some of the main questions that this study will attempt to answer are: How do the female characters in literary and cinematic works negotiate patriarchal relations of power associated with the Puerto Rican nation in the gendered spaces of the house, the factory, the beauty salon and the brothel? How do women construct alternative national imaginaries in spaces that simultaneously resist and perpetuate patriarchy? How do race and gender intersect in these spaces to critique racially constructed notions of femininity

associated with symbolic models of the nation? How does the relationship between gender and space in Puerto Rican literary works critique and enrich the literature on feminist geography and the construction of space discussed above?

Even though a number of Latin American feminist critics have emphasized the importance of the issue of space as it relates to gender, their studies have mostly focused on the problem of the border (Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera* would be the best example) and the relationship between gender and the representation of the nation. It is difficult to find Latin American studies that conceptualize the interrelatedness of space and gender and that present a cohesive theoretical framework for the analysis of these topics in Latin American and Caribbean cultural production. To date, one of very few studies that have engaged the issue of space at least to an extent is Ileana Rodríguez's *House/Garden/Nation*, in which the author analyzes literary representations of the transition to Modernity in the Caribbean, broadly understood from Venezuela to Nicaragua and from Jamaica to Guadeloupe. Rodríguez notes that the spaces that she studies, together with a series of other spaces (capitals, rivers, regions, provinces) exemplify "the heterogeneity of the nation [and] the difficulties in constituting it as a coherent totality" (Rodríguez 31). She enhances that notion by demonstrating the ways in which the family, frequent symbol of national unity, has disintegrated, as "the father and mother as leading forces and reproducers of social behavior have disappeared and have been substituted by aunts, uncles, grandparents, and servants" (Rodríguez 52). She develops her nation-building narrative around images of haciendas (representing productivity) and gardens, private spaces in which a woman can "discover her own sense

of self” and “begin to live her own story” (Rodríguez 92). Even though Rodríguez situates her analysis in the spaces that she finds representative of the nation, the book suffers from a lack of a theoretical discussion of space and its significance in the construction of gender, ethnicity and nation, and from an omission of a variety of spaces that would seem indispensable in a study of Caribbean literature, such as the island, the ocean, and, in the case of Puerto Rico (which is not included in the book) the colonial relationship between island and metropolis.

The 1993 publication of Gillian Rose’s *Feminism and Geography* elaborated in a cohesive manner some of the principal concerns of the developing field of feminist geography. The author’s focus on the relationship between gender and issues like knowledge, power, patriarchy, and rationality, all in the context of the gendered production of space, spurred a radical rethinking of the way in which space is approached and studied in the field of geography.

Rose prefaces her analysis with a critique of the way in which “feminism has been consistently marginalized by mainstream geography. Feminism’s concerns are never fully acknowledged by the geographical arguments with which it engages, and geography continues to virtually disregard feminist theory” (Rose 3). This, she argues, is a result of the field of geography’s exclusion of women as producers and objects of knowledge (Rose 4). In this way, the author sets the stage for a feminist critique of the relationship between the study of space and the conceptualization of gender, suggesting that masculinity and patriarchal hegemony play an important role in the relationship between knowledge and power as they refer to gender.

Rose further argues that this exclusion from knowledge, and from the access to power (discursive, representational and political) that it implies, is a consequence in no small degree of the traditional model of the subject of geography: “Gender is not the only discourse through which geographers’ claims to knowledge are mediated. Race, class and sexuality are also central. The master subject of geography is not only masculine, but white, bourgeois and heterosexual” (Rose 10). Therefore, the knowledge that is produced by and for the benefit of this subject is one that has traditionally marginalized women and their experiences of space, experiences that emerge out of their specific contexts of domination, subjection to patriarchal power, spatial limitations, and the binary association of public and private space with male and female, respectively. The racial and class aspects of Rose’s critique will be especially relevant to the analysis of the literary and cinematic works by Puerto Rican women, many of whom position themselves and their characters according to specific racial and class axes of identity through which they relate to the spaces that they inhabit.

Rose’s final major critique of the traditionally masculine and patriarchal field of geography involves the analytical understanding of binaries such as public vs. private and rational vs. non-rational to correspond to images of gender identities, with the respective implications for the possibility and the value of the geographic knowledge produced by women. The author lays out the ways in which knowledge produced by women has been devalued (in a way similar to Doreen Massey’s analysis of the devaluation of women’s work, to be discussed in the following section) as a consequence of the traditional association of the female with the natural and therefore with the non-rational (Rose 6-7).

Part of the value of this critique lays in the fact that it suggests the need to overcome the silence and the invisibility on the subject, and to expand the understanding of space and its relationship to gender by producing knowledge from the standpoint of gender identity and the gendered experience of patriarchy.

Rose suggests two strategies to resist and challenge the continued absence and attempts to marginalize feminist geographic knowledge. The first one she borrows from feminist critic Chela Sandoval, who speaks of the need for an “oppositional consciousness” (Rose 12) and for a capacity for a “strategic mobility” (13) through which one can adapt, resist and challenge “the shifting structures of capitalism, masculinism, racism, and so on” (Rose 13). The emphasis here is not only on the need to resist patriarchal structures of oppression, but also to recognize that these structures have multiple roots and sources, which can not be fought in isolation. One always needs to be ready to shift positions in order to confront a repressive practice that might come from different directions and through different social processes.

More importantly, as a strategy of resistance Rose suggests the urgent need to shift the object of study and to rethink the kinds of spaces that are being studied by geographers. In contrast to the urge to describe, document and map territories through masculine gaze and claimed rationality, she calls for the need to study the everyday spaces that women experience in the context of the social limitations and the patriarchal pressures to which they are subject:

For feminists, the everyday routines traced by women are never unimportant, because the seemingly banal and trivial events of the everyday are bound into the power structures which limit and confine women. The limits on women's everyday activities are structured by what society expects women to be and

therefore to do. The everyday is the arena through which patriarchy is (re)created – and contested. (Rose 17)

This urge to study “everyday spaces” is not only a call to critique patriarchy and the power that it exercises over women, but can also be understood as a call to uncover the ways in which women use certain spaces to resist and transform patriarchy, turn it upon itself, and exercise agency in the creation of different relations of power in spaces that they make inaccessible to patriarchal order. In numerous ways, the house, the factory, the beauty salon and the brothel, as represented by Puerto Rican writers and film directors, become such spaces of resistance and creative feminist agency.

Another issue that Rose discusses, and which is very relevant to the study of the relationship between gender and space, is the need to understand and analyze the body “as a site of struggle” (Rose 29), since, “far from being natural, [...] bodies are ‘maps of power and identity’; or, rather, maps of the relation between power and identity” (Rose 32). Since it is bodies that occupy spaces and since it is bodies that experience spaces – and Rose argues for the need to study space not as objectified territory but as it is intersected by social relations and relations of power – the body then becomes a fundamental analytical concept for the study of space by feminist geographers. Again, the body, embodiment and corporeal experience are among the most frequent and important issues for Puerto Rican feminist authors, and the ways in which they represent the experience of the house, the factory, the beauty salon and the brothel benefits from an understanding of the experience of space as material and gendered.

Another fundamental work in the development of the field of feminist geography is Doreen Massey’s *Space, Place and Gender*. Like Gillian Rose, Massey argues that

space, just like gender, is socially constructed and subjected to multiple negotiations of power. Specifically, the author claims that “particular ways of thinking about space and place are tied up with, both directly and indirectly, particular social constructions of gender relations” (Massey 2), an argument that can be understood in two directions, that space is always gendered, and that space is constitutive of the construction of gender.

One of Massey’s main contributions to the theorization of the relationship between space and place is the notion that “space” and “place” are not static or isolated concepts, but that they are traversed and negotiated by forces that operate in the society of which the particular space is part. Any space – landscapes, homes, workplaces – are subject to transformation:

The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counterposition to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that ‘beyond’. Places viewed this way are open and porous. (Massey 5).

The idea that no space can be analyzed independently of the spaces that surround it and with which it interacts through both social forces and material players (people, goods, money, to give a few examples) is fundamental in the analysis of the four spaces that are the focus of this study. Even though they are seemingly contained, clearly defined and isolated on multiple levels, in reality, they are subject to relations of power that come from the outside and that permeate them.

A consequence of Massey’s understanding of space as dynamic and contested is her intent to reconsider the traditionally perceived stability of some of the dichotomies associated with the spatial analysis of gender. Perhaps the most basic, and the most

commonly accepted one, is the notion that public space belonged to men and that women were to occupy closed, domestic, private places, the epitome of which was the home.

Massey argues that this dichotomy had the effect of defining acceptable and unacceptable spaces for women, and that it intentionally limited their ability to step out of the home:

“The attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity” (Massey 179).

In the case of Latin America, Jean Franco has discussed the spatial control of gender in her analysis of the post-Independence period, when

Women were especially crucial to the imagined community as mothers of the new men and as guardians of private life, which from Independence onward was increasingly seen as shelter from political turmoil. Two aspects of the recodification of gender deserve special attention: the carving out of a territory of domestic stability and decency from which all low elements were expelled, and the displacement of the religious onto the national, which once again made ‘purity’ the responsibility of women (Franco 81).

Franco argues that authors like José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi perpetuated this spatial distribution of gender by acceding to what was perceived as women’s “natural” roles. As Massey writes, “Mothering is [...] the main justification for women’s confinement to the home; it explains why they cannot be admitted to serious study of abstract questions, to university or Church careers, and why their intellectual development must remain strictly limited” (Massey 86). In different contexts, Massey and Franco assume a critical perspective that goes beyond just rethinking the meaning of public and private, and which suggests the larger implications of that binary understanding of gendered space – implications in terms of mobility, knowledge and power, and the construction of national models.

The other main dichotomy that Massey disrupts through her gendered analysis of space is that of men's vs. women's work, or what is considered labor, with all the implications that this notion carries for women's social and economic independence. By analyzing the changing conditions of labor for women in four areas in the UK, Massey reveals the ways in which, because of the interaction of social structures of oppression like patriarchy and capital, going to work outside the home contributed less to women's liberation than was to be expected in some cases. She analyzes some of the employers' tactics to keep women's wages low by "establish[ing] the men's job as skilled and the women's as less so" (Massey 203), even when the tasks performed by both genders were the same or complementary. Massey goes on to discuss specific cases in which women working in agriculture or factories were subject to this gendered devaluation of labor, with its economic consequences and implications for the reproduction of patriarchy.

In the case of the Caribbean, the issue of women's work has been well documented by Helen Icken Safa, in her study on *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner*, in which she argues that, since the 1930s, women have played a progressively larger role in the economic sustenance of the family, but that, in spite of that, patriarchy and capital continue to reproduce the image of the male authority figure. Safa notes that, since women perform both productive and reproductive labor, their "salaries are deemed supplementary to the primary male breadwinner" (Safa 37), an attitude that maintains patriarchal relations of power even as women gain more terrain in both the private and the public spheres.

Safa's specific argument, similar to Massey's, is that, even though more women are employed outside the home, their labor and compensation don't necessarily translate into more gender or labor rights and social/gender equality. On the contrary – men have begun accepting and exploiting women's work, as in the case of María Teresa (one of Safa's informants), whose husband refuses to look for work, relying on his wife's salary.

Safa explains that, even when women have been able to gain more equal rights and status in the domestic sphere (demanding that boyfriends and husbands share domestic tasks, for example), “they have made much less progress at the level of the state or the political process” (Safa 88). In the workplace, “gender subordination is reinforced by the paternalistic treatment of women by male managers and male union leaders, who tend to dismiss women workers who complain” (Safa 95), while, in the wider social sphere, women's “optimism is giving way to pessimism as they see progress becoming more difficult and fear that the future may not hold the same promises for their children that they once envisaged” (Safa 95). In this sense, Safa's analysis extends beyond the space of the house, to encompass that of the workplace and the nation, demonstrating that, in the Caribbean case (and in Puerto Rico in particular), as in Massey's analysis in the UK, employment outside the home has not always resulted in the expected recognition of the value of women's work or of their contributions to multiple levels and spheres of society.

Massey's and Safa's analyses suggest the need to examine critically the extent to which Puerto Rican literary and cinematic works offer a vision of the house, the beauty salon, the factory and the brothel, as well as of the labor performed in these spaces, as

sites and instruments of female agency and liberation, on the one hand, or of the reproduction of patriarchal order and gender norms, on the other.

In the process of rethinking the traditionally accepted dichotomies that constituted patriarchal discourse on spatial and gender relations, Massey also reconsiders the structures of gender oppression from which this discourse of binaries emerges. Massey, whose interest in the gendering of spaces comes as much from a position of the political left as it does from a feminist standpoint, examines the connections between patriarchy and capitalism in terms of the ways in which they create a discourse and a politics of gender and space that reproduce a system of gender oppression. The author suggests that, as

over time, women in big cities were less and less easy to contain in heterosexuality and in the domestic sphere (and here of course capitalism and patriarchy have had an uneasy relationship) metropolitan life itself seemed to throw up [...] a threat to patriarchal control (Massey 180).

She argues that, paradoxically, “it wasn’t so much ‘work’ as ‘going out to’ work which was the threat to the patriarchal order” (Massey 198), alluding to the intimate relationship between gender, patriarchy and space, a relationship expressed, in this case, through spatial control and patriarchal uneasiness at women’s newly-found capacity to overtly cross spatial limits (“going out”) that had previously been rigid and inviolable (which, in the case of Puerto Rico, might help to explain why some of the earliest salaried employment of women in the early 20th century was piece work that they could do at home and which subcontractors even came to collect). The relationship between patriarchy and capital that emerges from this analysis is somewhat at odds with the traditional image of the two enhancing and enabling each other. While Massey suggests

that this might still be the case, she also points out the ways in which patriarchy and capital are not always allies, but may sometimes act in opposition to each other, not necessarily for the benefit of women's liberation or agency, but as two different, yet complementary structures of oppression. It is important to note that, even though capitalism was one of the factors that foregrounded women's ability to cross spatial borders, and thus challenged a basic patriarchal mechanism of control, it constructed yet another structure of oppression in that it refused to recognize the value, both moral and economic, of women's work inside and outside the home as equal to that of men.

A useful way of analyzing the relationship between gender, sexuality and space is through the prism of materialist feminism. The concept of materialist feminism emerged in the 1980s as a response to Marxist feminism's rigid adherence to categories of class as analytical and political frameworks for feminist liberation. In contrast to Marxist feminism, which claimed that women should devote their political efforts to class struggle as the only medium of feminist equality and liberation, materialist feminism acknowledges the significance of women's material conditions, but only as they are related to multiple other axes of identity and structures of oppression. Thus, women are not only defined by their productive and reproductive roles, but also by their race, ethnicity, sexuality, and by the variety of social structures that oppress and control their multiple identities – from capital to patriarchy, racism and homophobia. In her 1993 book *Material Feminism*, Rosemary Hennessy outlines the characteristics, the main theoretical questions, as well as the political objectives of the materialist feminist analytics.

One of the principal concerns of material feminism – and one that Hennessy addresses from the very beginning of the book – is that of who materialist feminism speaks for. Who creates the knowledge, from what standpoint and in what historical context? How are relations of power, associated with multiple feminist identities, implicated in the creation of knowledge and in its feminist and political potential? And, for the purposes of this study, how does materiality – one’s material, contextual, historical conditions, beyond the singular issue of social class – affect the cultural construction of space and its feminist liberational potential, as well as its capacity to reproduce structures of oppression?

According to Hennessy, “discourses have a materiality” (Hennessy xiv), and the materiality of knowledge matters in relation to the production, as well as to the results of that knowledge. The significance, according to the author, is bidirectional, as material conditions (from the means of production to race, gender and sexuality) have a direct impact on the knowledge created, and as knowledge, in turn, affects the material conditions of different social groups, among which may be women, people of color, homosexuals, and people who identify themselves as standing at the intersection of numerous axes of identity. The author argues that there is a strong connection between knowledge, history and ideology, in that they construct each other – knowledge produces history, understood as historical discourse, and history can be read as ideology in that it is “one of the narratives of a culture, [...] always an intervention in the present” (Hennessy xvii). Since in Hennessy’s view knowledge is produced as much by official discourse and social agents with power, as it is by marginalized and disenfranchised groups, there is

space for parallel histories and ideologies, and for multiple and multifaceted understandings of the “social.” What always underlies her argument, however, is the insistence on the importance of one’s material conditions, understood in a broad sense, for the production of knowledge, history and ideology.

The question of space is essential to Hennessy’s conceptualization of materialist feminism. Since the author stresses the significance of material conditions, it is always necessary to consider the spaces that provide the matrix for the production of historical and ideological discourses. As an example, in the author’s view, “One of the crucial features of a global social analytic of materialist feminism is that it allows us to see workplace and home, suburb and ghetto, colony and metropolis as specific and interrelated sites of exploitation” (Hennessy 31). This passage enables the analysis of a place like the island of Puerto Rico, conceptualized through the multiple spaces that comprise it, from a materialist feminist standpoint, emphasizing the interrelation of spaces with structures of oppression like patriarchy (in the home, the workplace and the suburbs, for instance), capital (in the intersection of colony, metropolis and capitalist production and reproduction that occurs in the home and in the workplace), or racism (the construction of images of suburbs vs. *caseríos*, with the corresponding socially sanctioned class and racial images of the people that live in each space). The spaces analyzed in the study can be seen not only as workplaces, and consequently as sites of production, but also as located in a city or a suburb, and always on an island that remains under neocolonial control.

Hennessey's theorization of materialist feminism goes beyond the creation of an alternative, oppositional discourse, and instead calls for the active, palpable transformation of the material conditions which are affected by oppositional feminist discourses, and from which these discourses also emerge. She talks about "the feminist standpoint not as an experiential ground of knowledge but as a critical practice" (Hennessey xvii), suggesting that agency and practice are fundamental elements of her conceptualization of materialist feminism. This "commitment to the possibility of transformative social change" (Hennessey 35), the author argues, has to emerge as a reaction to the multiple structures of oppression and out of the multiple axes of identity that define women in contemporary society. In order to confront, resist and transform different sources and structures of oppression, Hennessey argues that it is necessary that women build alliances across perceived borders of identity and politics. One of the goals of the materialist feminist movement, then, would be "reformulating political alliances and (collective) intervention" (Hennessey 32), and the result of this reformulation would be a higher capacity for resistance and political agency.

What is appealing in this conceptualization of feminist agency in relation to the analysis of the spaces of the house, the factory, the beauty salon and the brothel in Puerto Rican literary and cinematic work is the possibility of addressing the analysis of space at the intersection of multiple axes of identity and structures of oppression. What seems limiting is that, even though Hennessey does acknowledge the issue of race as a basis for the construction of politics of resistance, she hardly elaborates on it. Race, especially as it relates to gender, sexuality and national identity, is a fundamental issue in the literary

and cinematic works analyzed in this study, and in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean as a whole. Its significance calls for a need to expand the theoretical conception of materialist feminism to include a broader understanding of the significance of race in women's material conditions and political agency.

Even more importantly, the call for transformative political agency grounded in women's material conditions provides a template for understanding the power of the solidarity and the alliances created among women in the four spaces studied here, spaces that in some ways are still permeated by patriarchal structures of oppression, by racism and homophobia, but which in other ways exclude them and provide a spatial opening for the production of liberating feminist discourses.

Space, Sexuality and Citizenship

While race, class and gender are fundamental for understanding the social tensions and the need for constant negotiations of the relations of power in different spaces, there are other problems that are no less important, and which have yet to receive adequate attention. One such issue is that of sexuality, specifically as it relates to questions of desire and consumption – all indispensable to an understanding of the interactions and the relations of power that enfold in the space of the beauty salon and the brothel. Among the most important questions that emerge from a discussion of sexuality in the context of space are: How does space define and delimit sexual citizenship, and how does sexuality redefine different spaces? In what ways does consumption enable or delimit sexual citizenship? How does sexuality interact with class, race and gender to

transform spaces often identified as heterosexual and heterosexist? What does the study of desire contribute to the understanding of the relationship between sexuality and space? How do the issues of sexuality and desire redefine the gendered spaces of the house, the factory, the beauty salon and the brothel?

The study of sexuality in relation to space in the fields of cultural and feminist geography is as recent as the current decade. It was only after Gillian Rose's call for the need to study gender in relation to space, that sexuality established itself as an analytical concept in the study of city spaces (Binnie 1995; Valentine 1996), landscape (Dowler, Carubia and Szczygiel 2005) and consumption (Peace 2001). This section offers a brief overview of the major issues, in relation to their relevance to the study of the space of the beauty salon as represented in Puerto Rican cultural production.

Among the first to emphasize the importance of sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, to the study of space, were the authors of the 2001 collection titled *Pleasure Zones: Bodies, Cities, Spaces*, a unique interdisciplinary effort that gathers articles on sexuality, eroticism and the corporeal in the space of the city. The authors' critique of "the missing lesbian' in geographical knowledge" (Bell, et.al. xiii) is followed by an urgency to understand the ways in which "the lesbian body configures a particular spatiality" (Bell, et.al. xiii) and to pay particular attention to the "issue of the visibility of lesbian bodies, and the exclusions, inclusions, and politics of lesbian identities in the city" (Peace 30). While sexuality continues to be silenced in the still limited study of space in Puerto Rico, some of the short stories that I will discuss here implicitly address

the relationship between space (the street, the beauty salon) and homosexuality, especially in relation to issues of sexual citizenship and homosexual desire.

One of the most urgent topics in the discussion of the relationship between space and sexuality is that of sexual citizenship. The preoccupation with the issue stems from the assumed normative heterosexuality of most urban (both public and private) spaces, and the sometimes subtle, sometimes active and visible calls to examine critically that heteronormativity. As Gill Valentine has pointed out, “control over the way that space is produced is fundamental to the heterosexuals’ ability to reproduce their hegemony” (Valentine 154). This control might be exercised and imposed overtly, through legislature prohibiting “public displays of intimacy between gay men” (Binnie 196) or covertly, through a conscious silencing of the issue of sex and sexuality, a case that Black has documented in beauty salons in the UK: “Heterosexuality operates as a default position, presumed and uncommented upon. Only when discussing male clients in the salon, or the treatments accessed by male-to-female transsexuals, was the all-encompassing heterosexuality of the salon ever breached” (Black 98). Heterosexuality then acts as a norm that plays an important role in the social construction of spaces, including those of beauty salons, even when these spaces might be perceived as having (and might indeed have) liberating potential in terms of gender, race and other axes of identity.

One of the responses to the dominant heteronormativity of urban and national spaces becomes possible through consumption as an instrument of resistance, as a claim to inclusion and often as a call for a transformation of the relationship between space and

sexuality. While conscious of the larger context of capital and commodification, Jon Binnie has noted the ways in which consumption still acts as an instrument of power for those who are marginalized because their sexuality does not conform to the normative, commonly accepted heterosexuality of the modern city:

Could one reason why so many queers enjoy going shopping so much (if and when we can afford to do so) is because shopping offers us the opportunity to assert at least some kind of power? Is it an effect of our not having power in other arenas, specifically in the realm of social rights? (Binnie 187).

Through the analysis of the creation of a space of inclusion like Old Compton Street in London, he further elaborates on this point by noting that consumption and consumer power not only serve as instruments, but also as limits to visibility and sexual citizenship: “among those excluded from Soho (and therefore less visible) are people who cannot afford the prices of food and drink or are unwilling to pay the pink premium” (Binnie 198). Consequently, sexual citizenship is enabled, but also limited by consumer power and the capacity to participate in the reproduction of capital-enabled spaces.

Similarly, Peace has studied the relationship between space, sexuality and consumption, this time as it relates to lesbian women, as opposed to homosexual men. In a critique of the dominant heterosexuality of urban space, Peace argues that consumption can provide lesbian women access, even if only to a limited and specifically designated and identified number of spaces:

The ‘ready-made’ understandings are that lesbians (and others) can buy their way into designated places in which their identity either may be or is proclaimed: lesbian discos, clubs, saunas, restaurants, cafés, bed and breakfast houses, motels, sports clubs. By ‘being there,’ they can ‘be’ (Peace 47).

By guaranteeing herself access in this way, “S/he who appears to have the capacity to consume can equally take on the appearance of the citizen. The consumer is the citizen-subject of the city par excellence” (Peace 51), in those cities/settings in which these spaces do exist. In this manner Peace critiques not only the assumed and reproduced heterosexuality of social space, as well as its “performative nature” (Valentine 154), but also the traditional model of the ideal citizen: white, male and heterosexual. This critique is indeed fundamental to the analysis of the space of the beauty salon, for example, in which the rigidity of the heterosexual order is challenged on a daily basis by the intimate nature of the interactions between female stylists and clients. While some of the stories represent that intimacy as a basis of female alliances and solidarity, others suggest that factors like desire and the need to find ways of transgressing social sexual norms might be behind some of the exchanges that occur between the female protagonists.

Chapter Outline

The study takes as a starting point the spatial aspect of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, that of the family house dominated by a father figure that maintains the traditional patriarchal order in the symbolic national family. Chapter 2 analyzes how, through the configuration and the politization of space, and through the alliances that it enables, Puerto Rican writers and film directors of the Generation of the 1970s subvert the traditional association of the family house with Puerto Rican national discourse and propose alternatives to the familiar patriarchal national imaginary. It focuses on the alternative families that dominate novels like Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon*

and Magali García Ramis's *Felices días, tío Sergio*, as well as films like Jacobo Morales's *Dios los cría* and Paco López's video to Rubén Blades's song *Ligia Elena*.

Chapter 3 examines the complex and contradictory roles that the space of the factory has played in the representation of Puerto Rican national identity in relation to gender and sexuality. It relies on a variety of documentary films and texts that demonstrate the ways in which the factory has been appropriated both as an instrument of official discourse and patriarchal power, and as a space of opposition from which Puerto Rican working women have staged a resistance to marginalizing and exclusionary practices and discourses. Luisa Capetillo's essays addressing her work as a reader in tobacco factories and as a union organizer, Dominga de la Cruz's testimony of the reality of women's labor in needlework workshops and tobacco factories, as well as two documentary films – *Luchando por la vida*, about female tobacco leaf stemmers and *La operación*, about women's productive labor and reproductive rights – are the texts that frame the analysis of gender and sexuality in the space of the factory.

Subsequently, my focus shifts from the factory to the space of the beauty salon. Thus, Chapter 4 examines several short stories and short films. It argues that the gendering and the queering of the space of the beauty salon by means of the reciprocity between gender performativity, desire and the gaze result in the construction of a space that challenges and subverts traditional gender hierarchies and relations of power associated with Puerto Rican cultural nationalist discourse. Two short stories by Carmen Lugo Filippi, "Milagros, calle Mercurio" and "Pilar, tus rizos," the story "Hebra rota" by Mayra Santos-Febres, and Sonia Fritz's eponymous short film, based on Santos Febres's

story, are the texts that serve as a matrix for the analysis of the ways in which the gendering and the queering of the space of the beauty salon disrupts cultural nationalist ideas of heteronormativity and cohesion, and proposes alternatives to the configuration of the national family.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the space of the brothel, demonstrating how the traditional patriarchal figure that has dominated the spatial trope of the family house in nationalist discourse is de-centered by an alternative figure, that of the Afro-Puerto Rican prostitute Isabel la Negra, who transforms the space of the brothel into an alternative national community, challenging previous representations not only in terms of gender and sexuality, but also of racial and class identifications. Among the first to turn their attention to the figure of Isabel la Negra and to fictionalize her life and the myths that surrounded her before and after her death are Rosario Ferré and Manuel Ramos Otero, in the short stories “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres” and “La última plena que bailó Luberza,” respectively. Their accounts present a figure that is complex and contradictory, and which dominates not only the space of the brothel, but multiple other spaces around it, assembling a symbolic spatial composite of the Puerto Rican nation. While Efraín López Neris’s film *Life of Sin* also presents Isabel la Negra as a powerful character, it reproduces racial and gender hierarchies by suggesting that she lost control of her life and her business endeavors because she tried to exercise power to which, as a lower-class Afro-Puerto Rican woman, she was not entitled. In contrast, Mayra Santos-Febres’s recent novel *Nuestra Señora de la Noche* presents Isabel as a figure that has the power to transform gender and sexual hierarchies in the brothel, to expose the

contradictions embedded in the model of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* and, ultimately, to suggest a reconfiguration of the idea of the national family through the space of the brothel.

My study begins with a discussion of the space of the house and of a number of novels and films that have subverted the spatial trope of the model of society proposed by cultural nationalist discourse. The following pages will also set the stage for the subsequent discussion of spaces like the factory, the beauty salon and the brothel, which have had a complex relationship with this national model, having acted as its matrices, but also as spaces of resistance and of the elaboration of alternatives that transgressed the racial, gender and class hierarchies of Puerto Rican national discourse.

CHAPTER II

Rethinking *la gran familia puertorriqueña* in the Family House

Spatial Tropes and the Representation of Puerto Rican National Culture

In much of Puerto Rican political and cultural discourse since the 1930s, the family house has come to symbolize the space of the nation, often representative of a set of class and racial characteristics that cultural nationalism has identified with *la puertorriqueñidad*, the “authentic” Puerto Rican character. Juan Gelpí, who has theorized the evolution of the house, the family and the father figure in literary discourse in his *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico*, claims that “La retórica del paternalismo a menudo remite a las relaciones familiares, y su metáfora fundamental consiste en equiparar a la nación con una gran familia” (Gelpí 2), led by “un caudillo o dirigente que viene a ser una especie de padre figurado” (Gelpí 3). The figure of this masculine leader has been used to legitimize the power of the intellectual elite since the generation of 1930.

The paternalist rhetoric and the debates over the existence and the essence of Puerto Rican national identity and culture have spanned more than a century. Even though they predate Antonio S. Pedreira’s *Insularismo*, this book is a prominent example of the early 20th century national cultural imaginary, one characterized by specific racial and gender components, and pertaining to an elite section of the society of the 1930s.

The image of Puerto Rican national culture evolved through the next three decades, owing to Luis Muñoz Marín's cultural nationalist ideology and the efforts that his administration made to consolidate, or at least to project an image of a consolidated nation, employing the help of artists, writers and filmmakers like those that composed DIVEDCO, and whose creative work laid the foundations of a number of arts, such as the art of the poster.

A turning point in the representation of the spatial trope of Puerto Rican national discourse was the 1979 publication of José Luis González's *El país de cuatro pisos*, which, even if hardly concerned with the issue of gender, inspired a change in the ways in which people thought of the nation in terms of class and race, center and marginality. González's proposal that the African component formed the foundation of a multi-layered Puerto Rican nation (González 21-22), as well as his call to reexamine the relations of power that govern it, offered an innovative view of race and class in national discourse. In *José Luis González: El intelectual nómada* Guillermo Irizarry notes that, by presenting the spatial trope of the nation as a house, González "se arroga el derecho de cerrar una discusión, con el discurso hegemónico, y de proponer una nueva versión de los hechos (de plano fenomenológico) y una nueva metodología que ayuden a solventar un programa nacional contrahegemónico" (Irizarry 142), even if the author simplifies the social tensions that intersect the house, and even as the house appears to be "una imagen sólida que no puede ser transmutada sin perder su estructura de significación" (Irizarry 163). Thus, with few early exceptions, it is only in recent decades that Puerto Rican writers and filmmakers have subverted the hegemonic and patriarchal model of the family, the space

of the traditional family house/nation and the figure of the father, to propose critical perspectives on the articulation of the Puerto Rican national discourse, and to affirm alternative national imaginaries.

The most recent debates on the symbolic representation of Puerto Rican national identity and culture have encompassed a postmodern perspective, exemplified by scholars and critics like Carlos Pabón, according to whom Puerto Rican nationalism and national culture have been subsumed under the power of “el capitalismo posfordista” evident in “la forma cómo los símbolos nacionales se han convertido en un producto cultural y comercial sumamente rentable para el capital transnacional que se ha trocado en ‘puertorriqueñista’” (Pabón 35). Such skeptical views of the possibilities of national culture and identity go against the analysis of critics like Arlene Dávila, who has argued that, in spite of the

widespread escalation of cultural movements in the current transnational context where the idiom of culture is increasingly rendered into one more tool to sell consumer goods [...], local cultural identities continue to be salient mediums for political mobilization and serve to promote a variety of other interests, not limited to issues of sovereignty and independence (Dávila 3).

According to Dávila, corporate sponsors like J.R. Reynolds for Winston and Anheuser-Busch for Budweiser “are simultaneously helping to market new ways of expressing Puerto Ricanness that are shunned by official definitions of Puerto Rican culture” (Dávila 8) because they don’t conform to the “acceptable” cultural nationalist identity. Similarly, in the context of more than a century of U.S. colonial control of the island, Puerto Rican political scientists, sociologists and historians have continued to reassert that the use of national tropes speaks to the existence of “a Puerto Rican nation in spite of, and because

of, almost five centuries of colonialism” (Carrión 68), and have pointed to the manifestations of an island “culture” contrasting with that of the metropolis (Carrión 69) in the fields of literature, art and cinema, as evidence of the vitality and strength of Puerto Rican nationalism. Numerous other critics, writers and artists, among them Yolanda Martínez San-Miguel and Mayra Santos-Febres, have noted the need to continue rethinking issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, language and the migratory experience as markers of identity and as sources of social and cultural opposition that impact Puerto Rican national culture¹.

The Trope of the House in Feminist Geography

This chapter responds, on the one hand, to a traditional Puerto Rican cultural nationalist imaginary that envisions the nation as cohesive and uniform, particularly as it relates to gender, sexuality and patriarchal discourse, and on the other, to recent feminist geographers’ conceptualizations of the relationship between space and issues of gender, patriarchy and the everyday. It is concerned with the house as a national trope, but also as a material and gendered space, that both constructs and is constituted by relationships of class, race, sexuality and desire.

Early feminists laid the foundations of the critique of the family home as a site of patriarchal power and control, a space that, even though “usually thought to be gendered

¹ See, for example, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel’s *Caribe Two Ways*, which addresses the problem of identity and national culture from the standpoint of race, ethnicity and migration, and Mayra Santos-Febres’s novels (*Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*, among others), which emphasize the significance of gender, sexuality, race and performance in rethinking the issue of national identity.

feminine, has also traditionally been subject to the patriarchal authority of the husband and father” (Duncan 131). This conscious and enforced association of the home with femininity is an element of the social and spatial configuration of the “separate spheres,” an ideology

based on complementarity between men and women, on the assumption that each can excel in their own sphere, women in the home and men in the public world of work and politics. It extols motherhood and sees women’s public roles as basically extensions of their domestic roles (Safa, *The Myth* 46).

Safa argues that, in Latin America, the hierarchy of the separate spheres, “the cult of domesticity and the emphasis on men as providers and protectors are even stronger” (Safa *The Myth* 47) and are translated into “the basic distinction between the *casa*, or the home, the domain of women, and the *calle*, or the street, the domain of men” (Safa *The Myth* 47). In *Plotting Women* Jean Franco argues that, in Latin America, the traditional gendering of spaces goes as far back as the 17th century, when “the choice for criollo women lay between two highly controlled states – matrimony and the convent” (Franco 27), as opposed to the privileged masculine spaces of the pulpit and the confessional (Franco xiii). She traces the spatial control of gender and sexuality through the 20th century, through the transition from the dominant discourse of religion to that of nationhood, and points out that, even though the forms of women’s identification with the domestic space have changed, “the separation of public from private [...] produced something of the same effect on women’s sexuality that religious discourse had done, making it either heretical or impossible” (Franco 95), even as the nation continued to be gendered feminine, and “women became the territory over which the quest for (male) national identity passed” (Franco 131).

The traditional association between domesticity and femininity could be seen not only in the division of the social space, but also in the construction of physical, material spaces. In relation to the materiality of the domestic space, in the current decade feminist architects have noted that “the concept of the home, produced at intersections of language, space, and social dynamics, is not fixed but changing over time” (Walker 831) and that

architectural language and thinking about domestic space are partly structured around a series of gendered binaries in which the preferred term privileges the dominant forces within architecture and society and has masculine connotations: designer/design, architect/occupants” etc. (Walker 823).

These gender binaries enhance an important function of space as a site that “tells people where they can and cannot be, which, in part, defines what people feel about who they are and how they feel about each other” (Walker 829) – in other words, relations of power and identities, including gender and sexual identities, emerge in and through the space of the family house. And, as Lorraine Dowler has pointed out, “[domestic] landscape is not only an expression of dominant values but also tends to reproduce them as part of the natural order” (Dowler 7), to enhance the social internalization of the spatial relations of power. It is this distinction and its variations (which seem to always position the woman in the house, while the man could be seen not only in the street, but at the workplace, on the road, or even abroad) that female Puerto Rican writers and film directors like Rosario Ferré, Ana María García, Mayra Santos-Febres and others represent and critique.

The above are just a few examples of a growing historiographic and critical literature that points to the many ways in which feminist geographers and cultural critics have addressed the construction of gender and sexuality through the space of the house.

Similarly, Puerto Rican writers and filmmakers have approached some of the principal symbols, spatial tropes and motifs of the national discourse, and have deconstructed and subverted them from their own positions of gender and sexuality. The following sections will address one such trope, that of the house, traditionally representative of the national family that is *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, and the ways in which the house has been imagined, configured, constructed, destroyed and rebuilt in Rosario Ferré's novel *The House on the Lagoon*, in Magali García Ramis's *Felices días, tío Sergio*, in Jacobo Morales's short film *La otra* and in Paco López's short animated video *Ligia Elena*. Even though these literary and cinematic works present four different visions of the Puerto Rican nation, what they all share is the significance of gender and sexuality in the construction of the national house and in the negotiation, whether ultimately reaffirming or subversive, of traditional patriarchal relations of power.

Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*: Narrating the National House

Key in the process of rethinking Puerto Rican national discourses were the writers of the Generación del 70², whose female representatives, as Carolina Sancholuz and others have noted, “hacen ingresar en los textos a los sectores postergados: la mujer, el negro, el mulato, el mestizo, el lumpen, el emigrado, el homosexual” (Sancholuz 578) and who, from the standpoint of gender, “plantan la cuestión de la alteridad como un marco que permite fragmentar y reconstruir los discursos de la nacionalidad con nuevas

² Some of the most well-known female representatives of the 1970s generation are the writers Rosario Ferré, Magali García Ramis, Olga Nolla and Vanessa Droz, among others.

inclusiones y exclusiones” (Sancholuz 578). Among the most important contributions of the writers that belong to this generation was the proposed centrality of gender as an analytical category, emerging from a number of historical factors, among which the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and the independence movement on the island. Consequently, writers like Rosario Ferré and Magali García Ramis “cross an analysis of gender and sexuality with their analysis of nationality, race and culture. As a result, their stories divide subjectivity into multiple, overlapping components” (Bost 191), thus establishing connections between multiple aspects of identity – racial, class, gendered, linguistic, sexual – all of which had to be negotiated in the context of the construction of a national discourse.

In this section, I propose a reading of Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon*, using the trope of the house – the space of the house – as a site where gender, race, class and their relation to Puerto Rican national identity are reconfigured against theoretical texts on Puerto Rican national discourses like José Luis Gonzalez’s *El país de cuatro pisos* and Gelpí’s *Literatura y paternalismo*. While *The House on the Lagoon* challenges González’s lack of discussion of gender in the Puerto Rican national imaginary, it also attacks his view of a Puerto Rican nation understood fundamentally through its popular and Afro-Caribbean elements. The house in ruins, then, as seen at the end of Ferré’s novel and as analyzed with *Literatura y paternalismo*, represents the reiteration of a crisis of the national imaginary, this time stemming not only from the loss of a patriarchal, Hispanocentric vision of Puerto Rico, but also from the renegotiation of class and race proposed in González’s book.

The House on the Lagoon tells the story of four generations of the Monfort and Mendizábal families, centering on the relationship between Isabel Monfort and Quintín Mendizábal. The novel is set in their family house, custom made for Quintín's predecessors, and destroyed and rebuilt several times in the course of a century. The house is inhabited by the Monfort-Mendizábal family and by their servants, most important of whom is Petra, the old African woman who emerges as the matriarch of her own family in the city's outskirts. The plot focuses on Isabel's decision to write a family history, a secret manuscript that enrages Quintín because it reveals secrets that he would prefer to keep hidden. As the years pass, the house is transformed from a site of patriarchal domination to one of violence, discord and contradictions, which result in the ultimate destruction of the house and of the patriarchal order that could no longer reproduce itself.

In a 2000 interview with Walescka Pino-Ojeda, Rosario Ferré tries to distance her novel from the analysis offered in José Luis González's *El país de cuatro pisos*, claiming that, since his national house consists of four floors, and hers of only two, and thus "la división de la Isla se muestra en dos clases, dos etnias y dos culturas básicas que son la española y la Africana (sic)" (Pino-Ojeda 105), González's model does not provide the best template for understanding *The House on the Lagoon*. I argue that in spite of these differences, Ferré's novel does benefit from a parallel reading of *El país de cuatro pisos*, if not because of the specificities of the depictions of the two houses, certainly because Ferré's characters and her vision of Puerto Rican history follow a historical trajectory

that, according to González, constitutes the blueprint on which the contemporary Puerto Rican nation is build.

During the 1970s, José Luis González's essays "El país de cuatro pisos" and "Plebeyismo y arte en el Puerto Rico de hoy" transformed the way that Puerto Ricans understood national culture – instead of a culture that followed white, elite and Eurocentric models imposed from above, or instead of populist models that blurred and brushed over social divisions and inequalities, González brought into the popular imagination the notion of *plebeyismo*, which he explained as a "creación de modelos desde abajo y su imposición hacia arriba" (González 99), "capaz de penetrar y conquistar los dominios de la expresión estética superior" (González 101). The notion of *plebeyismo* responds to González's "search for the popular grounding of the national culture" (Flores 62) and is based to a large extent on González's image of the Puerto Rican nation as a four-storied house, in which Africans constitute the first, foundational floor of the Puerto Rican nation. He argues that true Puerto Rican culture is "la cultura dominada" (González 12), whose base is Afro-Puerto Rican: "los primeros puertorriqueños fueron en realidad los puertorriqueños negros" (González 20). As Juan Flores has pointed out, the *plebeyismo* that González proposes as an analytical category to understand Puerto Rican national culture thus has racial and class implications meant

to “subvert the elitist and derivative national patrimony” (Flores 62), and offers a poignant criticism of previous national and national cultural imaginaries.³

One of the most significant ways in which Ferré revises González’s vision of Puerto Rican national identity is through her claim for the inclusion of women as protagonists and narrators of the construction of the nation. In *El país de cuatro pisos* women are part of the Puerto Rican national “house” insofar as they belong to a certain class or ethnicity, but are hardly mentioned as a group (or groups) with their own roles and needs in the development of Puerto Rican culture. The only time when José Luis González makes a direct reference to women is in relation to his desire to interrupt a line of analysis that blames the US invasion for the perceived “loss” of Puerto Rican culture, pointing out that

así como sus valores culturales le sirvieron a la clase propietaria para resistir la ‘norteamericanización,’ esa misma ‘norteamericanización’ le ha servido a la masa popular para impugnar y desplazar los valores culturales de la clase propietaria. Pero no solo a la masa popular – y creo que esto es digno de especial señalamiento – sino incluso a ciertos sectores muy importantes de la misma clase propietaria que han vivido oprimidos en el interior de su propia clase. Pienso, sobre todo, en las mujeres. ¿A alguien se le ocurrirá negar que el actual movimiento de liberación femenina en Puerto Rico – esencialmente progresista y justo a despecho de todas sus posibles limitaciones – no es en grandísima medida

³ In “The Puerto Rico that José Luis González Built” Juan Flores recognizes the significance, but also the weaknesses of González’s argument. Among Flores’s criticisms are González’s insufficient discussion of the interaction between race and class in the Puerto Rican national model, “the denial that Puerto Rico was a nation in 1898 as it passed from Spanish to North American colonial rule” (Flores 65), the absence of Taíno and Latino elements in the four-storied house, and, of utmost importance for the current analysis, the lack of a discussion of gender and the contributions of Puerto Rican women to the national project.

un resultado de la ‘norteamericanización’ de la sociedad puertorriqueña?⁴ (González 36).

Beyond this comment, there is no discussion of the patriarchal character of the development of Puerto Rican culture, no critique of the traditional image of women in the Puerto Rican literary canon that he analyzes (Pedreira, Marqués, etc.), nor of the ways in which women’s increased participation has challenged the patriarchal order, as later Yamila Azize Vargas, María M. Solá and others have studied.

Rosario Ferré’s response to the absence of women in the four-storied house is to make them protagonists and speakers, to emphasize their roles and voices in the construction and the narration of the nation. Critics like Lorraine Elena Roses have pointed out the ways in which in her previous work Ferré had used – and subverted – female prototypes like the figure of the doll, the double, the disabled or the hysterical woman, in order to negotiate the conflict between patriarchal power and female marginalization (Roses 281). One way in which the author makes a claim for the inclusion of gender in the Puerto Rican national imaginary in *The House on the Lagoon* is through another motif, namely Isabel’s manuscript, which re-writes Puerto Rican history from a particular gender, racial and class perspective.

Isabel begins writing her manuscript in secret, eager to uncover numerous contradictions and silences in the history of the Mendizábal family, yet anxious about the

⁴ Even though González draws a rather direct line from second wave feminism to the Puerto Rican feminist movement of the 1970s, feminist critics have been more careful in analyzing the nuances of this influence. Many have pointed out that Latin American (and in particular Puerto Rican) feminism had multiple sources and developed its own set of concerns, which placed – and thus transformed – western feminist ideas of female empowerment in specific Latin American economic and social contexts. See Thompson (2002), Saporta Sternbach et. al. (1992), Acosta-Belén and Bose (2000).

possibility that her husband Quintín might discover it. When Quintín finds the pages hidden in the walls of the house, he is outraged, but instead of confronting Isabel, he begins revising the manuscript in the margins. Isabel's manuscript, together with Quintín's revisions, results in a fragmented, palimpsestic work, in which "the insistent doubling of the narrative self constantly questions the nature of the author and the constitution of the authorial voice" (Barak 33) – both Isabel's voice and Quintín's, in an effort to subvert the historical claim to authority characteristic of national discourses. This authorial split is one way to visualize Ferré's idea of the relationship between gender and irony, "a splitting in two of the creative consciousness, a cleavage in which the writing self breaks into a historical empiric self, as well as into a linguistic self" (Ferré and Paravisini-Gebert 901), and which results in a transformation of the anger with which one might approach gender inequality and patriarchal power, into a creative source, in this case resulting in Isabel's rewriting of Puerto Rican national history.

An issue fundamental to the significance of the manuscript and to its relationship to gender is that of marginality and secrecy. The fact that Isabel writes the manuscript in secret from her family, and above all from her husband Quintín, is a sign of the "unofficial" character of history written from a woman's perspective, of Isabel's understanding of the possibility of being censored. However, the secret manuscript is also "a fundamental element of her literary deconstruction of patriarchy [that] includes an undermining of the masculinist values which are perceived as an integral part of the dominating system" (Fernández Olmos, "Sexual Politics" 43). In this case the values to which Fernández Olmos refers can be understood as the patriarchal characteristics of

official versions of nation and history, as well as the commonly perceived masculine quality of narrative authority. In fact, when Quintín discovers the manuscript, he is outraged. At first he reads it with condescension, counterposing his “official” history against Isabel’s “fictionalized” (and therefore “untruthful”) version of it: “As he read on, Quintín began to feel uncomfortable. The manuscript was an authentic effort at writing fiction; Isabel definitely intended it as a novel. But she had made up incredible things about his family and left out much of what had really happened” (Ferré, *House* 71). Very soon, he begins accusing Isabel of altering history – “history” signifying his version of the past, unmarred by Isabel’s interpretation: “But Isabel had altered everything. She was manipulating history for fiction’s sake” (Ferré, *House* 71). Quintín’s disbelief is in part the disbelief at the audacity of a woman who has crossed the limits of her discursive marginality and taken upon the task of re-writing the family/national history.

Another aspect of the problem of secrecy causes Quintín’s unease regarding the manuscript. In her writing Isabel exposes a number of family secrets that allude to the hypocrisy of the official history regarding issues of race, class and gender. She reveals stories that the family prefers not to remember – like those of the importance of the Bloodline Books, which people consulted before marrying, to make sure that there was no non-white blood in the bride or the groom’s family, or anecdotes about his predecessor Buenaventura Mendizábal’s self-righteousness and authoritarian character – long suppressed stories, that now take upon a new life in Isabel’s manuscript. These are instances in which Isabel “departs from traditional patriarchal discourse by favoring the orality of the oppressed [...] by telling a story that, in many cases, has been suppressed by

the powerful yet survived in the form of gossip and oral accounts among poor people, women and slaves” (Henao 75). Thus, one of the ways in which Isabel subverts the patriarchal master-narrative of the nation is by recurring to gossip and secrets, linguistic practices and sources that are traditionally marginalized and not considered part of official history.

It is debatable whether simple curiosity about Isabel’s imagination or a fearful desire to discover aspects of a past that he had himself repressed is what keeps Quintín from destroying the manuscript, but the fact is that instead of burning it, he takes upon the task of disproving its story by writing his version in the margins. In Isabel’s version of history, the voice that is thus literally “marginal” is that of the traditional patriarch, who now loses his authority and can only offer “other” or “alternative” versions of a history that someone else – a woman – is writing. This leads to an inversion of gender roles in relation to power – the power to construct and narrate a Puerto Rican national discourse.

Space, Gender, Nation: Destroying and Rebuilding the House

The manuscript’s potential to invert traditional relations of gender and power in the construction of national discourses is principally demonstrated through the representation of space in the novel. Isabel hides the manuscript in the house – the family house that Quintín built. It is hidden on shelves, behind books, as if it were part of the house’s walls. In this way, Ferré incorporates her version of Puerto Rican history in the walls that compose, that carry the weight of the national house, whether González’s

four-stories house or a new version of it. The manuscript is not published, not official, but its subversive voice is part of the house, and even though hidden, it has the potential to speak. Furthermore, when Isabel takes the manuscript to Petra so she can hide it in the basement, it becomes, at a literal level, part of the foundations of the house, and figuratively, the narrative foundation of national history. In a comparative reading, this episode is also an approximation and an allusion to *El país de cuatro pisos*, and the significance of the first, African, floor. When in the end, thanks to Petra, the manuscript survives the demolition of the house, it comes to represent “a victory for fiction and for Isabel, since it’s her version of the story that prevails” (Kevane 67). It speaks to the durability, to the historical transcendence of the woman’s version of the Puerto Rican nation, and becomes a claim for the recognition of the female voice.

While José Luis González’s *El país de cuatro pisos* does not address the issue of gender in the construction and the negotiation of the space of the house, it does discuss its racial and class compositions and intersections. His class analysis emphasizes the presence of “dos culturas: la cultura de los opresores y la cultura de los oprimidos” (12) and he clarifies that “esas dos culturas, precisamente porque coexisten, no son compartimientos estancos sino vasos intercomunicantes cuya existencia se caracteriza por una constante influencia mutua” (12), which is defined first and foremost by a relation of domination that results in the perception of a certain kind of “national culture”: “la cultura de los opresores es la cultura dominante y la cultura de los oprimidos es la cultura dominada. Y la que se presenta como ‘cultura general,’ vale decir como ‘cultura nacional,’ es, naturalmente, la cultura dominante” (12). In José Luis González’s analysis,

racial categories at a general level coincide with class, and Africans constitute the first – and foundational – floor of the national house. González assigns particular value to this first floor, arguing that it is one of the main elements that bring Puerto Rico closer to its Caribbean neighbors, and thus makes possible Caribbean unity and solidarity.

The representation of race and class, and the ways in which they negotiate the space of the house in Rosario Ferré's novel, in many ways coincides with González's image of the house, but, ironically, leads to a very different statement about Puerto Rican culture and national identity. Like José Luis González's book, *The House on the Lagoon* constructs an image of the Puerto Rican national house that is both spatially and temporally defined in terms of the relationship between race and class. As in *El país de cuatro pisos*, the first floor of the novel's house is occupied by Afro-Puerto Rican descendants of African slaves, now Quintín's and Isabel's servants. The second floor, that of the European migrants, is most prominently represented by Buenaventura Mendizábal, and the fact that the house did not exist before his arrival speaks to the novel's view of the beginnings, the foundations, the roots of the Puerto Rican nation. Buenaventura, and not the African slaves, lays the foundations of the national house. Petra and her relatives live in the house, and can be seen as "marginal members of the family" (Stoner 118), but even though they have certain agency and in numerous instances alter the course of the family's history, their status is that of servants who don't share the family's racial or class characteristics, nor the privileges that come with them. Contrary to José Luis González's version of Puerto Rican culture, here the first floor is a

subterranean level that is only part of the national house insofar as its inhabitants support the house through their labor and service.⁵

Petra, the one figure of authority at the first floor, is represented in a rather problematic way that does little to invert the relations of power that determine order in the house. Petra is the matriarch of her family in Las Minas and Lucumí Beach, but a servant in the big house. She has influence over Buenaventura and can dare to threaten Quintín, but her powers seem mystical, irrational, inaccessible to Isabel's logic and understanding of the world. Petra is the keeper of secrets that no one else knows, she miraculously recovers from an illness and her prophecy that Quintín will pay for disowning Manuel comes true faster than Quintín could ever imagine. After Buenaventura's death, when Petra's family members take over the house, they seem to bring chaos and disorder. Instead of the constructive force and the fundamental element of the Puerto Rican nation that Petra would be in *El país de cuatro pisos*, in *The House on the Lagoon* she is a power to be feared by those that build the house of Puerto Rican national culture.

Petra's character also represents a fundamental aspect of the relationship between class, race and gender in *The House on the Lagoon*. In contrast to *Maldito amor*, where "Ferré uses language which echoes the class structure and gender of her characters" (Hintz 87) and consequently "the reader can hear the multiple parts and the various intensities of the Puerto Rican melody" (Hintz 87), here Petra occupies a

⁵ Literary and cultural critics like Juan Flores have recognized the significance of José Luis González's Afro-Caribbean discourse, but have also noted the absence of the Pre-Colombian Taíno heritage, an absence that Ferré reproduces in the novel.

significant portion of the novel and often drives the development of the plot, but the narrative voice to which the reader listens is not hers. In a discussion of the “*nanas negras*” in the writing of Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla, Gosser Esquilín has noted that

while the white, well-to-do female writers can tell and fashion their own stories, the same is not entirely true for the Afro-Caribbean women in the texts. Their stories are still being written by others, and even when they have a voice [...] they are told how to act. [...] The *nanas negras* are still in separate quarters that are different from those of the white protagonists who consider those spaces distinct and separate (Gosser Esquilín 61).

Consequently, the relationship between Petra and Isabel as the narrator, problematizes Latin American feminism in relation to privilege, as “class and gender, two classical social divisions, come together in the intimacy of the home” (Stoner 117-118) – female writers can write because they use hired help for domestic chores (Henao), i.e. it is privilege that “allows her (Isabel) to explore her rights as a woman” (Henao 31). Petra is clearly marginal in the space of the house and in the articulation of the nation that the house represents. From the power that the written word permits them, Isabel writes about Petra and Quintín offers an alternative perspective that seems to demonize her even more than Isabel’s benevolent, yet fearful and detached descriptions (she mentions that there are times when she agrees with Petra but is afraid to stand up to Quintín).

From the standpoint of race, the juxtaposition of Petra’s marginalization with the centrality of Isabel’s narrative voice reveals a desire to subdue – not negotiate or resolve, but subdue – the racial hierarchies that structure Puerto Rican society. Critics have argued that,

by plotting Puerto Rican ethno-nationality through the subjectivity of *white* women and their fundamental conflict with Puerto Rican *white*⁶ men, Ferré cancels out asymmetrical power relations between Puerto Ricans and Americans and reinscribes the supreme value of whiteness over racialized subjects (Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop* 195).

This argument is valuable in that it points to the multiple silences that permeate the text – not only Petra’s marginalization, but an absence of a historized account of the relationship between race, racism, whiteness and U.S. colonialism on the island. Rather than accidental, these silences serve the purpose of providing visibility for the privileged white characters, thus constructing a nation that ignores the marginalization of Afro-Puerto Ricans, as well as the colonial oppression of white Puerto Ricans, in order to create the illusion of a powerful predominantly white society.⁷ In this sense, Negrón-Muntaner’s words⁸ take the problematic of race and gender further by inscribing it in the Puerto Rican colonial context, and by revealing the resulting necessity to rethink race and

⁶ Italics in the original.

⁷ This is undoubtedly related to Ferré’s politics of nation and language, which she crystallized in an article in the New York Times several years after the publication of the novel. In “Puerto Rico, U.S.A.” the author, who had voted for the island’s independence in two plebiscites, reconsiders her position and claims that “independence would be sure to hurt Puerto Rico’s economy. It would mean poverty, deteriorated health care and education, a disintegrating infrastructure and, worst of all, the disappearance of the Puerto Rican middle class” (Ferré, Puerto Rico, U.S.A.). Ferré’s decision to publish the novel in English was another controversial issue that is undoubtedly related to her change in political orientation and defense of statehood.

⁸ Negrón-Muntaner’s analysis of *The House on the Lagoon* against her thesis in *Boricua Pop* that Puerto Ricans’ attempts at self-value “have been staged through spectacles to offset shame” (Negrón-Muntaner xiii) is problematic in many respects, among which the use of “shame” as an analytical category for understanding national identity, and it merits a discussion much longer than the one that I dedicate to it in this chapter. What interests me in this study is her critique of the novel’s reproduction of certain hierarchies, among which those of race.

power in the context of the United States' impact on the racialization of Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora. Mayra Santos-Febres has eloquently addressed this in her recent collection *Sobre piel y papel*, especially in the essay "El color de la seducción," in which she traces the parallel racialization and sexualization of Afro-Puerto Rican women in popular culture and in literary texts. Thus, it is important to note that the female narrator and protagonist speaks from a particular gender, but also racial and class position, a position far from representative of the spectrum of female characters in the novel and one that inspires the need to question the composition and the hierarchies that order the reimagined, rebuilt national house.

In analyzing the relationship between space and gender in Ferré's writing, some critics have tried to distinguish the author's image of the nation from traditional patriarchal versions by arguing that her relationship to national space is one of feminine fluidity, as opposed to masculine marking of territory: "For Ferré, writing Puerto Rican culture does not imply a masculine relation to the soil of the homeland (dominating it, erecting upon it a spiritual architecture) but rather a feminist embrace of a fluid non-place, the vulnerable location of the in-between" (Heller 414). This image, problematic as it is because it ties the feminine to an abstract notion of flow and malleability that alludes to antiquated visions of mystique, helps little in understanding the representation of the national house in *The House on the Lagoon*. Instead of a non-fixed space, as in Heller's discussion, the nation that emerges from the novel is territorial and the house is quite concrete. However, through the image of the house, Ferré challenges national cohesion and integrity, as the Mendizabal house is fragmented, destroyed and rebuilt

multiple times, suggesting the need to constantly question and rethink the apparent authority of national discourse.

This last idea goes even further when the novel's final scene is taken into consideration. Along with subverting traditional national imaginaries built on specific gender, class and racial categories, Rosario Ferré has also made critics question her acceptance of the viability of the concept of the nation. In analyzing Ferré's early short story "Amalia," Claire Lindsay notes that its ending (parallel to that of *The House on the Lagoon*, as the house burns and the only survivors are a young girl and the Afro-Puerto Rican servants) suggests that the author goes further in breaking with certain national imaginaries:

For Ferré the idea of nation and national identity in her (Puerto Rican) context is highly problematic. [...] She even razes this 'conventional' type of nation down to the ground in her version of "Amalia" when the protagonist and her accomplices destroy the uncle's house in flames at the end of the story" (Lindsay 71).

While the destruction of the house by fire can be interpreted as a proposed end of nationalism, in "Amalia," as in the novel, there are characters that survive. It is the marginal characters – women, Afro-Puerto Ricans, slaves and servants, who cause the fire

and who also emerge from it, alluding to the possibility of a new kind of family, representing a novel nation founded on acceptance and inclusion.⁹

The Pedagogy of Gender and Nation in *Felices días, tío Sergio*

Whereas in Rosario Ferré's house patriarchy alternates with a feminine version of national history, other Puerto Rican novels and films attempt, with different degrees of success, to reconfigure the space of the house and to propose alternatives to the paternal model that dominates *la gran familia puertorriqueña*. Magali García Ramis's *Felices días, tío Sergio*, set in a middle class family during the years of Luis Muñoz Marín's government, and focused on the relationship between adolescent Lidia and her uncle, who has recently arrived from the US, can be read as a coming-of-age story, "un bildungsroman femenino situado en la década de 1950 [que] feminiza la narración épica masculina" (Acosta Cruz 269). At the same time, through the way in which the protagonist becomes conscious of, and then questions traditional patriarchal roles, in order to reveal a new possibility for women in the Puerto Rican nation, the novel is also a

⁹ In contrast to the examples in "Amalia" and *The House on the Lagoon*, there are no survivors after the house in René Marqués's play *Los soles truncos* burns down. The Burkhart sisters set fire on the family house after their father's death, in a gesture of desperation, recognizing the alleged tragedy and purposelessness that follow the death of the patriarch. As Inés remembers seeing her father's body, she expresses a sense of rupture, of an interrupted family and national history: "Y el tiempo entonces se partió en dos: atrás quedóse el mundo de la vida segura. Y el presente tornóse en el comienzo de un futuro preñado de desastres. Como si la muerte esta vez hubiese sido el filo atroz de un cuchillo que cercenara el tiempo y dejase escapar por su herida un torbellino de cosas jamás soñadas" (Marqués *Soles* 52). The dead father's association with the end of the Spanish colonial rule in Puerto Rico can be interpreted as a nostalgic, desperate critique of the loss of a patriarchal colonial past and of a lack of hope/vision for an alternative national imaginary.

“bildungsroman equívoco, que es sobre todo una novela de anti-aprendizaje” (Sotomayor 318), an un-learning of the gender roles, national imaginaries and the relations between them in the context of the national microcosm that the family house represents.

Before uncle Sergio’s arrival, Lidia grows up in a family that succumbs rather uncritically to visions of “prestige” and “progress” that seem to emerge from an eclectic mix of colonial and patriarchal interpretations of notions of race, class and gender. There is a simple yet uncrossable line between what is perceived as “good” and “bad,” and the children are expected to always consider this binary in their actions and decisions:

Del lado del Bien estaban la religion Católica, Apostólica y Romana, el Papa, Estados Unidos, los americanos, Eisenhower, Europa, sobretudo los europeos finos, Grace Kelly, la gente preferiblemente blanca, todos los militares, Evita Perón, la ópera, la zarzuela, todos los productos de España desde las mantillas hasta los chorizos y Sarita Montiel, y absolutamente todo lo germano y lo suizo, desde el vino del Rin hasta los relojes cucú (García Ramis 28).

A similar list for “el lado del Mal” includes communists, atheists, masons, Protestants, Nazis, the newly-formed African nations and Puerto Rican nationalists (García Ramis 28). These lists, schematic and exaggerated as they might seem when reflected through the prism of a thirteen-year old narrator, offer an idea of the kind of knowledge and prejudices that she would later have to confront and reexamine, inspired by Sergio’s lessons.

The irony explicit in the above binary knowledge can be found in the realization that *la enseñanza*, the reproduction of this colonial, patriarchal, racist and class-based order, ultimately meant to construct an imaginary of the Puerto Rican nation and to prescribe Lidia’s place in it as a white middle-class woman, is enfolded in the context of an absence of a patriarchal figure. The novel demonstrates the multiple ways in which

patriarchy can survive and reproduce itself without a patriarch, in a house in which, according to Lidia, “en nuestras vidas de a diario, no había ningún hombre que estableciera su ritmo de vida y su modo de varón junto a nosotros, o que marcara nuestro mundo” (García Ramis 12), and where Mamá Sara “dominaba en espíritu el hogar sin hombre de nuestra familia” (García Ramis 11). Years after Lidia’s grandfather and father had died, her grandmother continues to arrange the table by placing her “silla alta, como de reina, que ponía a la cabecera de la mesa del comedor e insistía que la del otro lado se dejara vacía para que allí se sentara el Hombre, que podía ser, según quien estuviera de visita, el tío Roberto, el monseñor Serrano o aún el primo Germánico” (García Ramis 10). The male figure is phantom, and any man seems to be able to fulfill the criteria for sitting in the special empty chair, just by virtue of being a man. In the words of Edna Biviana Henao, this is symptomatic of “colonial dynamics which cause the protagonists to internalize and identify with the colonial mentality to the point where they protect and perpetuate the very oppressive systems and relationships of which they are victims” (Henao 13). Patriarchy does not need a man in order to exist in the house – centuries of colonial rule, first Spanish and then US, the domination of the Catholic Church, as well as, in the immediate context of the novel, the paternal (yet almost ghostly) figure of Luis Muñoz Marín and his politics have assured the reproduction of patriarchal values that structure society and the gender roles within it.

The women in Lidia’s house reproduce and reaffirm the patriarchal order in different ways. As Mamá Sara and Lidia’s aunts reiterate daily a discourse of accepted and unacceptable gender and sexuality roles (regarding men, women, homosexuality and

heterosexuality), Lidia, Andrés and Quique internalize and in turn reproduce those models, even when they don't understand them or as they try to consciously resist them.

Gender and sexuality are among the main themes of the novel, and seem to be two of the principal causes of concern on the part of the women with regard to the adolescent girl. The aunts' discourse is filled with explicit references to the liberties and the limits of gender and sexuality, to what women and men are allowed and not allowed to do. Lidia encounters the issue of gender inequality in part because of her uncle, the newly arrived man in the house. She is not allowed to question what he does because "Él es un hombre, y a los hombres no se les va detrás preguntándole qué hacen o qué dejan de hacer" (García Ramis 9). These words are not only meant to assure the man's freedom, but also to teach a lesson about the limits to which Lidia needs to conform, because of her gender, in the patriarchal society in which she lives. This contrast is even more evident when the discourse of patriarchy is reinforced by that of religion, as the aunts use catholicism to explain the essence of institutions such as matrimony. When Lidia asks whether two people who live together without marrying would go to hell, her aunt Sara F. responds: "Bueno, de todas formas es culpa de la mujer. [...] Las mujeres que se portan mal son viciosas, lo hacen por vicio, en cambio, los hombres, muchas veces no pueden evitarlo, el hombre tiene el lobo por dentro..." (García Ramis 29). In this case, the woman reproduces the religious concept of female vice and primal sin and uses it to justify and reinforce patriarchal notions of femininity and masculinity.

The construction of gender according to traditional patriarchal norms in the novel corresponds to a rigidity in the limits of sexuality that the children are taught at the family

house. As seen above, heterosexuality and the institution of marriage are the models that are acceptable and expected. The restrictions by which the children from each gender are expected to abide correspond to their future roles of patriarch and mother/housewife, respectively. While Lidia's mother and aunts reproach her for not keeping clean and for being a *marimacha* (a tomboy), threatening that she will never find a husband, they approve of Andrés's interest in a white upper-middle class girl: "Todos estaban felices de que él se fuera haciendo hombre y hubiera escogido bien a su novia" (Garcia Ramis 117). The young boy is condoned for acting "like a man," while the young girl is reprimanded for not conforming to traditional norms of femininity and motherhood.

The limits of sexuality are drawn most clearly through the discourse on homosexuality, with specific references to Sergio. Early in the novel Lidia overhears a conversation that condemns homosexuality, which provokes questions that remain mostly unanswered: "Sí hombre, pato, le salió pato ese muchacho a la pobre Tati Almeyda. Ajá, pero ya lo mandó para Estados Unidos, allá lejos, a California que dicen que allá es que los están mandando a todos" (García Ramis 31). On the one hand, comments like these serve a pedagogical purpose, as lessons for acceptable and unacceptable norms of sexuality; on the other, they also expose the hypocrisy of the notion of the cohesion and uniformity of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* around which the national discourse of the 1950s was built, by suggesting that the presumed uniformity is possible only because difference is silenced, erased or expelled, often through forced migration.

The children's response to the discourse on gender and sexuality is multifaceted and often contradictory. They internalize and reenact these notions of gender and sexual

identities, while at the same time resisting some of their underlying principles and everyday manifestations. On the one hand, Lidia, Andrés and Quique reproduce images of femininity and masculinity through their games, a process evident in the girl's description of the children's reenactment of Tarzan: "Si yo quería ser Jane me tenía que quedar al pie del árbol, en la casa de la selva, cocinando y cuidando a Quique, que era Boy. Como quería tanto trepar yo también, la mayoría de las veces transaba mi identidad humana por la de mona" (García Ramis 15). In the game, Lidia is under pressure to conform to certain norms of gender and sexuality, and while she does not have the option of playing the male character of Tarzan, she negotiates and attempts to subvert the prescribed roles by using every opportunity that she encounters.

Through incidents like the one above, the novel uses sexuality to oppose national discursive associations with heterosexual masculinity and virility. One of the characteristics that differentiate Sergio from the rest of the characters that surround Lidia is his homosexuality, inferred from the sotto-voce references to "patos" and to his "ojos enormes, de pestañas largas casi de mujer" (García Ramis 7). Critics have suggested that Sergio's homosexuality is not only a reason for his marginalization, but also one of the "lines and parallels between Lidia and Sergio" (La Fountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans*), as the narrator's own lesbianism is suggested in numerous incidents, from her fascination with Sofía Loren to the constant accusations of her being a marimacha. Lidia's coming-to-consciousness by the end of the novel puts forth her character as an alternative figure – in terms of political affiliation, gender and sexuality – to the populist, cultural nationalist model that serves as a background to the novel's plot.

Lidia's resistance to rigid patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality develops parallel to her coming to consciousness and consequent subversion of the political and national discourses with which she grows up. These two aspects of her transformation – the politics of gender and the politics of nation – are connected through her position as a woman in a colonial society, in which she has to confront oppression and marginalization on multiple levels. As Fernández Olmos points out, “para las mujeres en una sociedad colonial y patriarcal, la lucha se dirige simultáneamente contra la agresión cultural y económica externa, e internamente contra los valores tradicionales, opresivos y anacrónicos del machismo” (Fernández Olmos, “Sobre la literatura” 22). As suggested above, her uncle Sergio (and what he represents) is Lidia's entryway into different ways of constructing gender and national identities.

When faced with traditional and patriarchal models of the Puerto Rican nation, of which she is expected to be a productive and constructive part, Lidia often questions and struggles to escape the prescribed behaviors and the imposed boundaries. She finds an alternative order in her uncle Sergio, a communist, independence supporter, and homosexual, who returns briefly from New York, and whose presence disturbs the order in the traditional family house. As María Acosta Cruz notes, “además de ocupar el lugar del padre ausente, [Sergio] representa un contrapunto ideológico al resto de la familia” (Acosta Cruz 271). Whether or not Sergio is meant to represent a missing paternal figure is in fact arguable, as his character diverges from the traditional model of the patriarch in numerous ways – he is only present in the house briefly, and the knowledge and the education that he brings never end up overcoming the dominant

discourse. However, the significance of Sergio's character lies in his ability to offer a kind of education contrasting with what the girl receives at home, emphasizing the importance of Puerto Rican history and of (often unspoken) national heroes that stand as alternatives to Luis Muñoz Marín.

One such incident occurs not long after Sergio's arrival, and illustrates the way in which he brings into the family house a version of Puerto Rican nation and history that finds itself marginalized, and that at the same time reveals the limits of the official discourse. When passing by a school named after Segundo Ruiz Belvis and Andrés asks who that man was, Sergio responds: "fue un hombre muy importante en nuestra historia, un abolicionista, ayudó que hubiese más justicia en Puerto Rico, estaba en contra de la opresión..." (García Ramis 60). The silence with which Lidia's aunt follows the uncle's response indicates to the girl that "había pasado algo malo" (García Ramis 60), a suggestion that what Sergio considers important in Puerto Rican national history, and the lessons that he teaches the children, stand in sharp contrast to the ideology according to which the family brings them up. By revealing this sort of "secrets" and by giving voice to the silences of the Puerto Rican past, Sergio unveils a history from the standpoint of nationalism that subverts and provides an alternative to the cultural nationalist ideology that dominates the populist regime of 1950s Puerto Rico and its *gran familia*.

Gendered Spaces and Queer Nations in *Felices días, tío Sergio*

The family house in which most of the plot of *Felices días, tío Sergio* takes place is represented as a space that upholds the patriarchal structure of national and gender

identity, and the limits imposed by it. The house in relation to the neighborhood, on the one hand, and the city of San Juan, on the other, denotes spaces “inside” and “outside” that stand for contrasting ideologies, and represent different degrees of oppression and liberation in terms of the construction of gender and national imaginaries.

The inside and the outside of official national discourse is marked, quite literally, by a wall that divides spaces that engender contrasting ideologies. Lidia’s house neighbors that of Don Gabriel Tristani, an old nationalist and independence supporter who lives with his daughter, la Margara, “una mujer callejera, mala” (García Ramis 3) who is about to have a baby out of wedlock. The children are forbidden to go to Don Gabriel’s house or to speak to la Margara, a prohibition that they promptly transgress in one of the opening scenes of the novel. Don Gabriel doesn’t conform to the children’s simplistic, exaggerated, even caricaturesque image of nationalists, of whom Lidia is taught to think as unkempt, long-haired unreasonable men. In contrast, “Don Gabriel no era así. Era un viejito de ojos azules y mucho pelo blanco; era muy limpio y callado” (García Ramis 33). Even at this rudimentary level, the girl realizes that the image that her family has constructed of Don Gabriel and of nationalists in general does not correspond to what she sees and experiences, especially after, guided by her uncle, she gets to come in close contact with the elderly man.

The proximity of the two houses, the prohibition and the threat of punishment associated with the adjacent space, causes curiosity that soon results in a transgression of the limits of that space, and, metaphorically, of the limits of the ideology of independence and nationalism. That transgression represents a step towards transforming the

protagonist's perspective of Puerto Rican nationalist discourse. In the opening passages, Lidia laments her inability to see, learn and cross to the other side: "Su casa colindaba con la nuestra por detrás, pero la pared enorme que dividía los lotes de la calle nuestra de los de la de él, no permitía que nos viésemos nunca" (García Ramis 33). As the novel progresses, the children find ways to get closer, to look over the wall, even as the space of Don Gabriel's house remains a taboo:

Andrés y yo nos trepábamos sobre [las conejeras] y nos guindábamos de las ramas del palo de pana para tratar de mirar a casa de la Margara, pero apenas si alcanzábamos. Tío nunca había vuelto a mencionar a los Tristani, ni nadie de mi familia tampoco. Pero sabíamos que vivían ahí; ella pasaba con su barriga frente a nuestra casa, ellos existían como algo prohibido, y queríamos verlos (García Ramis 73).

Curiosity causes the gaze that differentiates, but also acquaints and brings the children closer to the prohibited nationalist discourse.

The wall that divides Lidia's family from that of Don Gabriel also connects the two houses and thus represents the divisions, as well as the proximity of classes and national ideologies in 1950s Puerto Rico. As critics have pointed out, the spaces and the social classes and conflicting discourses that define them in the novel constantly interact: "los espacios exteriores e interiores dialogan entre sí; tras la casa de los nacionalistas y la casa de Lydia (sic) los patios se enlazan" (Sotomayor 319). It is to be expected, then, that the novel would suggest the possibility of "crossing over," of identifying with a perspective on national status and identity that differs from the one accepted and reproduced by the cultural nationalist discourse.

At a narrative level, uncle Sergio is the children's guide to the house of Don Gabriel, and symbolically, he leads them on the path to understanding and identifying

with Puerto Rican national identity. Sergio “funciona como sustituto del padre ausente que le lleva [a Lidia] la patria desconocida u ocultada” (Bourasseau Alvarez 785), in a manner that in many ways challenges the idea of puertorriqueñidad upheld by Luis Muñoz Marín in the 1950s. It occurs almost by accident, and, significantly, when Lidia’s aunts happen to be out of the house, when the power of their patriarchal voice to dictate, order and control is temporarily suspended. The first time that Sergio takes the children to Don Gabriel’s house, they feel the excitement and the fear of doing something forbidden, of crossing rigid boundaries:

Pero no podíamos evitar el altruista gesto, el dramático gesto, el retador gesto de acompañar al Tío como en secreta cofradía, a la casa del Nacionalista ese, de la mujer perdida esa, del hijo natural ese – porque allí no se salvaba nadie del rechazo de mi familia y mi clase – y tomar café con ellos, y sentarnos en el balcón un poco temerosos pero desafiantes, un poco a escondidas, no dejando ver nuestros rostros desde la calle, sentándonos de soslayo, pero sentándonos (García Ramis 111).

This initial emotion grows and transforms into an understanding, an appreciation and an identification with *la puertorriqueñidad*, and makes the children part of another kind of *familia puertorriqueña*, not the cohesive, united family imagined by Luis Muñoz Marín, but instead one that stands for independence from colonial and neocolonial power:

Para Quique y para mí el descubrirnos como puertorriqueños nos dio cohesión, nos permitió ubicar todo lo que habíamos comenzado a aprender, nos dio una identidad con la realidad cotidiana del mundo que vivíamos y nos Hermanó, por primera vez, con gente que no era nuestra familia sanguínea sino de otra familia más amplia, más grande, toda nuestra (García Ramis 152).

This culminates the process of coming to consciousness, alludes to the liberation of the mind from the patriarchal norms of the protagonist’s family, and signifies her capacity to distance herself from the populist and moralizing cultural nationalist discourse of the

1950s (but also from Sergio's model) ultimately resulting in a discovery of the political self.

The process of coming to consciousness has not only an ideological, but also a spatial dimension. Space denotes the contrast between the forces and discourses that operate inside and outside the house – the house as a dominion of a patriarchal order that leaves space for very few transgressions of norms of gender and national identity, juxtaposed against the outside, the street on one side and Don Gabriel's house on the other. When at the end of the novel Lidia looks for a way to understand Sergio's departure and her own loss, she needs to leave the confines of the house and step out to the patio (which borders Don Gabriel's house) in order to think: "El día que Tío Sergio se fue, cuando llegamos a casa, me fui a caminar por el patio a tratar de entender cómo era posible que a uno le cambiaran la vida, se la cortaran en dos, en un sólo día, en tres días, en un momento" (García Ramis 136). It is significant to note that the spatial position of the protagonist suggests that she has reached the moment when she is able to step out, literally and figuratively, of the family house in which patriarchy continues to restrain her politization, and in turn has taken a step towards her political transformation in terms of both gender roles and national identity.

As in *The House on the Lagoon*, the construction of the nation in *Felices días, tío Sergio* extends beyond the house of the metaphorical national family. In García Ramis's book it is again imagined as territorial, but instead of encompassing numerous location on the island's map, it is delimited by a small stretch of the capital city, in the area of

Santurce, which appears self-contained, self-sufficient and again marked by specific racial and class characteristics:

Nuestro mundo hasta entonces era uno medible y perfecto. Abarcaba unas veinte cuadras desde la Parada de Guaguas número 20 a la 15 a lo largo de la Avenida Ponce de León, la más importante en aquel tiempo, y sus calles laterales. Tenía Plaza de Mercao, edificios de Gobierno, bancos, cafeterías, iglesias, reposterías y nueve cines (García Ramis 12).

In the 1950s, characterized by the urge for progress, by urban development and by a modified, cultural-nationalist ideology of nation-building, the security and the identity of the white, middle class national imaginary find themselves threatened by the gradual incorporation of the lower classes into the urban context, often facilitated by the construction of housing projects in the proximity of middle-class neighborhoods. The novel alludes to the way that this proximity represented a threat to the perceived values of the utopian middle class to which Lidia's family belongs. In response to the announcement of the creation of a new housing project, Lidia's aunt fearfully says, "Ahora se dañará todo. La gente del caserío va a dañar las propiedades, empezarán los robos" (García Ramis 125), unequivocally positioning "self" and "nation" against clearly defined "others." Otherness, in this case, is engendered by racial and class characteristics that are undesirable in the imaginary – but also in the territory – of the white middle class, which perceives itself as the rightful model of national identity.

The white, middle-class, self-contained national model is constructed and reproduced through a rigid pedagogy of gender and class: "Casi nunca nos dejaban salir a jugar con los niños del vecindario. A mí porque no había niñas y a Andrés para que no fuera a coger las malas costumbres porque los varones de su edad no eran de familias

educadas” (García Ramis 48). Curiously, the education of Lidia, the female character, seems to be more concerned with gender norms than that of Andrés, whose most important responsibility is to represent the behavior and the education of his class, looking forward to the moment when he will be one of the men in charge of it. The nation’s gendered, reproductive function is ascribed to that of the young woman, while its leadership to the young (white, middle class) man, its future leader – a situation that reaffirms patriarchy and doubly feminizes the nation. Lidia’s capacity to transgress and subvert the gender roles and sexual norms that form part of the cultural nationalist imaginary positions her as an agent of possibility, as a potential protagonist in the construction of an alternative national imaginary with respect to gender and sexuality.

Felices días, tío Sergio is set in a historical, social and cultural context characterized by rigidly prescribed norms that govern the relationship between gender, sexuality and nation-building discourses. The characters, the relationships and the principles that coexist in the family house collectively construct a white, middle-class, patriarchal national imaginary, which defines multiple “others” – racial, class, ideological, sexual – that stand as counterpoints to the cultural nationalist project and representation of a uniform, cohesive Puerto Rican nation.

In reading *Felices días* as a narrative that subverts certain patriarchal aspects of national discourse, it is important to note the ways in which, through the figures of the uncle and of the young female protagonist, the novel uses gender and sexuality to oppose national discursive associations with a feminine nation governed by a patriarch characterized by heterosexual masculinity and virility. Lidia’s coming-to-consciousness

by the end of the novel puts her character forth as an alternative figure – in terms of political affiliation, gender and sexuality – to the populist, cultural nationalist model that serves as a background to the novel's plot.

Puerto Rican Cinema and National Culture

The images and the spatial tropes associated with Puerto Rican cultural nationalism have been the focus of interest of many writers, but also of a variety of other cultural producers, most notably those working in the Puerto Rican film industry. It is precisely in this context that Jacobo Morales's name and body of work often appear, as an example and a manifestation of the maturity of Puerto Rican cinema and of its capacity to discuss, constitute and critique the cultural nationalist model of the Puerto Rican nation. When Juan Manuel Carrión mentions Morales's 1989 Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language film for *Lo que le pasó a Santiago* (Carrión 68), he recognizes its significance for national culture, but explicitly suggests that the film shouldn't be read as an expression of a deceptively cohesive or unified national culture, but instead as a representation of divisions and inequalities which he blames, in no small part, on US colonial control of the island.

The films in Jacobo Morales's emblematic trilogy *Dios los cría*, *Lo que le pasó a Santiago* and *Nicolás y los demás* share common concerns with issues of class, race and gender, and assume a position that is often critical of a certain popular perception of Puerto Rican culture (white, middle-class and patriarchal). These are themes that can be traced to Morales's early work in the theater, as a playwright and a stage actor. As one of

the most recognized representatives of the playwrights of the Generation of the 1960s (Rivera de Álvarez 35), he shares an “aspiración de crear un teatro que refleje los cambios que se operan en el marco de [la] sociedad, penetrando en el meollo de la problemática insular (en lo político, lo social, lo cultural), como a lo pertinente al individuo y su destino en el conjunto de la vida colectiva que lo enajena” (Rivera de Álvarez 36). These concerns, hinted at in early plays like *Cinco sueños en blanco y negro* and *Aquella, la otra, éste y aquél* (Rivera de Álvarez 41) can be seen in the five short films that compose *Dios los cría*, from middle-class economic interest and guilt in “Negocio redondo,” to questions of gender, sexuality, appearances and expectations in “La gran noche,” to hypocrisy, infidelity, disrupted and reconfigured national families in “Dios los cría,” “Entre 12 y 1” and “La otra.”

The figure of Jacobo Morales is one of the most prominent, but is far from being the only one representative of the Puerto Rican national film industry, which has included a number of genres – drama, comedy, mystery, and animation, among others. Another cinematic genre with which this study is concerned is animation, and its place in Puerto Rican cinema and cultural production merits an introduction. Among the few sources that discuss the long tradition of Puerto Rican animation is *Idilio Tropical*, where, in an article on documentaries, animated films and experimental cinema, Ramón Almodóvar Ronda briefly addresses the history of Puerto Rican animation. He sets the birth year of animation on the island in 1949, when Jack Delano directed “La cucarachita Martina” (Almódovar Ronda 94). A tradition of commercial animation that developed in the 1950s in Viguié Film Productions that dominated the field of animation in Puerto

Rico until the 1980s, when Francisco (Paco) López founded Animación Boricua, “the first workshop to combine commercial and non-commercial activity” (Almódovar Ronda 94). It is precisely Paco López, who, in 1983, directed the animated video to Rubén Blades’s song *Ligia Elena*, which will be analyzed further along in this chapter. More recently, the field of computer animation has received some attention on the island, and has been protagonized by artists like Luis Jurabe, Mari Mater O’Neill, and Heriberto González (Almódovar Ronda 95). Still, Paco López remains the main figure in the field of Puerto Rican animation, continuing his work in Animación Boricua and teaching filmmaking and animation at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón.

Two Women, Two Houses, One Patriarch in *Dios los cría*

In order to rethink the relationship between gender, race, class and the issue of space in Puerto Rican literature and film, the following section will focus on spaces simultaneously gendered and racialized in two short films: *La otra*, part of Jacobo Morales’s *Dios los cría*, a collection of five vignettes of upper middle-class Puerto Rican life; and *Ligia Elena*, the animated video to Rubén Blades’s well-known song. These two short films use similar motifs, dichotomies and stereotypes to offer different perspectives that reconfigure the relationship between gender and space, perspectives that make contrasting arguments regarding the space of the Puerto Rican nation and the places of women from certain class and racial backgrounds in it. While *La otra* seemingly inverts gender stereotypes only to reaffirm traditional gender roles, *Ligia Elena* makes a

powerful statement about the need to rethink the relationship between nation, gender and space in Puerto Rico and more broadly, in Latin America.

Jacobo Morales's *Dios los cría* is commonly recognized as the film that marks the beginning of contemporary Puerto Rican cinema, the period in which “el cine puertorriqueño alcanza su madurez” (Torres Ortiz 97), and begins to make deliberate use of themes and motifs representative of contemporary Puerto Rican social issues. *Dios los cría* is a collection of five short films that represent different situations and aspects of upper-middle class Puerto Rican life. It begins with the eponymous short film *Dios los cría*, about the fight for the inheritance of a dead patriarch, followed by *Negocio redondo*, which uncovers the materialism and hypocrisy of the Catholic Church. Next comes *Entre 12 y 1*, set in an elevator in which three people realize and admit to infidelity, *La gran noche* which follows an aging prostitute, and *La otra*, in which a love triangle crystallizes problems of power and the contrast between expectations and reality when it comes to gender roles.

The short *La otra* is organized around two main images – of women and spaces – represented through two corresponding dichotomies – a wife and a lover situated in their respective houses. The representation of the two female characters exploits viewers' stereotypes about what constitutes a “typical” wife and a “typical” lover. The film opens with a sequence in which a beautiful woman (the actress Gladys Rodríguez) – presumably the lover – is depicted in front of a mirror, in a scene that visually alludes to *The Snow White* fairy tale. The use of colors like red for her hair and white for her robe is not accidental; instead, it suggests the promise of pleasure behind apparent but

deceptive innocence. As the woman asks the mirror, “¿quién es la más bella?” (Morales *Dios*), the camera catches details of her face and mouth, creating a sense of seduction and desire, while the three consecutive sexual acts with the male protagonist (played by Morales himself) that follow this character’s introduction imply a desire and an intensity that most audiences would associate with an extra-marital affair rather than with marriage. It is also significant that, in contrast to the second female character introduced shortly thereafter, this first woman has no name, suggesting that the film’s title alludes to her, “la otra mujer,” or “the other woman.” This representation builds on social preconceptions of marriage as monotonous, of sex as hidden or forbidden, of the female lover as secret and as stereotypically beautiful, and of the affair as a dream, both appealing and intense.

The space in which these initial scenes are situated again exploits audience expectations and enhances the stereotypical image of a female lover and an extramarital affair. The setting is the apartment’s bedroom and the *mise-en-scène* is such that the bed occupies the center of the frame, dominating the space and making an explicit suggestion about gender and about the woman’s role as a sexual object. The bed, where we see the woman during most of the first scene, is in a big, elegant apartment with large windows, with the white color again dominating the interior. Since the woman is always seen in the bedroom and there is nothing to suggest that she works – or, for that matter, that she ever leaves the home – the implication is that her main role is that of fulfilling the protagonist’s sexual desire. The combination of the setting, the slow motion and the

lighting suggest a sense of luxury, of a man who can afford to maintain an affair with a beautiful woman.

The construction of gender roles in the dichotomous representation of women in this film is completed with the introduction of the second female character, Josefina (Norma Candal), whose image is that of a “typical” wife and housewife, an image that once again builds on common preconceptions that invert – yet ultimately reaffirm – gender stereotypes and power relations in Puerto Rican society. Josefina is introduced as a woman whose activities seem limited to cooking, serving the male protagonist and worrying about his health. Josefina’s appearance is in stark contrast with the first woman’s – she is somewhat older and doesn’t project the same sense of glamour.

The spatial setting of this second part and the space that this second female character occupies once again play upon the audience’s internalization of common social preconceptions about marriage and traditional gender roles. The film leads one to believe that Josefina is the protagonist’s wife by situating her in the space of the kitchen – she cooks and serves him food, fulfilling a traditional role of reproducing gendered relations of power. In contrast to the bed in the first scene, here the object that occupies a central spot in the *mise-en-scène* is the table, where the male protagonist is having his dinner. His initiative to bring Josefina her plate and relieve her of her domestic duties is an evident exception, a situation made clear by the woman’s surprise and discomfort. Instead of inverting gender roles, this romantic scene elucidates what is normally lacking in this relationship – namely, equilibrium in domestic obligations and gender roles.

As suggested above, the relationship between Josefina and the protagonist reaffirms gender roles and stereotypes, both male and female, through the distribution of work – not only domestic work, but also salaried work. While Josefina cooks and maintains the house, she is not allowed to have a job outside the home. The male protagonist insists that, “¡Seré yo quien provea cuanto haga falta en esta casa!” (Morales *Dios*), exercising patriarchal power to prevent the woman from leaving the house and from providing for herself independently. (Significantly, in the final part of the film he is seen in his office in the Milla de Oro banking district in Hato Rey, as a professional whose job is, ironically, in quite a precarious position.) The fact that Josefina and the protagonist go to bed without the desire that characterized the first scenes of the film serves to emphasize the different quality of his relationship with Josefina, where the focus on sex is replaced by love and care – yet another stereotypical dichotomy on which the film builds. Thus, this second relationship and the space in which it develops also establish another side of the traditional masculine imaginary – that of the “breadwinner,” of the family man that has the responsibility and the capacity to take care of a loving, submissive wife and of a traditional house.

It is important to note that both relationships are introduced with no small portion of irony, evident at the narrative level in the rigid stereotypes that had long become transparent and that had been criticized by the feminist movement since the 1960s. At the formal level, slow motion, the easily perceivable contrast in color palettes and in motifs like the bed/table/window enhance the sense of irony and of a certain distance from the dichotomous reality depicted in the film. However, the irony never reaches the point of

denouncing the traditional gender roles, and instead frequently (as in the final sequence) flirts with the possibilities that these gender roles open for a reaffirmation of patriarchal power and domination.

The film's climax, in which the protagonist's two worlds inconveniently come in contact in his office, offers what the audience is led to think is the story's resolution. It becomes clear that the red-headed woman is in fact his wife, while Josefina is the secret lover. The wife's derision of the less attractive Josefina (who appears in the office with homemade cake, in contrast to the wife's bottle of champagne) is confronted with the emphatic words, "Eras esposa solamente en el aspecto romántico, amoroso" (*Dios*), suggesting that true love and affection are manifested in everyday actions like speaking, cooking, and sewing his socks. While at first sight this might seem a denunciation of traditional gender roles and of the sexualization of the female body, in reality it reaffirms and reestablishes another type of stereotype – of the reproductive role of women and of their restriction to the domestic sphere.

La otra's brief epilogue, which constitutes the second major role inversion in the film, reaffirms the gendered power structure through the man's capacity to continue ordering and manipulating the relationships with the two women. In the film's final moments, the male protagonist marries Josefina but is seen dancing in a bar with his former wife. On the one hand, this sequence is meant to expose the hypocrisy of a certain social character, middle-class, white and male, like many of the protagonists of the remaining four short films that constitute *Dios los cría*. More than a denunciation, however, the humor and the absurdity of this final scene construct a rather heroic

depiction, implying that the deception will be carried on indefinitely, without much chance of a true inversion or equilibrium of gender roles in Puerto Rican society.

This final scene also allows for a rereading of the short's title, and of a new way of understanding it in the larger context of the film, in relation to the other four vignettes. While at first glance a gender-referencing title like "la otra" would allude to the protagonial role of a woman, the film quickly makes it clear that this is not the case, and that the woman's – either woman's – significance in the film comes only as a result of her relationship with the male protagonist. It is he who decides who will be the official partner and who will be the other woman, imposing otherness in the context of a relationship in which women have little say. He assumes a position of power that seems absolute, undisputable, and socially accepted, and at no point do the women or other characters question his relationships. On the contrary, as seen in the last scene, even after discovering the truth, both women remain in relationships with him, only in roles that are deceptively inverted.

More broadly, the situation that unfolds in *La otra* can be read as an allegory and as an attempt at a critique of gender relations in traditional Puerto Rican national imaginaries. As the film continues the trend of constructing the Puerto Rican nation through the image of the house, the two different houses in which the plot develops can be seen as different sides, or aspects, of the Puerto Rican nation. These two sides are contrasting, yet complementary, and seem to serve the purpose of reproducing a patriarchal discourse. In addition, the film reaffirms the authority of the institution of marriage, and of man's power to determine the rules of behavior and the gender roles

around which that institution is organized. The woman, whether participating in the marriage as a wife or as an “other,” is always loyal and accommodating, rarely leaving the house or the limits imposed on her by her position as a wife or as a lover, while the man is characterized by his liberty to cross the boundaries between the two worlds that he creates and dominates. While the irony with which the male protagonist is represented might imply that the film assumes a critical perspective regarding gender and power relations in the Puerto Rican national imaginary, this irony in fact does nothing to empower women or to give them the tools to change the established situation. This is the case even when *La otra* is read in the context of the overall film’s title, as “dios los cría” (“y ellos se juntan”) is hardly an oppositional statement. It is rather one of observation and acceptance of a situation, of a kind of people, whose behavior might be reproachable, but which the speaker has no intention of attempting to change. Consequently, the film’s representation of women and gender relations in the Puerto Rican nation ultimately reaffirms and reestablishes a traditional, male-dominated power structure.

In an interview that focuses on the Puerto Rican film industry and on his own cinematic work, Jacobo Morales reiterates several times the need for authenticity for the success and the value of a film, an authenticity that he claims forms the nucleus of *Dios los cría*: “la autenticidad es lo que le brinda el mayor potencial de universalidad a una película” (Ríos Díaz 15). While the notion of authenticity is a problematic category of film analysis, in that it implies a compound, yet debatable set of cinematic characteristics, including the provenance of funding, director, actors, themes, locations, and, just as

importantly, the kinds of representations that it offers, Morales's words indicate his understanding of the responsibility that he bears for the development of a national film industry, one that he hopes would one day be able to transcend the island's borders. While a certain level of authenticity composes part of the merit of *Dios los cría*, in that the film "refocus[ed] Puerto Rican cinema by looking at things Puerto Rican – subjects, history, characters, idiosyncrasy – and drawing on that reality to propose an original, nationally-rooted definition of this art form" (Rodríguez 69), it is difficult to use the word authenticity to describe *Dios los cría*, as its focus is limited to a certain cross-section of society, and is hardly representative of Puerto Rico's social and cultural diversity and complexity. While the film represents a powerful indictment of the "greed, hypocrisy, deception, personal interest placed before human relations, and rejection of those who won't follow established ways" (Rodríguez 69-70), it can hardly be called "authentic" if one were to examine closely who is included and who is excluded from its representation. While, scene by scene, mostly white and middle-class characters expose their weaknesses and excesses, the film contains almost no references to working classes, Afro-Puerto Ricans, women who have subverted patriarchal power, or to a notion that there is a Puerto Rican culture and society beyond the satirized middle classes that Morales depicts. In the film, Jose Luis González's four-stories house, schematic and problematic as it might be, has been reduced to a single level, the parts of which are only distinguished by the motivations behind the hypocrisy, the materialism and the desire for power that haunt its scenes.

Race, Gender, Nation in the Urban Space of *Ligia Elena*

In contrast to “Dios los cría,” *Ligia Elena* presents a much more multifaceted and conflicted racial and class composition of Puerto Rican society. *Ligia Elena* tells the story of a white, upper middle-class young woman who escapes with a poor black trumpet player, and of her family’s consequent disappointment and panic at their daughter’s betrayal of their hopes for her future. The song’s – and even more so the video’s – representation of a predominantly white, Hispanocentric, patriarchal model of the Puerto Rican nation uses many of the same motifs, stereotypes and dichotomies as Jacobo Morales’s film. However, in contrast to *La otra*, Paco López’s video to Rubén Blades’s song results in a poignant indictment of traditional racial and class hierarchies, and, even more importantly, imagines a society that obeys different rules, constructing a national model founded on equality, acceptance and social integration.

The video’s plot develops around two sets of parallel yet contrasting spaces, representing different sets of racial and class associations. The first one consists of the urban spaces that the protagonists inhabit, beginning with the town from which Ligia Elena comes, with its orderly, wide, straight streets and neatly painted houses, suggesting a well-maintained middle- to upper-middle class neighborhood. The *arrabal*, the poor area where the musician takes Ligia Elena, presents a stark contrast to that setting. It is depicted as a chaotic area with winding streets, implying that the order and the roles that govern the town in which the girl’s family lives do not apply there.

The second set of spaces consists more specifically of the houses that the family and the young couple inhabit. The parents’ house is large, ample, and contains elegant

furniture that evokes associations with certain (stereotypically white, upper-middle-class) values. In contrast, the trumpet player's house (which, ironically, can be seen through the parents' window, suggesting that the distance between the two worlds, both physical and otherwise "social," is not that great, that they permeate) is small, apparently consisting of a single room, messy and disorganized, but emitting a sense of joy not associated with the big house. Instead of luxurious furniture, what can be seen in the musician's house is a large bed, reaffirming the sense of desire and pleasure that is not to be found in the family house. These two contrasting spatial representations, with their corresponding associations of freedom vs. conservatism and adherence to traditional social norms, construct two different models of Puerto Rican (and more broadly speaking Latin American) society – one patriarchal and hierarchical, and the other one modern and integrated.

As each space becomes associated with certain racial and class identities, the song and the video offer a critique of the traditional national ideal of whiteness. Even if in Latin America (and in Puerto Rico in particular) the imaginary of the predominantly white nation has been critiqued by intellectuals for decades,¹⁰ there is still an underlying

¹⁰ An early example of this critique of whiteness would be José Vasconcelos's 1925 *La raza cósmica*, which, problematic as it is, offered one of the first critiques of European colonial white hegemony, both discursive and social, and proposed an alternative for the racial composition of Latin American ethnic and national imaginaries. The concept of "raza cósmica" has later been criticized for erasing difference and therefore failing to address specific needs of different social groups (women, indigenous people, etc.) in their historical and cultural contexts.

racism that remains evident both in everyday practices and in linguistic expressions.¹¹

Through the representation of characters like Ligia Elena's mother, the video offers a critical perspective on whiteness as the traditionally ideal model of the Puerto Rican nation.

The contradictions embedded in the character of Ligia Elena's mother become the video's principal source of indictment of racism. The regret and the panic that emerge from her words, "a mí lo que más me choca es que esa malagradecida, yo pensaba que me iba a dar un nietecito con los cabellos rubios, así como Troy Donahue, y viene y se marcha con ese tuza [gentuza]" (*Ligia Elena*), exaggerated as they are in the song, are treated with unequivocal irony in the animated video. The visual representation of the blond grandchild takes the ideal of whiteness further, as the song as sung in the video describes him as a "nieto con cabellitos rubios, con los ojos rubios, con dientes rubios," (*Ligia Elena*), accompanied by the corresponding visual image of a blond-haired, blond-eyed, and blond-teethed baby. This picture of a white, blonde child complements the mother's exaggeratedly high blonde hairdo, but stand in contrast to her light brown skin. The song's lyrics never mention her race or ethnicity, but the way in which her attitude towards race contrasts with her own racial identity of a mulata points to a contradiction, to a "bourgeois logic of the racial inferiority of blacks [that] underlies the colonized and colonizing ideal [...] and the expectations regarding a white, racially

¹¹ Expressions like "mejorar la raza" (to improve the race, referring to marrying a lighter-skinned person in order to produce a lighter-skinned child) and jokes referring to the race or ethnicity of the subject are still common in everyday language. On the "chiste étnico" see Yolanda Martínez San-Miguel, *Caribe Two Ways*, especially the chapter titled "De ilegales e indocumentados: la inmigración dominicana a Puerto Rico."

exclusive upper-class sector” (Aparicio 88), which seems to have been internalized by a wide spectrum of Puerto Rican society. By making the mother the carrier of this traditional racial ideal of whiteness, by having Ligia Elena fall in love with a black musician, and by explicitly presenting her mulatto baby, the video uses gender to critique the reproduction of a patriarchal colonial social order, and emphasizes the young woman’s subversive role and her agency in the construction of a racially inclusive model of the nation that also crosses class lines.

The critical standpoint that the video assumes on the interaction of race and gender intersects with a similarly subversive commentary on the question of gender and class. According to the song’s lyrics, Ligia Elena and the musician come from different levels of the social hierarchy – while she is “de la sociedad,” he is “de la vecindad,” implying a class incompatibility that is likely to become a problem in the perception of the girl’s well-to-do family. The stand that the song takes in defense of class integration through the young couple’s relationship is evident in the futility of “regañes, ni viajes ni monjas / ni las promesas de amor que le hicieran los niños de bien” (*Ligia Elena*), and in the power of the “humilde trompeta” (*Ligia Elena*) whose freedom and love end up being more appealing than luxury and the promise of a comfortable life.

The video proposes a new, progressive, integrated national and social imaginary that is ultimately represented through the blending of the spaces represented in the videoclip. It is important to note the critique that the song and the video direct at the upper classes and at hierarchical discourses of race and gender – at the end, the trumpet player is seen among high society people, who move away, unequivocally in a gesture

that is meant to put distance between themselves and the black musician. Meanwhile, the poor area that he inhabits is never seen to reject Ligia Elena, even though she comes from a different background and a different social sphere. Consequently, the space that is seen as a space of possibility for the transformation of Puerto Rican cultural and national imaginaries is not the one commonly accepted as a model of Puerto Rican culture – upper-middle class, white, and patriarchal – but the one associated with African roots, popular culture (music, in this case salsa, long seen as a transgression, turning away from traditional Spanish genres like the danza) and race- and class-mixing that would result in a transformation of national discourses of whiteness and Hispanic identity to propose a unified, integrated Puerto Rican nation.

Conclusion

Throughout the 20th century there has been a wide range of political, as well as literary and cinematic, discourses on the Puerto Rican nation. While writers and critics of the generation of the 1930s constructed a predominantly white, elite, masculine, heterosexual and patriarchal national imaginary, more recent discourses have transgressed and subverted these characteristics, to open up possibilities for alternative representations of the nation, that emphasize the roles of previously marginal groups – Afro-Puerto Ricans and women, among others. The literary and cinematic works discussed in this chapter focus on the relationship between gender and national discourse by using the trope of the house as a setting and as a metaphor, to negotiate and offer alternative

national imaginaries, some of which reaffirm, and others subvert traditional patriarchal constructions of the nation.

Writers and critics like José Luis González and Juan Gelpí have addressed the use of the house as a metaphor for the Puerto Rican nation, and their analysis of race, class, colonial relations and power have helped understand the national discourses that emerge from the literary and cinematic work of writers and filmmakers like Rosario Ferré, Magali García Ramis, Jacobo Morales and Paco López. While Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* opens possibilities for transforming the relationship between gender and nation, it also reaffirms racial and class hierarchies that have ordered national discourses founded on notions of whiteness and the legacy of the Spanish colonial past. Jacobo Morales's *La otra* similarly reaffirms gender hierarchies by constructing a feminine nation governed by a patriarch who determines relations of power, gender roles and sexual norms in the national imaginary. Magali García Ramis's more critical approach presents the family house as a place that the protagonist needs to escape in order to understand and subvert the gendered relations of power at play in the cultural nationalist discourse out of which *Felices días, tío Sergio* emerges. Even more poignantly, Paco López's video *Ligia Elena* uses a set of parallel but contrasting spaces, again exemplified by the trope of the house, to construct an alternative national imaginary and to negotiate racial, class and gender hierarchies in order to propose a national discourse based on equality and social integration.

While some of the texts discussed above briefly address the issue of the spatial division of masculine and feminine labor and the relationship between women's

productive and reproductive work, the next chapter will focus on a series of texts whose purpose is to construct, contest or rethink the relationship between gender and national identity from the space of the factory, a space that has had a long, complex and often contradictory relationship to gender and sexuality, labor and national discourses.

CHAPTER III

Building the Nation: Women's Productive and Reproductive Labor in the Factory

Gender and Labor in Puerto Rican Historiography

Many island- and US-based writers and filmmakers have critiqued women's marginalization in the construction of the Puerto Rican nation by relating women's labor to the nation-building process, or by proposing alternative imaginaries of the nation that denounce the cultural nationalist patriarchal model. They have confronted the paternalism of official national discourses by criticizing the populist doctrine of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, exemplified by Luis Muñoz Marín's father figure, and by displacing the masculine narratives by utilizing and empowering alternative narrative voices and spaces of articulation. One of these spaces is that of the factory, where gender, class, race and labor, both productive and reproductive, often intersect to put forth previously marginalized or undesirable models of the Puerto Rican nation.

While gender had served as a matrix of historical studies for several decades before Joan Scott published her article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in this publication the author both legitimized and argued for the need for a careful and critical use of gender-based analysis in history and in the humanities in general. She critiqued the fact that, up until then, women's history had been met with

“acknowledgement and then separation or dismissal” (Scott 1055), and suggested the need to go beyond what had been known as women’s history, the need for an

analysis not only of the relationship between male and female experience in the past but also of the connection between past history and current historical practice. How does gender work in human social relationships? How does gender give meaning to the organization and perception of historical knowledge? (Scott 1055).

Subsequently, Scott offers her own definition of gender, intended to serve as a framework of historical analysis that would consider

the ways in which the concept of gender legitimizes and construct social relationships [and that would offer] insight into the reciprocal nature of gender and society and into the particular and contextually specific ways in which politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics (Scott 1070).

Scott argues that, as a determining element of social relationships, gender resides within a symbolic system (images of femininity and masculinity) set within a network of normative concepts (ideologies, political doctrines) that claim the power to control and interpret the meanings of these symbols. The ideological network, according to the author, is set within a socio-historical context that goes beyond kinship to encompass the economy and the polity, a context which must also always consider the role that subjectivity, in its multiple manifestations, plays in the construction and in the historical analysis of gender.

Puerto Rican women have constituted an active and indispensable part of the island’s economy through their work in industries like the tobacco, garment, canning and pharmaceuticals, and in recent decades Puerto Rican feminist historians have studied the relationship between gender and factory work in a number of these areas. In doing so, historians have taken different approaches – from Marxist, class-based notions of the

interactions between gender and labor, to historical accounts of women's labor, union activism and organization, and to literary and cultural studies that problematize the representation of women, especially working women, in literary texts since the Generación del 50. The three collections that best exemplify these directions in the study of the relationship between gender and labor in Puerto Rico are Edna Acosta Belén's *La mujer en la sociedad puertorriqueña*, María del Carmen Baerga's *Género y trabajo: la industria de la aguja en Puerto Rico y el Caribe Hispánico*, and Félix Matos Rodríguez and Linda Delgado's *Puerto Rican Women's History: New Perspectives*. The first two are composed almost exclusively of articles by Puerto Rican feminist historians, and cultural and literary critics, which, while not exhaustive, offer a good overview not only of the issues with which feminist historiography has been concerned, but also of the variety and the significance of this historiography.

Puerto Rican feminist historiography has addressed the issue of gender and labor from a variety of perspectives. Among the first and most important studies of this relationship are the works of Blanca Sivestrini, including *Los trabajadores puertorriqueños y el Partido Socialista, 1932-1940* and her work on Puerto Rican women in the workers' movement in the 1930s. In these studies, as early as 1979, the author suggested that it was necessary to recognize Puerto Rican women's active participation in the workforce before the commonly accepted decade of the 1940s, focusing on the tobacco and the needlework industries, their early development on the island, and the ways in which women's employment in those fields led to their active participation in unions that would ultimately transform the notion of class and identity in Puerto Rico.

Similarly, women's class consciousness and their participation in the struggle for labor rights have been studied in detail by Helen Safa and Isabel Picó, in analyses that focus on the need to rethink the extent of equality and the benefits of women's incorporation in the salaried workforce. More broadly, women's participation in civic organizations has also been addressed by Norma Valle-Ferrer, whose analysis of women's involvement in a large variety of organizations – from the early suffragist Liga Femenina Puertorriqueña and Asociación Puertorriqueña de Mujeres Sufragistas, to unions like the Federación Libre de Trabajadores and to “organizaciones cívico-social-festivas” (Valle “El feminismo” 99) like the Club Cívico de Damas – emphasizes the reach and the depth of women's social involvement in political causes within and beyond the labor movement.

As suggested in Valle's studies, an aspect of class consciousness related to women's labor is the issue of women's suffrage and their struggle to obtain the right to vote, which gained strength as more women became incorporated in the salaried workforce. The difficulties and the advancements gained by the women's suffragist movement have been the focus of studies by María de Fátima Barceló-Miller, who examines the “abysmal differences between the working-class women and the upper- or middle-class women, differences that posed an insurmountable obstacle to the development of a united suffrage movement” (Barceló-Miller 127). Gladys Jiménez-Muñoz also studies the women's suffrage movement, but focuses instead on the discourse of those opposing women's right to vote, and on the ways in which Puerto Rican men, “privileged colonized subjects” (Jiménez-Muñoz 149) reinforced gender and class

hierarchies and insisted on denying women the right to vote in order to preserve what power they did have in the colonial context.

In relation to specific industries, feminist historians have focused less on the tobacco and cigar-making factories (which have been studied in detail by historians like Angel Quintero-Rivera and Juan José Baldrich) and more on women's participation in the needlework and garment industry. The most important studies of the needlework industry in Puerto Rico are those by María del Carmen Baerga, who traces the history of the needlework industry in Puerto Rico and attempts to explain its social devaluation as a capitalist devaluation of women's work (Baerga "El género"). In another study the author argues that the relationship between class, age, working conditions and gender helps understand not only the limits of women's involvement in the women's and workers' rights movements, but should also inspire an understanding of the variety of struggles and resistances in which female needle workers participated (Baerga "Las jerarquías"). Other scholars, like Lydia Milagros González, focus on the history of the needlework industry by tracing its roots in the United States and by pointing out the conscientious process of education, of the schools' involvement in preparing young women for entering the salaried workforce specifically as workers in the garment industry. This tendency to educate girls in the needlework craft was hardly accidental, as Luz del Alba Acevedo explains. Instead, it served to reinforce the sexual division of labor and the processes through which women's work in the home and in the factory was devalued.

Textual Absence: The Factory in Puerto Rican Fiction

In contrast to the other spaces analyzed in this study, the factory has not been the focus of many fictional accounts, whether literary or cinematic. While it is possible that those may exist, thus far my research has only identified sporadic references to female factory workers, as in Ángel Lozada's novel *La patografía* (1998)¹. Most of the representations of the space of the factory seem to be autobiographical accounts, political pamphlets and articles, like Luisa Capetillo's texts and Margaret Randall's recorded testimony of factory worker and reader Dominga de la Cruz. More recently, a series of documentary films and docudramas that use studies of the development and the role of the factory in Puerto Rican history have also emerged. Of these, the most notable are the documentary films *Luchando por la vida: Las despalilladoras del tabaco y su mundo*, directed by José Artemio Torres, *Comerio: 180 Años de historia*, directed by Benjamin López (the first addressing entirely, and the second only marginally the tobacco industry in Puerto Rico), and *Tejedoras de vida: Puerto Rico, España y New York*, on the transnational connections and contrasts between needlework industries and workers, directed by Sonia Fritz. Another film by Fritz, the docudrama *Luisa Capetillo: Pasión de*

¹ Even though the mother's work in the factory does not constitute a major portion of the novel's plot, it is significant in that the exploitation that she suffers on the job causes an aggression that she directs against her son: "Mi mamá me amarra. Y entras tú, mami querida, a pegarme, a darme una pela con la correa, porque he hecho algo malo, no sé qué hice, y entras sudada y olorosa a Bumble Bee, con la correa, vestida con el uniforme blanco de la atunera, y la velocidad te tumba el gorrito, y estás bien rabiosa, pero ya a mí se me olvidó lo que hice, y tú pelas por la correa y empiezas a pegarme en las piernas, y duele, duele, ay cómo me duele, y tú me sigues pegando y yo sigo corriendo y gritando" (Lozada 143). The factory's repercussions in the broader context of the characters becomes evident as the author suggests that it threatens the concept of a united and caring family space.

justicia, loosely based on Norma Valle Ferrer's biography of the historical figure, uses reenactments and Capetillo's writings to present an allegorical account of her life and work in tobacco factories and as a political activist and union organizer.

Given the abundance of historical studies and documentary representations of the space of the factory, one must ask why spaces like the tobacco factory and the needlework workshop have not captured the imagination of short story writers, novelists and poets to a similar extent. Why have spaces like the house, the beauty salon, the brothel, the motel and even the airport been the setting of so many literary and cinematic representations, but not the factory?

The answers to this question are multiple and complex. The most simple and obvious, albeit not exhaustive, has to do with the fact that, even though tobacco and needlework factories were present, operating and employing large numbers of workers until the decades of the 1950s-1960s, they have gradually disappeared from Puerto Rican economy and society. The generations of writers of the 1930s and 1950s were more preoccupied with critiquing the changes that transformed the island after 1898, the same changes that threatened to displace them from their position of social and intellectual patriarchs of the nation, and which thus provoked numerous nostalgic representations of the recent past, but not necessarily of their present. Another reason would have to do with an issue of class and the interest of writers and readers alike in specific social spheres and realities. To the recent Generation of the 70s, writing about factories and factory workers would mean a departure from the modern, urban, middle- and upper-middle class realities of many of these authors, who emerged as factories in Puerto Rico

were beginning to lose importance and as foreign companies were beginning to leave the island. Similarly, it could be argued that, in the context of the rise of feminism, and of a growing awareness of the kind of significance that what Jorge Duany calls the “rough edges” of Puerto Rican identities – gender, race, anti-colonial – factories and factory work were associated with the past, with the everyday life of the generations that preceded both writers and readers (also middle and upper-class, educated and living in modern urban settings), realities that they were eager to overcome and go beyond, in order to address more current issues along the axes of racial, gender, urban, and “modern” identities.

History and Representation: Tobacco and the Cigar-Making Factory

The fact that most recent representations of the space of the factory have been through the documentary film genre, which claims a level of authority in addressing the factory’s presence and role in Puerto Rico, calls for a discussion of the relationship between history, representation and documentary film. Critics like Robert Rosenstone have addressed the power of film to represent historical realities, and have simultaneously done much to shift the debate away from the counterpoint of truth vs. manipulation, which has vilified and discredited the cinematic representation of history for decades. Rosenstone does this by arguing that all historical representation is “manipulated” – incomplete, selective, and at the service of particular interests – and that neither documentary, nor fiction film should be discarded on the basis of this argument. Rosenstone claims that, instead, the value of cinematic historical representation could be

found in its capacity to “engage the issues, ideas, data and arguments of [the] ongoing discourse” (Rosenstone 128) of history, through “images that are at once invented and might still be considered true; true in that they symbolize, condense or summarize larger amounts of data; true in that they carry out the overall meaning of the past which can be verified, documented or reasonably argued” (Rosenstone 128). This perspective emphasizes film’s capacity to represent and to rethink the past, to offer a critical perspective of others’ representations (written, “official”) of history, as it uses conventions of cinematic form like editing and reenactments, as in the case of the films to be discussed in the present chapter.

The complexity of the relationship between history and (cinematic) representation, and the fact that most of the texts in this chapter are of a documentary nature, calls for the need to analyze these texts in the context of the development of the factory (and of the process of early industrialization in Puerto Rico) as part of the island’s history. While I concur with Rosenstone on the constructed and incomplete nature of any historical account, I am interested in the ways in which these documentary texts represent history, the ways in which they evoke gender and sexuality in the space of the factory in relation to the Puerto Rican national discourse, and the way in which they address the issue of women’s work in ways different or similar to historical studies. Some of the questions that are of interest here are: What were the processes that enabled the development of tobacco factories, the first to employ women in large numbers, and the first to “produce” feminist labor organizers like Luisa Capetillo (1879-1922), who combined the occupations of worker, reader, journalist and union activist? What

processes took place in the factories, and how did they condition the emergence of a working-class and feminist consciousness, in simultaneous and intertwined ways? How did women working in tobacco factories develop a political consciousness different from that of women doing needlework in the home, and how did this difference shape feminist and class discourses related to the Puerto Rican nation? How do the texts analyzed in this chapter support, question or rethink the processes and the events to which the preceding questions refer?

Up until the mid-19th century, Puerto Rican tobacco was processed and prepared for use in workshops by means of a Spanish method that involved the handcrafting of tobacco leaves by artisans trained in the art and craft of cigarmaking, individually or in workshops that employed a small number of craftsmen, no more than four in most cases (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 24). Puerto Rican labor and economic historians situate the emergence of the tobacco industry in Puerto Rico in the late 19th century, as “the beginnings of the Puerto Rican factory system formed part of the transfer of Cuban cigar making to other countries as manufacturers attempted to participate in the bonanza of the Havana cigar by imitating its production” (Baldrich, “From Handcrafted Tobacco” 153). As a consequence, cigar-making factories began to operate in cities like New York, Key West, Tampa and San Juan, at first employing men, and soon thereafter, women. Even though the tobacco industry prospered in Puerto Rico, it was hardly a market owned by Puerto Ricans – on the contrary, after 1898, “a pesar de que el cultivo del tabaco era de pequeña escala y predominaba la propiedad puertorriqueña, alrededor de 80 a 85 por ciento de la fase manufacturera del negocio lo controlaba el capital

norteamericano” (Dietz 135). Companies like the Puerto Rican-American Tobacco Company and the New York Tampa Cigar Company were the most important ones, in that they opened factories, employed workers and consequently had the power to dictate hourly wages and working conditions in cigar factories on the island. This economic control and domination would later represent a significant portion of the background and the factors for the emergence of the Puerto Rican class consciousness and organized labor movement.

As tobacco factories grew in size and capacity, they represented a progressively larger part of the Puerto Rican economy. Ángel Quintero-Rivera points out that, by 1910, “74.6 percent of all industrial tobacco workers were employed in centers with more than a hundred employees” (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 31), while factories that employed over a thousand workers at a time “were found only in the tobacco industry, and these employed 35.9 percent of all cigarmakers” (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 31). The expansion continued in the second decade of the twentieth century, and by 1918 “el tabaco pasó a ser el segundo renglón más importante de la exportación, reemplazando al café” (Dietz 133). This unprecedented growth of the tobacco industry produced a demand for labor and for workers so great that factory owners saw themselves in need of employing women, who, up until that point, had only worked in the home – as laundresses, domestic servants, or in the piecework needle industry, which was still done in the house. As a consequence, “women were employed in certain stages of the elaboration process, especially in leaf stripping” (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 25). The growth of the tobacco industry, the demand for labor and the increase in the employment

of women in cigar-making factories had profound implications for the development and the construction of class, as well as feminist consciousness in Puerto Rico in the early 20th century.

The incorporation of women in the salaried workforce does not begin until the late 19th century², and even then the data is still contradictory. While examining the occupational distribution in Utuado, Fernando Picó demonstrates that “son poquísimas las mujeres de Utuado que dirigen sus propias tiendas, fincas y negocios. La documentación administrativa tiende a reforzar la visión de la mujer pasiva en la sociedad agraria puertorriqueña del siglo XIX” (F. Picó 174). At the same time, looking at a broader, island-wide data recorded in the 1899 census, Isabel Picó notes that “más de 60,000 mujeres de todas las edades trabajaban fuera de su hogar pero la gran mayoría de ellas lo hacían en calidad de criadas (18,453), lavanderas (16,855), modistas y costureras (5,785). Solamente 3,910 fueron clasificadas por el censo como obreras” (I. Picó 23). As Fernando Picó implies in the previously cited quote, part of the reason for this disparity might be the nature of the historical records and the tendency to ignore or diminish women’s salaried labor until the latter part of the 19th century.

Both Fernando Picó and Juan José Baldrich credit the tobacco industry with expanding the salaried labor opportunities for women. In the aftermath of the U.S.

² The timing is hardly coincidental – on the one hand, these are the years immediately following the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico (1873), an event that resulted in an increase in the amount of tasks, especially agricultural and domestic, formerly performed by slaves, that needed to be fulfilled by working-class men and women (as domesticity was exclusively associated with women’s work). The early years of industrialization in Puerto Rico and the opening of new factories in a variety of industries also expanded the demand for labor, both male and female.

invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, “el desarrollo de las nuevas empresas comerciales y la afluencia de capitales extranjeros en busca de inversión y mano de obra barata hicieron inminente una mayor participación de la mujer en la fuerza trabajadora del país” (I. Picó 23). Fernando Picó’s historical sources also discuss this trend, as he points out that

son los talleres de tabaco, a partir de 1900, que introducen a plena luz en la historia de Utuado ese nuevo personaje, la mujer asalariada, quien se vincula de forma estable a un centro de trabajo y recibe una paga regular por tareas fabriles dentro de un horario fijo, sin aportar materiales o instrumentos (F. Picó 176).

The increased participation of women in factory work represented a gradual transformation of the economic system on the island, as certain industries (needlework and tobacco, among others) became overwhelmingly associated with women’s labor. In the tobacco factories, women’s employment mainly as “stemmers and leaf-classers represented, for the most part, their first contact with capitalist relations of production” (Baldrich, “Gender and Decomposition” 108), thus incorporating women into areas of work that went beyond the traditional domestic obligations.

Women’s participation in the tobacco industry grew at a high rate during the first decade of the 20th century. Women were employed in a variety of stages and in different sites of production, from the agricultural to the industrial and from the small workshop to the factory. Historian James Dietz notes that,

la economía tabaquera empleaba a una gran cantidad de mujeres. En la fase agrícola se empleaba a más mujeres en las fincas de tabaco que en ninguna otra cosecha; en la fase industrial de la producción de cigarros las trabajadoras constituían el segmento más grande y de crecimiento más rápido de la fuerza trabajadora asalariada en las décadas iniciales del siglo (Dietz 134-135).

In terms of numbers, he claims that “en el tabaco, casi 80 por ciento de los trabajadores eran mujeres” (Dietz 145), a number comparable only to the needlework industry, in

which women occupied 85% of the workforce (Dietz 145). While the majority of women in the tobacco industry were employed in large factories, some continued to work in local chinchales, producing cigars of lower quality (Baldrich, “Gender and Decomposition” 116), for which they were paid even less than leaf-strippers or leaf-classers employed by “large centers controlled by North American companies [where] production was organized in terms of a division of labor and exclusively waged relationships” (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 24).

The incorporation of women in the salaried workforce and in the tobacco industry in particular had profound implications for a variety of social aspects in early 20th century Puerto Rico. Women’s shifting roles in relation to labor “provoked profound changes within the industry, in household composition, and in labor organization” (Baldrich, “Gender and Decomposition” 105). On the one hand, these changes were the consequence of the sheer scale or growth of women’s labor— while in 1899 women’s participation in the workforce equaled 9.9%, by 1930 it amounted to 26.1% (I. Picó 24), and notably, as early as 1910, “tobacco factories were the largest employers of salaried women” (Baldrich, “Gender and Decomposition” 108).

In spite of women’s growing participation in the workforce, it would be erroneous to think of their work outside the home as a definitive indication of gender equality. On the contrary, even though women were employed in a variety of industries, the value of their work and the salaries that they received for it were hardly comparable to those of male workers. As Marcia Rivera Quintero points out, women recruited for certain industries occupied “los escaños inferiores. Además de sirvientas, las mujeres fueron

reclutadas en grandes contingentes para despalillar tabaco, y trabajar en la industria de la aguja en el hogar, la confección de sombreros de paja y otros. Los peores salarios y las más sórdidas condiciones de trabajo se daban en estas industrias” (Rivera Quintero 52). Consequently, women’s marginalization and inequality continued to dominate labor relations, even when women managed to leave the home and to be employed in a variety of industries alongside men.

An early sign of the disparity between male and female work in the factories was the fact that “occupational segregation remained unchanged” (Baldrich, “Gender” 108) – women were only hired to do work at certain stages of the cigar-making process:

En la manufactura de cigarros, por ejemplo, industria en la cual las mujeres llegaron a representar 53% de todos los trabajadores, la producción estaba organizada en división sexual del trabajo muy rígida: las mujeres hacían el despalillado y clasificación de las hojas mientras que la elaboración del cigarro era tarea masculina (Rivera Quintero 53).

These early stages were the ones requiring the least amount of skill, and paid the lowest salaries. As a consequence, even though the factory provided an important opportunity for advancement and social and spatial mobility for women who previously only worked in the home, it would be long before women’s labor began to be valued and compensated in the same way in which men’s work was.

Historians have tried to explain this wage disparity in terms of gender, and more specifically in terms of the traditional construction of the woman as mother and homemaker first, and as a worker last. As Marcia Rivera Quintero suggests,

las actividades productivas de la mujer se han desvalorizado tradicionalmente. Así que cuando una mujer entra al mercado de trabajo en busca de un empleo remunerado, tanto su patrono como ella misma han tomado esos conceptos socialmente elaborados como parte de su propio pensar y creen que cualquier

suelo es mejor que ninguno – puesto que en el hogar no se le pagaba por los valores que producía. La participación de la mujer en la producción se ha considerado como secundaria a sus actividades reproductivas; de ahí su posición subordinada y marginal en el mercado de empleo (Rivera Quintero 55-56).

The pay inequality was often striking, as women's compensation, even in the cases of skilled work, often amounted to half of what men received for the same duration and amount of labor³.

The factories were hardly an exceptional case in the unequal pay for women's as compared to men's work. On the contrary, historical evidence exists that “los salarios por debajo del nivel de subsistencia y el exceso de horas laborales eran comunes en todas las demás labores realizadas en talleres y fábricas” (I. Picó 28-29). This was especially true in the case of the women in the needlework industry, in which the levels of exploitation reached an infamous peak. In the testimony that pieceworker Dominga de la Cruz gives to Margaret Randall, she describes her experience doing needlework in her home in the early decades of the 20th century. She refers to the labor that she and other women performed as resembling slave labor, and claims that “you can't imagine what work was like. We worked by the light of the lantern until two in the morning, day after day. And we were poorly nourished” (Dominga de la Cruz, quoted in Romero-Cesáreo 783).

³ In an even more striking case, Fernando Picó cites the annual report of the Comisionado del Trabajo, which states that women are paid about half of men's salaries even for work that requires more skills. Even though no specific examples of types of work or of amounts of salaries are given, this note suggests that it was gender and the devalorization of women's work, and not necessarily the amount or the skills required for a particular task, that determined the salary that female workers would receive.

The Home as Factory: Women in the Needlework Industry

Even though the cigar-making factory was one of the principal workplaces for women at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century, it was not the only one. The domestic space continued to be a place where feminine labor was performed, but the types of labor gradually expanded. As opposed to only performing unpaid domestic work, women began to enter a different section of the salaried workforce, that involving piecework, in particular needlework in the garment industry.

The needlework industry in Puerto Rico began thanks to a series of factors that made it necessary to expand the geographical area in which fine garments were produced. Its origins “lay in the commercial crisis brought on by World War I, which forced a halt in the export of finely sewn and embroidered garments and linen from Europe” (Boris 36), mostly to the United States. This complemented the devastating and lasting effects of the San Ciriaco hurricane that hit the island in 1899, destroyed crops and forced many people to move from rural to urban areas, augmenting the cheap urban workforce (Arcelay Santiago 27). The types of products that were produced and exported through the needlework industry encompassed a broad range of items: “Los artículos de algodón que se exportaban eran vestidos, faldas, blusas, ropa interior y pañuelos y otros artículos en cantidades más pequeñas” (Dietz 136). The work was part of a hierarchical system, in which women were given the materials and supervised by mostly male contractors and subcontractors (Dietz 136) that benefited from the women’s work more than the women themselves.

The statistics associated with piecework are as fascinating as they are revelatory of the type of work and the kind of exploitation associated with this labor. Eileen Boris notes that the majority of women – 75% in 1935-1963 – were between 16 and 35 years of age (Boris 41), still young and in a physical condition that facilitated the work often done during late hours and with little light. The Puerto Rican government made a conscious effort to incorporate women in the needlework industry, in part because of the demand on the part of US contractors, and in part because needlework was seen as a “feminine” occupation – it is hard, if not impossible, to find any testimony of male workers in the garment industry, other than contractors and subcontractors who were higher in the unwritten hierarchy of labor. An isolated testimony can be found in the documentary *Tejedoras de vida*, in which a man hesitantly admits that he knows of men that knew how to make mundillo, the elaborate lace for which Puerto Rico has become famous. However, the garment and needlework industry has consistently been dominated by women.

In order to prepare girls for piecework, “in 1918, the public schools in Mayagüez adopted a needlework curriculum for all of its schools” (Boris 36). This education began in elementary school, and occupied about half of the girls’ curriculum (Dietz 136). It is important to realize that this early preparation for women’s insertion into the labor force was neither incidental nor self-contained. As Margarita Ostolaza Bey notes, “la expulsión de la mujer fuera de su ‘propia esfera’ hacia la fuerza laboral ha aumentado considerablemente durante el período de la posguerra, según las exigencias del capital han transferido el trabajo doméstico a la esfera del mercado de trabajo asalariado y han

elaborado una división del trabajo acorde con la socialización política sexual, asociando estos trabajos como ‘trabajos de mujeres’” (Ostolaza Bey 70). In the specific case of Puerto Rico, the early education of girls into the craft of the needlework “era parte de un proceso más amplio en el que los Estados Unidos, como estado colonial, ofrecían el adiestramiento, las destrezas y el conocimiento necesarios para la acumulación de capital y la producción lucrativa para los capitalistas norteamericanos y para los pocos empresarios puertorriqueños que se asociaban a ese proceso” (Dietz 136) – in other words, even though girls and young women were the main producers in the needlework industry, they were the ones who benefited the least from the labor that they were performing.

Puerto Rican women’s exploitation in the needlework trade reached an extreme, as “Puerto Rican workers, factory and home alike, worked longer hours for wages lower than even U.S. workers in the South, who were considered the most exploited needleworkers on the mainland” (Boris 44). The conditions were harrowing, as depicted by Eileen Boris:

Most of these workers lived in cramped and drafty shacks in outlying mountain regions, on sugar and tobacco haciendas, and along the swampy outskirts of towns. Receiving their bundles of work from subcontractors known on the island as *comisionistas*, homeworking needle women labored for piece rates equivalent to one or two cents an hour in order to eke out cash in an economy that offered them few other opportunities (Boris 35).

The same realities are depicted in Dominga de la Cruz’s *testimonio*, recorded by Margaret Randall, in which Dominga alludes to “the double exploitation” by foreign factory owners and by Puerto Rican intermediaries (Romero-Cesáreo 783), an exploitation characterized by long hours, poor nutrition and night work (Romero-Cesáreo 783). The

exploitation of female labor thus occurred not only in factories, under direct supervision from the factory owners, but also in women's homes. In this sense, the home became a space of a double exploitation – on the one hand, due to women's unpaid domestic work, and on the other, due to their insufficient pay and the reality of the working conditions in which needlework was performed.

The name most frequently associated with the exploitation of women in the needlework industry in Puerto Rico is, ironically, that of a woman, María Luisa Arcelay, first a teacher in Mayagüez, then a garment workshop owner that employed women and children, and the first female elected official in Puerto Rico (elected to the Legislature in 1932 and reelected in 1936). While Carmen Arcelay Santiago's biography of María Luisa Arcelay⁴ presents a rather unilateral, idealized and defensive view of her, several references in other historical analyses claim that "she showed no interest whatsoever in women's issues" (Barceló-Miller 138) and offer a glimpse of the conditions and the exploitation to which the women working in her workshop were subjected.

According to Carmen Arcelay Santiago, María Luisa Arcelay first and foremost offered an opportunity to women and children to work and earn wages that they otherwise would not have had. Hers was one of the first workshops to open in Mayagüez, in 1917, and at its peak it employed up to 400 people (Arcelay Santiago 32). In 1939 she used her power as an elected official to introduce Law 663, which insisted on the implementation of a "reasonable minimum wage" ("escalas mínimas razonables de salarios" Arcelay Santiago 103) – but ironically, without demanding the establishment of

⁴ In spite of the last names, Carmen Arcelay Santiago clarifies that there are no family ties between her and María Luisa Arcelay.

an explicit minimum wage. Every workshop owner was obliged to consider what would be a reasonable wage for his or her workers. While in the context of the proposal this was justified as a step towards the fair treatment of workers, in reality it responded to the protests of factory and workshop owners and subcontractors, who threatened to close their shops should a minimum wage be written into law. In this sense, María Luisa Arcelay used her access to political power to cement her economic status and the dominant position of her social class, positioning “her class interests [...] above her gender interests” (Barceló-Miller 138).

What this biography doesn’t mention either are the strikes in which the workers in Arcelay’s workshop participated, and the violence with which the Puerto Rican authorities at that time confronted them. While Arcelay Santiago depicts Arcelay’s relationship with striking workers as one of reason and understanding, and even presents her as a victim (“María Luisa salió de su taller a explicarles a las manifestantes que las trabajadoras no se unirían a la manifestación. Los huelguistas le tiraron con piedras a María Luisa” Arcelay Santiago 61), Eileen Boris testifies as to the way in which “Police called to protect employer property, ended up killing and wounding strikers who had stoned the workshop of Representative María Luisa Arcelay” (Boris 39). This episode refers to the kinds of violence and exploitation to which workers, mostly women, were exposed in the needlework industry, as they worked in conditions that threatened their health and as they received wages that hardly responded to the amount, the duration and the nature of the work that they did. It is out of such reality that social and feminist

activists like Luisa Capetillo emerge to critique the hierarchy of labor and the relationships between workers, factory and shop owners, and the Puerto Rican state.

Union Organization, Women's and Workers' Rights

The increase in the employment of women in factories and workshops in a variety of industries came during a wider process of transformation and proletarianization, especially among “urban workers [whose identification changed] from artisans to proletarians, mainly in the development of large tobacco-processing establishments” (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 19). While it was men who first began to organize in unions and who took action to demand their rights as workers, women soon realized that they too had the opportunity to fight for equal and fair treatment, working conditions and compensation.

The inclusion of women in the factory workforce and their subsequent (albeit gradual and difficult) struggle for labor rights, resulted in a complex situation in which male workers, female workers and unions entered a problematic relationship conditioned by a variety of conflicting interests. Men understood that the incorporation of women in the workforce, and later in the union system, affected them in both positive and negative ways. As Juan José Baldrich explains,

Class pulled women together while gender pushed them apart. Class brought them together as workers in their common opposition to the fabricant. Gender kept them apart because cigar-making became a male domain once men excluded women at the beginning of the factory system during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Cigar-makers' unions reflected these conflicting tendencies. Unions encouraged women to organize as stemmers, classers, and the like. Men did not stimulate women to become cigar-makers and had misgivings before

accepting them in the occupations of the reorganized craft (Baldrich, “Gender” 107).

While the author points out that the FLT (Federación Libre de Trabajadores, the largest and most powerful union organization at the time) and other cigar-makers’ unions recruited women, their employment in factories was often hindered by men’s opposition, as they “perceived the entry of women as capital’s initiative to devalue their own work. Opposition to the employment of women was part of their own [men’s] struggle against capital. Their uneasiness with women in cigar-making was tinged with the same paternalism that manufacturers considered in hiring them: the devaluation of labor” (Baldrich, “Gender” 119). As a consequence, women had to resist not only the systems of capital and colonialism (in that the capital that operated the factories was often foreign, U.S.-based capital), but also a patriarchal perception of female work as less deserving and less valuable, resulting in men’s fear of and opposition to women’s salaried employment. These complex relationships and conflicts of interest had profound implications for the construction of space, gender and sexuality in the case of the factory. As the factory could no longer be uniquely identified with male labor, it became a site of multiple struggles, from those associated with workers’ rights to those pertaining to early feminist needs and demands in Puerto Rico.

In spite of the obstacles coming from both employers and male coworkers, women expanded their participation in factories and in the Puerto Rican labor force in general, and were able to organize and take direct and unequivocal action in defense of their needs and rights. As women like Luisa Capetillo and other labor organizers actively participated in the FLT and other unions, even traveling around the island to help raise

consciousness among workers in different regions, female factory workers organized around a combination of labor and gender rights to voice their dissatisfaction with their working conditions. Describing the case of Utuado, Fernando Picó emphasizes that, as early as 1911, “hay noticias de huelgas de despalilladoras en Utuado por aumento de sueldos” (F. Picó 180). These initiatives allowed for the development of class consciousness and for the transformation of the relationship between gender, class, national belonging and the space of the factory.

The incorporation of women in the workforce represented at least a partial shift away from women’s association with the space of the home and with domestic work. As Picó argues,

para muchas mujeres solteras el trabajo asalariado en los talleres, a diferencia del trabajo remunerado por tarea de las lavanderas o planchadoras, o el trabajo como criada, muchas veces residente, de las cocineras, representó una independencia relativa respecto a la estructura de la vida doméstica tradicional. También puso en contacto cotidiano a las trabajadoras con sus pares en el taller, y las inició en una serie de luchas reivindicativas (F. Picó 194).

By actively occupying the workshop and the factory, women transformed not only these spaces, but also that of the home, by means of challenging its unique association with femininity and women’s work. However, women’s incorporation in the salaried workforce was not a sufficient condition for the de-feminization of domestic work. As Helen Safa has argued,

el trabajo en sí mismo no ha modificado el status de la mujer. En tanto que el trabajo a sueldo fuera de casa puede traer a la mujer mayor independencia y libertad, ha creado también una carga dual para muchas mujeres, puesto que ellas son igualmente responsables de las labores domésticas y del cuidado de los niños (Safa 159).

Women were temporarily able to step out of, but could not definitely terminate their association with domestic work, as they were still expected to perform the tasks commonly identified as “feminine” and “maternal.” While the space of the factory became feminized, the space of the home did not become masculinized.

The space of the factory represented not only the transformation of the traditional association between women, work and domestic space, but also, for both male and female workers, it signified the opportunity to receive an education more extensive than the one they got prior to their employment in the factory. This education could be analyzed on a variety of levels, from a broader coming to consciousness, especially a proletarian, socialist and anarchist consciousness, to workers’ familiarizations with specific texts – political, philosophical and literary – through the institution and the work of the *lectores*, or factory readers.

Historians and literary critics have emphasized the role of the multiple facets of education that workers received in the factories, and the significance that this education had for the development of the feminist consciousness that emerged precisely out of the factory floor. Julio Ramos points out that “la fábrica de cigarros era, entre otras cosas, un espacio cultural donde los artesanos – muchos de tendencias anarquistas y socializantes – recibían una educación alternativa, a veces desde muy jóvenes” (Ramos, “Luisa Capetillo” 238). The concentration of workers in the factory “made the new proletarian condition more transparent for the cigarmakers” (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 31) and gradually spurred a sense of solidarity along axes of common rights and needs, inequality and the struggle against exploitation.

To a great extent, this education emerged as a direct consequence of the presence of the lectores, factory readers in most cases hired directly by the workers, to present to them political, philosophical, journalistic and literary texts during the workday. The institution of the readers was more egalitarian than most, as both men and women were known to occupy the position⁵.

The readers became an institution in the cigar-making factories in the latter part of the 19th century. In her biography of Luisa Capetillo, one of the most notable readers in Puerto Rico and later in New York and Ybor City, Norma Valle Ferrer describes the setting and the interaction between readers and factory workers:

El lector se sentaba o se paraba frente a un podio y leía en voz clara y alta para que los obreros que despalillaban las hojas de tabaco, y aquellos que manufacturaban los cigarros, los escucharan. Era costumbre que los obreros, si deseaban que el lector repitiera una o más veces cierto pasaje pegaran con sus instrumentos de trabajo o el tenedor de despalillar en la mesa, y el lector podría repetir infinitamente un pasaje en particular (Valle Ferrer 60).

The texts that readers presented in the factories were not accidental – on the contrary, they were chosen carefully, after deliberation and even a democratic vote among the workers. According to Julio Ramos, the hall would elect a president, who would propose and submit to a vote the texts that would be read in the factory the following day. The workers would vote on the texts and the next day the reader would present those that were chosen. Among the texts that became well known on the factory floors were

⁵ Among the better known female readers is Dominga de la Cruz, whose experience of employment first in the needlework industry and then in tobacco factories is documented by Margaret Randall. Alternately, among the many names of male readers were those of Fernando García and Benito Ochart, mentioned in Bernardo Vega's interview of Pedro Juan Bonit (Vega 131), who read newspapers in the morning and novels in the afternoon, respectively.

socialist newspapers like *Social Future*, *Democracy* and *Labor Union*, which often “published passages about or by outstanding women in the socialist and feminist struggles: names like Madame Roland, Clara Zetkin, and Rosa Luxembourg as well as other women around the world were frequently mentioned” (Romero-Cesáreo 778). Similarly, Nancy Hewitt points to texts like “classic essays on anarcho-sindicalist or socialist politics” and explains that “After a midday break, [the reader] would spend the afternoon presenting, with some dramatic flair, chapters from a novel selected by the workers and read serially over several days” (Hewitt 123). The variety of texts and themes offers an idea of the rich education that the workers received and to the significance of the function that the readers fulfilled in the space of the factory.

The experience of listening to the reader while working was complemented by participating in “círculos de estudio” (Valle Ferrer 61), which were “reuniones frecuentes y organizadas, celebradas entre grupos de obreros que discutían diferentes obras teóricas para elevar la conciencia de los trabajadores y fomentar en la práctica la teoría de la organización obrera” (Valle Ferrer 61). In most cases, they responded to a specific political ideology. As Pedro Juan Bonit tells Bernardo Vega about the study circles for factory workers in New York, “Los círculos de estudio eran casi todos de ideología anarquista, excepto el Círculo de Trabajadores de Brooklyn, que admitía trabajadores de distintas ideologías” (Vega 132). The círculos de estudio were a conscious and organized effort to inform, educate and inspire a palpable change not only in the working conditions of the factory men and women, but also in the class and political consciousness that informed their decisions and their struggles.

The readers provided a unique educational and political opportunity for the factory workers. By being part of the experience of listening to the texts that the readers presented, the factory workers, “(even ‘illiterate’ ones), [became] one of the best-informed and best-instructed groups in Puerto Rican society” (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 27). This was the case even more so for female workers, as women rarely benefited from the same formal education as men: “For women workers at the turn of the twentieth century, both on the Island and in the States, the practice of reading aloud in workshops provided a rare educational opportunity” (Sánchez-González 24). In this sense, in the space of the factory the readers offered a service and an opportunity that was aimed at raising political consciousness, but which had multiple effects, including that of providing a role of leadership and visibility, in addition to education, to Puerto Rican women, both workers and readers.

The educational and the political implications of the practice of reading in the factories were problematic for the factory owners:

Civic authorities and factory owners were convinced that the lectores were the instigators of radical activism in Ybor City. [...] Manufacturers had long been hostile to the institution, which allowed an individual complete freedom from employer control to proselytize among workers throughout the day on the shop floor. Yet cigar workers made it clear they would fight as vehemently for their right to employ readers as they did for higher wages, better working conditions, and union recognition; and by the 1910s, the institution had become entrenched (Hewitt 129).

Both the factory owners’ opposition and the workers’ insistence at preserving the practice of factory reading are testimony to the significance that readers had in the personal and social life of both male and female cigarmakers.

The origins of women's incorporation in the workforce were fundamental factors in the emergence of the Puerto Rican feminist movement. Even though the development of Puerto Rican feminism could not be analyzed without looking carefully at the workers' rights movement in the early 20th century, the origins of Puerto Rican feminism date back to the late 19th century. Historians have pointed out that the "powerful and enduring feminist tradition [...] extends back to the later part of the 19th century when women's demands for equal education first gained popular recognition in Puerto Rico" (López Springfield). Some of the notable names among them were those of Lola Rodríguez de Tió and Ana Roqué de Duprey, who "represented the educated woman of the privileged classes and their concerns with women's access to adequate education and their right to vote" (Romero-Cesáreo 771) and for whom oppression and marginalization "no radicaba en la explotación económica sino más bien en las restricciones legales y sociales a las cuales estaba sometida a pesar de su nueva condición profesional" (I. Picó 28). These early feminists were middle-class women whose work as teachers and journalists paved the way for their social and political consciousness and enabled them to formulate specific demands on behalf of women, regarding equal education, which they saw as the most effective route to gender equality on the island.

The development of the Puerto Rican feminist tradition was closely related to the workers' struggle and the fight for equality in the factories:

La modernización de la industria tabaquera no sólo proletizó a los artesanos, sino que a su vez incorporó tanto a niños como a mujeres en todas las etapas de la producción del cigarro. No es casual, en ese sentido, que los primeros fermentos del feminismo en Puerto Rico se dieran en las fábricas de cigarros, bastante antes que se consolidara el movimiento sufragista en las décadas del veinte (Ramos, "Luisa Capetillo" 238).

In this passage Ramos situates the emergence of Puerto Rican feminism as an organized, political movement, in the space of the factory, and points to two implicit reasons for it. The first of these reasons is the concentration of women who shared a reality of economic struggle and gender inequality in the home and in the workplace. The second surely involves the mention of children – an organized struggle for women’s rights would inevitably improve the treatment and the situation of children both in the workplace and in the home, whether through better working conditions and the regulation of child labor, or through the women’s increased salaries and better (healthier) work environment.

Beyond the struggle for equality, women’s work in the cigar-making factories had broader political implications. Not only were women contributing to the family income, but they were also looking at the possibility of economic emancipation. Ángel Quintero-Rivera has argued that the origins of the struggle for women’s rights and for the recognition of the value of women’s work “had a concrete base in the artisans’ experience in production and emerged as women began to participate directly in the productive process and enjoy an independent status in economic life. This began, at least on a significant scale, with the growth of the tobacco-processing industry during the first decade of the twentieth century” (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 24). This economic independence then paved the way for the incorporation of women in other kinds of labor, beyond the factory floor.

The process of women’s incorporation in the workforce gradually transformed the relationships between male and female workers in the tobacco factories. According to historians, labor organization against exploitation “overrode the traditional differentiation

of sexes as they developed together a common struggle” (Quintero-Rivera, “Socialist” 25). One example of the results of this common struggle can be seen in the change of attitude on the part of male workers towards female workers. Instead of thinking of women as an enemy in the struggle for fair pay and working conditions, men began to see them as “comrades,” a name used “not only among the new female proletarians, but also among their male fellow workers and among the traditional groups of artisans with whom they shared their daily community life” (Quintero-Rivera, Socialist 25). As women’s common purpose became evident through their involvement with unions and workers’ rights’ causes, the way in which male workers saw them also began to change, gradually resulting in solidarity and in the possibility of common efforts to fight for justice in the workplace and beyond.

Luisa Capetillo, Gender and Working-Class Consciousness

In the course of the 20th century, a number of Puerto Rican female writers have gone beyond the national imaginary to envision alternative communities organized around issues of class, equality, justice and women’s rights. Among the first was Luisa Capetillo, a socialist and self-proclaimed anarchist who worked as a journalist and a reader in tobacco factories in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Capetillo was born in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, in 1879, in a progressive family that valued education at a time when it was not readily available to women. Capetillo’s mother taught her to read and write, and insisted on introducing her to some of the important European authors of the late 19th century. After spending years working alongside her mother, a servant in upper-

class homes, Capetillo took a job as a reader in a factory in Arecibo, a decision that would determine her subsequent identification with the labor movement and with feminist ideas in Puerto Rico.

Capetillo's association with the labor movement began in the early 1900s. Her first participation in organized labor protests dates back to 1907, when she took part in a tobacco workers' strike (Golden and Findlen 36). Capetillo soon became an active leader in the Federación Libre de Trabajadores, which, as her biographers have noted, she "joined [...] via one of its strongest affiliates, La Federación de Torcedores de Tabaco (FTT), the tobacco workers' union. [...] Capetillo joined the FTT and became immersed in the radical politics embraced by its members and their counterparts throughout the Caribbean" (Hewitt 123). She saw her work as a journalist as an indispensable part of the struggle for workers' rights. In 1910 she began writing for *Unión Obrera*, the FLT's newspaper (Hewitt 123), and in the same year founded her own newspaper, *La Mujer*⁶ (The Woman), with the intention to publicize and politicize women's rights. Capetillo worked as a labor organizer in cigar factories in Puerto Rico, New York⁷, and Ybor City,

⁶ It is unfortunate that no copies of *La mujer* have been preserved.

⁷ Aside from Capetillo's own writing, the best testimony to her life and work in New York is provided by Bernardo Vega, who remembers meeting and working with Capetillo in factories there. Vega calls her "gran mujer puertorriqueña" (Vega 134) and talks with admiration about her political ideas and about her willingness to voice them. In relation to the issue of space, Vega also points out that Capetillo's "casa de hospedaje" was not only evidence to her hospitality, but, more importantly, a community center for the exchange of ideas among Puerto Ricans in the US.

Florida, and this work positions her not only as a Puerto Rican, but also as a Latina⁸ and international thinker and activist who steps outside the traditional understanding of the relationship between space, gender, sexuality and labor, and who, with her own work, serves as a bridge between the spaces of island and metropolis, between labor rights and women's rights, and between Puerto Rican and other Caribbean workers in spaces like the factory, the tribune and the newspaper.

Capetillo wrote four books: *Ensayos libertarios*, 1907; *La humanidad en el futuro*, 1910; *Mi opinión sobre las libertades, derechos y deberes de la mujer*, 1911; and *Influencias de las ideas modernas*, 1916. In these books, she emphasizes the importance of her involvement in the factory, in labor unions like the Federación Libre de Trabajadores, and her passion for the defense of women's rights, causes she sees as universal rather than restricted by national boundaries and affiliations. She confronts

⁸ There have been longstanding disagreements regarding the meaning and the use of the terms Latina/o, Puerto Rican, Boricua and Nuyorican. While Latina/o has, for the most part, been accepted to denote people of Spanish-speaking Latin America in the United States, in *Boricua Literature*, Lisa Sánchez-González explains that, "Boricua is a common term of self-affirmation in the stateside community; it is an adjective that references the indigenous (Taíno) name of Puerto Rico's main island, Boriquén. [...] Nuyorican is another important self-defining term. Initially a derisive term, popular among isular Puerto Ricans for demeaning mainland-born or -raised Puerto Ricans, Nuyorican was critically appropriated in the early 1970s by avant-garde poets. [...] For the purposes of this book, the term Boricua refers to the Puerto Rican diasporan community at large, and Nuyorican refers more specifically to the New York City community" (Sánchez-González 1). In contrast, the editors of the collection *Latina Legacies* argue for a broader definition of Nuyorican and for a more symbolic and affective use of Boricua, one that doesn't necessarily evoke the indigenous history of the island: "Nuyorican refers to Puerto Ricans born on the mainland, not just in New York, while Puertorriqueña and Puertorriqueño include islanders and Nuyoricans alike. Boricua signifies endearment, empowerment, and unity for all Puerto Ricans" (Ruiz 6). These differences in the definitions of the terms reflect the complex politics of space, birth, and relationship to the island that claim the right to decide who should and who should not be included in the Puerto Rican, Boricua and Nuyorican communities.

traditional paternalist discourse, and morality and marriage as its technologies of power (Foucault), using the language of the working class: “Mujeres de todas las posiciones defendeos, que el enemigo es formidable, pero no le temáis, que según es el tamaño es su cobardía!” (Ramos 195). By rephrasing the international worker’s slogan⁹, Capetillo links the factory to the issue of gender and at the same time denounces the marginalization and the perceived inconsequentiality of women in Puerto Rican society. She emphasizes the connection that exists between women’s rights and workers’ rights through their labor, claiming that both must be recognized and defended not just nationally, but universally.

It has been widely recognized that Capetillo’s main concerns were with anarchist ideas, socialism and the politics of class. At first glance, she hardly seems concerned with the nation or with the national model of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*. The concept of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* had emerged in the late 19th century, and was first used in the discourse of the landowning *hacendados* towards the Spanish colonial government and as an instrument in expressing their discontent at the power that U.S. absentee capitalism began to acquire after 1898, as discussed in the introductory chapter. It is highly unlikely that an educated and socially engaged person like Capetillo would not have been familiar with the concept of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*. Furthermore, her writing and the ideas that she expresses demonstrate instances of reacting to some of

⁹ Depending on the source, the two most common translations of the slogan into Spanish are “¡Proletarios de todos los países, uníos!” and “¡Trabajadores del mundo, únense!” While the first is closer to the original German wording found in Marx’s Communist Manifesto (“Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!”), the second is closer to the most common English version, “Workers of the world, unite!”

the ideology's basic principles, regardless of the fact that Capetillo consistently refuses to refer directly to the Puerto Rican nation. One of the rare occasions in which she does this is in *Mi opinión*, which she dedicates to her "paisanos" (her compatriots).

The problem of space is fundamental in analyzing Capetillo's work and her discussion of class, gender and nation. As Doreen Massey has suggested, "class relations could be understood as having a spatial form. The geography of social structure is a geography of class relations" (Massey 22). In Capetillo's writing, space fulfills a variety of functions – of marginalization and exploitation, but also of resistance and of the creation of a labor and gender consciousness intended to serve the demand of a series of rights – educational, labor and women's, among others. Her writing depicts class relations through a series of spaces and suggests that the anarcho-socialist model that she proposes also has a spatial dimension that determines the shift in the class and gender relations that Capetillo imagines.

There are four main spaces that interact to construct the relationship between gender, sexuality, space and the Puerto Rican nation in Luisa Capetillo's work. The two more literal ones are the factory and the public forum, or the public spaces from which Capetillo talks to the workers and participates in labor organizing. The less obvious (but arguably even more present) ones are the spaces of the home (the family home that she vehemently critiques) and of the page (the newspaper and her own journalistic writing, in which Capetillo presents her ideas in a variety of styles, at times argumentative and didactic, at times subtle and poetic, to construct her own philosophy of labor and women's rights, and ultimately her own notion of the ideal society). Each one of these

spaces, and their interactions with one another, form “a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation” (Massey 265) that imply the need to refer to these spaces as sites and indispensable aspects of the construction of Capetillo’s model of society.

The space of the house is the one that conditions the construction of gender and sexuality in the other three spaces. It could be argued that Luisa Capetillo’s ideas about workers’ and women’s rights emerge precisely as a consequence of her critique of the traditional gender hierarchies at the level both of the family and of the Puerto Rican nation, and the already familiar notion of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*. Even though Capetillo disidentifies and refuses to reference or engage the discourse of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, which existed since the 19th century, her critique is directed at a set of hierarchies and social relations associated with that social model.

Luisa Capetillo’s rejection of the model of the national family originates with the critique of the very foundations of that family, the institution of marriage sanctioned by the state and by the Catholic Church. Unlike other early feminists, Capetillo builds a powerful campaign against the institution of marriage, arguing that it is artificial, hypocritical, and that it establishes a set of relationships that end up oppressing and victimizing women. In defining her idea of marriage, she explains that “No quiero decir que esté sancionado por el juez ó el cura. Para formar matrimonio no se necesita sanción de las leyes ni seguir costumbre alguna establecida. La voluntad de dos seres humanos de ambos sexos es suficiente para formarlo y construir un hogar” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 138). In her opinion, the traditional catholic and state-sanctioned marriage is a

hypocritical arrangement, as frequently the man and the woman marry for reasons that have little to do with love: “En la actual sociedad la mujer se casa por seguir la costumbre. Y el hombre á veces para tener una ayuda ó esclava” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 161). Capetillo thus critiques the gender hierarchy that orders the traditional marriage and family, and “condemned conventional marriage as a form of prostitution” (Hewitt 126), arguing that “los rendimientos no deben crear entre los individuos obligaciones, ni deberes, ni derechos” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 185), as in the case of prostitutes, whose male clients feel that they have the right to their bodies and their labor.

Alternately, Capetillo suggests that there are other ways in which a marriage can function, without the familiar system of power that structures and orders a metaphorical national house. Her concept of a free marriage without civic or religious laws, based on “leyes naturales” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 164) is an expression of her devotion to anarchist ideas that insist on “rechazar toda atadura legal que proviene de las leyes creadas por el Estado, como las de la educación y las del matrimonio” (da Cunha 55). Free marriage, according to Capetillo, appears to be the only way in which a man and a woman can feel equally free to enter or to terminate a relationship that might not satisfy their emotional needs:

Y si es la mujer la que está aburrida y cansada de su esposo, y este a pesar de conocer ó comprender que molesta, que fastidia; persiste en la idea de retenerla por que la quiere, pero no ha sabido ó no ha querido captarse sus simpatías ó su cariño, ó no ha querido, ó le ha sido indiferente, creyendo que por que ella está cansada con el tiene la obligación de aceptarla sin haberla conquistado, es un... grosero, y esta mujer está en su derecho y deber natural de repararse por todos los medios y no engañarse a sí misma, ni engañar a los demás (Capetillo *Mi opinión* 150).

Similarly, according to the author, in the case of infidelity, “La mujer tiene derecho á separarse del marido infiel” (Capetillo *Mi opinión* 142). This relationship epitomizes what Capetillo calls “free love,”¹⁰ the only form of “marriage” that she could accept.

In addition to critiquing the traditional family and marriage norms by saying that love is enough to legitimize a relationship, Capetillo distinguishes between love and marriage, and between love and desire, thus approaching the topic of sexuality in a matter more open than any of her predecessors. On the subject of love and marriage, Capetillo warns:

Que no se confunda el amor con el matrimonio. El matrimonio es una convención social; el amor es una ley natural. El matrimonio es un contrato; en amor es un besar. El matrimonio es una cárcel; el amor es un apasionamiento. El matrimonio es la prostitución del amor (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 172).

With this warning, Capetillo implicitly rejects the traditional (and in her time already familiar) notion of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, by standing up to its most basic institution, that of the marriage that serves as the foundation of the patriarchal family and of the image of the national house. As a consequence, more broadly, Capetillo attacks the normalization of the institution of the family, understood as the basic unit of the nation governed by the interests of the state, and thus enables the introduction of an alternative concept of the national family, one that thrives in anarchism and for which the law and the tenets of the state are an unnecessary limitation.

Instead of love or marriage by law, Capetillo suggests the existence of something more powerful, a basic and natural emotion that she identifies as desire: “El amor es la

¹⁰ In *Mi opinión*, Capetillo states that “Sería necesario buscar y probar que el amor para ser justo y sano no puede ser de otra manera que libre” (171).

comuni3n completa de dos cerebros, de dos corazones, de dos sensualidades. El deseo no es m1s que el capricho de dos seres que una misma voluptuosidad re1ne. Nada es tan pasajero 3 poco estable como el deseo; no obstante, ninguno de nosotros se escapa de 3l” (Capetillo, *Mi opini3n* 177). Capetillo contrasts the perceived stability, or permanence (according to Catholicism) of marriage with the fleeting quality of desire, with its tendency to change its object and direction. In this way she confronts the notion of the permanence of the family as a microcosm for the nation, rejecting and disidentifying herself from the model of the *gran familia puertorriquena* and proposing a much more liberal national model, based on free choice instead of law, rights and obligations.

In more specific terms, Capetillo critiques the notion of the traditional family for the hypocrisy and the contradiction embedded in its model. As Julio Ramos has pointed out, “la misma entonaci3n de sus trabajos distanci[a]n la escritura de Capetillo de la ret3rica magisterial y paternalista cristalizada particularmente en el ensayo, e incluso en algunas zonas de la narrativa puertorrique1a de la primera mitad del siglo” (Ramos, “Luisa Capetillo” 248). In her essays, Capetillo claims that there are numerous contradictions that permeate the traditional family model. Most importantly, she notes that when the patriarchal establishment insists on keeping the woman in the house, as a mother and housewife, by claiming that her absence from the home would imperil the wellbeing of her children and her marriage, in fact it privileges a particular view of the family, that of the middle- and upper-class, in which women don’t necessarily need to work outside the home, but might choose to do so: “Y la mujer obrera que deja sus hijos

por cuidar los de las ricas y concurrir á las fábricas y talleres, ¿no perjudica su hogar?” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 154). She points out that, “el hogar protegido por las leyes, y las riquezas, se beneficia y se protegé más y se olvida el hogar pobre. Se olvida que la familia pobre, en vez de enviar á sus hijos á la escuela los utiliza vendiendo frutas ó los tiene que alquilar, ó hacer trabajo superiores á su edad” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 155). The *gran familia puertorriqueña*, in her view, excludes a large number of families, mostly working and lower-class, who can not afford to abide by the traditional model (in which women and children are positioned in the home), and who are thus marginalized by a national model that they inevitably help support through their labor.

Instead of a patriarchal family, Luisa Capetillo proposes the freedom of a relationship based on gender equality in the house and in the workplace. In terms of the relationship between husband and wife, or between two people who are not necessarily married, Capetillo insists that both have an equal obligation to fulfill their duties to one another in an exclusive relationship. Just like the woman is devoted to the man, the man should be devoted to the woman. In the case that he doesn't fulfill his obligations, Capetillo poses a rhetorical question: “¿Si ese hombre no sabe ó no puede cumplir con los deberes de marido, por qué exige a su mujer que los cumpla? ¿Qué moral es ésta?” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 142). It must be noted that, to an extent, Capetillo upholds certain gender roles, in saying that the man needs to fulfill his “deberes de marido,” but in her case those are related more to the fulfillment of the emotional duties of any man in a relationship, and to his obligation to reciprocate the woman's love and devotion. It is when the man is unfaithful, or when he fails to satisfy a woman's emotional needs, that

the author suggests one of two routes – either a separation, initiated by the woman but agreed upon by both partners, or an act of resistance by women, united in their struggle against patriarchal oppression. In this sense, the periphrasis of the international workers’ slogan discussed above (“¡Mujeres de todas las posiciones defendeos, que el enemigo es formidable, pero no le temáis, que según es el tamaño es su cobardía” Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 161) acquires a new meaning. By using it as a call to solidarity and resistance, Capetillo attempts to empower women, paradoxically, by telling them that they already possess the power (in numbers and unity) to confront and resist patriarchal marginalization and oppression.

Another aspect of the contradictory nature of the traditional marriage manifests itself not in the home but in the workplace, as Capetillo observes that women might be equally talented and qualified, but rarely occupy positions of equal power with men: “La mujer posee en alto grado, penetración, sagacidad, prontitud, buen sentido administrativo. ¿Por qué no desempeña cualquier puesto administrativo?” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 153). Through these words, Capetillo contests “the boundaries of sexual citizenship” (Binnie 196) by demanding women’s equal participation in positions of leadership and in constructing the society that they inhabit. Capetillo sees gender inequality in the workplace as a direct consequence of the gender hierarchy in her society, in which women continued to be associated with domesticity and motherhood, as noted in the previous section. Her critique of the family and her refusal to reference or identify with the *gran familia puertorriqueña* is directed against “marianismo – the behavior code which elevates women to a virgin’s pedestal wherein they are immobilized and kept from

making their own history” (Vélez 10-11). It also goes beyond the stereotype of the woman as mother, wife and housewife, and extends to the implications that this model carries for women’s broader participation in society – as workers equal in status and compensation to their male counterparts.

Even though Capetillo critiques the stereotypical association of women with the home, domestic space and labor, she emphasizes the importance of motherhood not simply as a “natural” function of women, but rather as a reason and a factor in their education and in their social liberation. In her biography of Luisa Capetillo, Norma Valle Ferrer notes that, “Para Luisa Capetillo, la maternidad es una de las funciones más hermosas reservadas por la naturaleza a la mujer. Opinaba que se sentía un ser humano por haber parido” (Valle Ferrer 57), emphasizing that for Capetillo a woman is always a mother, always fulfilling a reproductive function, even when she does not literally give birth.

According to Capetillo, motherhood is not simply associated with a traditionally understood domestic obligation, but has a broader set of functions and responsibilities that require women to acquire a new set of characteristics. The most important of these functions is that of education. According to the author,

La mujer madre es la primera que educa, dirige al futuro monarca, como al ministro y presidente; al útil bracero y el inteligente educador. Ella forma, modela cuidadosamente, pero de un modo á veces equivocado, por falta de educación, casi siempre los futuros lejisladores y revolucionarios (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 143).

Capetillo thus suggests that women should have equal access to education, since they are the first and most important educators. Even though in the passage she reproduces

certain stereotypes of gender roles (the woman as mother who stays in the home and takes the principal care of children, and the male gender of the leaders that she mentions), her idea intends to promote women's access to education and wider social participation, demanding "the kind of education and social services that would allow women to act effectively in public as well as private spheres" (Hewitt 125), as "la madre instruída" (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 144) is not educated only at school, but through her equal participation in social events, with equal rights and responsibilities.

By positioning the mother as a teacher, Capetillo consciously transforms the space of the house, suggesting that it is a space of instruction, an alternative and a necessary complement to the traditional school: "No hay duda que la primera y mejor escuela es el hogar" (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 144). The space of the family home, the traditional house of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, becomes a space with multiple social functions, again responsible for the creation of the leader of the national family, but, in contrast with traditional interpretations, suggesting that gender equality is the basis of the effective completion of this function, and assigning much more power to the woman in the formation of that leader.

Capetillo's struggle for gender equality is inevitably connected to the fight for equal rights for workers, and the need for solidarity across social classes. Noting that Capetillo called for rich women to side with workers, ("¡Mujer rica! Tu puedes redimir a tus hermanos explotados! Redímelos que tuya será la gloria!" Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 158), Lisa Sánchez González points out that

Puerto Rico's first published working-class feminist is also the first to insist on elaborating class divisions between women, which she argues are habitually

rationalized in Puerto Rican culture. Capetillo was especially intolerant of those women who feel entitled to their relative luxury while seeing others in their immediate vicinity – even women working long hours in their own homes – suffer for lack of the most basic necessities (Sánchez-González 27).

Capetillo's distinction between levels in the class hierarchy and between the preoccupations of working-class and middle-class women, is not limited to a critique. Her realization that there is no "coherent oppressor" (Anderson 198) allows her to discern multiple levels of power and oppression among women themselves, and she takes her critique further, to make a direct, unequivocal call for solidarity and for support in a common cause – that of confronting gender and labor oppression. In this sense, gender and class are mutually constructed in Capetillo's work, as two complementary axes of identity and intended bases of resistance. Consequently, Capetillo transforms not only the space of the family house, but also that of the workplace – whether factory, workshop floor or the home as workplace – to imbue it with an understanding of the need for common fronts in the struggle for equality and in the defense of women's and workers' rights.

One might argue that, by placing the problem of resistance and rights at the intersection of gender and class, Capetillo neglects a series of other issues of identity, marginalization and recognition, the most important of which would be that of race. While the author avoids creating "reglas universales o generales de la sociedad de su tiempo" and refuses to participate in "la función generalizadora, universalizante, que predomina en su época" (Ramos, "Luisa Capetillo" 247), she is not yet at the point at

which she could critique racial discrimination and oppression¹¹. Even though she begins to publish her work only about 40 years after the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico, the issue of race is one of the most neglected in her writing.

Similarly, Capetillo assumes a heterosexist and often times homophobic perspective on marriage and relationships, going as far as to identify homosexuality as one of the undesirable consequences of men's treatment of women, as when women initiate "relaciones sexuales con otra mujer, atrofiando de este modo su cerebro y perjudicando su belleza" (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 167). While Capetillo devotes much effort to the struggle for gender and labor rights, it must be recognized that on occasion she does that at the expense of promoting a normative heterosexuality¹² and even vilifying homosexual expression.

Even though Capetillo has not always been recognized as a labor rights leader and factory worker organizer¹³, she has indeed confronted and critiqued the notion of the

¹¹ In the early years of the 20th century there were already voices, which, even if coming from the Puerto Rican diaspora in the US, addressed racism and racial discrimination in Puerto Rico. One notable example is that of Joaquín Colón López, who, in a letter to the newspaper *El Mundo*, asks with indignation, "¿Por qué no encuentra usted al negro puertorriqueño – y no me refiero al mulato ni al grifo – en las grandes oficinas, bancos y lujosas tiendas de Puerto Rico, como no sea limpiando, etc., mientras todos estos negocios reciben con agrado el dinero de los negros que también los patrocinan?" (Colón López 249). While Capetillo asks a similar questions regarding women's participation in position of leadership and power, she does not share a similar concern for the visibility of Afro-Puerto Ricans, focusing instead on gender and workers' rights.

¹² It is equally important to recognize that Capetillo writes in the 1910s and early 1920s, decades before the gay rights movement was to develop.

¹³ For example, in her article on "La mujer en la política puertorriqueña," Mercedes Otero de Ramos briefly mentions Luisa Capetillo as a feminist and a journalist, but avoids discussing her socialist and anarchist identification, and her labor rights work.

nation and the national family by juxtaposing the space of the house against a series of other spaces – those of the factory, the newspaper and public stage – and by emphasizing the significance of class differences and class solidarity as marginalized aspects that bring out the contradictions embedded in the idealized Puerto Rican national model.

The space of the factory is present in Capetillo's writing through the figure of the worker, and through the ideas of social class and political philosophy that permeate her essays. Her identification with workers in the cigar-making factories inspires her socialist and anarchist views, going as far as to claim that “Los anarquistas no pueden respetar la propiedad privada, porque saben que es hecha por la explotación, y si la respetacen serían tan hipócritas como los que la hicieron” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 226). It is from her work in the factory that this class consciousness emerges, and that makes her claim that socialism, more than state institutions and even nationalism, can prove to be the solution for inequality and exploitation, and for the foundations of an egalitarian society:

Socialista soy, porque aspiro a que todos los adelantos, descubrimientos á invenciones establecidos, pertenezcan á todos, que se establezca la socialización sin privilegios. Algunos lo entienden con el estado, para que este regule la marcha, yo lo entiendo sin gobierno. [...] Socialismo ácrata (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 291).

As da Cunha notes, “en la [sociedad] capetillana, no son los intelectuales, ni los clérigos, ni los burgueses los que se transforman, sino que son los obreros los que transforman a la sociedad mediante una revolución pacífica del pensamiento y acción para convertir luego a los demás” (da Cunha 59). The space of the factory then becomes the source of new

ideas on class, equality, justice and nation, according to a configuration that Capetillo sees as logical, ethical and necessary in Puerto Rican society.

The space of the factory also becomes the matrix for the critique of the marginalization of workers, and consequently the foundation for the critique of the model of society that privileges a middle-class patriarchal identity. For Capetillo it is unacceptable that the national model represented a small fraction and neglected to recognize the contributions, and even the existence, of many Puerto Ricans – workers, women, and others. For her, “una nación no sería moderna mientras excluyera a la mayoría de sus ciudadanos de la sociedad y de las cuestiones de gobierno” (da Cunha 56). The main technology of marginalization and exclusion, according to Capetillo, is that of labor exploitation and unequal pay, a reality that the author equates with slavery in an allusion intended to make the reader perceive the depth of abuse and the historical legacy of labor exploitation on the island: “La esclavitud del salario es la esclavitud moderna, que oprime y ha hecho y hará más hambrientos y criminales que la esclavitud de razas y la de la época colonial. Es más cruel, más injusta” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 295). As a result, the factory would become the matrix for a “revolución pacífica” (da Cunha 53) that would inspire the transformation of society into a socialist-anarchist, just and egalitarian community in which nationalism and state government would give primacy to issues of rights and needs, especially as related to workers, women and other previously marginalized groups.

What informed Capetillo’s interest and dedication to factory workers and to workers’ rights in general was, to a great extent, her work as a reader. As such, in the

factory she was both a worker and an educator, a leader who inspired a transformation of the individual and collective political consciousness on a daily basis. In this way, she added yet another facet to the factory – not only a space of labor, but also of education and political action.

The other two spaces that act as sites of the construction of gender and the national imaginary are the public stage and the newspaper, in their relationship with the space of the factory. Instead of separate, these spaces transform into one another, and can be understood in both literal and figurative ways.

The space of the public stage is the most unexpected of the spaces in which Capetillo constructs her model of an anarchist and socialist nation of workers. During her involvement with la Cruzada Ideal (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 298) Capetillo uses the public stage to speak to factory workers in order to educate them, to raise consciousness and to organize them along axes of needs, rights and class identity. Her writing often resembles the speeches that she gave as she went around the island. She addresses workers and peasants directly, pointing out injustice and posing rhetorical questions, making clear appeals to them to see through the system of exploitation and to build a network of resistance and active struggle. This tone is consistent throughout her work, from her earliest essays in *Ensayos libertarios*¹⁴ to her writing in *Mi opinión*:

¹⁴ As early as *Ensayos libertarios* (1907) Capetillo establishes a relationship of brotherhood with the workers, appealing to them as “hermanos trabajadores” (Ramos, *Amor y anarquía* 91). Still, it is curious that the notion of brotherhood, and not sisterhood, would prevail in Capetillo’s appeal to the workers, even though, as discussed above, more and more women entered the workforce in the early 1900s. While not necessarily a contradiction, this suggests a certain separation between Capetillo’s ideas of the implementation of workers’ and women’s rights, or, alternatively, a political gesture meant to seek the support of the still male-dominated system of unions.

¡Trabajadores! [...] ¿Dónde está el producto de vuestro trabajo? La Hermosa riqueza que producen el trabajo, el azúcar y el café, dónde está? En las arcas del que os explota, que se ha hecho capitalista mientras careceis de concepto de ser humano. ¿Vuestro trabajo no produce? Y de donde extrae el que os explota tantos miles de dollars? ¿Qué es lo que produce? (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 296).

From the metaphorical tribune of the page to the material tribune/stage she makes a direct appeal for justice, as she again calls on the workers to “haced que los gobiernos que llevais a poder con vuestros votos, contraigan el deber de proporcionaros trabajo cuando no lo haya en otra parte” (Capetillo, *Mi opinión* 260) – only one example of a consistent dedication to the construction of a different kind of nation, one that gives equal labor and education rights, among others, to women and working-class people.

Capetillo’s use of the newspaper and the stage, and of the newspaper as a stage/tribune, situates her on the margin of the working class with which she identified and for which she fought, as Julio Ramos has argued in his study of the author’s life and work¹⁵. Her liminality is represented in the paradoxical, at first sight, fact, that “el trabajador apropia la tecnología de la cultura dominante para la elaboración de sus propios discursos. En las fisuras abiertas por ese quiebre de la exclusividad letrada, surge un nuevo intelectual, escritor y orador que, lejos de ser inspirado por las musas del ocio creador, emergía como un cuadro sindical, propagandista, y agitador” (Ramos, “Luisa Capetillo” 240). Capetillo herself acknowledges and confronts this liminality in *Influencias de las ideas modernas*, in the essay “A un amigo barbero,” recounting an incident in which she was told that “solamente los que aran la tierra son

¹⁵ In “Luisa Capetillo: una escritura entre más de dos” Ramos notes that Capetillo was the subject of a “doble marginalidad” (243) – and one might argue, of multiple marginalizations – as a woman, a worker, a female activist, but also of a literate, educated, writing woman, worker and activist.

productores” (Ramos, *Amor y anarquía* 123). The paradox of this apparent liminality might seem less problematic, though, if one were to see it not as a sign of exclusion, but as a step in the social transformation – after all, Capetillo’s access to the tribune and to the newspaper, her political consciousness and her education, were two of the rights that she desired for all women and workers, not only for the select few with which some may have identified her. In this sense, her liminality, her position between the illiterate and the educated, the exploited, the socially conscious and the actively resisting, forms an indispensable part of the process of social and political transformation in which she participated and for which she fought during the active years of her life.

Capetillo’s use of the spaces of the page and the stage is an indispensable part of the construction of gender and nation in Sonia Fritz’s docudrama *Luisa Capetillo: pasión de justicia*. The film is “una adaptación libre” (Fritz, *Luisa Capetillo*) of Norma Valle Ferrer’s biography of Capetillo, and the act of writing and the space of the page are present throughout. As Capetillo is shown writing, a voiceover narration presents her ideas on workers’ and women’s rights, and as she reads to workers in the tobacco factory, the idea of “una nueva realidad” (Fritz, *Luisa Capetillo*) taken from Dostoyevski’s *Crime and Punishment* is intended to allude to her revolutionary feminist and socialist ideas.

In turn, the public stage emerges as a space that constitutes a complementary and indispensable side of Capetillo’s activist and organizing work. The film only alludes to this space through Capetillo’s role in organizing factory workers’ strikes, but the space that substitutes that of the public tribune in the film is that of the theater stage. In addition to writing articles and political pamphlets, Capetillo was also the author of

several plays, whose themes ranged from the image of a utopian anarchist society to gender relations and social perceptions. The film presents Capetillo's life as a playwright whose ideas, as represented in the theater, reach out and appeal to people in a way in which her essayistic writing doesn't always do. The play staged in Fritz's film addresses gender relations and the limits imposed on women in a patriarchal society, and reaches its climax in a moment in which the main female character declares that "a mí no me interesa ser una señorita" (Fritz) and demands her freedom from virginity and from the expectation of marriage. The fact that the play is performed on the stage implies a certain degree of formality, of access and influence that the written page might not have had among those workers that had little education and literacy. The stage then becomes not only a site of representation of Capetillo's ideas on feminism and women's rights, but also of the transformative power of her discourse, and of the construction of a concept of gender, sexuality and women's social participation that moves away from the patriarchal model embedded in the image of the Puerto Rican nation as a family.

There is yet another space that must be evoked when analyzing the work of Luisa Capetillo, that she constructs through her writing and her union involvement. The space between Puerto Rico and the continental US, from New York to Ybor City, constitutes yet another distance that Capetillo bridges through her activist and literary work¹⁶. In Capetillo's writings, the diasporic space inhabited by Puerto Rican workers in the United

¹⁶ In the collection titled *Latina Legacies*, Vicky Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol argue that the creation of literature and art must be considered an integral part of the labor of Latina women, even as it "complicates the notion of labor" (Ruiz 4). In this way, the editors call for an expanded view both of work, and of the contributions that Latinas have made to US and Latin American cultures.

States becomes an alternative and complementary site of the critique of the national model and of the construction of a class and political identity based on socialist and anarchist consciousness. Literary critic Lisa Sánchez González goes as far as saying that “the fin-de-siècle working class migrant generation’s most avant-garde texts [...] comprise the foundational narrative enterprise of Boricua literary history” (Sánchez-González 21), situating Capetillo in the position of originating Puerto Rican Latino literary production. While it is important to recognize Capetillo’s early and significant contributions to Latino literary production, she was neither the only one, nor the one whose work offered the broadest, most complete representation of the life of Puerto Ricans in the United States. Among the other workers, activists and authors that arrive in New York around the same time as Capetillo are Bernardo Vega and Jesús Colón, whose memoirs present an extensive and often detailed overview of the history and the experience of Puerto Ricans in New York. Even so, it is important to recognize Capetillo as a transnational worker and writer, as a Latina woman who offered an indispensable testimony of the life and work of the Puerto Rican and Latino community in the United States.

By crossing over from Puerto Rico to New York and Ybor City, Capetillo constructs a network of spaces that share common concerns of gender, sexuality, labor, rights and social justice. By taking her feminist and anarchist ideas from the factories in Puerto Rico to those in New York and Tampa, she imagines a common space imbued with the possibility of solidarity, of multiple axes of resistance, and of common goals of subverting a class hierarchy and of constructing an identity – gender, class, political –

that prioritizes the concern for economic and social equality. The space of the factory is an indispensable part of this transnational space, as it is in the factories in Puerto Rico, New York and Tampa that her ideas for rights and justice crystallize. Even though the workers don't share a common geographic space, the space of the factory acts as the common ground that enables their activism and their struggle for educational, economic and social opportunities and justice.

Gender, Labor and the Factory in *El pueblo no sólo es testigo: la historia de Dominga*

Another figure that presents a class-based account of the space of the factory is that of Dominga de la Cruz, a needleworker and a tobacco factory reader in Mayagüez in the 1930s. Her position regarding the relationship between gender, class and nation shares certain aspects with that of Luisa Capetillo, but at the same time diverges from her predecessor's political ideas in significant ways. Dominga's testimony, recorded and published by Margaret Randall, encompasses her entire life, from the childhood that she claims she never had, to her employment as a worker in needlework shops and as a reader in a tobacco factory, to her political persecution in the 1930s and her protagonism in the events leading up to the Ponce Massacre¹⁷, her presentations in poetic recitals, and to her political exile in Mexico and Cuba. Consequently, the spaces in which Dominga de la Cruz's testimony is set are those of the factory (the needlework workshop and the tobacco

¹⁷ The Ponce Massacre occurred on March 21, 1937. On that day, the Nationalist Party organized a peaceful march whose purpose was to protest the incarceration of the Party's leader, Pedro Albizu Campos. The protesters were granted a permit, which was then revoked by Blanton Winship, the colonial governor of Puerto Rico. On the day of the Massacre, police began shooting at the unarmed protesters, killing 19 and wounding more than 200.

factory), the party (Albizu Campos's¹⁸ Nationalist Party¹⁹) and the nation, which she sees and constructs from the standpoint of a persecuted activist and of a political exile.

The first space that serves as a matrix for the construction of the Puerto Rican nation in Dominga's narrative is that of the factory. In a way similar to the historical actors in other texts discussed here, Dominga focuses on the working conditions, on their social context, and on the oppression of women that resulted from them. A number of times she emphasizes that women were paid very little for their work in the factory: "La mujer del pueblo trabajaba en los talleres donde se confeccionaba ropa que luego se embarcaba para Estados Unidos. Algo que me acuerdo bien de esa época es que yo ganaba \$1.50, ¡al mes, compañera!" (Randall 44). She attributes that to the structure of the industry and recounts that, "un agente que contrataba con la fábrica se traía ese trabajo, nos cogía a nosotras para trabajar y después él cobraba una comisión. Era una explotación doble la que nosotras sufríamos" (Randall 25).

Dominga's consciousness of the systematic exploitation of workers' rights comes as a result of the class consciousness that she developed as a factory reader. She remembers specific instances in which texts produced an impact in her and in other factory workers: "También a los obreros de ese chichal les leí un libro acerca de la revolución francesa. Ese libro gustó muchísimo a toda la clase obrera del país. Los

¹⁸ Pedro Albizu Campos (1893-1965) was a lawyer, politician, independence supporter and the leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. He was imprisoned multiple times for his criticism of Puerto Rico's colonial relationship to the United States.

¹⁹ The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, founded in 1922 and dissolved after Albizu's death in 1965, was the main institutional supporter of Puerto Rican independence from the United States.

obreros discutían, ellos discutían entre sí” (Randall 30). Much like Luisa Capetillo, by reading and by raising the workers’ consciousness, Dominga transforms the space of the factory into one of education, a space that both constructs (through labor) and helps rethink (by voicing class-based needs and demands) the Puerto Rican nation.

The second space in which Dominga situates her testimony and her idea of the nation is the metaphorical “space” of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. The party is presented as a natural consequence of Dominga’s experience of the factory. She recounts the first time that she heard Albizu Campos, the leader of the Nationalist Party, speak, and remembers the way in which his words immediately resonated with her understanding of factory labor and her class condition. In this first instance, through the figure of the leader, the party emerges as a space of inspiration and as an instrument of the crystallization of the ideas of class and workers’ rights.

Dominga’s analysis of the Nationalist Party goes further and problematizes the space in relation to gender and sexuality. When she goes to the party’s office to sign up and become a member, she encounters surprise and dismay on the part of the men who didn’t expect a woman to take the initiative and join their political cause on her own: “Era una Junta aquella casi de hombres solamente. Pero me inscribieron” (Randall 36). According to Dominga, this marginalization of women in the Nationalist Party was systematic, even in crucial moments when their presence and help were vital. She remembers how, in the events leading up to the Ponce Massacre, the female members of the party were asked to stay back and not participate in the march. Her response is one of indignation: “¡todavía hoy nosotras tenemos que pelear nuestro derecho a

luchar!” (Randall 50). Through these words she critiques the patriarchal relations of power that persist even as men and women combine their efforts in the struggle for independence and economic rights.

From the spaces of the factory and the party emerges the space of the Puerto Rican nation. While Dominga talks about it from the standpoint of her experience on the island, the nation is a space of ideas, of struggle and of persecution, all inevitably intertwined and related to her experience as a woman, a worker and a member of the Nationalist Party. These multiple axes of the construction of the national imaginary in Dominga’s narrative are best summarized through her experience in 1937, during the Ponce Massacre. Her consciousness as a woman, a worker and a nationalist independence supporter is challenged with the assassination of 19 young people who were protesting Albizu’s incarceration. In contrast to the utopic space of an independent nation, Dominga encounters the violence of the State, as her narrative constructs an image of an official national model that is exclusionary and repressive in the methods that it uses to reproduce itself.

Dominga’s image of the nation is complemented by her experience in exile. Unable to resist and escape the persecution that followed her role in the events in Ponce (most significantly, she raised the Puerto Rican flag again, after the person carrying it was shot), she is forced to go to Mexico and then to Cuba, where Randall interviews her. Dominga’s critique of the island under colonial rule is conditioned by the hospitality that she received in Cuba and by the care that she experienced in the Soviet Union during her

medical treatment there. The contrast that she notes when she briefly returns to Puerto Rico in 1976 provokes sadness and outrage:

Puerto Rico me dio una pena enorme. Es un pueblo que está herido, pero que está herido de otra manera muy sutil, distinta de cuando yo vivía allá. Ahora hay aún más desempleo, y no se come nada sembrado en Puerto Rico: muy poco. Casi todo viene de afuera, de California o Santo Domingo. Bueno, es un desastre. ¡Puerto Rico, por culpa de los yanquis, es lo que se llama un desastre! (Randall 106).

What stands out in this description is that Dominga no longer sees Puerto Rico as a nation, but as part of the capitalist chain that links the Caribbean to the United States in complex and devastating ways. Even though the nation that emerges at the end of her testimony is thus alienated from the ideals for which she fought, Dominga maintains her hope, claiming that “La lucha continúa” (Randall 108) because once again, through her exile in Cuba, she has been able to confirm the possibility of the society that, for her, in Puerto Rico still remains an illusion.

Luchando por la vida: Reenacting History in the Factory

In contrast to Capetillo’s anarchist and anti-nationalist philosophy, a number of contemporary documentary representations of the space of the factory demonstrate the opposite intention – that of inserting women’s work in the Puerto Rican national history, creating a narrative that recognizes its marginalization and exploitation, but ultimately positioning it as an integral part of the nation-building process. One such documentary is José Artemio Torres’s *Luchando por la vida: las despalilladoras de tabaco y su mundo*, a film that focuses on the history of tobacco in the town of Comerío, and which makes

women's factory work the primary instrument for the representation and the rethinking of Puerto Rican national history.

The film is divided in two parts, the first providing the national context and the history of tobacco production in Comerío, and the second one consisting of interviews with former *despalilladoras de tabaco*, intertwined with a reenactment of the ways in which the women remember their "typical" day in the factory.

The documentary's first section resembles an illustrated lecture on the history of the tobacco industry and on the intricacies of tobacco production and cigar-making in the town of Comerío. The director uses historians Ángel Quintero-Rivera and Fernando Picó as consultants, and much of the factual and statistical information that the film presents comes from their studies of tobacco in Puerto Rico. With graphs and tables the documentary notes landmark years and numbers (annual quantity of production, rates of increase and decrease), and uses additional archival material (photographs and video) to offer an overview of the history of tobacco production in Puerto Rico and to claim truth and authority in its representation.

The claim to authenticity and veracity is enhanced by a number of elements of film form and style, namely the voiceover narration and the film's editing. The male voice that recounts the history of Puerto Rican tobacco and its development in the specific case of Comerío is intended to be that of the informed historian, the one who has the right to speak from and for the nation. Similarly, the juxtaposition of a variety of materials – from drawings of *taínos* using tobacco to photographs dating back to the early 20th century, to maps and pages from archival documents – adds a sense of truth based on

evidence, of a historical narrative that is authentic and authoritative, and which is intended to serve as a veridical context and matrix for the element that the film intends to insert in that history, namely women's work in cigar-making factories.

The two main spaces with which the film is concerned are those of the factory – the physical space and the memory of it, recreated through the reenactments – and the space of the nation, again material but also symbolic, enabled by the factory and by women's labor in it.

The space of the factory is represented through archival photographs and through the reenactment in the final part of the film. The image of the tobacco factory that emerges through these representations is spacious yet claustrophobic, crowded and busy, characterized by constant labor without rest. In the pictures as well as in the reenactment, the women are seated close to one another, in long rows behind tables on which piles of tobacco wait to be stemmed. As if to emphasize the traditionally perceived "feminine" quality of the space, in the reenactments the women gossip, tell jokes about pregnancy and motherhood, and discuss the fact that several generations of women in the same family have worked in the tobacco factory. These images and conversations construct a sense of community, of a shared space and of shared preoccupations and concerns, most having to do either with what the documentary understands as "women's" issues (the family, motherhood) or with the work that women were performing in the factory. While some of the women, like Etelvina Rosario and Luz Falcón, do discuss the dismal working conditions and insufficient pay in the factory, the voice that provides the audience with the historical, political and economic reasons behind these conditions is the omniscient

masculine voice of authority, of the historian, of the one who can claim to possess the truth. This presents a striking difference with the representation of the factory and of women's work in the writings of Luisa Capetillo, whose voice addresses economic, labor and political issues that position and contextualize the factory in an informed, authoritative way. Consequently, the documentary filmmakers seem to use the women's voices as examples and evidence, but not necessarily as the core of the history that they are trying to present.

Another difference, which at first sight appears curious, but in fact carries deeper implications for the representation of the factory and women's work is that, in the film, the institution of the reader is substituted with that of the radio. While this representation is "truthful" in the sense that most of the women represented in the film began working after the 1930s, when the *lectores* were no longer ubiquitous in cigar-making factories, it is notable for its implications in the representation of the women and of their labor and political consciousness. While Norma Valle-Ferrer makes extensive references to the variety of socialist and anarchist texts, newspaper articles on current events and politically charged literary works that the readers presented to the factory workers on a daily basis, the play that comes from the radio in the documentary is a melodramatic radionovela titled "Cuando amar es pecado" and protagonized by the famous actors Axel Anderson and Elena Montalbán, who were, interestingly enough, the protagonists of the 1959 film *Maruja*, about a woman who comes to a tragic end because of her sexuality and desire to transgress traditional feminine roles. The fact that what the women listen to is a melodramatic radionovela that alludes to sinful love, and not a text associated with

the politics of the times, is a sign of the film's desire to subdue certain issues associated with women's factory labor in order to facilitate their insertion in the cultural nationalist model by enforcing the consensus that lays in its foundations.

It must be noted that the filmmakers recognize and include certain aspects of the contradictory, conflictive and exploitative nature of factory work. The women mentioned above are only two of several who discuss issues like working conditions and low pay. In one of the most moving interviews in the film, Carmen Rosario (La Changa) even recounts an incident in which women stood up to a factory owner when he fired some of their coworkers, and refused to go back to work until he accepted all of them back, and then returned to work when the owner tried to keep some women out of the factory. Rosario recognizes the gender hierarchy involved in the confrontation – she remembers saying to the owner, “Sí, nosotras vamos a entrar. Por encima de usted que es un varón nosotras vamos a entrar” (*Luchando*) – but the interviewer's questions never take her story beyond the incident, to problematize the relationship between gender, class and labor. Instead, the victory appears more as a small act of conscientious workers, as a sacrifice that may have endangered their jobs, but which was resolved in a favorable way, through the owner's acceptance of the women's demands – yet another instance of consensus, even in the face of conflicting class interests.

In the documentary, the space of the nation also has two levels, a material and a symbolic one. The representation of the material, palpable, visible nation, the one which all viewers should recognize and with which they should identify, is quite traditional. It is based on images of land and maps, in which men either work the fields, or measure and

depict them, always in control of the form and of the representation of the “motherland”.

The maps, the long panning shots and the video footage of the countryside and of agricultural work are also examples of nostalgic images intended to allude to the island’s history and to serve as triggers for a collective memory of a lifestyle that is disappearing.

As an extension of the material nation, the symbolic nation that the film constructs emerges from the space of the factory. By narrating the history of the tobacco factory and by explaining in detail the cigar-making process, the film recognizes that, historically, the tobacco factory has been integral to the Puerto Rican economy. By presenting archival images of factories that employ hundreds of people, the film intends to demonstrate that the tobacco industry and the cigar factory acted as economic pillars of the Puerto Rican nation.

The space of the nation also emerges as a consequence of the reenactments of factory work performed by the women that protagonize the film. The reenactment is a documentary technique that allows the viewer to receive an idea of “how things were” but is also problematic in that the perception is mediated first by the memory of (in this case) the historical actors decades after the original events, and second, by the selectivity of the film editing that only allows certain parts of what is remembered and reenacted to reach the audience. What most cinematic reenactments of history have in common, however, is that, in ways similar to the use of archival footage, they are intended to connect the present to the past, to bring the past to the present, always with a tinge of nostalgia and of longing for what was and for what might be lost. The juxtaposition of archival photographs of female tobacco factory workers with images of the contemporary

reenactment of the dynamics in that space serve to awaken and revive the collective memory by using the collective nature of factory work. In this way, the film evokes a common national history with which not only the women in the documentary, but also its viewers are invited to identify.

At first sight, it might appear that the documentary is too critical of the exploitation of the women who worked in the factory to be able to construct a sense of consensus and common national space. While it is true that the film addresses the working conditions and the insufficient compensation that las despalilladoras received, its ultimate goal is not to critique or to demand retribution. Instead, the film emphasizes the exploitation and the marginalization in order to represent them as necessary sacrifices and to depict the women not as victims but as martyrs for the national cause. This intention is most evident in the filmmakers' interview with Ana Gutiérrez Rosario, the daughter of a despalilladora, who explains that it is only decades after the fact that she understands her mother's sacrifice – the long working hours, the low pay and the daily separation from her children. Not coincidentally, the young woman is filmed standing outside, in the street, in the public space, in front of a car, a certain sign of modernity and progress which, the documentary suggests, were enabled by her mother's labor and sacrifice. This recognition, from daughter to mother and from woman to woman, serves to legitimize the factory work together with the context in which it was performed, and to claim that, instead of looking at the women as subjects that were exploited, they should be regarded as (unconscious) builders of the Puerto Rican nation.

A fair look at the film must recognize that it does a lot to bring forth and to rethink women's protagonical role in the home, in the workplace and in the larger context of the nation. However, where the documentary comes short is in its capacity to elucidate the injustice and the exploitation that tainted their historical protagonism, and thus to expose the contradictions embedded in the apparent consensus of the Puerto Rican cultural nationalist model.

Productive and Reproductive Labor in *La operación*

While Torres's film focuses on the marginalization of women workers with the goal of incorporating them into a cohesive, unproblematic national discourse, documentary filmmaker Ana María García²⁰ critiques the state's abuse of working women and their productive and reproductive work and rights in order to expose the exploitation of their sexuality and labor for the benefit this same national discourse. In her documentary *La operación*, García critiques the relationship between gender, space and national discourses, as she sets out to examine the reasons and the consequences of the mass sterilization of women of child-bearing age in Puerto Rico from the 1940s to the 1960s, and the contraceptive pill testing conducted on Puerto Rican, mostly black and mulatto working-class women. In García's analysis, Operation Bootstrap's discourse of "overpopulation [that] had to be controlled" (López 38) and the need for female labor in

²⁰ Cuban-born Puerto Rican filmmaker Ana María García teaches at the Department of Communications at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, and is one of the most renowned documentary filmmakers on the island. Her most famous films are *La operación*, 1982; *Cocolos y roqueros*, 1992; and *Culture and Tradition*, 1998, among others.

the needlework and other industries that developed in Puerto Rico after World War II served as the background of the political justification of the implementation of these practices, “consciously developed as a long-term solution” (López 38) to the island’s economic problems.

The questions that guide my analysis of *La operación* are: What is the significance of the fact that a disproportionate number of sterilizations were done in the factories in which women worked, with the approval and often the recommendation or request of their superiors? How does that fact transform the space of the factory as a space traditionally associated with production as part of the nation-building process and capital development? What does the film say about the relationship between gender, labor (productive and reproductive) and the Puerto Rican nation? How does the film become a form of testimony, and how does it expand the notion of “subaltern speech”?

In relation to the issue of space, sterilization has to be analyzed as an official policy that addressed the need for women to move from the house to the factory and to assume new roles of workers and producers. As in the case of Luisa Capetillo, the factory becomes a site for the construction of class, gender and national identity through women’s work. In the early years of the Estado Libre Asociado, as part of Operation Bootstrap, the discourse on the family began to change and to insist that “para progresar había que tener una familia pequeña” (*La operación*). This small family allowed women to assume a productive role outside the home, in addition (and not as a substitute) to her reproductive role in the home. It is still significant that it was the reproduction of mostly lower-class women that had to be controlled, as “the programs aimed at bringing women

into public birth control clinics target only the poor” (Safford 37). The responsibility of fulfilling the traditional roles of mother and (house)wife were still theirs, and the labor that they were now performing in the factory was not reciprocated by men’s labor in the home. Consequently, the notion of “progress” expressed in the above quote could be interpreted to refer to a particular understanding of “progress” at the level of the family (fewer children and thus more income per capita per family). More broadly, though, it refers yet again to the family as a microcosm of the nation, as the patriarchal concept of progress that would come at the expense of women’s labor and the control of women’s bodies through sterilization and other kinds of reproduction control. Women became the instruments of the construction of the nation, but instruments in a process controlled by a patriarchal system of power that only allowed them to construct a specific national model. In this sense, the fact that the state imposed sterilization and population control in order to ensure women’s productive participation in the nation is ironic and hypocritical in a number of ways. While it suppresses – or prohibits – women’s reproductive functions, contradicting the traditional image of the nation as a mother, it controls and exploits their labor for the benefit of the very same nation-building process.

The use of the factory as a site for the construction of gender and nation through women’s work and reproduction control is part not only of a patriarchal nation-building process, but also of a process of capitalism that formed an inextricable part of the new national imaginary. As Tamara Falicov notes in a review of the film, “There is a causal relationship between the move to integrate women into the factory workforce and a government effort to promote the sterilization of women, which was free, and paid for by

a US AID grant” (Falicov). In an interview for *La operación*, Dr. Antonio Silva, the notorious mastermind behind the sterilization campaign in Puerto Rico²¹, explains,

en las fábricas teníamos clínicas de planificación familiar. Especialmente donde había un alto número de operarias mujeres. Entonces la compañía les daba un break, de una hora, e iban a la clínica de planificación familiar. En la misma fábrica. Para que no tuvieran ni que ir al centro del pueblo. Y cuando los industriales se reunían en la asociación de industriales, yo iba y les hablaba y les decía, necesito la colaboración de ustedes. Y les teníamos números: miren, en los beneficios de maternidad que se ahorra la compañía nada más es para ustedes profitable dejar que esas mujeres dejen de trabajar una hora y vayan a la clínica de planificación familiar. Porque en el tiempo no solamente lo que le costaba a la compañía si tenía que pagarle el parto, pero los dos meses que la ley en Puerto Rico prescribe cuando una mujer da a luz, un mes antes y un mes después, que la productividad de esta persona que se pone en zero en esos dos meses, se significaba a la compañía millones de dólares (*La operación*).

His words are accompanied by scenes of women working in garment factories with a sense of urgency and concentration that emphasizes their restless labor and the need to earn a living – both elements exploited by the desire for profit that emerges from Dr. Silva’s narrative.

Several issues are significant in the quote above. First, it makes explicit the relationship between capital, gender, and the control of space – women should be encouraged to visit family planning clinics in the factory, so that there be no need to step out in the city, where their time and their labor would be wasted, and which is a public

²¹ Dr. Antonio Silva orchestrated and executed the sterilization campaign in Puerto Rico, and was later hired in order to build a similar campaign in Lincoln Hospital in New York. As the documentary explains, his employment at Lincoln Hospital was no accident, as it was another place attended by women of racial minorities (mostly Hispanic women). In this sense, Dr. Silva’s work adds another layer to the ideal model of the nation, in which non-white women are marginalized and excluded through the official denial of their reproductive function, which becomes a technique of population control.

space reserved for men, as it is men (employers, lawmakers or doctors) who have the power to decide where the clinic should be operated. Second, the quote emphasizes the extent to which the capital needed for the construction of the new Puerto Rican national model depended on the labor of women – it was women who had to sacrifice having children in order to participate in the discourse and in the ideal of progress. Third, it tacitly identifies working-class women in particular as the foundations of the Puerto Rican cultural nationalist model, as it is their labor, their time and their national responsibility that foreign and domestic factory owners require in order to ensure the development of a number of industries and the acquisition of profits that arguably eclipsed even the notion of modernity, industry and progress embedded in the new Puerto Rican national imaginary.

The relationship between gender, colonialism and capital provides the organizing core of the documentary, but it has also been the cause for the film's most prominent critique, that voiced by Frances Negrón-Muntaner in her discussion of Puerto Rican women's film and video production in the article "Of Lonesome Stars and Broken Hearts." Even though Negrón-Muntaner recognizes the film's (especially the documentary genre's) merits in representing the issue of female sterilization on the island, she argues that, "while the film is focused on a policy that affects women as women (and very specifically, women's reproductive choices), the film is not about women as gendered subjects in a patriarchy. Instead, it uses the stories of women as a metaphor to reveal and critique U.S. colonialism on the Island" (Negrón-Muntaner, "Of lonesome" 240). She sees this as part of a broader trend in which "Puerto Rican women's

film practices are deeply rooted in a master narrative of anti-imperialism which impedes a gender specific analysis or an anti-colonial reading which questions its own nationalist premises” (Negrón-Muntaner, “Of Lonesome” 241). While one must recognize that, to a great extent, this has indeed been the trend in Puerto Rican women’s filmmaking (and to the list of documentary and experimental films that Negrón-Muntaner offers can be added a number of fiction films, such as Sonia Fritz’s *El beso que me diste*), I would disagree with her claim regarding the perceived absence of gender- and sexuality-centered analysis in *La operación*. Even though it is not provided by the voiceover narration (which focuses on the historical context), the visual images and the women interviewed in the film do provide an opportunity to interrogate and understand the gender-specific causes and implications of female sterilization. From discussions about men’s resistance and outright refusal of vasectomies to images of women telling other women about the effects of the experimental contraceptive treatments, the film positions the analysis of gender and sexuality as a central issue for understanding its main topic. The lengthy explanations of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. that Negrón-Muntaner critiques form part of the historical setting of a process, and its absence would represent a de-contextualization, which could only obscure the understanding of the construction and the control over gender and sexuality in Puerto Rico.

The value of *La operación* lays not only in that it problematizes the issues discussed in the preceding pages, but also in serving as a historical document, as a testimony that gives voices and faces to the women that participated in the process of industrialization and nation-building, some of them willingly, others unwillingly and still

others unwittingly. Even though the film uses archival material, still images and interviews with doctors and former government officials, it devotes the greatest amount of time and space to the stories of the women who worked in the factories and who visited the family planning clinics, where they were subjected to sterilization or given experimental contraceptive treatments with exaggerated hormone levels to their health's detriment. In the film, the women reveal the space of the factory not as a site of organized resistance (as in the case of Luisa Capetillo) but rather as a space of control and patriarchal power that they could only perceive as such years after the events, and to a great extent thanks to the provocation by the questions posed during Ana María García's interviews. In this sense, the documentary space of the film is juxtaposed against the space of the factory, and becomes in itself an instrument of denunciation and critique that speaks out against the exclusion and exploitation of women that served both capital and the construction of the Puerto Rican cultural nationalist model for decades.

Parallel to denouncing the sexism, racism and class discrimination involved in this practice, the film also addresses the question of machismo in Puerto Rican society, as women testify to the fact that men refused to be sterilized, in spite of the fewer complications and the reversibility of the operation, citing concerns about losing their sexual energy, and insisting that women subject themselves to the surgery instead. In this way the film takes a critical stand as regards the contradictory nature of the relationship between gender and national discourse. It suggests that while the mother is often taken to represent the nation and to be the cultural protector of the family, in the case of the campaign for population control in Puerto Rico women's sexuality and reproduction were

seen as an excess to the nation and as a threat that needed to be controlled and restricted by force.

Conclusion

The construction of gender, sexuality and the Puerto Rican nation takes place in a variety of spaces. Of these, the factory is one of the most problematic, as its relation to women and female work at first sight appears to contradict the original association of the factory with masculinity, an association that goes as far back as the beginning of the industrialization process in the 19th century. In spite of that association of the factory with the work of the male breadwinner, however, Puerto Rican history has demonstrated the myriads ways in which women have used the space to propose alternatives to the gender hierarchies in the Puerto Rican national model – from those that identify women’s work as less valuable than men’s to those that insist on maintaining the domestic space as the privileged location of women. In response to these social hierarchies, Puerto Rican working and writing women like Luisa Capetillo have re-gendered the space of the factory, “feminizing” it so as to claim the value of their labor and to construct a space in which women’s rights can be thought and demanded alongside workers’ rights. Similarly, authors and film directors like Sonia Fritz and Ana María García have represented the struggles of female factory workers to critique the contradictions embedded in the Puerto Rican cultural nationalist model, and to propose alternative imaginaries. While some of these imaginaries maintain the possibility of building an egalitarian and just nation, others, like the one created by Luisa Capetillo through her

literary and activist work, tend to suggest an altogether different option – the idea that axes of identity like class and gender can serve as the organizing lines of society, making the national model altogether obsolete.

The following chapter will focus on another space of female labor -- that of the beauty salon -- as a gendered and a queer space that enables the construction of a national imaginary that challenges the heteronormative cultural nationalist model.

CHAPTER IV

Gendering and Queering the Beauty Salon

Puerto Rican cultural nationalist discourse has positioned and constructed gender and sexuality in a variety of spaces and has used each space in order to delimit borders, to include and to exclude acceptable and undesirable models of gender and sexual identities and behavior. While it often appropriated the spaces of the house and the factory to project a model image of the reproductive and the productive functions of women, it has not been able to use the representation of other spaces to the same effect. In contrast, feminist writers and directors have reached out and set their literary and cinematic texts in spaces like the beauty salon and the brothel, and from these locations have voiced eminent critiques of the patriarchal models of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*. This chapter focuses on the ways in which authors and film directors like Carmen Lugo Filippi, Mayra Santos-Febres and Sonia Fritz have used the space of the beauty salon as a site for the construction of models of gender and sexuality that evade, as well as critique, those put forth by cultural nationalism.

The Beauty Salon: Anthropological Perspectives

From an anthropological perspective, the beauty salon has been studied as “a useful and important microcosm of wider social relationships” (Black 10), and as such it

offers the possibility for a rethinking and for a reconfiguration of the intersections between space, gender and issues like race, class, sexuality, solidarity, and commonly accepted and culturally constructed ideals of femininity and of beauty. Paula Black's study of beauty salons in the UK and Ginetta Candelario's analysis of the Dominican beauty shop in Washington Heights, NYC, present these spaces as multifaceted, and always as spaces of performance, negotiations and contradictions.

Black argues that one of the main functions of the beauty salon is that of the construction and the performance of gender identity, which "always varies according to space" (Black 86). Using Butler's concept of the performativity of gender, Black suggests that beauty salons have historically been, and continue to act as, spaces in which women negotiate racial, class and sexual boundaries. In contrast, Candelario focuses on the transnational, racial and ethnic context of the Dominican beauty salon as a space that acts as "an important socializing agent that facilitates the immigrant and transmigrant adaptation to New York City and helped to sustain Dominican ethno-racial identities as Indo-Hispanic" (Candelario 28-29). Through participant observation, the two authors offer fascinating accounts and discussions of the ways in which the beauty salon acts as a site for the construction of gender, race and national identities.

Black is careful to emphasize that beauty salons are, most importantly, spaces of contradiction, combining possibilities for interaction, solidarity, and even political consciousness, while at the same time reproducing patriarchal norms of femininity, or enabling capitalist exploitation of gender and sexuality. Black points out that, "One reason beauty salons are so important to women in a vast range of different cultures is

that they represent a socially sanctioned meeting space. However, these local spaces are also influenced by the global economic system which encourages the purchase of profitable products and treatments, and presents a normative ideal of femininity” (Black 87). While one might disagree with Black in that there are multiple factors that create culturally-specific ideals of femininity, the author is correct in noting the contradictory nature of the space of the beauty salon as one of exploitation as much as of solidarity and liberation, issues that become even more salient when comparing Black’s analysis with that of Puerto Rican anthropologists and cultural critics, like Isar Godreau and María Isabel Quiñones Arocho, who have studied the interactions and the negotiations of identity in beauty salons on the island.

One of the principal negotiations that occur in the beauty salon, according to Black, is that of race and ethnicity. Her study focuses on beauty salons in the UK, and she notes that “local salons in particular are divided into those catering to white women, African-Caribbean salons, and those serving an Asian clientele” (Black 10), which leads to a conclusion that “the salon may be seen as a relatively homogeneous space in terms of the gender and ethnicity of its clients” (Black 10). Even though the author does not specifically mention race in this passage, throughout the book she addresses the issue in both historical and anthropological terms, always insisting that race is one axis of identity that is fundamental to the understanding of the space and the interactions that take place in the beauty salon.

While tracing the history of the beauty salon, Black notes that race has been an important issue in the definition and the development of these spaces from their very

beginning. In explaining the racial hierarchies that operated in 19th-century Britain and in suggesting the ways in which the beauty salon was a space that reproduced the social order, Black points out that “such a [racial] hierarchy supported the aspirations of white women to ensure and display their whiteness in order to secure privilege” (Black 24). It is fascinating how her story parallels one recounted by Candelario, in which an African-American client is left unattended at Lamadas (the beauty salon that the author studies), as a consequence of a series of barriers: “The client, in the context of Salon Lamadas, was ‘foreign’ to Alma and María because of the language barrier, because of the unfamiliar hair-culture practices and technologies, and because of the strangeness of her presence. At the same time, Alma and María’s own foreignness were highlighted by the client’s presence” (Candelario 210). The issues of race and whiteness are notable in the authors’ descriptions of the different – racially and ethnically defined – kinds of beauty salons that operate in the UK and among Dominican women in New York. While in some places like Puerto Rico the division between beauty salons might be less visible, there are certain racial dividers, often associated with class and location – even though a salon might not cater only to white women, its location and the cost of its services might exclude, or present an unwelcoming environment, to working-class women or to Afro-Puerto Rican women living in certain areas.

Black’s focus is far from unilateral, as she discusses practices of exclusion, but also practices of political organization that historically took place in beauty salons in different cultures and parts of the world. In addition to exploring the significance of racial hierarchies and white privilege for the development of the beauty salon, Black also

notes the ways that during the civil rights era African American beauty salons performed an important political function as sites of encounter and of raising of political consciousness. She explains how in African American communities in the early to mid-20th century,

a critique of the hegemony of white beauty was also linked to capitalism, and the beauty industry was seen as a financial exploiter of black women. Ironically, perhaps, beauty salons catering to African-American clientele formed one of the community locations where information about the civil rights movement was passed on, and from where political resistance was supported and organized. (Black 37-38).

This analysis suggests that race, racial hierarchies and racial politics have been an integral part of the historical development of the beauty salon and its relationship to gender. As Black, as well as Puerto Rican critics like Godreau and Quiñones Arocho suggest, that relationship continues to develop in different cultural and geographical areas, from Europe to the Caribbean.

In recent years African-American beauty salons have also become sites of the discussion of different realities, namely that of AIDS and sex education. As the documentary film *DiAna's Hair Ego* suggests, by virtue of being a space in which a trusting community exists, the beauty salon functions as an educational and prevention center for African American women, but also men and children. Through the activism and the materials provided by DiAna and by Dr. Bambi Sumpter (including educational videos, pamphlets, “culturally sensitive” books and even free contraception), the black beauty salon becomes a space for the discussion of sexuality and gender, in the process maintaining the health and strength of the community.

Another factor that Candelario and Black introduce as important in understanding the relationship between gender and the space of the beauty salon is that of class. As discussed above, Black notes that beauty salons in the UK are often homogeneous not only in terms of race, but also class. In this sense, beauty salons can often act as sites of reproduction of social limits and class hierarchies, welcoming women from a certain socioeconomic level and excluding others through the kinds and the cost of the services offered.

However, as with other social structures, the role of beauty salons in the construction of class identity seems to be more complex. While in some cases they might uphold and reproduce class divisions, in others they serve as stepping stones for upward or downward mobility, especially for the women who own them or are employed in them. As Black points out, “the beauty salon is a significant source of female self-employment” (Black 104), noting the number of salons privately-owned by women. As such, the salons have to be seen as businesses that directly impact issues of labor and class, enabling some women to achieve economic self-sufficiency. In this sense, ownership of a beauty salon can be seen as a step towards upward social mobility and financial independence for women.

A class hierarchy is also evident in Candelario’s analysis of Lamadas, but in her case the hierarchy is composed of the very women that work in the salon. While Chucha, the owner, is educated and comes from an upper-middle class Dominican family, most of the stylists don’t share her social class, and this determines their relationship to Chucha and their standing in the salon, the kinds of tasks that they are asked to perform, etc. In a

telling example, while Chucha prefers to eat her delivered meals undisturbed, most of the women gather to eat around the massage table, while two of them, unable to afford the delivery, bring more economical food prepared at home.

In yet other, more specific cases, employment in the beauty salon could represent an escape, often the only available way out of a situation of marginalization and abuse, but an escape that doesn't necessarily result in a better social class position. One such situation is presented in Don Kulick's *Travesti*, where the author makes references to the beauty salon as a site of employment for young Brazilian transvestites who had been forced to leave their homes. In the case of Luciana (one of the book's subjects), working in the beauty shop did not necessarily provide a permanent way out of abuse and exploitation, as she ended up abandoning the salon for prostitution, encouraged by other transvestites that had used her beauty services (Kulick 137).¹

Employment in the beauty salon, while benefiting some women, might be detrimental to others' economic status and even health. This is the case mostly with women who have no control over the salon, over hiring practices, the administration of work hours and adequate compensation. Black mentions that, "long hours and low pay are endemic in the industry. Despite being subject to laws concerning health and safety, and workers' rights, the industry is poorly regulated and generally non-unionised, which

¹ On a related topic, Kulick also discusses the importance that hair and beauty carry in the transvestites' everyday lives, and often in their economic benefits. Numerous times he reiterates the fact that, "long, beautiful hair, for example, is much more admired if it is one's own, not a wig or the mass of synthetic-fiber hair extensions that the overwhelming majority of travestis weave into their hair" (Kulick 200). Kulick explains this with the common association between hair and femininity, and gives multiple examples of transvestites doing their hair, transforming the house in which they live into an improvised beauty salon.

contributes to these abuses of employment standards” (Black 105). Consequently, women’s labor in the beauty salon is not only a source of upward social mobility, but might also be a victim to exploitative labor practices.

The issue is complicated by the fact that there are multiple kinds of labor that women perform in beauty salons, and only a portion of their work is recognized as skilled and therefore salaried. According to the testimony of many of the women interviewed by Black, a large portion of the work that they do on a daily basis in the beauty salon is what the author calls emotional labor, or counseling. Beauty therapists, hairdressers and other women who work in different beauty salons frequently discuss the fact that clients come to the salon to share personal, sometimes intimate stories, and that they often expect a response that might range from that of “an intimate yet detached listener” (Black 117) to thoughtful and considerate advice. As Candelario explains,

Salon Lamadas was an intimate social space beyond the home and the workplace where women could congregate and talk about topics that ranged from their assessment of local, national and international politics and happenings to the provision of information about how to negotiate local institutions and bureaucracies and the emotionally and physically taxing terrains of romantic relationships, health issues, and workplace experiences (Candelario 208).

This increases the expectations of the beauty salon employees to encompass not only the work for which they were trained, but also characteristics and qualities that they are “supposed to” have by virtue of being women and working in the beauty salon.

The reason that this kind of emotional labor sometimes presents a burden for the beauty stylists is that their interactions with clients are always inevitably based on services that take place in the arena of capitalist exchange. This double burden of labor presents a contradiction that the author explains in the following terms: “Therapists

experience an ambivalent relationship with clients encompassing the role of the trained professional offering advice, and also the service worker being paid to give the client what she wants” (Black 117). The issue of profit, inseparable from the interaction between beauty therapists and clients, affects the labor, as well as the adequate compensation of the worker. Even though she is not trained or paid to give emotional and personal advice, if she does not fulfill the client’s expectation that she do so, the client might react with dissatisfaction with the services that she received, which in turn might affect the employee’s pay or even job security.

The expectation for emotional labor, or emotional services, is augmented by the physical proximity of the beauty therapist to the clients. Unlike most other professions, that of the beauty therapist involves closeness that often consists of contact with the client’s hair or body, which might result in different reactions and different kinds of expectations on the part of clients:

Beauty therapists are aware that touch is a powerful indicator of intimacy. If the client finds that intimacy difficult to handle, then the therapist must find tactful ways of handling her unease. If that intimacy is welcome, as several interviewees noted, then touch may unleash communication on other levels; the therapist may be required to handle feelings that are not initially and obviously to do with bodies, as, for example, when clients confide about their family or marital problems in the course of treatment (Black 124).

Thus, close physical contact, which is inherent in the beauty therapist’s work, becomes the cause for expectations of emotional services and emotional labor on the part of the employees of the beauty salon.

The proximity and the intimacy involved in the work of the beauty salon allude to a degree of homoeroticism that few of the authors have engaged extensively in their

studies, possibly because of its persistent stigma and marginalization. When Candelario explains that Chucha and Leticia, the owner and the manager of Lamadas (a transformation of “las dos amadas”) are a lesbian couple, she quickly clarifies that “their sexuality was unnamed and explicitly unacknowledged by them and by staff and clients. No one called them a couple, much less a lesbian couple, or even ‘partners’” (Candelario 195). While sexuality is continuously constructed in the beauty salon, this story suggests that the space is governed by a hierarchy, according to which heterosexuality is visible and constantly referenced, while homosexuality remains invisible and excluded.²

The contradictions between paid and expected labor, and between professional and personal interactions between clients and beauty salon employees, challenge one of the main premises of the Puerto Rican stories set in beauty salons that will be discussed later in this chapter – that of the space of the beauty salon as a site of possibility for the development of female solidarity. For solidarity to develop, sharing, emotional labor and the work of counseling must be reciprocal, and in the space of the beauty salon, governed

² At the same time, a number of cinematographic representations have subverted the heterosexist order of the beauty salon, with different intentions and effects. John Waters’s film *Female Trouble*, for example, is partly set in a beauty parlor in which the stylists are homosexual men or transvestites, and which caters to women and transvestites. On the one hand, Waters transforms the salon from a space of community to one of the obsession with and the exploitation of beauty. On the other hand, he takes to an extreme the notion of community, as the protagonist (Dawn Davenport, played by Divine) marries Gator, one of the stylists who continues to proclaim his heterosexuality even as Aunt Ida keeps looking for male partners for him, thus positioning the salon as a space of fluid gender and sexual identities. The film also challenges the association between the beauty salon and the concept of beauty, as some of the activities that take place in Lipstick (the name of the salon) are so grotesque that they deny the possibility of any conventional understanding of beauty (the owners entertain themselves by taking pictures of Dawn while she commits crimes and abuses her daughter, drug her to make her perform, and testify against her in a murders trial).

by the rule of profit and exchange of services, it is most often unilateral, usually expected from the beauty salon employee but not from her clients (even though the reverse situation may occur, when a stylist may require emotional labor on the part of clients). While many of the stories' protagonists, whether clients or hairstylists, expect to find (and normally do find) a certain level of female solidarity in the beauty salon, Black's study presents the need to question if not the sincerity, then at least the extent to which such solidarity might develop in a place where services are exchanged for profit.

The Beauty Salon in Puerto Rican Theory and Criticism

Puerto Rican theory and criticism have turned their attention to the study of the social production of the space of the beauty salon and its relationship to gender and sexuality only recently, most prominently in two fundamental essays by anthropologist Isar Godreau and by cultural critic María Isabel Quiñones Arocho.³ While these articles address many of the same concerns that cultural and feminist geographers bring up in

³ In addition to these main theoretical articles, any analysis of the beauty salon in Puerto Rican cultural production must mention Pepón Osorio's installation "En la barbería no se llora" on exhibit at the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico in San Juan. In contrast to the articles by Godreau and Quiñones Arocho, Osorio's work comments on the intersection of gender and nation in the barbershop, which he presents as an exclusively (and arguably exaggerated) masculine space. The installation, which occupies an entire hall of the museum, features objects and decorations that construct masculinity in different ways. From the heroic masculinity depicted in the pictures of male athletes and musicians, to the tragic masculinity of the drawing of a rose and bullets accompanied by the sign "Perdóname Madre" and from the masculine nation represented by the flags that Puerto Rican men wave in the video clips to the sign "No gossip allowed," meant to clearly separate the barbershop from its parallel space, the female beauty salon (Osorio), the installation constructs a complex idea of masculinity intersected by axes of race, class and national identity, saturating the space of the barbershop to such a degree and with such exaggerated intent that it ultimately questions the "natural" dominance of masculinity in the Puerto Rican nation.

their analysis of the construction of space, they do so in the specific context of Puerto Rican politics and discourses on gender, sexuality, class and race. While Godreau's focus is on the practice of the "alisado" (hair straightening, often among Afro-Puerto Rican women) in relation to issues of race, national identity and discourses, Quiñones Arocho emphasizes the connection between the services offered and the consumption effectuated in the beauty salon, on the one hand, and the possibility of gender and sexual empowerment, on the other. Even though the authors approach the space of the beauty salon and the negotiations that occur within it from different theoretical standpoints, both of them recognize the possibilities, and critique the limitations that this space offers for the reconfiguration of the relationship between gender, sexuality and national discourses in Puerto Rico.

Isar Godreau's study of the racial and gender negotiations that take place in Bina's Beauty Salon in the city of Ponce takes as a starting point a critique of island discourses on race, gender and national identity that date back to the period of slavery and to the first theoretical works on the relationship between race and the Puerto Rican nation, like that of Antonio S. Pedreira.⁴ Godreau suggests that, thanks in no small part to traditionally racist discourses on Puerto Rican national mixture (consisting of European white, indigenous Taíno and African population) that have tended to prioritize white and

⁴ In a famous passage of his *Insularismo* (1934), Antonio S. Pedreira defends Puerto Rico's identification with its Hispanic roots and whiteness, dismissing racial mixture and the island's African heritage as a source of national confusion: "El elemento español funda nuestro pueblo y se funde con las demás razas. De esta fusión parte nuestra confusión." Pedreira)

indigenous ethnicities and to neglect and marginalize that of African descent,⁵ “la celebración de la mezcla no es arbitraria, sino selectiva en tanto favorece unas combinaciones y no otras” (Godreau 107). As a consequence, Godreau argues against the popular assumption that “el alisado imita una estética occidental/blanca y que la mujer negra que se alisa está, por ende, negándose a sí misma” (Godreau 84). In contrast, she claims that, as a consequence of the national imaginary of racial mixture, Afro-Puerto Rican women straighten their hair in order to approximate that ideal and thus claim their right to belonging in the Puerto Rican nation: “una de las razones por las que el alisado tiene vigencia y sentido social no es, necesariamente, porque le facilite a la mujer parecer blanca, sino porque la acerca a estereotipos dominantes de ‘la puertorriqueñidad’” (Godreau 100). In the process, they also “transform Eurocentric notions of beauty” (Duany 182) by subverting “the ideology of *blanqueamiento* (whitening or bleaching) [that] continues to permeate Puerto Rican national culture” (Duany 182), an ideology no longer associated with the desire to be white, and signifying an attempt to belong to a specific model of Puerto Rican national imaginary instead.

In this sense, Godreau’s argument seems to suggest that the functions of the beauty salon involve practices of construction and reproduction of Puerto Rican national discourses as they relate to race and gender, in response to the ever-reiterated question of who belongs to the nation, and in an act of adaptation and accommodation to

⁵ It is quite telling that, even though a national symbol like the seal of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña) features an African, a Taíno and a white man, the figure that is still widely associated with and recognized as representative of the “true” Puerto Rican character is that of the jíbaro, the white peasant.

exclusionary national discourses. This interpretation is important in the sense that it leads the analysis away from the notions of “false consciousness” and “Puerto Rican inferiority complex” that often enter the discussion of Spanish colonialism and US imperialism on the island, especially in relation to issues of race and class. However, Godreau also recognizes that the use of the space and the services of the beauty salon comes at the expense of defining and distancing “Puerto Rican national subjects” from their “others” – “aquellos que se consideran ‘negros’ o ‘menos mezclados’”. Desde una perspectiva puertorriqueña, éstos pueden incluir a los afro-americanos, los dominicanos, los haitianos o a las personas del Caribe inglés” (Godreau 96). While the author notes the consequence of creating and reproducing notions of “otherness” based on race, she devotes little time to its critique. That critique seems especially urgent for the purposes of the present work, as the resulting black “otherness” involves a gender and sexual dimension. Since it is almost exclusively women who straighten their hair, and thus, according to Godreau, attempt to approximate an ethnic and racial national ideal, it is those women (much more so than men) who choose not to straighten their hair that remain outside the national imaginary. In this sense, the beauty salon has the potential not only of becoming a space of national unity and conciliation, but also of a creation of differences and “otherness” that doubly marginalize women in relation to their position in the Puerto Rican nation.

In contrast to Godreau, Quiñones Arocho does not engage the relationship between race, gender and nation, and instead approaches the analysis of the beauty salon from a standpoint that comes closer to the feminist geographers’ concern with gender and

sexual citizenship. Using Foucault's idea of the production of the self and Lipovetsky's point of the individual as an agent of consumption, Quiñones Arocho examines the relationship between consumption, gender, and dominant and culturally specific notions of femininity. She critiques the popular idea that consumption is nothing other than a form of manipulation that benefits the flow and reproduction of capital, and instead interrogates the possibilities of "beauty consumption [...] as a form of emancipation from the constraints of everyday life" (Quiñones Arocho 110). The transformation of the body that takes place in the beauty salon thus becomes an expression of agency: "denied economic equality or even political power, women celebrate the techniques and products that offer them control of their lives" (Quiñones Arocho 123). In this sense, the author conceptualizes consumption not as a manipulation and consequently an expression of weakness, but rather as conscious agency in the control over one's body and self.

Another perspective on the construction of the beauty salon as a site of feminist agency and empowerment is that presented by Luz María Umpierre in her book *For Christine: Poems & One Letter*, in "A Letter to Moira." Umpierre begins the letter by recounting an incident in which she invited Moira to have a haircut on her, after which Moira told her that she would think of her every time she (Moira) combed her hair (Umpierre 32). The relationship that developed after, and as a consequence of the shared experience of the beauty salon, leads Umpierre to tell Moira that she "had made the decision to be [her] lesbian mother" (Umpierre 37). The space and the experience of the space of the beauty salon thus enable a solidarity that goes beyond friendship or

ideological affinity, and that instead reaches the level of profound family (feminine) bond.

On the other hand, while the idea of beauty and beauty services as an expression of empowerment and a step in the production of a gendered and national subject carries a lot of validity, the author's assumption seems to be that women who use these services are disempowered and marginalized. While this might be true for many of them, there are also women in high professional positions who, as Isar Godreau has pointed out in her article, visit the beauty salon not to escape, but rather to remove an obstacle (the mark of race, in this case) that might hinder professional development in a racist and sexist work environment. While Godreau agrees that such practices reproduce racism and discrimination (Godreau 98), she argues that this is a valid use of the technique of hair-straightening and of the services of the beauty salon, as it allows women to deal with ("bregar," Godreau 113)⁶ racism and gender discrimination. In this sense, Quiñones Arocho's idea of the use of the beauty salon as a way of "escaping the constraints of family life (Quiñones Arocho 115), while relevant for many Puerto Rican women, is incomplete in that it does not address the situation of women who use that space and

⁶ The critic that has analyzed the cultural meaning of the verb "bregar" is Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, in his essay "De cómo y cuándo bregar." He explains the process as "dirimir sin violencia los conflictos muy polarizados. En ese sentido, connota abrirse espacio en una cartografía incierta y hacerle frente a las decisiones con una visión de lo posible y deseable. Implica también – es crucial – el conocimiento y la aceptación de los límites" (Díaz Quiñones 22). The function of "bregar" is also that of negotiation of power relations and hierarchies, as it "supone una trama de relaciones en que predomine la voluntad de cumplir lo prometido, de introducir un poco de aire fresco, de humanizar los mecanismos del poder y preservar un orden evitando las confrontaciones" (Díaz Quiñones 23).

these services for a variety of other reasons, among which their empowerment and advancement in the workplace.

Godreau also discusses the issue of consumption and consumerism involved in the beauty salon, but focuses on the function of beauty product advertisements and the gender and racial discourse that they use to attract the mostly female clientele. Godreau explains that after emphasizing the “problem” of curly hair, “los productores de estas mercancías buscan identificarse con el subalterno, haciendo suyos sus miedos y preocupaciones para así venderle una salida al problema” (Godreau 108). Her interpretation of the examples that she provides exposes the ways in which the beauty industry, and hair-care products in the Puerto Rican case in particular, in a sense reproduce antiquated, racist and sexist discourses (of the “wild” woman, represented by her “wild” hair – and image that carries racial, as well as gender and sexual implications, and, as Quiñones Arocho points out, the moral imperative to defeat the “evil” seen as what is “natural” [Quiñones Arocho 125]). While the article reveals multiple ways in which women use the beauty salon for the purpose of resistance and empowerment, when the question touches on consumption, Godreau seems to disagree with Quiñones Arocho’s analysis of personal empowerment. Through the analysis of the short stories and films by the authors mentioned above, this chapter will revisit the question of consumption and will explore the different positions regarding the possibilities and the limitations offered by consumption in the beauty industry and the transformative power of the beauty salon.

The question that is perhaps most relevant to the analysis of the literary and cinematic works in this chapter is that of the possibility and the process of constructing female solidarity in the space of the beauty salon, around shared concerns of race, gender, sexuality, family and labor. The authors of the two essays both recognize and analyze in some detail this issue, ultimately agreeing, at least to some extent, on the opportunities for female solidarity, the creation of community and the possibility of resistance in the space of the beauty salon.

Godreau's essay is especially concerned with the issue of solidarity, which the author understands as one of the "dinámicas interpersonales que se dan entre mujeres durante el proceso de alisarse" (Godreau 85). In the process of sharing certain beauty rituals in the salon, women share time and experience "contacto íntimo entre mujeres que se dejan tocar, halar y lavar por otras, ya sea a cambio de un pago, o simplemente porque sí. En el proceso, se intercambian cuentos, chismes, preocupaciones, y también se construyen solidaridades" (Godreau 121). By pointing out the multiple levels of interpersonal exchanges – from discursive to physical and corporeal – the author emphasizes the empowering effect of the possibilities that the beauty salon offers to women who use its services.

The possibility of solidarity in Quiñones Arocho's article emerges mainly from the conversations that she records and reproduces, and which occur between the female clients that visit the beauty salon. As one of the women says, "That's why I come here, to fix myself up and to forget my troubles in life" (Quiñones Arocho 116). The important part of this line is not the reason why the women visit the beauty salon, but their need to

“come here,” to go to the physical place that provides them with the capacity to address their everyday experiences and circumstances. Thus, as women share their frustrations and give each other advice on topics as intimate as family and sexuality, they construct a community that empowers them to resist some of the mechanisms of patriarchal oppression.⁷

One of the most important aspects of the possibility of solidarity is that of overcoming racism among women themselves, and of bridging gaps caused by difference in social class, as well as race. Godreau sees a definite possibility for this process to occur in the space of the beauty salon: “el ideal de belleza compartido en el *beauty* hermana y acerca a las mujeres, suavizando distinciones sociales en el trato personal” (Godreau 124). “Hermanar,” to create sisterhood, is a powerful notion that speaks to the possibility inherent in any space, including the beauty salon, in which women have the freedom to interact away from patriarchal forms of restraint and oppression.⁸

While, as some of the short stories to be analyzed further suggest, that kind of social solidarity (problematic as it might be) might occur, it is sometimes the site of

⁷ A similar idea emerges from Mario Bellatin’s novel *Salón de belleza*, in which the female clients of the beauty salon visit it in search of an escape from old age: “La mayoría eran mujeres viejas o acabadas por la vida. Sin embargo, debajo de aquel cutis gastado era visible una larga agonía que se vestía de esperanza en cada una de las visitas” (Bellatin 30). Interestingly, upon the beauty salon’s transformation into a shelter for AIDS patients, women are no longer allowed: “Nunca acepté a nadie que no fuera de sexo masculino” (Bellatin 34), the implication being that, since the salon no longer offers the services of the beauty industry, it is no longer a feminine space.

⁸ This is not to say that the beauty salon offers a space that is free of patriarchy. The specific instances and ways in which patriarchal control attempts to dominate the seemingly isolated space of the beauty salon will be discussed in relation to the short stories in subsequent sections.

tensions and negotiations over race, class, etc., thus transforming the space of the beauty salon into one that reproduces certain social hierarchies. In a revealing example, Quiñones Arocho narrates an incident in which a client, Berta, asks for another client's opinion of a manicure design. In what follows, "Yolanda looks at her with great surprise and immediately approves the manicurist's work. The minute Berta walks away, however, Yolanda makes a gesture of repulsion, and her other friends laugh" (Quiñones Arocho 121). This incident implies that issues of taste, sometimes associated with class, might act as bases for establishing distance instead of building solidarities. It also suggests that the exchanges that take place in the beauty salon, while ultimately empowering and constructive, are not immune to the tensions that traverse the society in which the beauty salon is situated and to which its customers belong. In this sense, as female solidarity and resistance to patriarchy are among the main issues in the literary and cinematic works to be analyzed below, one has to examine with care the extent of these solidarities and of the discursive and practical instruments of resistance and liberation that they offer the female protagonists.

Queering the Beauty Salon in *Milagros, calle Mercurio*

Since the 1970s, Puerto Rican writers have used a variety of strategies in order to "move away from modernist representations of the nation as a territorially grounded, linguistically uniform, racially exclusive, androcentric, and heterosexual project" (Duany, "Rough Edges" 187). One of these strategies has been the decision to set literary and cinematic works in spaces not normally associated with the traditional cultural nationalist

model of the nation, and from these spaces to question the cohesion and uniformity of Puerto Rican national discourse. Among the spaces that figure prominently in recent Puerto Rican literary production is that of the beauty salon, which serves a variety of critical goals in two short stories by Carmen Lugo Filippi (“Milagros, calle Mercurio” and “Pilar, tus rizos”) and one by Mayra Santos Febres (“Hebra rota”).

The plot of Carmen Lugo Filippi’s story “Milagros, calle Mercurio” develops in a variety of spaces, and addresses many of the concerns that cultural and feminist geographers have expressed regarding the relation of space to gender, patriarchy, power, desire and consumerism. The story’s protagonists, Marina and Milagros, move from Madrid to Isla Verde and Ponce, from the street corner to the strip club, and in all these spaces they struggle to challenge the power of patriarchy and traditional norms of gender and sexuality. In the process, they also transform traditional social constructions of space, gender and nation, both feminizing and queering physical and metaphorical spaces in order to construct alternative imaginaries of the relationship between gender and nation.

The first set of spaces that the story encompasses are the geographical settings that the protagonists inhabit – Madrid, Isla Verde and Ponce, with their houses, beauty salons, and street corners, in the case of Marina, and Ponce’s streets, church and strip club in the case of Milagros. The story’s narrator, Marina, begins remembering her life as a student at the University of Puerto Rico, but quickly moves on to talk about her marriage to Freddie, who is only identified by his military occupation and by the monotony in which Marina’s life with him resulted. She goes to live with him in a

military base outside Madrid, but her dreams for travels around Europe never materialize. On the contrary, the experience quickly turns into that of a housewife burdened by domestic work and by the lack of social and cultural activities: “Cuando la nena cumplió un año ya me encontraba al borde de una neurosis. La rutina doméstica me aplastaba, necesitaba respirar otros aires y más que nada hablar con alguien que me comprendiera” (Lugo Filippi, “Milagros” 28).

While Marina’s oppression results to a great extent from a patriarchal structure of social order – she moves because of her husband’s job and is left to take care of the home and of their child – it is also a product of wider patterns of global flow of capital and neo-colonial power. As Rosemary Hennessy argues, it is necessary to see “workplace and home, suburb and ghetto, colony and metropolis as specific and interrelated sites of exploitation” (Hennessy 31), as “the division of labor and the distribution of extracted surplus are related to patterns of production and consumption which are affected by and in turn shape political and ideological structures” (Hennessy 31). In Marina’s case, patriarchy interacts with imperial and military structures of power (her husband’s participation in the U.S. army, which controls his and Marina’s patterns of geographical and social mobility) to reproduce gender oppression, exemplified by Marina’s resulting restriction to the domestic sphere.

It is not surprising, then, that the narrator seizes the chance to work at a beauty salon as her only opportunity to leave the home and to perform labor that is not domestic and that in some sense satisfies her need for self-realization. As critics have pointed out, “The salon also offers a feminised space away from external demands upon the woman,

and a place where pleasurable attention to the body and the emotions may be obtained” (Black 87). Even though Black writes the above words to analyze the consumption patterns of beauty salon clients, in Marina’s case they are very much valid in relation to the benefits that the beauty salon employee encounters in her job. In the salon, through her labor and through her professional relations with other women, Marina rediscovers what she had been forced to deny herself in her domestic work, namely “pleasurable attention to the body and the emotions.” Even though she remembers those years with irony, inventing a French-sounding word with the intention of alluding to both the author’s real-life occupation as a French language teacher and to the artful aspects of her character’s work – “me inicié en las artes peñoriles” (Lugo Filippi, “Milagros” 28) – Marina recognizes that it was the desire to escape domesticity, to encounter pleasure and an opportunity for social participation that brought her first to the salons in Madrid and San Juan, and then to her privately-owned salon in Ponce.

The space of the beauty salon, even though presented as an alternative to domestic work and space, is hardly unproblematic. It is saturated with a variety of tensions – of race, class, gender and sexuality – that the story introduces as the characters’ relationships develop. Faced with the choice of moving with her husband to Alabama or leaving him and returning to Puerto Rico, Marina decides to begin work in a beauty salon in San Juan, in Isla Verde, where she uses her knowledge of the beauty industry to resist demonstrations of superiority by her upper-middle class clients, whom she calls “perfectos monigotes con ínfulas de grandes damas”: “Tenía tal maestría para bajarles los humos que el mismo Junito se asombraba de mi ‘savoir faire’” (Lugo Filippi, “Milagros”

29). Descriptions like the one above challenge the argument that the main relationship that develops in the feminine space of the beauty salon is that of solidarity, “la solidaridad que se forma entre hermanas, amigas y vecinas al compartir, cotidianamente, el ritual del embellicimiento” (Godreau 120), showing instead the multiple levels of inequality and power relations that become evident when the salon is analyzed as a capital-dependent space of labor and of the provision of services. Instead, it comes to illustrate Paula Black’s argument that “Inside the beauty salon a world exists, which, although closed and intimate, is also open to the influences of the wider world within which the salon is situated” (Black 7), and that the space of the salon offers a “useful and important microcosm of wider social relations” (Black 10), in this case a microcosm of a society traversed by rigid class and racial lines, as suggested in Chapter 1. What Godreau describes as altruist solidarity enabled by the space of the beauty salon is not impossible, but through the relations of power between employees and clients, in both cases women, the short story uncovers an alternative that proposes to rethink the beauty salon as a space intersected by complex axes of capital, labor and patriarchy, which acts as a metaphor of aspects of Puerto Rican society.

It is in part the lack of independence, and in part her mother’s insistence, that drives Marina to open her own beauty salon, this time on Mercurio St. in her hometown of Ponce, in the south of Puerto Rico (which is also Lugo Filippi’s hometown). The salon is different in that it is set up and decorated according to Marina’s desires, as she is the owner and has complete control over the outlook of the space:

Lucía coquetón el lugar con sus paredes recién empapeladas, sus collages de cortes y peinados que yo misma había ideado sobre planchas de plywood negra y

sus tres secadoras idénticas, alineadas frente a un gran espejo de marco sencillo (detestaba lo pretenciosos ribetes dorados de los espejos de Woolworth's)" (Lugo Filippi, "Milagros" 29).

The most important part of this description is in fact what it leaves out – the image of a certain kind of space that silently constructs its own class identity. The problem of class is once again present in this description, in the narrator's desire to demonstrate good taste through the matching hairdryers and the simple (but presumably more elegant) mirror frame. In this last case, Marina positions herself in contrast to other women who would have preferred Woolworth's products, that she considers kitch, and evokes a sense of style that gives her salon a class identity that she has claimed since the beginning of the story through the descriptions of her relationships with Spanish and upper-class Puerto Rican clients. The detail of this description points to the need to think space, and in this specific case the space of the beauty salon, as a site of intersection of multiple axes of identity and power, some reproduced by the very women that own and manage or that visit and benefit from the services of the beauty salon.

Aside from the beauty salon, in Lugo Filippi's story there are a number of places that collectively construct the image of a city and a nation defined in particular ways by gender and sexuality. The space that is always prominently present in the part of the story that takes place in Ponce is the street, with the possibilities that it offers women for resistance, as well as the limits that it imposes on them by virtue of being an open space, accessible to the scrutinizing gaze of power and authority. Feminist geographers, as well as gender and queer studies critics, have theorized the space of the street and its relation to gender and sexuality as multifaceted, as a site of resistance and liberation, but also of

repression. Nancy Duncan, who has studied the gendering of public and private spaces, argues that, “although places may be more or less overtly politicized, there are no politically neutral spaces” (Duncan 135). When discussing the relationship between gender, sexuality and the street, Duncan notes that the street offers the possibility for resistance that the privacy of the home often denies women, homosexuals and other groups that struggle against patriarchal oppression. She claims that, “The street serves as a metaphor for sites of resistance that are part of a rhizome-like process of deterritorializing and a progressive opening up to the political system” (Duncan 129). Similarly, while discussing the increased presence and the successful claims to sexual citizenship made by the gay community in London, specifically in the area around Old Compton Street, Jon Binnie points to the advances made by gay men (he discusses men in particular) in that specific area, thanks to certain patterns of consumption that have developed there in recent years. Binnie argues that “The boundaries of sexual citizenship are [...] being contested every day in the street, even if it is much queerer (and more dangerous) to hold hands on the nightbus, in the supermarket or on the underground” (Binnie 196). While he acknowledges the limits that “private” or enclosed public spaces impose on sexual expression and on the claims to sexual citizenship, he seems to agree with Duncan that the street offers possibilities that these enclosed spaces deny women, queer people and other social groups marginalized by patriarchal social norms. In the specific case of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican diaspora, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes’s analysis of the participation of LGBT groups in the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York has shown the way in which sexuality and national discourse can

intersect and be negotiated in the space of the street (La Fountain-Stokes “Queer Puerto Ricans”).

Just as it is true that the street has enabled the social integration of some groups and has provided a venue from which they have claimed rights and visibility, depending on specific socio-political circumstances it has also been a site of repression and of reproduction of social hierarchies and relations of power. While it is true that the street has offered visibility and social access to different groups and social movements, “the concentration of these movements and subcultures in urban space has made it easier to both demonise and control them (and to sanctify major cultures and spaces)” (Knopp 149). In a striking example, Marta Cruz-Janzen remembers growing up black in a white neighborhood in Puerto Rico, and points out the pressure that the space of the street and the desire for access to that space, exerted on the family: “[My grandparents] were the only blacks in the neighborhood, always conscious of their neighbors’ watchful and critical eyes. We were careful never to set foot outside the house unless we were impeccably groomed” (Cruz-Janzen 169). In her case, the street becomes a space of control and of the reaffirmation of racial models perceived as belonging to the Puerto Rican national imaginary, or, conversely, as undesirable. Knopp’s and Cruz-Janzen’s words problematize the analysis of the space of the street to bring up the need to address issues of power relations, official and everyday reproduction of patriarchy, and the politics of private vs. public spaces in relation to race, gender and sexuality.

In Lugo Filippi's story, the street plays an important part in the construction and the reproduction of norms of gender and sexuality.⁹ Marina first notices Milagros as the girl is walking down the street with her mother, and it is Marina's gaze and access to the street that construct an image of Milagros and her mother that initially identifies them with traditional norms of femininity:

Fuiste tú, Marina, el clavo caliente que se apostó en el balcón para observar la peregrinación crepuscular de Milagros. La madre avanzaba a trancazos, la Biblia bajo el brazo, y su apocalíptica seriedad contrastaba con el gesto cómico-grotesco de literalmente arrastrar a una niña de siete o seis años a lo sumo, muy parecida a Milagros, por lo que dedujiste que era su hermana. A un pie de distancia, Milagros las seguía sin alterar en lo más mínimo su rítmico trote (Lugo Filippi, "Milagros" 31).

Later on in the story, it is again in the street, through the neighbors' gossip, that Marina hears that Milagros has been discovered and detained in a strip club where she was performing: "No se puede creer en nadie, nena, la Milagros tan seriecita, tan mosquita muerta y mira lo que hacía cuando salía de la escuela, na menos que esnuándose en un club de la carretera pa Guayanilla, esnuándose, oye eso, y que esnuándose!" (Lugo Filippi, "Milagros" 35-36). The street becomes the space in which the "intimate, gossipy life of small-town Puerto Rican women" (Levins Morales 4) is scrutinized, and consequently controlled, by the very same women, who in this case act as agents of patriarchal power, reproducing "internalized sexism" (Hernández and Springfield 821) and models of acceptable femininity.

⁹ The name of the street, calle Mercurio, is in fact an autobiographical element in the story. Lugo Filippi herself grew up in Ponce, on Mercurio St.: "se cría en la calle Mercurio, en pleno centro de la ciudad, en lo que hoy se conoce como la zona histórica" (Torres 103).

The above scenes are only a few of the examples that point to the problematic nature of public space, specifically the space of the street, as it relates to gender and sexuality in Puerto Rico. For Milagros, the street offers no chance for liberation or resistance – she hardly ever walks outside alone, but is often accompanied by her mother. One can presume that Marina’s gaze is not the only one that follows and judges mother and daughter as they walk down the street, on their way to church. Thus, instead of a space of resistance, the street here becomes a site of objectification and of the reproduction of norms of gender and sexuality that emerge in the interplay between the gaze and the performance of identities that it imposes on women.

The relationship between the gaze and the performance of gender roles in the space of the street is part of a larger issue, that of the interplay between patriarchal power and urban space. Feminist and urban critics like Doreen Massey have pointed out the ways in which patriarchy orders and controls not only gender roles and behaviors, but also the degrees to which urban space is accessible to women. Massey argues that in the modern world, the city

was gendered in the very general sense of the distinction between public and private. [...] The public city which is celebrated in the enthusiastic descriptions of the dawn of modernism was a city of men. The boulevards and cafés, and still more the bars and brothels, were for men – the women who did go there were for male consumption” (Massey 233-234).

Consequently, the limited access to public space that women were given was an expression of an “attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere [that was] both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control of identity” (Massey 179). Massey thus presents the city as a gendered space, masculine and patriarchal, and which

used to impose (and still imposes) rigid restrictions on gender and sexuality, especially as it comes to physical mobility and social inclusion and participation.

This analysis helps explain one of the climactic episodes of Lugo Filippi's story, in which Milagros is detained in a strip club by the policeman, Rada, and is taken home in order to be punished by her mother. Here, the road (la carretera) and the strip club act as sites of patriarchy and male dominance, as the men's presence in the strip club (both the clients' and Rada's, whose professional duty is confounded by a fascination and attraction to Milagros's nude body) is never questioned, and goes unpunished, while Milagros suffers verbal condemnation and physical abuse for having been seen and for having performed in the strip club. Milagros, just like "toda mujer que intente cruzar la línea de lo socialmente vedado para ella será castigada, marginada como poco femenina o como diabólica. La mujer debe mantenerse dentro del rígido dictamen patriarcal que exige de ella pasividad e inferioridad intelectual" (Palmer-López, "Re-visión" 252-253). Palmer-López's use of the metaphor of "crossing the line" is especially opportune for an analysis of this story, as for Milagros, the limits of gender and sexuality are not only those of "acceptable" behavior, but also of access to space. In specific spaces, the expression of female sexuality is criminalized and condemned, while male agency and

the male demand that enables the existence of these same spaces – strip clubs and other sites of sexual exploitation – are left to reproduce without any repercussions.¹⁰

What comes into play in this episode is not only Milagros's, but also Marina's sexuality, and its relation to space, as Luz María Umpierre has pointed out through a homocritical approach to the story ("una perspectiva homocrítica," Umpierre 309). Marina's fascination with Milagros soon becomes a subtle attraction, as the narrator begins following the girl and reenacting in her mind the scene in the strip club. While Rada is allowed to participate, even to protagonize the events that take place in the strip club, as a woman Marina has no access to the physical space, and consequently imagines the scene as it might have happened, whether or not it actually occurred in the way in which she describes it. As Umpierre notes, "dentro de la sociedad puertorriqueña a Rada [el policía] se le permite disfrutar y excitarse con el baile erótico de Milagros; a Marina no. No obstante, la escena no deja de estar cargada de sexualidad" (Umpierre 314). The scene to which Umpierre refers, the mental reenactment of Milagros's arrest in the strip club, acts as further evidence to the limits that patriarchal society imposes on gender norms and behavior, as Marina is forced to perform a "female" role in the scene (to participate in gossip and condemnation on the corner in front of Milagros's house) and to suppress and dissimulate her desire, her attraction to Milagros's performance.

¹⁰ The practice of punishing the women performing in strip clubs and letting the clients and the owners go unpunished continues. As recently as July 2008 a police raid in Santurce resulted in the detention of 15 female dancers who were accused of "exposiciones obscenas." An article recounting the events was published in the daily newspaper "Primera Hora." It claims that, "Como es común en estas redadas, no se detuvo ni a los administradores de los negocios ni mucho menos a la clientela de ambos clubes. [...] La alegación de la policía es que el delito es la exposición, no observar." (Hernández Pérez).

There are multiple moments in the story, in which Marina's desire for Milagros is expressed through a gaze, the role of which is both transformative and problematic in an analysis of gender roles and power structures. Marina's gaze is what connects different spaces – the beauty salon to the street, the street to Milagros's house – and through it Marina expresses her desire for Milagros as she follows the girl down the street. The role of the gaze in the story is thus fundamental not only in the construction of gender and sexuality, but also in that of space.

Literary and cultural critics have interpreted Marina's gaze in distinct and contradictory ways. Diana Vélez argues that, by looking at and desiring Milagros, Marina "masculinizes herself vis-à-vis Milagros in her imagination" (Vélez 8), and thus "she becomes a man in her social positioning with regard to Milagros" (Vélez 8), which allows her to question her social position and adopt a more feminist standpoint. While it is true that Marina's gaze shifts and is transformed in her interactions with Milagros, it is arguable that the gaze becomes masculine; that analysis would deny the difference of a feminine lesbian attraction by equating it with that of a man, and consequently with the often objectifying, patriarchal gaze. In contrast, in the case of Marina, the desire expressed through the gaze is accompanied by a strong degree of identification with the girl, as Marina relives her own experience through Milagros's subversion and challenge of gender and sexual norms. Thus, Vélez's analysis of the masculinization of the gaze and the self contrasts with Umpierre's "perspectiva homocrítica," which allows a different understanding of the relationship of identification and desire that develops between the two protagonists.

Umpierre's homocritical perspective is also useful as a complement to Godreau's analysis of the relationships that develop between women in the beauty salon, and indicates the ways in which Lugo Filippi's story proposes a transformation of the space of the salon vis-à-vis Black's analysis of sexuality in that particular space. Godreau notes that the salon is characterized by "tiempo compartido y de contacto íntimo entre mujeres que se dejan tocar, halar y lavar por otras, ya sea a cambio de un pago o simplemente porque sí." (Godreau 121). Even though this particular description of the interactions that take place in the salon does not explicitly reference sexuality, it is fundamentally homoerotic, even if it leaves out the element of desire that defines Marina's relationship with Milagros in the salon.

On the other hand, Godreau's and Umpierre's descriptions of the beauty salon, as well as Lugo Filippi's fictional account, challenge ethnographic studies coming from other cultural and social contexts (in this case the UK) that argue that in the salon, "heterosexuality operates as a default position, presumed and uncommented upon" (Black 98). In contrast to Black's account, sexuality seems to be an inextricable part of interactions in the beauty salon in Puerto Rico, as seen in the articles and stories by Godreau, Quiñones Arocho and Lugo Filippi. Marina's desire then transforms the space of the beauty salon in fundamental ways, presenting the possibility for both gendering and queering it.

Just like "the heterosexing of space is a performative act naturalized through repetition and regulation" (Valentine 146), so is the queering of space the product of desires, gazes and other performative acts that transform the identity of the space and the

relations that develop in that space. Consequently, Marina's "lesbian body configures a particular kind of spatiality" (Bell, Binnie et. al. xiii), as the narrator not only transgresses gender and sexual norms by transforming Milagros's hair and self, but also queers the space of the beauty salon as she encounters, observes and desires Milagros. In the process, Marina does much more than challenge norms of gender and sexuality. Her desire for Milagros, and the way in which she subverts common associations of the beauty salon with female heterosexuality, "change[s] the way we understand space by exposing its performative nature and the artifice of the public/private dichotomy" (Valentine 154). Marina defines the public space of the salon by lesbian desire, and in this way turns the private, marginalized and silenced experience of desire into a powerful instrument of subversion and transformation of social norms and of the construction of public space.

The challenge to particular constructions of gender and space is realized not only through the theme of desire, but also through the trope of the double, represented through the parallel experiences of Marina and Milagros, and the similar challenges that the two women have to confront. On a narrative level, the parallels that the story draws between the two protagonists culminate in the final scene, in which Marina sees Milagros's reflection in the mirror, as the girl enters the beauty salon:

Pules cuidadosamente la formica de las improvisadas coquetas y con una hoja húmeda del periódico frotas los espejos que te entregan de pronto la imagen de la Milagros, sí, de ella misma, ¿estarás soñando? Pero no, allí está junto a la puerta, mirándote parsimoniosamente, sin pestañear, un poco ladeada a causa de una maleta que lleva en la mano izquierda... Sin volverte la examinas en el espejo... (Lugo Filippi, "Milagros" 38).

This scene, in which Milagros takes control and escapes the patriarchal oppression of her family home, is reminiscent of Marina's own escape, which had also challenged the limits imposed on women, in Marina's case bound by marriage to be nothing other than a wife and a mother.

Milagros's final physical transformation in the beauty salon represents her ultimate subversion, as she accepts her "body as a site of struggle" (Rose 29), expressing her desire for liberation through the materiality of her own body. As feminist critics have pointed out, "far from being natural, [...] bodies are 'maps of power and identity'; or, rather, maps of the relation between power and identity" (Rose 32). In this final scene, by reclaiming control of her own body, Milagros assumes the power to construct her own identity in ways that escape the patriarchal rules reproduced by her mother. By transforming her body in a way in which she had previously been forbidden to do ("Maquíllame en shocking red, Marina, y córtame como te dé la gana" Lugo Filippi, "Milagros" 38), Milagros challenges patriarchal norms that construct an image of submissive femininity bound to reproduce patriarchal patterns of gender and sexual oppression.

The fact that Milagros's transformation takes place in the beauty salon is problematic on various levels. Even though the beauty salon has a number of subversive and liberating aspects, as anthropologists have noted, it is also a place where the body "is moulded and worked on in order to achieve a look, and sometimes also a feeling, which is regarded as 'appropriate' in relation to categories of gender, age, sexuality, class and ethnicity" (Black 11). Similarly, Godreau's analysis points to the ways in which the

services offered in the salon, specifically hair-straightening among Afro-Puerto Rican women, serve as a “brega congraciente” (Godreau 113), as a way for women to claim inclusion in the Puerto Rican nation and to navigate a racist society “para abrirse espacio y negociar su posición en la sociedad, sin confrontar, directamente, la lógica racista que determina ‘lo negro’ del pelo como no deseable, poco atractivo o poco femenino” (Godreau 113). These analyses point to the ways in which the materiality of the body and the practices of the beauty salon can be used to navigate social prejudice and marginalization, and to claim inclusion, without necessarily challenging patterns of patriarchal or racial oppression. In this sense, Milagros’s desire for transformation contrasts with these uses and functions of the beauty salon, as she demands an appearance that, instead of helping her belong, would set her apart from norms of “appropriate” or “acceptable” femininity in the context of the patriarchal society in which she lives.

Another reason why Milagros’s use of the beauty salon for the purpose of challenging patriarchal norms might be seen as problematic is that the girl’s transformation would be effectuated in a place and through a practice of consumption that is often associated with the intersection of capital and patriarchy in relation to women’s labor. Feminist critics have analyzed women’s subordinate position in the workforce, which persists in spite of women’s increased social participation in recent decades:

The advancement in women’s education, employment and their involvement in the public sphere in Puerto Rico have not meant a total redefinition of gendered social functions. Occupational segregation, pay differentials, the ‘double day’ and ideological structures that perpetuate the notion of domestic and childrearing work as women’s responsibility, have all kept women sexually subjected to the control of men (Colón-Warren 111).

Similarly, while discussing the need to expand class analysis to include the question of gender, María Milagros López notes that labor equality is still an unreachable goal for women in a patriarchal society, that “el capitalismo necesita del patriarcado para poder operar eficientemente,” and that “la supremacía masculina suple el capitalismo con el ordenamiento y control que les son necesarios” (López 108).¹¹ As Milagros enters the beauty salon in the story’s final scene, is she giving in to the power of capital, as well as to a different model of femininity, constructed for male consumption? Even though the protagonist’s actions might be interpreted in this manner, I argue that, by approaching the beauty salon for her ultimate transformation, she is indeed using that space as an instrument of liberation and in the process transforming it to become more than just a site of reproduction of patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality.

In recent years, cultural critics have turned their attention to the phenomenon of consumption, and to the ways in which it relates to gender, sexuality and the construction of identity. Emma Casey and Lydia Martens, the editors of the 2007 collection *Gender and Consumption*, introduce the volume by criticizing the tendency to underestimate the role of shopping and consumption in the construction of identity by saying that “in characterizing aspects of social life as trivial, a rationale is created for the silencing of such experience; thereby creating gaps in knowledge” (Casey and Martens 5). Similarly,

¹¹ One example would be women’s domestic work, which serves both patriarchy and capital. As critics like Falcon O’Neill have argued, “La ideología que define las instituciones mediante las cuales se realiza y se reproduce la dominación de la mujer por el hombre, es la que podemos denominar patriarcado. El patriarcado constituye la superestructura ideológica del modo de producción doméstico. Ideología desarrollada por el hombre a partir del momento en que necesita justificar por qué se apropia del trabajo excedente de la mujer” (Falcon O’Neill 115).

Elizabeth Silva argues that “consumption is a critical part of the creation of a sense of self” (Silva 151), suggesting that, instead of an irrational act, consumption of goods and services is often an expression of the desire to construct an identity that would respond to certain class, racial, gender, sexual or other markers, whether as a way of claiming an entrance/participation in a certain social group, or as an expression of its rejection.

While consumption, especially as it relates to the female body, could be the result of – and for the benefits of – patriarchal social norms and models of femininity, it is important to recognize an alternative function of the beauty salon, namely that “in the specific case of women, beauty consumption appears as a form of emancipation from the constraints of everyday life” (Quiñones Arocho 110). As the same critic points out,

it is necessary to transcend approaches that insist in defining consumption as irrational behavior that only contributes to male domination. While it is true that women consume available texts and images, they also do not lose their agency. Through their strategies of consumption, women create their own codes, often in contradictory ways (Quiñones Arocho 125).

In Milagros’s case, it is precisely agency that the protagonist encounters and claims as an instrument of empowerment by stepping into the beauty salon at the end of the story. Her consumption of the beauty services offered in the salon is not an expression of submission to patriarchal norms of beauty and femininity, but an act of liberation from gender and sexual patterns of oppression.

Another reason why Milagros’s desire for a physical transformation should be seen as an act of subversion is the kind of change that she desires, in the context of the options and the expectations to which women must conform in the society in which she lives. The model of femininity imposed by her mother, and which Milagros in the end

rejects, is that of marianismo, “el modelo para la mujer según la cultura patriarcal puertorriqueña,” and “uno de los aspectos sociales que derivan directamente de la identidad religiosa del país y que son perpetuados por la población en general” (Ruiz-Meléndez 13). Using as a model the Virgin Mary, marianismo constructs an image of femininity that is subdued, unthreatening, domesticated and often policed and reproduced by the very women living in a patriarchal society. In this context, another commonality between the two protagonists is that both are forced to look for “la liberación de la mujer sumisa a los dictámenes de la madre y el marido” (Zalacaín 681) – and to help the other achieve it. By asking Marina to cut her hair (one of the symbols of marianismo) and to give her a “shocking red” make-up – an allusion to Rosario Ferré’s story “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres,” about the famous prostitute Isabel la Negra, in which that color of nail polish connects her to her “double,” Isabel Luberza (Ferré) – Milagros rejects a model of femininity that denies women their agency, and through that, their sexuality, and opts for an alternative that would allow her to construct her own gender and sexual identity that subverts patriarchal norms of femininity.

Milagros’s agency and transformation through consumption must be analyzed in the context of the relationship between gender/sexuality, consumption and citizenship, which has been explored in more detail in recent years. In the modern city consumption has become inevitable and indispensable, to the point of being associated with national belonging and citizenship itself. As Robin Peace explains in her article on sexual citizenship and consumption, a society that discriminates and marginalizes on the basis of gender and sexuality is willing to overlook its prejudices if the claim for belonging and

citizenship comes through the market, through the act of consumption: “S/he who appears to have the capacity to consume can equally take on the appearance of the citizen. The consumer is the citizen-subject of the city par excellence” (Peace 51). Thus, consumption enables sexual citizenship, but also acts as a substitute for the rights and for the agency that society continues to deny to its citizens based on gender and sexuality, as Jon Binnie has argued in his analysis of Old Compton Street in London as a queer space:

Could one reason why so many queers enjoy shopping so much (if and when we can afford to do so) is because shopping offers us the opportunity to assert at least some kind of power? Is it an effect of our not having power in other areas, specifically in the realm of social rights? (Binnie 187).

Consumption, according to his words, is an instrument of agency in a social situation in which that agency, and the rights that come with it, are denied on the basis of sexual marginalization and discrimination.

Through the transformation of the main characters, “Milagros, calle Mercurio” alludes to this relationship between sexual citizenship, gender and consumption. Both Marina and Milagros have in some ways escaped marginalization based on gender and sexuality: on the one hand, Marina’s escape from the oppression of domesticity and marriage, and on the other, Milagros’s resistance to the early stages of the same patriarchal model, reproduced by her mother. Both participate in the process of capitalist exchange, one by providing her services in the beauty salon, the other in the strip club. By opening the beauty salon and by offering her services to other women, Marina has found a way to participate in Puerto Rican society, to be a gendered citizen, even though not yet a sexual/queer one, as her desire for Milagros remains silent. However, it appears that Milagros’s intent to use the services of the beauty salon (to consume) at the end of

the story is more of an attempt to escape a society that has rejected her, than a desire to transform herself in order to gain belonging into that society. In this sense, Milagros challenges the claims that consumption enables gendered and sexual citizenship, as it points to the ways in which patriarchy can marginalize even attempts to construct an identity of a gendered and sexual citizen through consumption.

The problem of the relationship between gender, sexuality, consumption and citizenship is part of a larger issue, that of the gendered aspect of the national imaginary, and of women's participation in it. Feminist theorists have critiqued Benedict Anderson's thesis of the nation as an imagined community, pointing out that it "assumes an imagined citizen, and this citizen is gendered" (Sharp 99), namely the (always presumably) male gender of the fallen soldiers. Sharp goes further, noting that "just as this gendering of the national privileges the masculine over the feminine, so too does it privilege one particular notion of masculinity. Nationalistic rhetoric is characteristically heterosexual/heterosexist, most especially in its promotion of the nuclear family" (Sharp 105). Carmen Lugo Filippi's story both reflects and critiques these masculine and heterosexist aspects of the image of the national citizen.

"Milagros, calle Mercurio" is set in a society that seems to reproduce the masculine, heterosexist model of the national citizen, thus imposing limits of belonging and exclusion that determine the characters' different levels of participation and agency in the Puerto Rican nation. The story presents an axis of power in which men and women occupy opposite and unequal positions – as noted earlier, while the men's presence in the strip club is never questioned, and while doña Fina dismisses the possibility of that

happening altogether by saying that “total, que a ellos no les hubiera pasao na, aquí esas cosas se tapan con la política y el dinero” (Lugo Filippi, “Milagros” 38), Milagros is punished for performing in the strip club. In the context of Sharp’s critique of the gendered nature of the national imaginary, this contradiction can be interpreted as an attempt to control and impose limits on women’s use of their sexuality by excluding those who dare to do so from participation in society and by confining them to the domestic sphere (Milagros is taken back home, her mother becomes the instrument of control and punishment, and the girl is not allowed to leave the house except, as it appears in the end, if she were never to go back). Thus, this national imaginary imposes on women a choice that men don’t have to make – whether to conform to the model of the virgin or the prostitute, the only two options that seem available for women’s sexuality.

Fantasy as Resistance in *Pilar, tus rizos*

“Pilar, tus rizos,” the second story set in a beauty salon in the *Virgenes y mártires* collection, uses a different set of techniques to critique patriarchal discourse and to suggest the possibility of feminine agency and liberation. This story, in contrast to “Milagros, calle Mercurio,” approaches the space and the interactions that develop in the beauty salon from the perspective of the female client. Pilar, who, as the readers discover at the end of the story, is a wife and a mother, is spending the afternoon in Gloria’s salon, sitting under a hairdryer, reading a melodramatic romance novel whose characters are Sissy Bite and Piss Ducon, and imagining herself in a similar plot, protagonized by herself and the handsome Mauricio, a character who is a product of her imagination. As

the two plot lines (of the romance novel and the one that Pilar daydreams) evolve, the story constructs the image of a woman who is struggling to negotiate structures of patriarchal oppression and traditional norms of gender and sexuality. While Pilar's actions are hardly as daring as Marina's or Milagros's, by setting against each other the spaces of the beauty salon, the home and the romance novel, the short story constructs a powerful critique of the social and the spatial limits that patriarchal society imposes on Puerto Rican women.

Even though the story is set in a beauty salon, most of the plot takes place in the space of the romance novel that Pilar is reading. As the amorous relationship between Sissy and Piss intensifies, so does that of Pilar and Mauricio, the imaginary male protagonist of her own version of a romantic daydream. Pilar reveals the way in which she imagines meeting Mauricio at a dance, when he romantically invites her to accompany him for a bolero, the way in which he courts her by complementing her and the way she (in contrast to Sissy) is able to reject his passionate advances. Through these two parallel narratives, instead of explicitly critiquing patriarchal discourse, models of gender and structures of power, the story positions the protagonist in the midst of them, as their victim, and uses her situation to expose and condemn gender and sexual oppression.

The romance novel and Pilar's immersion in her own fantasy plot act as an attempt for a temporary escape from patriarchal discourse and power, an escape that never completely materializes, and which in reality reproduces patriarchal structures of oppression. Pilar's depiction in the beauty salon alludes to a desire for distance and

isolation from the outside world – even from the world of the beauty salon – as she sits waiting, unable and unwilling to hear the chatter of the other customers, and fully immersed in the universe of the romance novel that she is reading. Her attitude is similar to that expressed by one of Quiñones Arocho’s interviewees, as she says, “That’s why I come here, to fix myself up and forget my troubles in life. If it weren’t for these moments...” (Quiñones Arocho 116). The ellipsis that closes this description of the beauty salon’s function implies the alternative is not only undesirable, but possibly even unthinkable. Pilar’s voluntary spatial, auditory and visual isolation (when not reading, she only looks at herself in the mirror), intensified by her immersion in multiple levels of fictional fantasy plots, thus represents a similar desire to escape a repressive patriarchal reality.

The plot lines of the romance novel that Pilar is reading and of the fictional account that she protagonizes in her mind, are further evidence of the ways in which the woman imagines a space of escape from patriarchal discourse and power. Through the two fictional narratives she also constructs an identity that attempts to challenge (but in reality reproduces) patriarchal models of gender relations. While Sissy submits to Piss’s courtship and sexual advances without any resistance, Pilar inverts gender roles and presents her own character as capable of controlling and manipulating her relationship with Mauricio. When Sissy is presented as weak, submissive, and unable to resist Piss’s desire, Pilar responds, “Tonta es, tonta la Sissy. No sabe manejar la psicología del hombre” (Lugo Filippi, “Pilar” 24). The narrator’s alternative response, however, reproduces a different patriarchal model of femininity, as she alludes to the idea that a

woman needs to be a virgin on her wedding day: “No, Mauricio, prometiste que no lo harías hasta llevarme al altar. Quiero ofrendarte mi virginidad” (Lugo Filippi, “Pilar” 24). On the one hand, Pilar is participating in what Quiñones Arocho describes as women “just playing at being other women” in the context of being “denied economic equality or even political power” (Quiñones Arocho 123), inventing an alternate identity that allows her to assume a kind of agency that she does not have in her everyday life. However, instead of subverting the patriarchal structures that oppress her, she is only able to create an alternative within certain parameters that seem available to her from the position in which patriarchal discourse and practices have placed her.

Parallel to the space of the romance novel is that of the house, the domestic space characterized by oppression and restrictions of both social and spatial mobility. Even though its patriarchal logic is present throughout the story and in a way exerts power over the activities and the narratives that develop in the beauty salon and in the romance novel, it only becomes part of the plot at the end, when Pilar’s husband calls her to go back home because he is about to go out for the night.

This final scene has profound implications for the construction of the domestic space, as well as the space of the beauty salon. Even though up to that moment the beauty salon had been the overall setting, and therefore the privileged space of the plot, Pepe’s phone call transforms the relations of power to reveal the beauty salon as a place of otherness, or as an “Other in the form of place itself” (Rose 45). Patriarchal discourse becomes the dominant force that orders not only gender relations (Pilar is expected to fulfill her role of a wife and a mother), but also the beauty salon’s capacity to function as

an alternative place of escape and solidarity. Even though up to that point that possibility had existed, the intervention of the (literal and metaphoric) voice of patriarchy disables it and reinstates the rules that had been suspended during the woman's visit to the beauty salon.

As is the case of Milagros's home and mother, and even more so the case of novels like *The House on the Lagoon* and *Felices días, tío Sergio*, in this story too the home becomes a powerful instrument for the affirmation of patriarchal discourses and practices and for the reproduction of traditional models of gender and sexuality. Feminist critics have long argued that "The limits on women's everyday activities are structured by what society expect women to be and therefore to do. The everyday is the arena through which patriarchy is (re)created – and contested" (Rose 17). In the case of Pilar, the everyday, exemplified by home and family, has a spatial dimension that patriarchy orders and delimits, another "attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere [that is] both a specifically spatial control, and, through that, a social control of identity" (Massey 179). Pilar's spatial mobility and her physical presence in a place are determined by gender roles dependent on patriarchal models of femininity, which construct female identity through space. While Pilar is expected to go home to care for her children, her husband is free to go out and spend a social evening with other men during his "viernes social" – a situation that quite literally positions the "outside" as the realm of freedom and masculinity, and the home, or the "inside" as that of femininity, gender and sexual oppression and exploitation.

The relationship of control and subordination that emerges between and within the spaces of the beauty salon and the home suggests the need to rethink space as static, and to conceive of it as a construction of multiple axes of power and social relationships. In Doreen Massey's words,

The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through conterposition to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that 'beyond.' Places viewed this way are open and porous (Massey 5).

Similarly, according to Nancy Duncan, both private and public spaces are "subject to various territorializing and deterritorializing processes whereby local control is fixed, claimed, challenged, forfeited and privatized" (Duncan 129). Furthermore, Puerto Rican critics like Godreau and Quiñones Arocho have demonstrated the ways in which class, race, gender and sexuality interact in their specific social contexts to transform the beauty salon from a space associated exclusively with the beauty industry to one in which axes of gender, sexuality and national identity are rethought and negotiated. In Pilar's case, an act as simple and everyday as a phone call, which connects the social realms and the physical spaces of the home and the beauty salon, is able to transform the identity of both spaces and to rearrange relations of solidarity and power, through which the story ultimately exposes and critiques patriarchal control and the imposition of models of gender and sexuality. Both the home and the beauty salon, then, become examples and evidence of the malleability of space, of its constructed nature and the need to think of it as a site of struggle, contradiction and constant negotiation.

The space of the romance novel and the domestic space intersect in the beauty salon, which functions as a temporary escape from the oppression of marriage and motherhood, of domestic work and obligations, and ultimately becomes a space that provides little opportunity to actively question or resist Pilar's subordinated position. This argument is best illustrated in the story's final scene, when Pilar's husband calls to scold her for not being home with the kids when it's his time to leave for the viernes social. The stylist, Gloria, transmits Pepe's angry message without resistance, and seems to accept that Pilar will do what her husband expects her to: "Acaba de llamar Pepe. ¡Parecía rabioso! Que has tardado mucho y que dejó los nenes con la vecina porque es su viernes. A ese no lo esperes hasta tarde, si llega" (Lugo Filippi, "Pilar" 24). In contrast to Marina in the previous story, Gloria projects traditional norms of femininity, by acting out one of the "multiple ways in which women discipline themselves in order to conform to idealised notions of feminine beauty, of compulsory (hetero)sexual attractiveness and particular expectations of feminine behavior" (McDowell 79). The patriarchal model of "feminine behavior" that Gloria projects and that Pilar reproduces, is that of the housewife and mother who puts her own physical and emotional needs last, prioritizing those of her husband and her children.

Through the interaction between the space of the romance novel and that of the beauty salon, the story problematizes the question of solidarity, which a number of critics have discussed and which is a prominent aspect of the relationship between Marina and Milagros in "Milagros, calle Mercurio." Aside from the conversations between the characters in Pilar's fictional narratives, there is hardly any dialogue until the very end of

the story, and consequently little possibility for building alliances and for encountering solutions to shared problems. In this sense, while the beauty salon does offer “a feminised space away from external demands upon the woman” (Black 87), it indicates little possibility for support and solidarity along gender lines. While the story illustrates the argument that few women “associate their visits [to the salon] with beauty; rather they provide explanations for their treatment choices in reference to their own biographical specificities, and also in wider sociological terms” (Black 45), it challenges the idea that what develops in the salon is a relationship of solidarity (Godreau 121). Instead, the story presents the beauty salon as a place of temporary escape that fails to provide the instruments to challenge patriarchal structures of oppression, or to construct a valid alternative to them.

While, as Diana Vélez has argued, at first glance the story places the character in a subordinate position (Vélez 15), it does so critically, in order to expose and question the violence that lies behind patriarchal models of gender and sexuality. The story does this not through the protagonist’s actions (on the contrary, she seems to submit to the patriarchal power that imposes the abovementioned rules of behavior), but through a meticulous development of a relationship of identification between the main character and the reader, made possible by the point of view of the narrator, as well as the popular and conversational aspects of the language in which the story is written.

The identification between protagonist and reader, which makes it possible for the story to expose and condemn patriarchal structures of oppression and models of gender and sexuality, is possible thanks in part to the narrative perspective, the point of view of

the female main character who also acts as narrator. The multiple facets of her identity that the story reveals from the very beginning, from her trivial insecurities (“Quizás ya debería usar gafas,” Lugo Filippi, “Pilar” 19) to the memories of her past (“Quizás por eso sus amigas de entonces la llamaron (¿o la apodaron?) Suzanne Pleschette: peinado coquetísimo y hoyuelos que se marcaban cada vez que reía de veras,” Lugo Filippi, “Pilar” 20) and her dreams for a perfect partner (“Cerró los ojos para solazarse viendo a Mauricio caminar con un paso un poco torpe, paso a paso, paso que le recordaba a Marlon Brando” Lugo Filippi, “Pilar” 20), as well as the alternation between first, second and third-person narration, which allows the protagonist to reveal herself from multiple perspectives, facilitates the readers’ understanding of and identification with Pilar. While a third-person omniscient narrator might create a sense of distance and detachment, a shifting narrative perspective that includes first-person narration creates a closer identification between narrative voice and reader. In addition, by setting the plot in a beauty salon, a place and an experience that many of Lugo Filippi’s readers would have shared, the author further enables that identification to develop. As the readers follow Pilar’s narrative voice, they enter a relationship of identification that puts them in her position and that allows them to experience the violence of the final scene as the protagonist would. The dynamism of the narrative perspective, then, is an important factor in the identification and in the creation of solidarity that makes it possible to expose and condemn patriarchal control and models of femininity.

The other instrument that the story uses to enable the identification between protagonist and readers is the language, specifically its popular, conversational and oral

aspects. As Edna Acosta-Belén notes, the language of many of the writers of the 1970s generation is

un lenguaje que a pesar de estar enraizado en las modalidades dialectales y en la cultura popular puertorriqueña trasciende el tradicional calco lingüístico de la ‘manera de hablar’ de los personajes y se convierte en el instrumento versátil, metamórfico y paródico del narrador (Acosta-Belén, “En torno” 222).

Similarly, in “Pilar, tus rizos,” instead of consistently confident and authoritarian, the narrative is fragmented, filled with interruptions, questions, exclamations, changes of topic, jumps from the present to the past and from a real to a fantasy world that suggest a stream of consciousness approach. The informality of such approach allows the reader to relate to the character’s concerns and to construct a relationship of solidarity that allows the audience to identify with Pilar’s everyday struggles and oppression. It is through the solidarity that the story constructs between reader and protagonist, as opposed to the solidarity that others have argued develops between stylists and clients in the beauty salon, that the story exposes and critiques patriarchal discourses, models of femininity and oppressive practices.

Hebra rota: Domestic Violence and Gender Solidarity

While writers from the Generación del 70 like Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega and Carmen Lugo Filippi focused on the relationship between space and issues like patriarchy, female independence and mobility, in the 1980s feminist authors began to approach space in relation to a wider variety of themes, such as domestic violence and a newly-elaborated solidarity along racial and gender lines. Mayra Santos Febres’s short story “Hebra rota” and Sonia Fritz’s eponymous short film, one of three that she based on

stories by Santos Febres,¹² examine some of these issues through the relationship that develops between the two female protagonists, ten-year old Yetsaida and Doña Kety, who straightens the girl's hair in her beauty salon. As the two women share a reality of abuse, in each other they encounter a level of solidarity that surpasses the protection that the family can offer, and thus transforms the space of the beauty salon into a site of shelter and alliance. Even though, like in Pilar's case, the beauty salon is unable to provide strategies for the subversion of patriarchy or feminist agency in the context of violence and oppression, it offers a space that permits the development of an axis of solidarity that allows women to cope (*bregar*) with oppression by temporarily escaping the role of the victim, and by constructing their identities in different terms, through race, gender and sexuality.

Like Carmen Lugo Filippi's stories, "Hebra rota" takes place in two spaces, the beauty salon and the family home. These two spaces are mutually constructed through "a complex web of social, cultural, economic and political factors [that] contribute to the reasons why women choose to visit beauty salons" (Black 40). The descriptions of the two settings contrast in ways that suggest the protagonists' different associations with each space – while the house is presented as an enclosed and claustrophobic space, devoid of communication and understanding, the beauty salon's physical position and the relationships that develop in it reveal it as a space of alternative relations of power and of solidarity along gender and racial lines.

¹² The series of three short films includes "Hebra rota," "Dulce pesadilla, Abnel" and "Nightstand," all three originally published as short stories in the 1995 collection *Pez de vidrio*.

The story presents an image of home that contrasts with traditional depictions of the family house and the *gran familia puertorriqueña*. The house's physical depiction in Sonia Fritz's faithful cinematic adaptation is hardly reminiscent of the houses in *Dios los cría* or *Ligia Elena* in that, instead of projecting a sense of high class, comfort and luxury, it is small and dark, constructing a setting of claustrophobia and of a need to escape (Fritz). More importantly, instead of a unified Puerto Rican family inhabiting an idealized house, representative of the nation and of national territory, as in the cases of novels and stories discussed in the previous chapter, the story and the film based on "Hebra rota" reveal a family home characterized by lack of unity and by a prevalent violence whose victims are the female characters. Not only does the plot begin with an image of aggression against the ten-year old protagonist ["Una niña y un padre y una memoria rota como una nariz a los diez años con aliento a alcohol encima" (Santos Febres, "Hebra" 65)], but soon thereafter the readers discover that Doña Kety, just like the other women in her Trastalleres neighborhood, is the victim of similar aggression (Santos Febres, "Hebra" 66). Luis Muñoz Marín's idealized national imaginary, already seen in novels like *Felices días, tío Sergio* is absent from Santos Febres's story, as the author introduces her female protagonists in a domestic setting structured not by consensus but by "patriarchy as an organizing social arrangement" (Hennessy 25), and more specifically, in a situation of violence that neither of them seem able to escape. In this sense, the depiction of the home "discredit[s] myths created by the nation-building novel" (Henaó 96), myths of perfect marriages and national consensus that Puerto Rican cultural nationalist ideology had tried to establish and which feminist writers, among

others, had challenged for decades. In the process of dismantling the myth of national unity, Santos Febres exposes its characteristic violence and exclusion, and proposes to rethink the trope of the house in relation to the possibilities that other spaces, like the beauty salon, offer for female solidarity, liberation and inclusion.

As in the case of “Milagros, calle Mercurio,” the beauty salon is adjacent to the woman’s living space. In contrast to the space of the house, however, the beauty salon in “Hebra rota” is presented as a site of liberation, alas temporary, from patriarchal power and from its palpable expression as domestic violence. The salon is located in the neighborhood of Trastalleres, a working-class and Afro-Puerto Rican part of Santurce in which car repair shops and gas stations are the most visible spaces of employment. The description of the beauty salon, which “queda alto, alto en el cielo como un pájaro de cemento que transporta hacia la belleza” (Santos Febres, “Hebra” 66), alludes to the way in which the characters perceive that space, as one that offers not only the promise of beauty, but also of serenity, escape and the possibility for an alternative social order. As critics have pointed out, “the visit to the beauty salon is a way of escaping the constraints of family life” (Quiñones Arocho 115), and an escape from physical and metaphorical constraints is precisely what Yetsaida encounters in Doña Kety’s salon. In her analysis of the story, Isar Godreau shares this idea, arguing that what the girl looks for in the beauty salon is to forget: “Este olvido que busca la niña en el alisado se nutre de la esperanza de belleza que encarna Doña Kety y de la práctica seductora del ritual en su beauty casero” (Godreau 121). Even though Godreau focuses on the practice of the alisado, or hair-straightening, her analysis presents a strong argument for the beauty salon’s capacity

to offer a possibility to escape and to forget (even if temporarily) patriarchal control and violence.

It must be noted that the above description of the salon is also tinged with a sense of irony. The beauty salon in the story and in the film is a simple construction made of cement, very different from the luxurious salons of which Yetsaida dreams. The ordinary quality of Doña Kety's salon, combined with the hope with which the young girl invests it, serve to emphasize the social marginalization of the characters and their need to find an escape, however temporary and tentative, from the violence of their everyday experience.

The idea that by going to the beauty salon women are “playing at being other women” (Quiñones Arocho 123) acquires a very specific dimension in the case of Yetsaida. Having discovered the possibilities that the salon offers, the girl dreams of a permanent escape: “Ella quiere dedicar su vida a eso más allá de un beauty en Trastalleres; va a ir a la academia de belleza al lado de D’Rose el año entrante, oh sí, y a la Sky Academy of Looks and Beauty en Miami cuando se vaya a proseguir estudios” (Santos Febres, “Hebra” 68-69). The film’s illustration of this episode is quite telling, establishing a contrast between the limited space of the house and the beach, an open space where Yetsaida, grown up in her dream, experiences her liberation. This dream of a permanent escape indeed supposes not only a transformation of her social circumstances (a liberation from the oppressive family home), but also the construction of a new identity, that of an independent and professional woman, through which the protagonist would substitute victimization for agency and oppression for possibility.

The spaces of the family home and the beauty salon intersect and construct each other through a number of themes, like race, gender, sexuality, violence and solidarity. Of these, the theme that most prominently connects the two spaces in which the story is set is that of race, foregrounded by the prejudice and solidarity that emerge out of the characters' negotiation of the relationship between race and the Puerto Rican national imaginary. Yetsaida, the ten-year old protagonist, experiences the issue of race differently in the house and the beauty salon. In the girl's home her blackness is something to be ashamed of: "El padre ni le toca las pasas del asco, sí, del asco. Ella se lo ha visto en la cara, en los chistes de la mano enredada, en el fastidio de Mami peinándola entre gritos con la peinilla mellá" (Santos Febres, "Hebra" 67). It is quite telling that in the film the scene in which the mother brushes the girl's hair is set in the bathroom, a space both claustrophobic and associated with the need for privacy, the desire to avoid the gaze of others, and the danger of embarrassment. Yetsaida's exclusion from belonging in her family is also, on a metaphorical level, an allusion to her marginalization in the Puerto Rican nation.

On the other hand, in the beauty salon and in the image of Doña Kety herself, Yetsaida encounters the possibility to gain access through a certain code of appearance that corresponds to what is "acceptable," to a set of characteristics understood to belong in the national imaginary: "Doña Kety, tan elegante, es prieta, sí. – Pero esa hermosa mata de pelo lacio y pintado de color chavito que le cae por los hombros" (Santos Febres, "Hebra" 66). In contrast, Yetsaida's race, marked by her curly hair, positions her as not possessing "a becoming corporeality" (Peace 51) and as having one of the "transgressive

identities [that] are not becoming in the public sphere, where propriety is regulated by formal and informal codes of access” (Peace 51). In Doña Kety’s salon, “the boundaries of racial identity are also worked out and fought over” (Black 21), and Doña Kety’s ability to transform appearance gives her the social codes of access mentioned above (even if with minimal effect at combating racism and marginalization).

The principal code of access that Doña Kety can give Yetsaida in the beauty salon is that of *el alisado*, or hair straightening, a practice whose anthropological implications Isar Godreau has analyzed in detail, in the context of Afro-Puerto Rican women in the San Antón neighborhood in Ponce. Some critics have suggested that the alisado is a symptom of a desire for *blanqueamiento*, or racial whitening, which “remains key to personal and national advancement, while darkening of the race is blamed for everything from poverty and underdevelopment to the whole sorry history of Latin America and the Caribbean” (Cruz-Janzen 175). According to Godreau, however, practices among black Puerto Rican women such as hair-straightening and bleaching are not a result of an expression of a desire to look white. They are “signos de ‘otra cosa’ y no de blancura anglosajona ni europea” (Godreau 95). Instead, the author argues that in contemporary Puerto Rican society, straight hair constructs national identity through differentiation: “un diálogo de diferenciación vis-à-vis aquellos que se consideran ‘negros’ o ‘menos mezclados. Desde una perspectiva puertorriqueña, éstos pueden incluir a los afro-americanos, los dominicanos, los haitianos o a las personas del Caribe inglés” (Godreau 96). As it comes to race, once again Yetsaida’s family is hardly Muñoz Marín’s idealized image of a *gran familia puertorriqueña*. There is no consensus or desire for a common

national racial identification. On the contrary, one of the causes of the violence that the girl suffers is precisely her blackness, a reality that alludes to the different racialization of gender in the case of Puerto Rico: “General cultural devaluation of females sets Latinegras additionally at risk. Because of the greater status and patriarchal authority bestowed on all males, regardless of race or social status, Latino cultures are more forgiving of blackness in males” (Cruz-Janzen 178). While this might seem an extreme generalization, in the case of the story the father’s own race is never referred to or questioned, and one is left to wonder whether, had the father had a black son, he would have subjected him to the same aggression, and to what extent the intersection of race and gender determines the girl’s oppression. In this situation, Yetsaida desires straight hair in order to resist and possibly eliminate one of the factors for her marginalization and for the violence that she experiences. More than a desire to look white, Yetsaida’s use of the beauty salon is a “brega congraciente” which she utilizes to “abrirse espacio y negociar su posición en la sociedad, sin confrontar, directamente, la lógica racista que determina lo ‘negro’ del pelo como no deseable, poco atractivo o poco femenino” (Godreau 113).

Yetsaida’s way to deal (*bregar*) by looking for an image and for an inclusion into the Puerto Rican national imaginary responds to marginalization and violence parallel to those that Milagros suffers, and which, in Yetsaida’s case, are problematized further by the issue of the young protagonist’s race. In contrast to Milagros (or Petra in *The House on the Lagoon*), however, neither Yetsaida nor Doña Kety have a proper voice, and neither of them can actively “denounce the racial as well as the gender discrimination they face” (Gosser Esquilín 51). Instead, these characters’ situation alludes to that of

Pilar, as it is through point of view and thus through the readers' identification with the protagonists that patriarchy, racism and violence are exposed and critiqued.

As "race identities cannot be decontextualized and separated off analytically or politically from the constitution of other identities and axes of power" (Anderson 208) the issue of race in "Hebra rota" lies at the intersection of a number of other themes. One that is fundamental to the construction of space in the story is that of violence, particularly physical violence in relation to the female body. The two protagonists are not alone in suffering aggression on the part of men. On the contrary, the multiple references to the women's broken noses and the "mapamundi," the scarring and coloration on Doña Kety's arm, which may be a result as much of handling the hair-straightening iron, as it could be of the domestic violence to which she is subjected early in the film. The experience of domestic violence and pain bring them closer together, and into a community of female victims of domestic violence: "como todas las otras mujeres del barrio [Doña Kety] tenía la nariz rota a puñetazos" (Santos Febres, "Hebra" 66). Quite literally, thus, the female body becomes "a politicized site of struggle and contestation" (Bell, Binnie, Holliday vii) and "[a map] of the relation between power and identity" (Rose 32), as physical violence acts as a patriarchal instrument for the construction of a hierarchy of gender, of a subjugated femininity and a dominant masculinity.

The issue of violence is closely related to that of space, in that, by definition, domestic violence has a spatial dimension, normally identified with the family home and with the reproduction of patriarchy. Even though, as seen in Ch. 1, the home is

frequently thought of as a female space, it “has also traditionally been subject to the patriarchal authority of the husband and father” (Duncan 131), who controls it to project and maintain patriarchal order. In Yetsaida’s case, by the end of the story the dream that the girl has of studying at a beauty school in Miami parallels another, unspoken dream – leaving behind the patriarchal logic and violence of the family home. After having understood and suffered the violence of patriarchal order in the domestic space, where “abuse has generally been a private and hidden problem” (Duncan 132), the girl dreams not of a different kind of home, but of a public and female space, which would offer her the possibility to escape paternal and patriarchal domination, and to construct a different identity based on solidarity, agency and professional realization.

As in the case of Milagros and Pilar, the issue of female solidarity is central to the construction of space in “Hebra rota.” Speaking about urban space, Lawrence Knopp argues that “the various sexual codings associated with cities are sites of multiple struggles and contradictions, and as such are instrumental in producing, reproducing and transforming both social relations of various kinds (including sexual relationships), and space itself” (Knopp 153). Knopp’s words suggest that a site like the female-coded beauty salon and the relationships that develop in it in the stories fulfill an important role with regards to the construction of gender and sexuality, as well as the gendered construction of space.

In the story these processes are revealed through the practices that take place in the space of the beauty salon, and through the relationships that develop as a consequence. At first sight *el alisado*, the most common and the most desired service that

Doña Kety offers, might seem problematic because, as some have argued, by transforming an Afro-Puerto Rican woman's appearance, it distances her from her racial identity and becomes an expression of a desire for whiteness. However, anthropologist Isar Godreau has shown the ways in which the *alisado*, even though problematic, does not necessarily mean "un rechazo hacia la persona negra que lo tiene" (Godreau 118). Instead, as in the case of Yetsaida and Doña Kety, it offers a pretext, an opportunity for the creation of alliances between women who look for ways to deal with racial discrimination or, as in the story, violence and exclusion. The question that remains, upon analyzing the solidarity between Doña Kety and Yetsaida alongside that between Marina and Milagros, is, to what extent does the alliance that develops between the women in the former case offer an opportunity for resistance and subversion of the social processes under critique? What literary strategies does Santos Febres use to expose and condemn patriarchal domination and violence, and how do they differ from those used by Lugo Filippi in terms of their ideological effects?

"Hebra rota" demonstrates a "commitment to the possibility of transformative social change" (Henessy 35) similar to that of "Milagros, calle Mercurio," even if the two stories use different literary techniques and ideological means to critique the unequal participation of women in the Puerto Rican nation. While Milagros's decision to leave her home suggests the need to actively resist, escape and challenge patriarchal domination, Yetsaida's relationship with Doña Kety and her dreams of going away are more of a way to deal with a situation of violence and oppression while unable to escape it. Undoubtedly, a strong relationship of solidarity based on shared social circumstances

develops between the two female characters. Doña Kety's labor is not only a service; rather, in her "mano experta y sin violencia" (Santos Febres, "Hebra" 69) and in her "dedos que no quieren romperle nada, que quieren dejarla bella y radiante para que el céfiro juegue con su cabello" (Santos Febres, "Hebra" 69) Yetsaida finds the pleasure and the comfort that allows her to construct an identity which enables her to dream of an alternative role for herself, one of a professional woman free of the violence of her family and society (See Fig. 15). Simultaneously, the relationship gives Doña Kety the opportunity to exercise "the labor of the body and the creation of a sense of self for both the therapist and the client" (Black 101), as she too finds an outlet for escape in helping alleviate Yetsaida's pain. In spite of this relationship of identification and solidarity, however, escape for both women is only temporary. Doña Kety was never able to leave or to resist violence, and Yetsaida would have to wait years before she is able to attempt to escape or to subvert the order that subjects her to patriarchal aggression. By positioning the female protagonists in a situation that borders on imprisonment, a repressive and violent context that suggests their exclusion and their lack of means of protection or liberation, the story takes a strong stance against patriarchal domination and racism. It is through this inability to escape the violence of family and of society, and by implication the repression on the level of national participation, that the story critiques patriarchal national imaginaries that exclude women or treat them as second-class citizens.

Conclusion

In the work of authors like Carmen Lugo Filippi, Mayra Santos Febres and Sonia Fritz, the space of the beauty salon becomes much more than a site for the reproduction of the beauty industry. These artists' short stories and films construct the beauty salon as a space of tensions along axes of racial, class and sexual identity, of struggles and negotiations of patriarchal models and gender norms, and of female agency and strategies of resistance. With different degrees of success, the literary and cinematic works analyzed in this chapter also present the beauty salon as a space of the creation of solidarity between women who are marginalized and oppressed by sometimes common, and sometimes competing social forces. In the process, by setting their stories in the exclusively "feminine" space of the beauty salon, the authors also propose ways to rethink the traditional cultural nationalist idea of the Puerto Rican nation by critiquing the contradictions of a discourse that claims unity and cohesion, but which continues to oppress and marginalize women's voices, labor, spatial and social mobility.

CHAPTER V

Locating Power on the Margins: Gender and Sexuality in the Brothel

Prostitution and the figure of the prostitute have interested Puerto Rican historians for over a decade, and while a body of literature on these issues is currently emerging, there is a resounding lack of a historical, anthropological or cultural analysis of the most common space of prostitution, the brothel. In her 2008 book *Meretrices*, Nieve de los Ángeles Vázquez Lazo emphasizes that many questions still remain when it comes to the study of the spaces of prostitution: “¿Cómo eran los prostíbulos en su interior? ¿Cómo se distribuía el espacio y cómo funcionaban?” (Vázquez Lazo 213). This chapter attempts to address these questions by analyzing the construction of the space of the brothel in Puerto Rican literary and cinematic discourse, in relation, on the one hand, to issues of gender and sexuality, and on the other, to the ways in which these intersect to construct an alternative trope of Puerto Rican national imaginary, one that both complements and contrasts with the trope of the family house of the cultural nationalist concept of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*¹ (Gelpí 51).

¹ For a discussion of the origins of the idea of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, see Chapter I: Introduction.

The Literature on Prostitution in Latin America

There is a growing body of historical, anthropological, sociological and cultural studies on questions pertaining to prostitution in Latin America. In terms of geography, the Latin American countries in which the history of prostitution has been covered most extensively are Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, with an increasing number of studies also looking at Central America and the Caribbean. The history of prostitution in Mexico has been studied through a variety of periods – from Ana María Atondo Rodríguez’s *El amor venal y la condición femenina en el México colonial*, to Katherine Elaine Bliss’s *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City*, and William French’s “Prostitutes and Guardian Angels: Women, Work and the Family in Porfirian Mexico,” in which the author exposes the ways in which prostitutes embodied “many of the social ills lamented by self-proclaimed cultured Porfirians” (French 537), uncovering complex connections between class, gender and nationhood. More contemporary analyses of prostitution have addressed specific areas in Mexico City, as in Angélica Bautista López’s and Elsa Conde Rodríguez’s *Comercio Sexual en La Merced* in which the authors propose a new terminology to talk about “sexoservidoras” as opposed to prostitutes or sex workers.

The literature on prostitution, sex work and brothels in Brazil is also quite extensive. Sueann Caulfield’s work in *In Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity and Nation in Early-Twentieth-Century Brazil* demonstrates the ways in which the state intervened in defining notions of honor in order to construct “acceptable” models of race, class and gender. She claims that “only by conserving the stabilizing force of ‘natural’

social hierarchies epitomized by patriarchal honor, these men (and some women) argued, could Brazil's leaders promote progress and civilization" (Caulfield 11). More recently, studies in Brazil have shifted their focus to phenomena and practices of prostitution that have not been studied sufficiently in other Latin American regions, such as transgender prostitution, child prostitution and sex slavery. Some of these studies, such as Néstor Perlongher's *El negocio del deseo*, offer a detailed historical and anthropological account (in this case of male prostitution in Sao Paulo), discussing issues of repression, violence, or specific spaces like La Galería Metrópole (Perlongher 74), but hardly touch upon issues of desire, pleasure, or affective relationships that develop. In contrast, Don Kulick's *Travesti* takes a close and detailed look at transgender prostitution in Salvador, Brazil's third largest city, and examines aspects that other studies neglect or avoid, such as the element of pleasure. Kulick claims that,

Travesti prostitution is [...] not only a source of income, but also, as Erica emphasizes, a source of pleasurable and reaffirming experiences. [...] Rather than seeing the prostitution they practice as a degrading form of sexual exploitation, travestis regard it as work, much like any other job – except that their work on the street makes them their own boss, and it provides them with access to more money than they could ever dream of earning through salaried employment (Kulick 136).

In noting that "Travestis consider the prostitution they perform as work, and they see themselves as professionals" (Kulick 141), the author emphasizes the element of choice and agency in travesti prostitution.

Beyond studies on travesti prostitution, Romeu Gomes's and Mario Lorenzi's studies offer insights into child exploitation and prostitution, while Gilberto Dimenstein examines the sexual slavery of girls in Brazil. In addition to these historical and

anthropological studies, Leandro Feitosa Andrade's interest in the representation of juvenile prostitution in media images suggests that there are complex ways in which street children are sexually exploited not only by adults who approach them for prostitution, but also by the stigmatizing discourse created in mainstream Brazilian media for consumption by a public that values sensation as much as philanthropy.

In addition to Mexico and Brazil, a substantial amount of scholarly work is developing on prostitution in Argentina. Donna Guy's 1991 study, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina* is one of the best known and useful works on the historical relationship between prostitution, national discourse and state control, and of the ways in which they "were shaped by and in turn shaped social organization, culture, and politics in modern Argentina" (Caulfield 170). Guy's discussion of the numerous ways in which prostitution in Argentina was regulated from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, when "physicians replaced the police as the enforcers of enclosed prostitution" (Gilfoyle 123), offers an important insight into the problematic of the intersection between gender, sexuality, class and family ideals, as "prostitution became a metaphor for upper- and middle-class fears about the lower class and the future of the Argentine nation" (Guy 44). The study is useful in that the author explores different facets of prostitution, from trafficking in women to life in the brothel and to state-imposed regulations that controlled and reproduced repressive discourses.

More recent studies on prostitution in Argentina have moved in the direction of attempting to listen to and to document the voices of women who practice prostitution, as in the case of Lohana Berkins' and Claudia Korol's edition of the workshop *Prostitución/*

trabajo sexual: las protagonistas hablan, an encounter initiated by the International Commission of Human Rights, and that took place in September 2006 in Buenos Aires. This dialogue offers important insights into the linguistic and conceptual debate over the use of the terms *prostitute* and *sex worker*, as it gives women on each side the opportunity to represent themselves, and to ultimately realize that, in spite of the different emphasis that they place on issues like work, choice, marginality and recognition, they share an interest in the defense and the implementation of the same rights: to respect, protection from violence, education, and the creation of, in their own words, “espacios que nos posibiliten mejorar la calidad de vida y que nos permitan salir de las situaciones en las que nos encontramos” (Berkins 24), as their ultimate goal is to end the need to be part of the sex trade.

In recent years scholars have also turned their attention to Central America and the Caribbean as sites of different kinds of prostitution, sex work, exploitation, trafficking or social activism related to prostitution. The relationship between class, gender and prostitution in the construction of national imaginaries discussed in the context of Mexico and Argentina is the topic of David McCreery’s work on female prostitution in Guatemala City from the late 19th to the early 20th century, in which he shows how “attempts to regulate prostitution must be understood as part of a liberal drive to mobilize and control society as a whole in the interest of a class-defined vision of national development” (McCreery 334). In the case of Costa Rica, only a decade ago UNICEF published a study of the sexual exploitation of children (Claramunt 1998), while in the same year Jacobo Schifter’s ethnography *Lila’s House: Male Prostitution in Latin*

America looked at the specific case of a house of male prostitution (*cacherismo*, the prostitution of young boys) in San José, Costa Rica. In relation to the study of the space of the brothel, this is a useful book in that it emphasizes the problem of space by offering a detailed description of the house, its rooms, hallways, kitchen, the configuration and the power relations that order this space.

As in the case of Central America, the literature on prostitution in the Caribbean is not only growing, but also expanding the vocabulary and the range of issues discussed in relation to the social, economic, cultural and gendered constructions and implications of prostitution. The theme that has figured most prominently in the literature on Caribbean prostitution in recent decades has been that of sexual tourism², especially relating to Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

The literature on prostitution in Cuba includes work on las jineteras, whom Amir Valle describes as “la mujer (generalmente de edades que oscilan entre los trece y treinta años) que vende su cuerpo al turista a cambio de algún beneficio” (Valle 14). The author alternates chapters on the history of indigenous, black and creole prostitution with

² In its broadest definition, sex tourism “is a protean term that attempts to capture varieties of leisure travel that have as part of their purpose the purchase of sexual services. [...] Sex tourism highlights the convergence between prostitution and tourism, links the global and the local, and draws attention to both the production and consumption of sexual services” (Wonders 545). More recently, critics have expanded the definition, arguing that sex tourism should include relationships that go beyond the commercial sex tourism to include those that are not necessarily compensated (Bauer 4). For more on sex tourism in the Caribbean, see Kamala Kempadoo’s *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*. For studies of gay sex tourism, see Stephen Clift, Michael Luongo and Carrie Callister’s *Gay Tourism: Culture, Identity and Sex*, as well as Gordon Waitt and Kevin Markwell’s *Gay Tourism: Culture and Context*.

interviews and stories of prostitutes that he met in Havana during his research. In relation to the issue of space, he points out that

la prostitución en la isla de Cuba, ya por esa época [the late 1930s] conocida como el Burdel de América, no se practicaba exclusivamente en las casas de tolerancia, burdeles y prostíbulos de los barrios marginales o pobres de las ciudades y pueblos, sino que, sobre todo en el caso de La Habana y de algunas otras ciudades importantes, también tenía lugar en los más importantes hoteles (Valle 154).

Valle's work shares common themes (of personal histories, class and racial identities, violence and the flow of capital) with the work of Rosa Miriam Elzalde in *Flores desechables: Prostitución en Cuba?* and Tomás Fernández Robaina's *Historias de mujeres públicas*.

On the topic of gay travel male prostitution in Cuba, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes's essay "De un pájaro las dos alas" examines "the intersection of gay-cultural travel with the political and material conditions of the Cuban people through Puerto Rican eyes" (La Fountain-Stokes, "De un pájaro" 25), offering a first-person account, as well as historicizing and contextualizing the phenomenon in relation to "the impoverishment of the professional (middle-class) and working-class sectors, deteriorating health care, widespread hunger, political censorship, increasing criminality, and transportation difficulties" (La Fountain-Stokes, "De un pájaro" 16), in addition to discussing questions of sexual identity.

Recent work on Caribbean prostitution has taken a more comparative approach, as in the case of Amalia L. Cabezas, who conducted a study in Cuba and the Dominican Republic and uses extensive interviews to problematize the understanding of the relationship between jineteras and race, the definition of sex worker in relation to class,

race and sexual orientation, the way in which emotional labor enters the realm of sex work and the need to understand the “new patterns of sexual commerce in Cuba and the Dominican Republic [that] are opportunistic, fluid and ambiguous” (Cabezas 997).

Even though the Dominican Republic has been a sex tourist destination, especially for European and US men (but also, recently, women), the literature there is much more scarce. The most prominent studies are those by Carmen Imbert Brugal on the Dominican “export” and trafficking in women, and by Denise Brennan, on sex work in Sosúa, a “sex tourist town” that she uses as a matrix to coin the term “sexscape” (Brennan 709) to denote the result of a process in which historical reality and social imaginary intersect to construct a space that is identified exclusively through the sexual capitalist transactions in both the foreign and the national imagination. Brennan’s study enriches the work on regulation by demonstrating how it is not only government and police that control the sex trade in Sosúa, but also the women themselves, who, through gossip and direct condemnation of other women, try to construct a discourse that allows them to participate in the sex trade while defining themselves along the lines of martyrdom, as mothers who sacrifice for the sake of their children. In addition to Cabezas’s previously mentioned comparative study of prostitution in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, scholars like Kamala Kempadoo have expanded the region of comparison from Belize to Cartagena, to situate the Dominican Republic in a broader Caribbean context that allows her to explore the understanding of the concept of “sex work” and the multiple ways in which women challenge, transgress and redefine boundaries of imposed terminology, patriarchal control, and spatial configurations not

only within each country, but also on a continental scale, as they become sites of the mutual construction of whiteness and blackness.

While much of this literature has been published by scholars and international organizations that study and speak for the men and women who practice prostitution, in recent years another kind of literature has emerged, one created by the women and men eager to speak for themselves. A pioneer in this area has been the international group RedTraSex, which encompasses 13 countries of Latin and Central America and the Caribbean, and which is composed of groups of sex workers from each nation, who organize to actively promote recognition and respect for sex workers and work so that “en América Latina se respeten los derechos humanos de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales” (Amorín 21). RedTraSex’s most important projects to date have been two workshops in 2006 in Costa Rica, out of which the manual for *Un movimiento de tacones altos: Mujeres, trabajadoras sexuales y activistas* was born. Written by sex workers for sex workers, the manual is intended to educate women about a variety of issues, from the difference between sex and gender and the way in which patriarchal structures of oppression operate, to the risks, the challenges and the rights associated with their occupation. Significantly, the way in which the authors define the intended goals of the manual are to ensure that sex workers be “preparadas para incidir en las políticas públicas de nuestros países, para de una vez por todas sentirnos orgullosas de las mujeres que somos y para que nadie más hable en nombre nuestro” (Reynaga y Amorín 9). The criticism explicit in the final part of this statement is also a challenge addressed to the sex workers themselves, to use the book to develop political consciousness and to be able to

express their own voice, as opposed to delegating it to scholars, journalists, social workers and activists.

The Brothel in Puerto Rican History and Criticism

While little is known about the comprehensive history of the brothel in Puerto Rico, multiple references in Eileen Suárez Findlay's, Nieve de los Ángeles Vázquez Lazo's and Laura Briggs's studies on the history of prostitution in the Puerto Rican context allow for an overview of the emergence, the development, the official regulation, and the hierarchic structures of power and control that have governed brothels in Puerto Rico since the colonial period. Such understanding of the social history of the space of the brothel facilitates the analysis of the literary and cinematic works in this chapter, and of the ways in which they depict the space of the brothel to represent, challenge and propose alternative tropes to the gendered construction of the Puerto Rican national imaginary.

Vázquez Lazo dates the first documented reference to a brothel in Puerto Rico to the year 1526, when the Spanish monarch Carlos I gave his "concesión para instaurar el primer prostíbulo de Puerto Rico" (Vázquez Lazo 40), even though the author points out that there is no evidence that the brothel was ever opened. The first references to specific names of prostitutes appear three decades later, in 1555, when Isabel Ortiz is mentioned as the "regente de un burdel que era visitado con asiduidad por algunos de los conquistadores" (Vázquez Lazo 42), and when a note regarding a prostitute called Brígida, "esclava de padre" (Vázquez Lazo 42) appears to give an early reference to the

issues of race and colonialism, which will remain relevant to the representation of brothels and prostitution in literary and cinematic works up to the present.

During the 17th and the 18th century there is little evidence of the existence of brothels in Puerto Rico, even though prostitution continued to flourish. Interestingly enough, Vázquez Lazo has found evidence of prostitution in documents that represented orders directed to clerics and soldiers of that period, prohibiting them the friendship and the “encuentro en casas de unas mujeres sospechosas a horas incompetentes de la noche” (Vázquez Lazo 45). But it is not until the 19th century that prostitution, and specifically prostitution in brothels, entered the realm of legal, medical and media discourse, and that a Puerto Rican national discourse began to include prostitution, even if only to ultimately condemn, demonize and marginalize it.

The 19th century was characterized by an increase in prostitution, due to the “migration of many unmarried male laborers, the city’s [San Juan] growing importance as a naval port, and the migration of many impoverished and young women, presumably seeking domestic or sex work” (Briggs 58). In this context, a variety of discourses – emerging from official government policies, press publications, liberal ideology and even early elite feminist arguments – tried to address the issue of prostitution, in many cases responding to fears that had to do with the loss of patriarchy and the construction of a particular kind of Puerto Rican nation, white, elite and patriarchal. These “discourses about respectability shaped sexual practices, racial meanings, and sexual regulatory strategies” (Suárez Findlay 6), and managed to police prostitution, even if not without a substantial dose of resistance, as both Suárez Findlay and Vázquez Lazo have

demonstrated. More specifically, the increase in the levels of prostitution brought about a set of medical regulations intended to “reglamentar la prostitución desde un punto de vista sanitario” (Vázquez Lazo 51) as, from that moment on, “la medicina y la ley lograron imbricarse en un estrecho diálogo que duraría todo el siglo y desplazaría paulatinamente la figura del sacerdote teólogo, encargado hasta el momento de condenar la prostitución” (Vázquez Lazo 51). This shift, which started in Europe and reached Puerto Rico in the final decades of the 19th century, would thus ultimately justify the intervention of government and police in the practice of prostitution.

The regulation of brothels and prostitution in Puerto Rico was a colonial policy (Briggs 58-60) and a process that the Spanish metropolis “strongly endorsed [...] as essential to a ‘modern’ nation, enjoining a sharp geographic separation between *gente decente* and prostitutes” (Briggs 59), a philosophy which, the author argues, “provided a legitimating argument for U.S. colonialism” (Briggs 41). Regulation was also an institutional process that had wider implications for gender and sexuality, and that positioned marginalized women according to a set of spatial restrictions that dictated acceptable locations and configurations not only for the prostitute but also for the brothel and for its relation to the street and to the city.³ It constructed and circumscribed a network of other spaces – hospitals, prisons, so-called zones of tolerance – associated with the brothel, and meant to assist officials in the control and regulation of prostitution.

³ The studies that have been done so far have been on Puerto Rico’s two major cities, San Juan and Ponce. Much work remains to be done on prostitution in other towns and rural areas on the island.

It is important to point out that this spatial reconfiguration of urban space and of the spaces of prostitution was hardly arbitrary. Instead, it was conditioned by a set of racial and class prejudices that informed the effort to separate and denote racial, class and sexual characteristics as undesirable in the Puerto Rican national discourse. As Teresita Martínez-Vergne has argued with regard to the ideology of the *beneficencia*, which stood at the intersection of charity work and social control, “Official preoccupation with prostitution occurred not because of the existence of a class of women who provided sexual favors for men outside of marriage and the family but because in so doing they mingled indiscriminately with people of a better class: upper- and middle-class women and men” (Martínez-Vergne 32). Thus, the official control of prostitution, the characteristics of race and class with which it was identified in the popular imagination, as well as its strategic association with disease and delinquency on the part of official discourse in the 19th century turned women into “mujeres doble, triple y hasta cuatro veces marginadas” (Vázquez Lazo 13), a process of marginalization that offered a convenient “other” to the Puerto Rican national ideal that was being constructed at the same time. The irony lies in the way in which, in the late 20th century, these are precisely the characteristics (real or imagined) that have inserted prostitution and the space of the brothel in literary and cinematic representations of the Puerto Rican nation, and that have inspired a rethinking and a reconfiguration of the spatial tropes, as well as the gender, racial and class composition of the Puerto Rican nation.

There were multiple ways in which the Puerto Rican government regulated the practice of prostitution beginning in the 19th century. Following measures already in

existence in Europe,⁴ Puerto Rican officials used strategies like the employment of “médicos higienistas” (Vázquez Lazo 55) to work in newly created hospitals that served prostitutes. Instead of voluntary, the visits to the hospital were made mandatory, as women involved in prostitution were obligated to sign a register which assured their inclusion in the lists of “elementos divergentes” (Vázquez Lazo 105) and to subject themselves to vaginal exams twice a week. As Vázquez Lazo points out, this practice of inscription and control through official and patriarchal gaze and institutions assured the construction of a national ideal of gender by means of classifying and delimiting the traits and the kinds of behavior that were undesirable (Vázquez Lazo 76), traits and actions that did not conform to the traditional feminized model of the nation, which, in Puerto Rico, was enhanced by racial and class characteristics. Poverty, often stemming from the legacy of slavery on the island, and the lack of other options for women to support themselves and their children, were common factors for prostitution in 19th century Puerto Rico. As a consequence, black women, former slaves and poor working women practiced prostitution – or at least were denounced and documented as such – more often than white women of a higher social class. These same black, working-class women had no place in the model of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* as it was constructed according to racial (white) and class lines. They were aberrations, examples of how a wife and a mother supposed to reproduce national characteristics and ideology was expected not to look like or act.

⁴ Regulation in Puerto Rico began in the 19th century when the island was still a Spanish colony, and continued after 1898, when it passed under US control.

Space was the main axis along which women's bodies and the practice of prostitution were regulated, restricted and controlled. The most stark examples of this spatially-based marginalization may be found in the 1890 Reglamento de Higiene Pública, which divided prostitutes in three main categories:

Primera. Las internas que viven en casas de efecto matriculadas como tales.
Segunda. Las externas o sueltas que acuden a las casas de recibir, hallándose registrados sus nombres en libro especial de la casa [...]. Tercera. Las que ejercen sus tratos en su casa o morada (Reglamento, citado en Vázquez Lazo 113).

Women were thus categorized according to the type of house in which they practiced prostitution – whether they were residents of an officially registered house, only temporarily visited one or accepted their clients into their own house. The fact that the word that the Reglamento uses is “casa” and not “burdel,” “prostíbulo” or another denomination of brothel is significant in that it extends and reproduces the domestic sphere of femininity, even if the social discourse on prostitution of that period condemned prostitutes as “mujeres públicas.” This fact suggests the extent to which space, and the domestic sphere in particular, were closely linked not only to the practice of prostitution, but also to the discourse on gender and sexuality – and, at the same time, how problematic their understanding and their use was in the context of women who did not conform to traditionally accepted gender roles.

Another way in which prostitution was spatially regulated was through the social controls imposed on the urban mobility of prostitutes in cities like San Juan and Ponce. The Reglamento ordered that prostitutes could not “circular por las calles ni paseos céntricos de la población antes de las once de la noche ni aun en los días de fiesta nacional, función de teatro o cualquier otro espectáculo público hasta que terminen estos,

aunque sea en hora avanzada” (Vázquez Lazo 114). They were expected to keep the houses’ doors and windows shut, and not to lean outside the windows, so as not to be seen from the outside, or so as not to attract clients from the street. The persistence with which this rule was enforced can be seen in the judicial cases against prostitution from the final decades of the 19th century: “Las infracciones más frecuentes fueron sobre aquellos puntos del Reglamento que prohibían su paso por la ciudad durante el día o exigían que las puertas y ventanas de sus casas estuvieran clausuradas” (Vázquez Lazo 177). In Ponce prostitutes could not go out in the streets before 10:30pm any day of the week (Vázquez Lazo 154). Rules like these limited prostitutes’ mobility both spatially and temporally, forcibly excluding them from the cities’ everyday life, as well as from the benefits of most social activities that took place.

By these means, the rules also implemented in practical terms the discourse that used “definitions of ‘honor,’ ‘respectability,’ ‘race,’ and ‘proper sexual practices’ [to ascertain] who will be included or excluded in the national community being imagined” (Suárez Findlay 12). *La gran familia puertorriqueña*, as Suárez Findlay notes, was the creation of 19th century Liberal autonomists: “To replace the brutality of slavery and the libreta labor regime, they posited a benevolent but hierarchical paternalism as the glue which would hold a society together under Liberal leadership and which would more effectively mold a pliable workforce” (Suárez Findlay 55), with the implicit understanding that women in their roles as mothers were the main figure responsible for the successful construction of this national model. Given this new responsibility attributed to women and female sexuality, the regulations went beyond discourse, to

effectively “consolidate elite male Liberal power” (Suárez Findlay 78) and to distinguish between women fit to be mothers of the Puerto Rican nation, and those who departed from the ideal white, elite, “respectable” model. What that meant in everyday practice was that rules separated prostitutes from those that could identify themselves as citizens of the Puerto Rican nation, as women practicing prostitution could not legitimately be present in most spaces and partake in most activities to which the “Puerto Rican national family” had access during the day, even if they were still expected to pay a monthly quota for being included in the official register of prostitution.

Any transgression of these rules on the part of the prostitutes meant not only official censure, fines and possible imprisonment, but also carried the risk of violence in everyday life. Vázquez Lazo cites evidence of the stoning of prostitutes who were only complying with the Reglamento’s rules of visiting a hospital for vaginal exams twice a week. Men intercepted these women and attempted to throw stones on them or to run them over. Not surprisingly, these acts of violence had little legal consequences for the aggressors, even when women were hurt or exposed as being prostitutes. Social and spatial control thus intersected and found their ultimate expression at the expense of women who were already marginalized and were often forced to endure sexual violence for lack of other options of employment.

Yet another way in which prostitutes were marginalized in and through urban space can be found in the rules that delimited specific areas of the city as “zonas de tolerancia” (Vázquez Lazo 114) and ordered that it was only there that brothels would be

allowed to exist. This policy was inspired by fear and by the desire to control both sexuality and race. Laura Briggs points out that

The institution of the segregated district for prostitutes also immediately followed the abolition of slavery, and was part of an extensive system of limiting the movements of free laborers, black and white. By the 1890s, the majority of the women in San Juan were black or mixed race (Briggs 58).

The case of Ponce is again representative, as its own Reglamento ponceño delimited the area between “Las calles de Buenos-Aires, Virtud al Norte, Jobo partiendo de la Salud al Este, Callejón del Comercio, calle de la Luna extremos Este y Oeste, calle de Vista Alegre, Barrio de Ballajá, Callejón del perro y Punta brava en la Playa” (Reglamento ponceño, Vázquez Lazo 156), and it became illegal for any woman even “alleged to be a prostitute” (Suárez Findlay 89) to be present in other parts of the city. Similarly, San Juan only allowed brothels to be located between “las calles de Tetuán desde los números 36 y 39, recintos Norte y Sur y calle de Norzagaray” (Vázquez Lazo 114). The specificity of these instructions inadvertently alludes to mapping, in this case that of sexuality and race onto urban maps that clearly define female (often black) sexuality⁵ as undesirable and only allowed to exist in spaces regulated by law -- an exclusion made more evident by the fact that the area outlined by the streets described above compiles the outermost part of the city (hence the literal spatial marginalization), which also lays closest to the piers and the military forts. These urban maps also allude to the mapping of the island by the early conquistadors, and thus enhance the association between the

⁵ It is important to note that the prostitution that was regulated was female prostitution. This is not to imply that male prostitution did not exist at the time in Puerto Rico, but to suggest that gender operated in the discourses and in the practices that were implemented in multiple and complex ways.

masculine gaze, female sexuality and national discourse, implicit in the Reglamento's rules.

Regulation was made possible by means of a variety of additional spaces established to complement the "zonas de tolerancia" and the medical and legal control of brothels and prostitution. Prisons were the most obvious place through which the regulation of prostitution was effectuated. In contrast to countries like Spain, which had "casas de recogimiento" (Vázquez Lazo 46) specifically for prostitutes, as "places of tolerance" that would "make room for illegitimate sexualities" (Foucault 4), in Puerto Rico the women were taken directly to the city prisons, where they were often subjected to violence and abuse by guards. As previously noted, prostitutes were often imprisoned precisely because they were seen on the street or were accused of not obeying the strict rules regarding exposure to the external gaze.

In addition to prisons, Puerto Rican authorities established hospitals dedicated specifically to the treatment and hospitalization of women that practiced prostitution. El Hospital de Santa Rosa in San Juan was representative of the problematic functions that these establishments fulfilled, and of the contradictory methods that they used. The hall that was initially intended for the prostitutes was soon closed and they were transferred several times, until the Hospital Especial de Mujeres was opened in San Juan in 1912. These hospitals were the places in which mandatory medical exams were performed and in which women were interned, often against their will, if they were deemed to suffer from a contagious disease. Instead of helping women, these spaces often subjected them

to dismal conditions (Vázquez Lazo 192-193) and in many ways women's stay in them resembled imprisonment, as they were usually interned there against their will.

The Brothel in Puerto Rican Literature and Film

An analysis of the relationship between space, gender and sexuality in Puerto Rican cultural production must include a discussion of the brothel as a site where historical tensions of class, race, gender and sexuality surface and reconfigure traditional national imaginaries. When writers and directors choose to speak from the space of the brothel, they often do so in order to confront patriarchal discourses with respect to female roles and participation in the Puerto Rican nation. The brothel focalizes power relations of gender and sexuality while offering multiple possibilities to subvert patriarchal hierarchies and to reorder traditional views of gender and sexuality in national discourse. In this section I analyze literary and cinematic representations of the negotiations of gender and sexuality in relation to the construction of the Puerto Rican nation-state.

In Luis Rafael Sánchez's story "Tiene la noche una raíz," the traditional patriarchal space of the house is transformed by female sexuality, and revealed as a brothel through the gazes and the gossip of local women. The story's protagonist, the prostitute Gurdelia Grifitos, lives condemned by these women and exploited by their husbands, until one night she opens the door to a ten-year old boy who wants to find out why all men come to Gurdelia's house. At first confused by the boy's request, the woman offers him tenderness and maternal love that leave him convinced that he has experienced something divine, in an allusion to the mother/whore paradigm. By juxtaposing two

figures – that of the prostitute and that of the mother – the story uses the space of the house as a brothel and as a home, as a male-dominated site of exploitation and a maternal, nurturing space. In this way it inspires empathy, critiques the abuse of female sexuality and proposes a more complex representation of it, one that goes beyond marginalization and condemnation. It is a gesture through which, as Luis Felipe Díaz notes, the popular voice (in this case female) “se ha encargado de darle sentido y perdurabilidad, desde su otra historia, a la narración nacional” (Díaz 188). Luis Molina Casanova’s film *La guagua aérea*⁶ adapts Sánchez’s short story but makes Gurdelia Grifitos part of the migratory experience, representing the incident as a flashback while the woman is on a plane to New York, thus transforming her memory of the incident that occurred in the house/brothel as a motive for her escape, and for joining the Puerto Rican community in the US. In the story, as well as the film, the house/brothel is a space that reproduces traditional models of femininity and only allows the construction of temporary solidarity or of an alternative community through an escape from the life of prostitution.

The House and the Brothel in *Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres*

While Gurdelia Grifitos is a fictional character, another prostitute, Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, an emblematic historical figure from Ponce, has inspired a number of

⁶ For an analysis of the film’s representation of the Puerto Rican migratory experience, see Ana Yolanda Ramos Zayas’s “Implicit Social Knowledge, Cultural Capital and ‘Authenticity’ Among Puerto Ricans in Chicago.” For a discussion of the film’s position in the Puerto Rican film industry, see Silvia Álvarez Curbelo, “Vidas prestadas: el cine y la puertorriqueñidad.”

writers who, in the past three decades, have revisited the story of her life. Two of the most fascinating narratives that look back at (and reinvent the image of) Isabel la Negra first appeared in the magazine *Zona carga y descarga* in 1975: Rosario Ferré's "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres" and Manuel Ramos Otero's "La última plena que bailó Luberza."

Ferré's story is an account of the encounter of Isabel Luberza, *dama de sociedad*, and Isabel la Negra, the prostitute who had been the lover of Luberza's husband Ambrosio for years, until his death. Isabel la Negra visits the wife to claim her half of Ambrosio's house, with the intention of converting it into a brothel. During the encounter, the two women transform into one another, Luberza destroying Isabel la Negra physically, yet suggesting "a fusion of both women into one indivisible entity" (Aparicio 4), becoming her, absorbing her consciousness, and initiating "una alianza silenciosa entre ambas" (Gelpí 159). Through the representation of the two complementary spaces of the house and brothel, on the one hand, and of the two female bodies, on the other, the story points to the oppression that the two women shared during their respective relationships with Ambrosio, and consequently becomes a forceful indictment of the subordinate position of women in relation to the patriarchal norms of Puerto Rican society. The story also offers a powerful critique of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism and traditional models of the nation, as it uncovers the complex ways in which national consensus is built on racial and gender oppression. It ultimately proposes a technology of resistance that not simply allows for the inclusion of women, Afro-Puerto Ricans and

other marginalized groups in the national imaginary, but also proposes a new national model based on gender solidarity and the subversion of patriarchy.

The space of the brothel, the construction and the subversion of models of sexuality and national imaginaries that occur in it in Ferré's story are inevitably tied to the space of the house, and to the complex web of hierarchies and negotiations of power that develop in it, as discussed in Chapter 2.

The interconnected spaces of the brothel and the house become sites of the construction of masculinity and femininity, and, in the process, develop a critique of traditional configurations of gender and sexuality, specifically a modified version of the virgin/prostitute binary. The house, occupied by Isabel Luberza and desired by Isabel la Negra as the future location of her brothel, emerges as a site of the construction of traditional patriarchal models of respectable femininity, but also problematizes them by exposing the structures of oppression that participate in the reaffirmation and in the reproduction of these models.

The space of the house (and future brothel) is represented as the site of the construction of traditional models of femininity, through the interactions between Isabel Luberza and her husband Ambrosio, as well as through the ways in which the woman internalizes the patriarchal structures of oppression that impact her behavior and self-understanding as a woman. Critics have pointed out the ways in which, even though the house is a space that has traditionally been gendered feminine, it has also historically been a subject of patriarchal authority (Duncan 131). Isabel Luberza's house is no different. Even though in the story it emerges as the property of women (intended to be

shared by the two Isabels after Ambrosio's death), through multiple flashbacks it is revealed as a site of domination and oppression. It is in the house where Isabel Luberza found out that Ambrosio had maintained a relationship with Isabel la Negra, and it is also in the house where she reproduces a gender model in an attempt to bring her husband back home. The masculine figure is constructed parallel to that of Isabel, as having the freedom to impose gender and sexual relations, as there is nothing to prevent him from continuing the relationship with both women, and, as revealed later in the story, of exploiting both. When she realizes that Ambrosio is not about to abandon her rival, Isabel Luberza employs other methods to win him back, "por medio de esa sabiduría antiquísima que había heredado de mi madre y mi madre de su madre. Comencé a colocar diariamente la servilleta dentro del aro de plata junto a tu plato [...] Colocaba sobre tu cama las sábanas todavía tibias de sol bebido, blancas y suaves bajo la palma de la mano" (Ferré, "Cuando" 75). In the process, she affirms traditional models of gender and sexuality, specifically ideas of domesticity and of what a good housewife should be: one that takes care of her husband's comfort in the home. These practices and techniques are the inheritance of generations of women in her family, and Isabel Luberza becomes an example of the ways in which women themselves can become the perpetrators of patriarchal structures of oppression, as they internalize and reproduce them (Henao 13).

The specific model that Isabel Luberza reproduces in the story is that of a version of the virgin, in a traditional opposition with the prostitute – in her case, it is that of the faithful, devoted wife and housewife who follows the established social rules without resistance. In that sense, Isabel Luberza exemplifies one instance of the model of

marianismo, conditioned by religion, patriarchal society and culture (Ruíz Meléndez 13). Even though the story hardly touches upon the question of children, she is the model of motherhood and domesticity that Suárez Findlay and Laura Briggs argue was constructed in order to provide a figure that would be responsible for upholding the national model, as well as guilty in the instances in which it failed. As such, Isabel Luberza is not only a convenient mythical figure, exemplifying acceptable gender roles and behaviors (Palmer López, “Re-visión” 254), but also one that becomes a matrix for a possible critique of cultural nationalist models of the Puerto Rican nation, and of the gender and sexual axes of identity that it includes or excludes.

The construction of gender and sexuality in the story becomes more fluid when the space of the brothel is introduced, and unveiled as a site of a parallel construction of femininity and masculinity. Isabel la Negra is clearly described so as to correspond to the traditional model of the prostitute, both as an archetype and as a sexualized model of femininity, exoticized yet set in the specific historical and cultural context in which the story is set: “Isabel la Perla Negra del Sur, La Reina de Saba, the Queen of Chiva, la Chivas Rigal, la Tongolele, la Salomé, girando su vientre de giroscopio en círculos de bengala dentro de los ojos de los hombres” (Ferré, “Cuando” 67). She is the antipode of Isabel Luberza, exemplifying everything that is undesirable in the context of the Puerto Rican nation, from blackness to the emphasis on sexuality and seductive power.

Interestingly enough, even though the house is the space of the construction of acceptable and respectable models of femininity and the brothel is that of undesirable, excluded characteristics, the roles and the spaces are somewhat inverted when it comes to

the construction of masculinity in the story. The brothel becomes the site of reaffirmation of a specific form of masculinity, white, privileged and heterosexual. In Isabel la Negra's words, fathers took to the brothel their sons,

para que sus papás pudieran por fin dormir tranquilos porque los hijos que ellos hubieran parido no les habían salido mariconcitos, no les habían salido santoletitos con el culo astillado de porcelana, porque los hijos que ellos habían parido eran hijos de San Jierro y de Santa Daga pero solo podían traerlos a dónde mí para poder comprobarlo (Ferré, "Cuando" 72).

While the house is the space in which masculine control and patriarchal power are exercised, it is in the brothel where they are constructed, confirmed and reproduced. In this sense, the brothel also becomes a site for the reproduction of the Puerto Rican nation and its patriarchs, as their capacity to rule has often been closely associated with masculinity and virility.⁷

Another way in which the spaces of the brothel and the house intersect and complement each other in the construction and the critique of gender roles in the Puerto Rican national models is through the relationship between desire, pleasure and the gaze. In the case of the brothel, it is masculine pleasure and desire, and the male gaze, that police the space and construct masculinity in opposition to a desired, but undesirable

⁷ The most notable example of that traditional patriarchal image can be found in Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's depiction of Luis Muñoz Marín in his chronicle *Las tribulaciones de Jonás*. There, Rodríguez Juliá dedicates a substantial portion of the text to the description of the former governor's physical attributes. Muñoz Marín is repeatedly characterized as "un animal político" (Rodríguez Juliá 29, 37, 96), and as the owner of "el bigote más famoso de todo Puerto Rico" (Rodríguez Juliá 20) – descriptions intended to emphasize his virility and its supposedly logical consequence – his ability to serve as the father of the Puerto Rican nation. In these words, gender and sexuality intersect to delimit the outside and the inside of the nation, and to point out in whose (masculine) image this nation is constructed.

femininity. Reminiscing of the later years of her relationship with Ambrosio, Isabel la Negra says,

Cuando te empezaste a poner viejo, Ambrosio, la suerte se me viró a favor. Sólo podías sentir placer al mirarme acostada con aquellos muchachos que me traías todo el tiempo y empezaste a temer que me vieran a escondidas de ti, que me pagaran más de lo que tú me pagabas, que un día te abandonara definitivamente (Ferré, “Cuando” 73).

These lines present the complex web of negotiations and power relations that take place in the brothel when it comes to the construction of gender, sexuality and Puerto Rican national imaginaries. On the one hand, as Doreen Massey has pointed out, the configuration of cities and the spaces within cities are often made for male consumption and pleasure, composing what she calls the “city of men” (Massey 234). In the case of the story, even in his impotence, Ambrosio finds a way to subject Isabel to his gaze and to experience pleasure through her sexuality. On the other hand, his desire and his pleasure also become a weakness and open the possibility for the woman to assume a position of power, as his fear of losing her distances him from the model of the patriarch who can have what he desires, certainly in the domestic sphere. This moment also represents an instance in which Ferré inverts gender roles and positions of power to critique hierarchies of gender and sexuality in the Puerto Rican nation and to expose the ways in which they can be subverted and transformed.

The intersection of desire, pleasure and the gaze in relation to the space of the house in turn develops from the perspective of Isabel la Negra, and has profound implications for the construction not only of gender, but also of race and class in the Puerto Rican national imaginary. Once Isabel la Negra decides that the house would be a

good place to move her brothel, which would represent “una redistribución ‘escandalosa’ de ese espacio doméstico de clase alta” (Gelpí 159), she goes to visit Isabel Luberza, and the sight of the house makes her remember “aquella visión que había tenido de niña, siempre que pasaba, descalza y en harapos, frente a aquella casa, la visión de un hombre vestido de hilo blanco, de pie en aquel balcón, junto a una mujer rubia, increíblemente bella, vestida con un traje de lamé plateado” (Ferré, “Cuando” 70). The memories uncover two social hierarchies that organize the relationship between Ambrosio, Isabel Luberza and Isabel la Negra – of class and race – and suggest that the desire that Isabel la Negra expresses for possessing the house is in part a result of a complex web of social, economic and racial structures of power and oppression. The passage contains two levels of contrasting images – of the girl’s poverty vs. the couple’s wealth, and of the girl’s implicit blackness, revealed in her name and in other sections of the story, vs. the couple’s whiteness, suggested through the references to the white suit and the blond hair. Isabel’s desire to enter and to own the house is then related directly to that image from the past, suggesting that having the house would be a subversive act of pleasure in response to Isabel’s subordination by elite white privilege.

Critics like Mayra Santos-Febres have interpreted Isabel la Negra’s desire for the house in more critical terms, arguing that it positions the black female character as a threat, because she “sigue ocupando el espacio de lo Otro, es el ser amenazante que le puede quitar la herencia a la mujer oficial, auténtica” (Santos-Febres, *Sobre piel y papel*, 154). While the element of threat certainly exists in the encounter between the two Isabels, and in the lover’s desire for the wife’s house, the story in fact appears to condone

the effectuation of this threat. The takeover (both material, of the house, and physical, of Isabel Luberza's body) is seen as a new beginning, as a subversion and a reconfiguration of a national model and its main figure, but without the complete destruction of that model (as is the case of Ramos Otero's literary version of Isabel la Negra's life).

As critics like Paula Black have argued, the "performance of gender identity varies according to space" (Black 183), and in the image of Isabel Luberza's house Isabel la Negra encounters the opportunity for a different performance of femininity. Instead of realizing an empty material threat, the desire and the possibility of ownership of the house gives her the chance to imagine herself as a different woman, in a different space: "Sentada en el balcón de mi nuevo prostíbulo sin que nadie sospeche, los balaústres de largas anáforas plateadas pintadas ahora de shocking pink alineados frente a mí" (Ferré 68). These words "[propose] new modes of writing and reading a national Puerto Rican cultural identity in more complex, and, hopefully, more democratic ways" (Aparicio 7). In this case, the story implies that class and race are possible routes for the subversion of traditional characteristics associated with the Puerto Rican national imaginary, and finds the source of their possibility in a figure that has previously been excluded from that imaginary, that of the lower-class Afro-Puerto Rican woman.

The spaces of the house and the brothel, together with the bodies of the two Isabels that inhabit them, become metaphoric sites of construction of the Puerto Rican national imaginary. Isabel Luberza exemplifies the construction of the traditional, acceptable, desired nation, that in which Ambrosio, in her words, "depositó en mi vientre la semilla sagrada que llevará tu nombre como debe ser siempre entre un señor y una

señora” (Ferré, “Cuando” 76). The union and the resulting cohesion of racial and class characteristics correspond to the cultural nationalist Puerto Rican model. However, in Ferré’s story, the Puerto Rican nation that is literally and metaphorically conceived in this way is quite problematic. The woman and mother in that union (Isabel Luberza) is a woman marginalized and oppressed in spite of her class and race, due to the patriarchal structure of the relationship in which she participates. The conception of this national model is one rooted not in a “Latin American national romance” (Sommer), but in gender oppression and infidelity, and thus is haunted by a structure of power that exploits women as national mothers while denying them any agency in the construction of the Puerto Rican nation.

The space of the brothel becomes, quite literally, the site of construction of a Puerto Rican national imaginary through Isabel la Negra’s body, with regard to the struggle, confrontation and negotiations of *la puertorriqueñidad* of the island Puerto Ricans vs. *la puertorriqueñidad* of the Puerto Ricans in the diaspora. The Puerto Rican diaspora in the US is present in the story in several ways, most notably through Isabel la Negra’s language. More than once in the text she uses words in English which, the readers are led to believe, are not only a consequence of her trips to Europe, but also of the fact that among her clients are Puerto Ricans who live in the US and who return to the island periodically.⁸ The Puerto Rican national imaginary is thus constructed not only

⁸ This would present a credible interpretation from a historical perspective, since, as Jorge Duany has demonstrated, mass Puerto Rican migration to the mainland US can be traced back to the 1920s. Evidence of it can be found in the multiple community organizations (voluntary associations, parades, festivals, and others), that were “swiftly reconstructed in the diaspora” (Duany 185).

through the character's gender, sexuality, class and racial axes of identity, but also through the language that she uses and that marks not only her, but also the people/clients that surround her.

The other way in which Isabel la Negra becomes a site for the construction of the Puerto Rican national imaginary is through her bodyspace (Duncan), through her body as a gendered space. She says that “ella era la prueba en cuerpo y sangre de que no existía diferencia entre los de Puerto Rico y los de Nueva York puesto que en su carne todos se habían unido” (Ferré, “Cuando” 66). In this case, Isabel's bodyspace is her body's superimposition on, or ability to function as a matrix for, the construction of the Puerto Rican national imaginary, beyond the schism of island and diaspora, or of the often perceived contrast between authenticity and foreignness. The body, intersected by axes of desire, domination and subjection (terms also relevant when discussing national models), becomes the space in which the geographically divided nation that “struggle[s] over language” (Flores, *Divided Borders* 201), what Juan Flores has called Puerto Rico's “divided borders” come together. That this happens in the body of a woman is problematic, because it evokes traditional association between nationhood, motherhood and model sexuality, but that this happens in the body of an Afro-Puerto Rican prostitute is significant because it proposes a different kind of origin, one based not on whiteness and class elitism, but, in a sense, on José Luis González's foundational first floor of the four-storied Puerto Rican house, that of African culture and of the legacy of slavery.

Rethinking Power in *La última plena que bailó Luberza*

Manuel Ramos Otero's story "La última plena que bailó Luberza," published alongside Ferré's short story, presents a strikingly different look at the figure of Isabel la Negra, and at the ways in which, through gender and sexuality, she transforms the spaces that she inhabits, including the symbolic space of the Puerto Rican nation. The story takes place during the final day of Isabel's life, and follows her from the church to her limousine, to a fortuneteller's house, and back to Frau Luberza's Dancing Hall, where she walks through the halls, fully in control of her body and of her space. The significance of the spaces that Isabel inhabits in this story is that she invests all of them with her power, as she manipulates priests, calls judges for favors, establishes and upholds her own rules back in the brothel, dismissing all threats, from malicious gazes to court orders against her. Consequently, the brothel, as a space of transgressive sexual practices, becomes a site that endows Isabel la Negra with power that she then uses in her confrontations with patriarchal structures of oppression that attempt to control and condemn her. It is murder that puts an end to her life, and even in that final scene of the story Isabel seems in control, following every bullet as it enters her body, tracing its route, as the assassins remain nameless and inconsequential.

At first glance, the organizing element of Ramos Otero's story is time, more than space. The plot begins with a time stamp of 6:13 A.M., and six more indications of time appear throughout the story, in a sequence that spans just over 24 hours. On the one hand, the indication of time creates an expectation for a climax, for a turning point that would justify the sense of urgency that emerges from the numbers. At the same time that

Ramos Otero creates that expectation, however, he subverts it by building a stream-of-consciousness narrative from alternating perspectives, which results in vertiginous changes of discourse that do not correspond to the linearity of time. On the other hand, the visual aspect of the time stamps (the methodical sequence of numbers that precede every episode in the story) alludes to the transgression of the conventions of the short story genre, as if one were about to see a new scene of a film or the beginning of a television episode every time the action is transported to a new moment. This fragmentation of the narrative also functions as a fragmentation of the space of the text, as it is literally divided into seven sections, each of them in its own way leading to Isabel's death. In this way, on yet another level, in contrast with Ferré's story of fusion and possibility, and keeping with the "negación de una historia monumental" (Sotomayor, *Femina Faber*, 292), in his story Ramos Otero fragments and questions the possibility of a cohesive national subject in the figure of Isabel la Negra, or in that of any other character in the short story.

The fragmentation and the (im)possibility of the national subject constitute only one of a multiplicity of contrasts between Ramos Otero's and Ferré's short stories. Another striking difference between them is the absence of the space of the house in "La última plena que bailó Luberza." While the house figures prominently in Ferré's story (and traditionally in the larger context of her literary work), and while there are multiple references to houses in Santos-Febres's and in López Neris's work, Ramos Otero practically erases the space of the house from the narrative, and from any Puerto Rican

national imaginary that it might arguably construct.⁹ The only instance of a reference to a house sounds like a fragment of a memory which appears in parentheses that Isabel quickly closes:

[el] caserón de los Oppenheimer donde Mamá María le espantaba las moscas a la señora por el día y por la noche le espantaba el marido a la señora y se acostaba con el señor como su madre se había acostado con el señor de entonces y había espantado moscas con inmensos abanicos de paja (Ramos Otero 197).

This image hardly resembles that of a unified, cohesive and patriarchal national house. Instead of being controlled and dominated by a patriarch in the image of Ambrosio (or Quintín Mendizábal, or even the dead father in Magali García Ramis's *Felices días, tío Sergio*), the relations of power in the house to which Isabel refers are manipulated by the servant, Mamá María, who exercises her sexual power over the master as easily as she scares away the flies from his wife's face. This image sharply contrasts with the cultural

⁹ In certain respects, the representation of the house here is similar, and in others it is different from that in Ramos Otero's story "Casa clausurada." In "Casa clausurada," the last remaining member of a family visits the abandoned family house and remains trapped inside, with a mixture of terror and relief. At first the protagonist is cautious about entering the house: "La casa. Clausurada. Espera. Porque yo la viole. Piensa que el tiempo perdido podrá reconstruirse a través de mi memoria. Piensa que por mi fetichismo de recuerdos llenos de polvo y de tristeza gris, la casa vuelve a tener la juventud disuelta en el viento que la carcome con el aroma del monóxido de carbono mutilando su piel" (Ramos Otero 67), afraid that "el olor de los ancestros me golpeará en la cara" (Ramos Otero 68), terrified of the possibility of having imposed on him a collective memory and history that he does not share. In the end, after looking at the family albums, he feels drawn towards a common identity and is much more conflicted about the national house/family: "El temor que una mano mueva la perilla y la casa quede abierta tratando de evocar un pasado un tiempo anterior a su existencia, una vida sin vida, sin velas que se prenden, un mundo sin casas clausuradas. El temor de que al abrir la puerta el mundo de la casa clausurada termine para siempre" (Ramos Otero 72). The identification still feels like an entrapment, as the character has no possibility of reconstructing the family (exemplified by his dead mother) but instead remains inside because he is engulfed and afraid of not having access to the house if he leaves -- a powerful statement on the technology of nationalism.

nationalist notion of the *gran familia puertrriqueña*, as it presents an inversion of the gender relations of power, and ultimately depicts, albeit briefly, the dysfunction in the family house (a triangle that involves a subordinated, yet subordinating servant, as opposed to a traditional patriarchal matrimony).

Even before setting his protagonist in the space of the brothel, Ramos Otero introduces two other spaces that serve to subvert the traditional Puerto Rican cultural nationalist imaginary: the church and the limousine. In official discourse the church still represents the reproduction of traditional gender roles and of relations of power, in relation to the patriarchal model of the nation¹⁰. In contrast, Ramos Otero opens the story by positioning the character of Isabel la Negra in the space of the church in order to expose and subvert certain contradictions embedded in the relationship between gender, Catholicism and religious norms. Much like in “Negocio redondo,” the second part of Jacobo Morales’s *Dios los cría*, in which a secret and semi-legal transaction takes place in a church, and in which a priest desires one of the nuns, the church in Ramos Otero’s story is hardly the model of an institution and of a space that upholds traditional roles and power relations. On the contrary, it becomes a space characterized by hypocrisy and by an abuse of power that renders impossible the figure of the citizen promoted by cultural nationalist discourse, and that constructs an alternative model of the citizen, whose rights and whose relationship to different institutions is governed by mutual exploitation and by economic and sexual power.

¹⁰ A recent example, one of many, is Archbishop Roberto González’s opposition to gay marriage on the basis of moral and religious concerns.

The first glimpse of the church that the story offers is not that of piety, devotion or the fulfillment of traditional Catholic values. Instead, it is a secret meeting between Isabel and the Monsignor, in which the woman makes a generous offer to buy an indulgence: “Vengo a comprar el reino de los cielos para cuando me muera” (Ramos Otero 195). Not only is she in a position to offer a significant amount of money for the controversial practice of the indulgence, but, more importantly, she is in a position to dictate the terms of the transaction, to exploit the priest’s interest, and to withdraw the offer at any time: “el Monseñor sabe que ésta será mi última oferta para comprar el reino de los cielos” (Ramos Otero 195). In this way, the story inverts gender and social roles on two levels – first, a woman that is seemingly marginalized twice (both as a woman and as a prostitute) has the power to manipulate and dictate the conditions of a significant financial transaction with a seemingly powerful institution (the Catholic Church). Second, this episode also blurs the boundaries of Christian ethics and corruption, as the priest accepts money for an absolution that he does not believe should be granted:

¡Tú maldita pecadora Luberza a ti no hay padrenuestro que te salve del mangle asqueroso de tu vida? de: ¡Tú Luberza de los mil demonios del fango ni tu dinero ni tus gangarrias de dama elegante pueda tapar la peste de tu sudor de azufre negra bandolera puta arrabalera a ti no te toca ni el pedazo de cielo polvoriento sobre San Antón (Ramos Otero 195-196).

It is in the very space of that church that corruption and bribery invert relations of power and thus construct an alternative, caricaturesque notion of citizenship and nation, dependent upon one’s ability to participate in economic transactions in order to gain inclusion in the national symbols and rituals.

The racism embedded in the Monsignor's words functions as yet another level of marginalization that the woman is able to confront and subvert with her economic power, and thus reflects a profound critique of the institution of the Catholic Church. More importantly, it serves as evidence of the futility of the racial aspect of the construction of Puerto Rican national identity, as the notion of the three cultures (an egalitarian combination of the Hispanic, African and Taíno cultures) falls apart in the priest's racist uttering. His words function as a poignant critique of the official discourse on race in Puerto Rico, as his character implies the extent to which racism and the marginalization of Afro-Puerto Ricans still exists on the island.

The corruption that takes place in the church goes beyond indulgences, and reaches some of the basic tenets of Catholicism, such as the priests' celibacy and the condemnation of prostitution. In a surprising turn, the conversation between Isabel and the Monsignor ends with a clarification – the mayor has already reserved the girl that the Monsignor usually requests, but Isabel would be happy to have the fifteen-year old Providencia visit him that night instead. The girl's very name is ironic, as its implication of divine guidance stands in contradiction to the abuse of power and to the transgression of religious norms that the Monsignor is about to commit. The fact that she is a young Dominican woman smuggled into Puerto Rico in secret makes her situation even more tragic, as she can count neither on Isabel's protection, nor on that of the legal authorities. The priest's use of the services of Isabel's brothel then complicates the gendered relations of power in the story – on the one hand, Isabel holds the economic and sexual power to control the Monsignor, while on the other hand, one of the instruments that enables her

power is the exploitation of other women. In this sense, Isabel emerges as a figure that subverts gender roles only to the extent that she extracts a personal benefit, which might result in a social outrage – her indulgence – but not in any large-scale social transformation of gender norms and expectations. In this way, Ramos Otero represents the failure to construct a cohesive or ethically redeemable subject, whether feminine or masculine, whether associated with the center or with the margins of the national discourse, and consequently expresses a profound, however implicit, critique of cultural nationalism's inability to fulfill its discourse and its ideological claims.

The second space in which Ramos Otero positions his protagonist is her limousine – significantly, not simply a car, but a vehicle that indicates luxury and power. Ironically, the description of Isabel's limousine is also reminiscent of the description of a hearse: “Las ventanillas de cristal ahumado de la limosina de Frau Luberza no permiten que los que caminan por la calle vean que Frau Luberza, recostada contra los interiores blanco perla de piel y moaré, parece la Viuda Negra de los arácnidos” (Ramos Otero 197). The car's darkness, the position of the woman's body and the reference to the black widow serve as foreshadowing of Isabel's impending death, and evoke solemnity and solitude, as she travels alone and invisible.

The urban landscape through which the limousine moves indicates the modernity imagined and desired by Puerto Rican cultural nationalist discourse. However, as depicted in the story, that modernity fails to turn into a space of the construction of a national community. On the contrary – Isabel is alone, isolated, and even the living only exist to remind her of the dead:

ése parado frente al Parque de Bombas se parece al difunto Meñón; ese otro sentado en el banco de la plaza se parece al difunto Gastón; ese otro recostado sobre la puerta del Comité Pipiolo se parece al difunto Franciscolo; ese guardia de palito se parece al difunto Víctor Virgilio; hoy nadie se me parece al Licenciado (Ramos Otero 197).

While alluding to a feminine version of Benjamin's flâneur, her depiction is also that of an anachronism, of somebody that is able to control, exploit and manipulate, but not to belong – a marginalization that, as previously discussed, results in part from her gender and occupation, and in part from her power to control and order, as opposed to participate on equal terms in any national community.

In the context of the above passage, it is also significant to note that, as Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé has argued in relation to other stories by Ramos Otero, “there is here both the invocation of a national identity and its short-cutting” (Cruz-Malavé, “Towards an Art of Transvestism,” 159). The depiction of the national community in the story is hardly that imagined and desired by the discourse of cultural nationalism. It is rather one in which solitude and corruption pervade (from the solitary figures of the men that she passes by on the street, to the mayor and the judges that she can call for favors when her brothel is threatened by the law). In this sense, even as Ramos Otero creates the image of a woman who has the power to control society, he also demonstrates the contradictions, the hypocrisy and the weaknesses of that society, as it fails to amount or conform to any cohesive notion of a Puerto Rican national imaginary.

The second part of the story takes place in Isabel's brothel, which enhances the critique and the suggested impossibility of the Puerto Rican cultural nationalist model

through the configuration of the space and through the specific ways in which people inhabit that space.

The first way in which the story uses the space of the brothel is to critique the cultural nationalist model of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, and its traditional image of the national patriarch. In contrast to the model exemplified by the patriarchal figure of Luis Muñoz Marín, as argued above, the space of the brothel lacks a prominent masculine figure. Instead, it is substituted by the feminine, yet ghostly figure of Isabel. The men that enter are rather an afterthought in Isabel's mind, even as she walks down the hallways of the brothel and listens in on every room. She (and not a man) is the omnipresent and omnipotent figure, claiming that “ningún macho es más macho que Frau Luberza” (Ramos Otero 204) and investing the space of the brothel with her presence and power: “Pasa por las paredes sus ojos Frau Luberza. Se apresura Frau Luberza. Posa el oído sobre la puerta de la Providencia Frau Luberza. Todo lo sabe Frau Luberza” (Ramos Otero 207). She balances her power (and the continuous, uninterrupted operation of the brothel) on a blurry line between favors and blackmail, and confronts every governmental or institutional threat with a phone call:

¡otra orden de la Corte Suprema del carajo Viejo acusando a Frau Luberza Oppenheimer [...] de ser la propietaria de un antro de perdición o casa de lenocinio! [...] Me busco el directorio de teléfonos influyentes y llamo al juez que se las buscaba con la Meche o llamo al juez que se las arregla con la Polilla todos los jueves [...] y otra orden de la Corte Suprema que se va por el inodoro! (Ramos Otero 201).

Instead of a national unification in which legal institutions control and order society, in Ramos Otero's story these institutions are powerless. The officials' corruption gives Isabel the tools to confront and to subvert the law in order to establish an alternative

social order, which she executes not from a governmental office but from the brothel. In this sense, not only does the story present an alternative, matriarchal and subversive figure of national leadership, but also proposes an alternative to the traditional spatial tropes associated with the national imaginary (the house and state institutions), suggesting the brothel as an alternative site of the construction of social relations that determine the (in)efficiency and the (im)possibility of the national model as conceptualized by Puerto Rican cultural nationalist ideology.

The physical configuration of the space of the brothel enhances this notion of impossibility and critique of the cultural nationalist ideology. Instead of a large family house through which the family members move freely (as in Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* or García Ramis's *Felices días, tío Sergio*) the brothel is divided into "20 cuartitos" (Ramos Otero 206), each inhabited by a girl and by her clients. The only one that can move from room to room is Isabel, but even she remains outside, in the hallway, listening and observing without entering the rooms. The *gran familia* is absent from that narrative, and to the extent to which any sort of society exists, it is fragmented, separated, deplete of cohesion or solidarity, and self-sufficient for the benefit of its own reproduction and existence. The imagined unity and uniformity of the Puerto Rican nation, in terms of both class and race, becomes an impossibility as the brothel emerges as a fragmented space of sexual and economic transactions. In contrast to the space of the beauty salon, in which consumption can be understood to function as a form of agency,¹¹ from the standpoint of the marginalized, in the case of the brothel the

¹¹ For the analysis of consumption as a form of agency and resistance to marginalization and disempowerment, see Binnie (1995).

consumers are men who enjoy economic and in most cases racial privilege. The women that Isabel employs don't seem to benefit from the transaction in any way, as Isabel continuously reiterates that they are "material" (Ramos Otero 200) and that she is doing them a favor that they now have to repay her.

The final manifestation of Ramos Otero's critique of the Puerto Rican national model can be found in the story's final episode. Isabel's powerful, yet haunting presence in the brothel ends with her assassination by "cuatro machos de humo" (Ramos Otero 208), reminiscent of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse who bring war, disease and imminent death. The space of the brothel then becomes the site of Isabel's violent death, no longer her fortress, no longer able to protect her and to maintain and reproduce her power. As Cruz-Malavé argues in another article, this assassination can be interpreted as yet another act of subversion of national imagery and ideology: "la escritura de Ramos Otero no sólo marca, como hemos señalado, una ruptura con el yo patriarcal, autoritario de la generación del 50, sino que rompe también, en términos más generales, con un discurso de formación nacional que convierte la patria en mujer para poseerla y contenerla, para hablar en su nombre o escribir sobre ella" (Cruz-Malavé, "Para virar al macho," 263). In this way, Isabel's vulnerability in the space in which she appeared to have the most control and security once again subverts the patriarchal model of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* – the alternative figure of power and leadership is not deposed through legal or official means, but at the hands of hired assassins, obeying the orders of a nameless master. The society that emerges on the pages of Ramos Otero's story is marked by such disarray and dysfunction that the instruments of power and control spiral

deeper into the underworld, as powerful men find it necessary to employ means more violent and less legal than Isabel's blackmail and favoritism. In a symbolic final scene, the four assassins are seen kissing as they disappear in the fog, in a homoerotic gesture that leaves one wondering whether Isabel's death signifies the beginning of something new, of a social order no longer organized around the axis of patriarchy and heterosexuality (that the very Isabel reproduced throughout her life, in the space of the brothel), or whether the violence that would initiate such possibility (Isabel's murder) already forfeits its chances for existence. In either case, this final act of violence, followed almost instantly by homoeroticism, serves as a double critique of the Puerto Rican cultural nationalist imaginary, of its premise of a utopian unity and of a heterosexual, patriarchal hierarchy.

Transgression and Punishment in *Life of Sin*

Several years after Ferré's and Ramos Otero's stories, Efraín López Neris¹² made *Life of Sin* (1979), a film based on the life of Isabel la Negra. The film follows a reporter as he investigates the rise and the tragic fall of the famous prostitute, offering a perspective that clearly contrasts with previous (feminist) literary representations. It presents Isabel's life as a tragedy, and proposes a disturbing notion of justice that can only be understood from within the framework of patriarchal norms and limits imposed

¹² Efraín López Neris was born in Caguas in 1937 and began his acting career in the early 1960s, participating in several feature films in the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, he played the role of El Chino Perales in the 2004 film *Desamores*, and has also taken part in the 2008 production *Las dos caras de Jano*. He has directed the TV series *Con lo que cuenta este país* (1991) and *Life of Sin* (1979), his only feature film. (imdb.com)

on gender and sexuality. The very title suggests a form of redemption that sees abandonment and betrayal as inevitable payback for daring to ignore or transgress gender and sexual norms allowed by dominant patriarchal discourses.

The space in which the film's plot opens is that of the cemetery, at a time immediately following Isabel's funeral. A journalist (Henry Darrow) working on a report on Isabel's life and death attempts to interview the last three people to leave her grave – her cousin Rita,¹³ her adopted son Manolín, and another friend – but is denied that request. The fact that the film begins at the cemetery, with Isabel's death and with the silence surrounding that death is hardly a coincidence. On the contrary, it sets up the rest of the film as a series of flashbacks that create the expectation of the eventual revelation of the causes behind her death, in a manner reminiscent of Gabriel García Márquez's *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*. The title complements that expectation by suggesting that the causes might be found in Isabel's "life of sin." The space of the cemetery and the film's title thus set up the film's plot as an investigation that answers the central question before it even poses it. Isabel's life of sin is not simply the implied reason behind her tragic death. More importantly, it is a life that she chose and consequently a death that she brought upon herself, by behaving in a way that is neither "virtuous" nor "honorable," as understood by religious and national discourses.

¹³ Neither "Rita" nor any of the actresses playing the prostitutes in Isabel's brothel are explicitly credited in the film. Their names appear in a list under the collective title "Isabel's Girls": Lottie Cordero, Awilda Lugo, Doris Berminquel, Sandy Sommers and Betzaida Falcón. This fact is not only curious, but also notable in that it reproduces the invisibility of female Afro-Puerto Rican actresses in Puerto Rican cinema.

Notwithstanding the manner of dying, death can be thought of as a collective experience that unites a family in mourning, and has often been attributed such a function by Puerto Rican writers and directors. One of the best examples of this representation is Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's depiction of the death of Rafael Cortijo in *El entierro de Cortijo*, a chronicle in which people from all races and classes in the Puerto Rican nation come together to bid farewell to one of the country's most prominent artists. In contrast to the description of Isabel's death and burial in Mayra Santos-Febres's novel *Nuestra Señora de la Noche* (see farther below), the representation of Isabel's funeral in *Life of Sin* hardly enables the creation of a national community. Even though her figure is consistently represented as important on and beyond the island (a sailor tells Isabel that her fame has spread as far as Hong Kong), her funeral is a private experience whose impact does not reach beyond her immediate family. Her cousin, her adopted son and her close friend are the only ones at her grave in the film's introductory scene, suggesting that part of the punishment for living a life of sin is loneliness and forgetting. The mise-en-scene in that scene positions the characters of the three mourners in the center, their black clothes standing in contrast to the whiteness of the gravestones, as if to emphasize their isolation, their small number and their silence, as if no words could redeem Isabel's life and honor. The two reporters that frame the shot emphasize an element of sensationalism that sharply contrasts with the solitude of the mourners. Even though few mourn for Isabel, many are curious about her life and her death. Consequently, in López Neris's film the cemetery does not function as a matrix for the construction of a national community in the context of the death of a prominent figure in many ways symbolic of

that nation. Instead, it appears as a place both of solitude and of exploitative curiosity, as the only outcome of sinfulness and the inability to conform to acceptable norms of gender and sexuality.¹⁴

The space that dominates the narrative after the initial scene set in the cemetery is that of the brothel, which, in the case of López Neris's film, functions as a matrix for the construction, as well as the condemnation of a specific subversive model of gender and sexuality.

Much like Ferré's story, the film sets the space of the brothel against the background of another space, that of the house. In contrast to "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres," however, the two spaces intersect and blend to a much greater extent. There are several houses in the film, but the two that carry the most significance in the construction of gender and sexuality are the house that Mr. Ted, one of Isabel's lovers, sets up for her in Ponce, and Isabel's own house in the city's outskirts. The physical configurations of these spaces and the relationships that develop in them enhance the film's standpoint regarding the critique and the exclusion of specific gender and sexual norms in the Puerto Rican national imaginary.

¹⁴ In contrast, in Ramos Otero's story "Loca la de la locura" the protagonist's visit to the cemetery becomes a subversion of the national family and of its patriarchal, cohesive, and communitarian characteristics, but without blaming and punishing a character that transgresses its model. After the transvestite Loca la de la locura kills her lover Nene Lindo when he attacks her, she goes to his grave, feels no remorse, and then visits her mother's grave: "Después a la tumba de mamá. Arrodillada con un bouquet de miramelindas y pringamosa. Vencida pero jamás acorralada. [...] Con un puñal de huesos para unirme a la revolución" (Ramos Otero 240). The "family" in the story consists of people who don't belong in the traditional *gran familia puertorriqueña* -- a transvestite, a dead hustler and a dead old woman. Ramos Otero proposes an alternative national model, or none at all, if the final reference to a revolution were to be taken to signify an opposition to the established, dominant (national? legal?) order.

The house that Mr. Ted maintains for Isabel (Miriam Colón) represents the tensions of gender, sexuality, class and race that permeate the society in which Isabel lives. The space is opulent and affluent, so much so that one of Isabel's friends is heard complimenting her on the home's appearance. Isabel has a servant and consequently is identifiable as "the lady of the house," a position that carries a specific racial (white) and upper-middle class association. Given that Isabel is of a lower class Afro-Puerto Rican background, the film makes it clear that the house is the American man's gift to her, establishing patriarchy as the condition that enables the existence of that space. This gift is not selfless or benevolent, however. On the contrary, it comes with obligations, restrictions and control that impose norms and behaviors "suitable" to Isabel's new social identification. Mr. Ted ridicules her taste for pigs' feet and refuses to understand why she continues to eat them when he provides her with the best food on the market. He extinguishes the candles that she lights to Catholic and to Orisha deities, once again imposing a separation between a "cultured" lifestyle and Isabel's traditions and customs. When Isabel decides to go visit her own home in the outskirts of Ponce, he tries to stop her, provoking her to leave him altogether, to which he responds with anger not only against her, but against the island of Puerto Rico as a whole: "The hell with you! The hell with this country!" (López Neris). His character thus represents American (and patriarchal) attempt and powerlessness in controlling Puerto Rican society and culture, while at the same time suggest the U.S.'s profound disdain for them. The film also implies the performativity not only of gender, but of class and racial identities – if Mr. Ted can't make Isabel act according to the norms acceptable by the upper-class and white

sectors of society, he would rather not be associated with her (or with an island that assumes lower-class and Afro-Puerto Rican culture at the center of its identity).

In contrast, Isabel's house in the outskirts of Ponce is a space guided by different kinds of rules and expectations, ones associated with gender and sexuality that challenge and subvert those accepted and included in the imaginary represented by Mr. Ted and by the Catholic church. This second house is also the place in which home and brothel blend to propose an alternative national imaginary, one constructed around the figure not of a patriarch, but of an Afro-Puerto Rican woman who uses gender and sexuality as instruments of power and self-realization.

At the beginning of the film, Isabel's house is just that – a house in which she also shelters women who are abandoned by their men and by their families, and who have no other place to go. In this sense, the space of the house becomes a type of shelter created in response to numerous manifestations of violence and of patriarchal power. At first, Isabel only envisions the space as another home, as an alternative to the violence of the patriarchal order that governs the houses from which these women come and to which they are not allowed to return. It is marginalization, then, that inspires the construction of a different kind of community, organized by and consisting of women, and based on solidarity and on a shared reality of violence and exclusion.

Upon Isabel's return from Mr. Ted's house, she finds the house disorganized, dirty and full of men that the women living there invite to entertain. While at that point it is not yet a brothel in the traditional sense (a space in which money is exchanged for sex), it soon becomes one. Instead of trying to bring the house back to its original appearance

and function, Isabel orders the women to begin charging the men: “Having fun is not enough. [...] From now on we charge. We charge for everything” (López Neris). These words serve as a statement of initiation of the space of the brothel, while offering a reason for prostitution that stands in contrast with some of the main causes that critics have noted: “Financial need is overwhelmingly identified as the motivating factor for women to enter the profession. Depending on the setting in which the prostitution takes place, there may be an element of coercion” (Campbell 4). In Isabel’s case, there is neither coercion nor an apparent, immediate financial need. She makes a deliberate choice based on a desire and on a set of realities that already exist (the men know the house and are used to visiting it). What is even more interesting is that the film does not make Isabel fully responsible for the house’s transformation into a brothel, but seems to assign that responsibility to all women, suggesting that it is not the necessity, or even the mind and the entrepreneurial spirit of one, but the moral corruption of many that inspired that transformation. The fact that none of the women object to the new rules can be interpreted in two ways – either that they feel threatened of being expelled from yet another home, or that they readily agree to the implications of the new order in the house.

During the second half of the film the house is consistently identified as a brothel, as Isabel’s room (the owner’s living quarters) is the only one in which sex is not exchanged for money. The film constructs Isabel as the driving force behind the brothel’s success and fame. She organizes activities like a mock society ball and turns a fight into a deliberate performance that ends when she decides to stop it. She chooses whom to accept and whom not to let in. She hosts dinners for the mayor, intended to earn her

special favors and the ability to be a phone call away from his protection when the need arises. The centrality of Isabel's character in the brothel thus suggests the construction of a figure alternative to that of Mr. Ted (or the bishop, for that matter) – a figure that has, and that exercises power that comes not from colonial relations or traditional religious norms, but from her use of gender and sexuality to legitimate her position in society – not in the society to which the bishop, Mr. Ted, or even the journalist investigating her death belong, but in the underground version of that society, in which these same people operate according to a different set of rules, to which they won't admit in the open (the bishop accepts a generous donation from Isabel but publicly condemns her, while the U.S. Navy offers Isabel an exclusive contract for their sailors that would ban Puerto Rican men from entering the brothel).

In contrast to Ferré's and Ramos Otero's stories, the brothel in López Neris's film is presented as an unsustainable institution, despite its apparent success. Even though the brothel is famous as far away as Hong Kong, Isabel is unable to enforce her own rules. She is forced to expel Shirley, one of the girls, for bringing inside a pimp despite Isabel's explicit ban, and hits Paolo (Raul Juliá), who cuts her, is arrested, and eventually dies in jail. These events suggest that the processes that take place in the brothel, the presumed "sins" of the film's title, are too much for one woman to handle. She has power, but is not omnipotent like the protagonist in Ramos Otero's version of the story. In the film, her power fails her as her enterprise becomes bigger, as she accumulates enemies and as she reproduces and projects the socially reprehensible behavior under the brothel's roof.

While this representation might appear to contradict Isabel's earlier sporadic image as a powerful woman who is free to make her own decisions (early in the film she is seen walking down a city street, in an image that suggests independence and power), in reality it is hardly surprising. On the contrary, cinematic representations of prostitution have traditionally swayed between two extremes, as Russell Campbell has demonstrated:

Predominantly, and unsurprisingly given that the film industry has been male-dominated, prostitute characters in film are creatures of the male imagination. [...] Because of the contradictory emotions she generates, she has come to occupy an equivocal position in the male imagination, both valued and vilified. A symbol of eroticism in a sexually repressive society, or of endurance in the face of intense humiliation and suffering, she attains a positive coloring; but as a symbol of flesh against the spirit, of the commercial against the freely offered, or of the depth of social life against its heights, she is negative (Campbell 5).

While Isabel is initially represented as a potential alternative to the patriarchal figure, her failure and her eventual death suggest that the film sides with the position of the church and of the citizens who condemn Isabel rather than appreciate her for her unlikely social ascent and for her consistent charity work.

Isabel's death outside the brothel and the film's ending -- the words of the bishop (José Ferrer) appearing as a voiceover, suggesting the church's omnipresence and omnipotence in its condemnation of fornicators, adulterers, sodomites and thieves, among others -- suggest that the alternative community and the subversive central figure that the film had initially seemed to depict, belong to a frustrated imaginary, one that can exist temporarily, but which is ultimately doomed to failure and literal demise. The film's ending explains the images that accompany its opening credits -- those of a large building, abandoned and dilapidated, which the audience can now identify as the former brothel. Not only does Isabel die as a consequence of the enemies that she has accumulated

thanks to her business and power, and because she tried to go against socially acceptable norms of gender and sexuality, but the brothel, the physical space that housed those activities, literally withers in time, to become only a distant memory of a woman and of a place that didn't conform and that were consequently punished for it.

The space of the Puerto Rican nation is clearly identified in the film, as in one scene Isabel passes by Ponce's unique fire station, whose red and black stripes not only represent the colors of the island's second largest city, but which are also easily recognizable by any Puerto Rican on the island and many in the United States. However, the depiction of Isabel and of the brothel in *Life of Sin* can be understood in a context that goes beyond that of the Puerto Rican national discourse, and that touches upon the implications of the nature, reach and reception of cinematic representation. While *Life of Sin* can be understood as a Puerto Rican film (in terms of its cast, crew and funding), it is a made-for-Hollywood Puerto Rican film. It casts some of Puerto Rico's most prominent actors (Raul Juliá, José Ferrer, Miriam Colón) and, more importantly, is shot in English instead of Spanish, pointing to an intended US and/or international market and audience. In this sense, the representation of Isabel la Negra can be understood in a context in which, in the case of Hollywood films,

many moviemakers have gravitated to the daring subject of harlotry because of its exploitative value. Film producers were quick to realize that many moviegoers would be titillated by pictures dealing with the controversial topic and that it would mean sizeable box-office profits. By presenting such stories, moviemakers allowed filmgoers to enter vicariously the "immoral" world of the streetwalker, thus providing many viewers in the audience their first or only acquaintance with the risqué – and to some forbidden" world of sex-for-pay (Parish xiii).

Isabel is thus not only a counterpoint for Puerto Rican cultural nationalist discourse in relation to acceptable norms of gender and sexuality, but also a foreign and sexualized woman in a twice-exoticized space: the brothel and Puerto Rico as a Caribbean location, from the perspective of Hollywood.

In addition to the element of gender and geographic exoticism that conditions the film's representation of prostitution and the brothel, one must also consider the perspective from which the film speaks about the historical figure of Isabel. Very few women are involved in the decision-making aspects of the film's production.¹⁵ In an industry that "has been wholly dominated by men [...] there were primarily male scriptwriters and male directors interpreting the scope of morality that the female character did or did not have in the scenario. [...] this male domination led to a confusing double standard; i.e. what made a woman immoral or scandalous would not always be represented in the same manner if applied to a man" (Parish xv). The film thus becomes an instrument of representation that acts from a variety of perspectives – patriarchal, national and economic – to make appealing and at the same time to ostracize its object of representation based on gender, sexuality and on her non-conformism to the model acceptable in Puerto Rican national and religious discourse.

¹⁵ Aside from the film's leading star Miriam Colón, two women stand out as having played an important role in the final product. Vicky Hernández was one of the producers and Gloria Piñeyro was the editor (which, curiously enough, has been the most common "female" occupation in the Hollywood film industry, much more so than those of director, screenwriter, or producer). The credits indicate a predominantly male presence: Efraín López Neris directed, Emilio Díaz Valcárcel wrote the script, J. Armando Arica produced the film, and Alex Phillips was the cinematographer.

From the Brothel to the National Family in *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*

The most recent and extensive literary representation of Isabel la Negra's life is Mayra Santos Febres' novel *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*. Its plot takes place between several spaces – the brothel, the house in the city of Ponce where one of Isabel's clients (Fernando Fornarís, the father of her son Roberto) lives, the arrabal where the boy is being raised by another woman, and the Puerto Rican diaspora in the US where the man's "legitimate" son Luis Arsenio goes to school. These characters and the spaces that they inhabit in the end all come together at Isabel's funeral. Through that final scene, the novel suggests the formation of a new kind of family, reunited in spite of decades of hatred, exclusion, abandonment and betrayal. In this way, Mayra Santos-Febres not only retells the story of the famous prostitute, but also assigns her a key role in reinventing the Puerto Rican national imaginary on the island and in the diaspora.

As in Rosario Ferré's story, in Mayra Santos's novel the space of the brothel emerges against the background of the space of the house – in this case, of three different houses that appear throughout the text, and through which the author develops a critique of traditional images of femininity and masculinity in the Puerto Rican national imaginary.

The first house that appears in the novel is that of Fernando Fornarís, a lawyer and the father of Isabel's son Roberto. He abandons Isabel to marry Cristina Rangel, a woman that is Isabel's complete opposite. She comes from Ponce's high society and conforms to the expectations associated with the traditional patriarchal image of femininity. Even when she realizes her husband's continuous involvement in the life of

Isabel's child (whom Isabel abandons at birth), she keeps her silence, and speaks neither to question nor to object. On the surface, she maintains the appearance of the perfect home, living in a large family house, and inhabited by a successful patriarch and by his obedient wife. Below the surface, however, the home is characterized by contradictions and betrayal. Cristina's pain, attributed by her son to his father's betrayal, turns her into an alcoholic, causes her to lose her mind and leads to her ultimate death. Fernando's secrets and absence from the home make him an unlikely patriarch – he dominates the relations of power in the home without actually being present, in a situation reminiscent of the father's absence in the plot of *Felices días, tío Sergio*. Even though the father in *Nuestra señora de la noche* is alive, the reproduction of patriarchy during his frequent and increasingly long absences lays the foundations for the construction of a particular kind of masculinity, one that is so powerful and omnipresent that it needs not be seen to be obeyed. Even though at one level Fernando Fornarís appears as the epitome of the patriarch of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, his family is in fact fragmented and incomplete – his son with Isabel has no access to the family house, and he only gets to meet his brother in the final parts of the novel. In this way, Santos-Febres suggest the level of fragmentation and the lack of national unity that make the idea of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* problematic.

A second house that appears in the novel serves as a site for the construction of that traditional masculinity that seems to lack in Luis Arsenio's home. His friend Esteban Ferráns lives in a house that resembles that of the Fornarís: “chaflán mallorquín en la entrada, aldaba de bronce, una casa tan idéntica a la suya” (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 79).

In contrast to Luis Arsenio's house, however, Esteban's house is dominated by a male presence: "En el salón biblioteca estaban todos los hombres de la familia. Esteban padre había convocado a sus hermanos, que llegaron de la finca del Tibes y del negocio de la capital tan pronto oyeron la noticia de que se aproximaba el tío Jaume" (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 80). In contrast to *Felices días*, where the uncle's arrival signified the beginning of the redefinition of constructions of gender and sexuality in relation to Puerto Rican cultural nationalism, in the case of the Ferráns the uncle's return from Spain serves as an opportunity to reiterate and to reproduce traditional masculine and patriarchal notions associated with the *gran familia puertorriqueña*. As Luis Arsenio observes, "Esta era claramente una conversación entre hombres, una escuela en proceso que iniciaba a su amigo en los trámites y costumbres de los machos de su estirpe" (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 81). The Ferráns house serves as a space for the reproduction not only of patriarchy, but also of the national model based on patriarchal relations of power, as at the end of the novel the Ferráns family becomes the owner of a large portion of the Fornarís estate. As women are hardly visible in the Ferráns house, it becomes an exaggerated, almost grotesque depiction of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, one in which women are not only subordinated, but literally invisible.

The third house that functions as a space for the construction of femininity and masculinity in the novel is the hut in the outskirts of Ponce, in which the old Doña Montse raises Roberto Fornarís. Paid by Fernando Fornarís to take care of the boy since his birth, Doña Montse resembles the traditional model of Puerto Rican motherhood

much more than Cristina Rangel. She takes care of the child in a way that makes him believe that she is his real mother:

-Madrina, ¿tú eres mi mamá? [...]

-Madre es la que cría, Nene.

-Pero ¿quién es mi mamá?

-¿Tú me quieres, Nene? Porque yo te adoro. (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 19)

The love and the care that Doña Montse provides make her a maternal model that contrasts sharply with the abandonment and the exclusion on the part of both Isabel (Roberto's mother) and Fernando Fornarís (his father).

Even though Doña Montse approximates the traditional model of motherhood, the hut in which she raises Roberto hardly resembles that of the family house of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*. On the one hand, it sharply contrasts with the notion of the middle-class urban home, equipped and maintained to support a nuclear family. Instead, it is a poor shack in which, in Robertito's words, "Madrina y yo dormimos entre unos sacos, y a mí me da miedo Papá que me vaya a picar un alacrán. Los otros días soñé que uno..." (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 68). In this way, the space of the house (the hut in which the boy is being raised, in contrast with the large upper-middle class house in which Fernando Fornarís raises his other son Luis Arsenio) questions the class aspect of the notion of the national family, and calls the readers' attention to the poverty and inequality that deprive members of the same "national family" from the opportunities that other members of that family acquire by birth.

The space of the house in which Doña Montse and Robertito live functions as a critique of the traditional model of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* in yet another way. Even though enabled by a patriarch who provides the economic conditions for the home,

the house in fact lacks a patriarchal figure. Fernando Fornarís's absence affects the relationship between the woman and the boy, as he frequently asks her, "¿Cuándo viene mi papa? [...] ¿Por qué no vive con nosotros? ¿Por qué viene en un carro grande, grande y con el mismo carro se va?" (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 18). Doña Montse thus finds herself in the position of having to uphold the model of the national family (to look for explanations and to invent excuses), assuming the position, ironic as it is, of reproducing the structure and the foundations of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* and of the image of its patriarch from the position of economic and racial marginalization. Through the character of Doña Montse, through her marginalized and subordinated position in Puerto Rican society, and through the incongruities and contradictions evident in the construction of the space of the house, the novel offers a powerful critique of the foundations¹⁶ of the cultural nationalist model of the Puerto Rican nation, and of the social conditions out of which it emerged.

The space through which the novel begins to construct an alternative model to the traditional cultural nationalist model is that of Elizabeth's Dancing Place, the brothel where most of the characters find themselves at different moments of the narrative. Through the transformation of the space itself, and through the construction of gender and the idea of the family, the brothel becomes a space that offers an alternative, however fleeting, to traditional national imaginaries and gender roles.

¹⁶ Chronologically, the episodes that include Doña Montse and the young Robertito take place in the early 1930s, before Luis Muñoz Marín presented the Popular Democratic Party's idea of cultural nationalism, but depict a social reality that serves as a background and a foundation for that idea.

One way in which the space of the brothel critiques traditional images of the Puerto Rican nation is by proposing the brothel as an alternative of the family house commonly associated with the *gran familia puertorriqueña*. In contrast to the house in novels like *Felices días* or in films like *Dios los cría*, where it remains static for the duration of the narrative, the brothel in Mayra Santos-Febres's book is a dynamic space that transforms with the modernization of Puerto Rican society and with Isabel's increasing social empowerment. While at first it is a well-maintained, yet modest place, as Luis Arsenio describes it upon his first visit ("Las mesas estaban vestidas con manteles y velitas acodadas contra la sombra. Una tarima lo suficientemente grande para darle cabida a una banda de charangas se iluminaba con luces de piso. Habían adornado el prosenio con lascas de bambú y con un extraño mural de mariposas amarillas con escarchina sobre un fondo verde, simulando un follaje" Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 32-33), towards the end of the novel the same character notes that

Al Elizabeth's le había hecho una ampliación de cuartos en la parte trasera. Un pavimento de brea cubría la carretera de entrada hasta bien metido el monte. Ya no dependía de un generador de manigueta. [...] El piso entero era de cemento. Se veía que Isabel había prosperado (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 242).

This transformation comes not only as a result of the brothel's popularity, but also as a consequence of the favors that politicians do for Isabel, in exchange for women or for her silence. As an example, while there is no electricity in any section of the San Antón neighborhood in which the brothel is situated, "cerca del río, en ese puterío alejado y montaraz, había generador con poste de luz de los que pone el Gobierno" (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 127). In this way the author subtly critiques the corruption of the patriarchal national model (it is the men that participate in government that ordered the installation

of electricity in that particular place), and at the same time foregrounds Isabel's power and capacity to act as the center of a community, albeit based on favoritism and in many cases on covert blackmail. By taking advantage of the corruption and the hypocrisy embedded in the patriarchal structure that enables the prosperity of her brothel, Isabel also exposes and serves as an instrument of critique of that same traditional, patriarchal, national model.

By decentering the figure of the patriarch and by substituting it with that of Isabel la Negra, the brothel also becomes the site of the construction of models of femininity and masculinity that in certain ways depart from those constitutive of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*. However, even though the brothel in Mayra Santos-Febres's novel lays the foundation for an inclusive national model in terms of gender, it continues to reproduce a power structure that doesn't quite allow for an equitable level of inclusion for women.

The main figure in the brothel is that of Isabel, and her description enhances the image of power and control in the space of the brothel in the context of Puerto Rican society. Isabel is literally at the center of the brothel ("En medio de aquel salón una mujer prominente fumaba sentada en un trono de paja" Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 34), sitting in a throne, which, even though not of any value, situates her in a position of power reminiscent of that of a queen. She is in complete control of the space that surrounds her: "Paseaba su vista como si estuviera evaluando un espectáculo de variedades y a la vez como si sopesara estrategias de defensa en un territorio minado. Todo lo abarcaban sus ojos. Su piel era azul, azul pantera, azul sombra de ojo

hambriento” (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 34). On the one hand, in emphasizing Isabel’s control over the space, this description connects race (Isabel’s black, almost blue skin) to the notion of power, by situating an Afro-Puerto Rican woman at the center and at the “throne” of the metaphoric space of the nation. On the other hand, however, this description is also problematic, as its allusion to the panther, a powerful and dangerous, yet exotic animal, brings up associations between black female sexuality, exoticism and animal imagery. In this sense, the centrality of Isabel’s figure serves as a base for a national model that does not marginalize race, gender and sexuality, but still includes them in a rather problematic way.

In contrast to the image of femininity, the image of masculinity constructed through the space of the brothel is traditional and patriarchal, in terms of power, as well as in its racial and class characteristics. Even though Isabel is at the center of the brothel’s existence and success, the women that work for her occupy a subordinate position used only to serve the needs of the male clients: “Esas mujeres eran las responsables de romper la tirantez de los machos” (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 34). Boys go to Elizabeth’s Dancing Place to “become men,” as in the case of Luis Arsenio and his friends: “Aquella noche, si el plan se daba según lo estipulado, Luis Arsenio, Esteban, Pedrito y Alejandro Villanúa se convertirían en hombres de verdad, según la usanza de los machos de su estirpe” (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 26). Even when Luis Arsenio finds himself infatuated by Minerva, a young prostitute at Elizabeth’s Dancing Place, he knows that her class and race won’t allow the relationship to evolve into anything deeper than their encounters in the brothel: “Después encontraría la manera de arrancársela de los

sueños y de los apetitos. Se echaría una novia quizás, una chica a propiedad a quien besar castamente y presentarle a la familia” (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 78). The masculinity that this relationship constructs is one clearly enabled by Minerva’s gender and sexuality, but also constructed in opposition to her race and class, to depict the image of a future patriarch already conscious of the social divisions that set him apart from other members of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* like Minerva.

At first sight, *la gran familia puertorriqueña* that emerges in the space of the brothel appears diverse and democratic. An early description of the men that visit the brothel points out that “Al Elizabeth’s Dancing Place entraba todo el mundo. No había miramientos de edad, color, procedencia o pecas en la piel” (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 25). This seemingly inclusive space, however, is traversed by axes of power that benefit men in high political and social positions, in return for favors or for information that might be useful as blackmail in the future. The “family,” consisting of Isabel and the women that work for her, is also far from democratic. Instead, Isabel has complete control over such decisions as who is allowed to work in the brothel, who gets certain clients, etc. The female solidarity so productive in the construction of the alternative gendered space of the beauty salon is not visible in the case of the brothel as described in the novel. On the contrary, the brothel reinterprets and intensifies, but without necessarily challenging, structures of power and relations of oppression, even those (like Isabel’s power) that at first glance seem to subvert traditional gender hierarchies associated with the cultural nationalist model.

While the brothel is the space in which masculinity is constructed in a most evident and complex way, there are other spaces that complement that construction of gender identity and gender roles, especially as it comes to the notion of masculinity in relation to that of patriarchy and national identity. Even though the novel is mostly set in Ponce, a significant portion of it takes place in Philadelphia, on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, where Luis Arsenio enrolls as a college student. His experience in Philadelphia constructs a particular image of the Puerto Rican diaspora, one that goes against recent ideas of renewed connections to the island and of the contributions of the Puerto Rican community to US culture. In contrast, the novel constructs a foreign space that is inhospitable, and that makes impossible the construction of any community, whether diasporic or (trans)national, understood as bridging the distance between Puerto Rico and the United States.

Critics like Jorge Duany and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel have demonstrated the multiple nuclei, connections and interactions that characterize the Puerto Rican communities in the United States, their relationship to the island and to the notion of Puerto Rican national identity. Even though both recognize that the reality of these relations has been consistently problematic (as demonstrated through racial, class and national references that have tended to denigrate the Puerto Rican community in the United States from the standpoint of many island Puerto Ricans¹⁷), they also argue in favor of the possibility of the construction of a (trans) national community that

¹⁷ See the analysis of Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel in *Caribe Two Ways*, for example.

recognizes the contributions that Puerto Ricans in the US make to both island and US cultures.

In her book *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies* Carmen Teresa Whalen studies the creation of a Puerto Rican community in Philadelphia through a critique of the paradigms of the “culture of poverty” and the “underclass,” “racial ideologies that point to particular groups of people, emphasize their ‘problems’ and hold them culpable for their own poverty” (Whalen 241), paradigms with which U.S. government agencies approached the newly-emerging Latino communities in the post-World War II era. This attitude was reflected in the ways in which government and police reproduced stereotypes of Puerto Ricans as violent and criminal, most notably in the events leading up to the Philadelphia riots of 1953. In July of 1953 a Puerto Rican man was accused of stabbing an American in a bar, which caused a group of white men to invade several homes of Puerto Rican families. The fighting that followed involved up to a thousand people (Whalen 183). As Whalen explains, the 1953 riots

reflected white residents’ fears of racial change, racism against Puerto Ricans, and perceived competition for housing and jobs. White residents moved out and sometimes reacted with violence. Puerto Rican migrants, in turn, faced the racial hostility that came with racial change in northern urban areas in the postwar era. As they responded to the incident, policy makers and social service workers transformed the riots from a racial incident against Puerto Ricans into an indication of the ‘Puerto Rican problem’ (Whalen 184).

Even though Mayra Santos-Febres’s novel takes place before the events to which Whalen refers, her decision to set the book in Philadelphia undoubtedly relies on the historical memory and impact of the racial and ethnic conflicts between Puerto Rican and

white residents of that city. In this sense, the setting enhances the critical approach that the author takes to the idea of connections and the possibility of a (trans)national Puerto Rican and Latino community. The novel's protagonist, Luis Arsenio, arrives in Philadelphia with great hopes for the symbolic value of his trip: "Emigraba. Ampliaba los horizontes de su clan" (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 164), but quickly realizes that in the US he is a different person from the one he is accustomed to being in Puerto Rico. Unlike in Ponce, in Philadelphia he is not perceived as white, and his island origins cause confusion, incomprehension and lead to his exclusion from the sectors of US society that correspond to the upper-middle class to which his family belongs in Puerto Rico. The unexpected rejection by his girlfriend, Maggie Carlisle, comes as the final blow in a long sequence of events, and she explains her betrayal with words that point to the impossibility of the racial and class recognition and integration of Puerto Ricans in US society:

Además, ¿cómo iba yo a presentarte a mi familia? Hola, éste es Louie Forneress from some island. No sé si tiene medios para sostenerme. Nos queremos casar y vivir en la selva, en un árbol junto a los monos. No es tan alto como Johnny Weissmuller, pero... 'Me, Jane; tú, Tarzán' (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 247).

Not only does Maggie's rejection represent Luis Arsenio's marginalization in US society, but, on another level, it also signifies the impossibility of the construction of a (trans)national family in the diasporic space. In the United States, Luis Arsenio will never be a patriarch like his father in Puerto Rico. Because of his race, class and national origins, he is emasculated, as the possibility of creating a traditional family is denied to him by a white, upper-class woman. In this way, the novel questions Duany's and Martínez-San Miguel's ideas of the viability of a transnational community, as well as

Negrón-Muntaner's notion of the "latinization of American culture". Instead, it remains rooted in a traditional notion of national community, one that is in fact reminiscent of the cultural nationalist notion of *la puertorriqueñidad* in that it excludes the possibility of establishing lasting transnational connections with Puerto Ricans in the US or between the US and Latino community, for the benefit of the redefinition and the expansion of the notion of *la puertorriqueñidad*.

In contrast to Mayra Santos's novel, films like *AIDS in the Barrio* and *Brincando el charco* assume a different perspective regarding the relationship between gender, sexuality, diasporic space and community. Frances Negrón-Muntaner (co-director of the first and writer/director of the second film, both set in Philadelphia) acknowledges the difficulties in building a diasporic Latino community in the context of colonial and economic domination. In *AIDS in the Barrio*, Negrón-Muntaner and Peter Biella explore the intersections between economic and social marginalization, patriarchal attitudes toward masculinity and homosexuality, and the problem of AIDS in the Latino community, in the process exposing and indicting the social factors that derail the prevention of AIDS among Latino men (and some women). Similarly, *Brincando el charco* critiques the notion of the "melting pot," and the "myth of racial democracy" (*Brincando el charco*), but at the same time offers a glimpse at the complex relationship between Latinos, U.S. society and colonial attitudes, gender, sexuality and race. By revealing the factors that derail the development and the recognition of the contributions of Latinos to U.S. society, and by suggesting (in *AIDS in the Barrio*) quite directly and didactically ways to solve some of the problems of AIDS infection, of

stereotyping and reproducing dangerous patriarchal attitudes towards sexuality and AIDS, the films become instruments for the construction of a Puerto Rican and Latino community in the U.S. that *Nuestra Señora* appears to deny.

The novel does culminate in a national reunification, but one that takes place in an unlikely space, and whose nature is problematic in many respects. The national unity that Santos-Febres proposes is represented by the reunification of the two brothers (Luis Arsenio and Roberto) through their coincidental encounter on the SS Seaborn during World War II, and through their first direct interaction in Manila, during the investigation of the murder of a Philippine man committed by Roberto. At first glance, by staging the brothers' reunification in the Philippines, Santos-Febres appears to challenge the indispensability of territory and space in the construction of the national model. The brothers could have met anywhere, but the historical circumstances set their encounter in Asia -- significantly, in the Philippines, which shares Puerto Rico's colonial legacy in relation to both Spain and the U.S. In this way, the author appears to argue that the nation (a non-traditional model of the nation, represented by the unity of two brothers) can be (re)constructed anywhere, even in the most remote of places, and does not need the space of the island of Puerto Rico (even though it takes place on another island) in order to reproduce itself.

However, the brothers' reunification in Manila is fleeting, as they hardly exchange a word, and neither is sure whether the other one recognized him as a brother. That recognition can only come when both return to the island, to the territorial space of the Puerto Rican nation, at Isabel's funeral (an act that associates the family with the space of

the island at yet another, symbolic level, as Isabel is buried in the ground on the island, in a gesture that alludes to “diversas genealogías: de la familia, de la nación, del cuento mismo [Sotomayor, *Femina Faber* 279]). On the one hand, the scene is reminiscent of that of Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá’s description of the multitude at Rafael Cortijo’s funeral: “Eran personas de todos los caminos de la vida. Putas niñas y matronas, antiguos clientes que se quedaron debiéndole a Isabel algún favor, representantes de todos los partidos políticos, ancianos y lavanderas, cantantes de poca monta y artistas de renombre internacional” (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 356). On the other, as others have noted, depending on the perspective and the purpose of the representation, family bonds and family history can evoke “an epistemological crisis of both family and nation from which the characters emerge and to which the characters return” (del Río Gabiula 84). In a subversive act, the author associates the social impact of one of Puerto Rico’s most prominent artists with that of Isabel la Negra, and in this way proposes a different center around which to construct a national model – not that of the entitled patriarch, but that of an Afro-Puerto Rican woman who only rose to power later in life, and by using her sexuality as an instrument in that ascent.

What remains problematic is the image of the national family that emerges after Isabel’s death. On the one hand, it is an image based on a rather traditional cultural nationalist model of racial reconciliation – the black and the white Fornarís, together with Manolo, the boy that Isabel raised, come together and are greeted by the people as Isabel’s sons: “La multitud se dispersaba, la gente se iba despidiendo. Hasta hubo quien le presentara condolencias a Manolo, a su hermano y a él” (Santos-Febres, *Nuestra* 359).

The image of the three brothers standing at Isabel's grave is one that unequivocally includes Afro-Puerto Ricans in the national imaginary (and, as mentioned above, in fact places them at its center). On the other hand, it is somewhat reminiscent of the notion of racial consensus on which the idea of cultural nationalism is based. Instead of recognizing and exposing problems like racism, discrimination and marginalization, the final scene suggests a reconciliation that is still difficult to conceive of in contemporary Puerto Rican society.

Furthermore, even though Isabel becomes the root and the center of the construction of the Puerto Rican nation, the family that remains is an entirely masculine one, consisting of the three brothers. This image of the *gran familia puertorriqueña* after Isabel's death erases women from the national model, as the three symbolic founders of the nation become a soldier, a lawyer, and an overseer in the brothel. In this sense, the novel constructs a national imaginary that is patriarchal and in which women not only occupy a subordinate position, but from which they are completely absent, except in the figure of the now deceased Isabel.

Conclusion

Puerto Rican authors and film directors have used the figure of the prostitute and the space of the brothel as instruments for the critique and the construction of a variety of national imaginaries. From Rosario Ferré's and Mayra Santos-Febres's models based on feminist and racial unity and solidarity, to Efraín López Neris's condemnation of the brothel as a space of "sin," and to Manuel Ramos Otero's denial of the possibility of any

alternative, ethically redeemable community, the brothel has been a controversial space in which power hierarchies along axes of race, class and gender have clashed and struggled to negotiate the representation and the construction of the Puerto Rican nation. The literary and cinematic texts analyzed above depict the space of the brothel not as a mere setting of the plot, but as a gendered and political space that serves as a matrix for social critique from different standpoints of gender, racial and national debates in Puerto Rico.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

There is a longstanding trend in Puerto Rican literature and film to use space as a matrix from which to challenge, often in subtle, yet powerful ways, the dominant discourses on nation, gender and sexuality, to voice critiques and to propose alternative tropes for the official cultural nationalist model and the hierarchies that have organized it in the 20th century. The authors of the novels, short stories and films analyzed in the preceding chapters participate in this tradition in creative, constructive and innovative ways.

One of the main goals of this study has been to examine and interrogate the possibilities of the relationship between feminist geography, Caribbean and Puerto Rican Studies, and to engage them in a productive conversation. Until recent years, the discussion of space in Puerto Rico had focused primarily on the space of the island and on its relationship to the United States, whether regarding the debate on the Puerto Rico's political status, the economic and cultural interactions between the island and the mainland, or the politics of language and identity. While many of these debates have existed since the Spanish colonial period and the development of the independence movement, they intensified during the 20th century, especially after the publication of Antonio S. Pedreira's *Insularismo* in 1934. I hope that this study makes a contribution to

these debates, and that it allows for a broader discussion of the intersections and the negotiations between space, gender, sexuality and national discourses.

At first sight, the house, the factory, the beauty salon and the brothel appear to be four different and seemingly unrelated spaces, but a closer look reveals, a number of common threads and parallel axes of analysis. First, these spaces allow for the discussion of different connections between gender, sexuality and the cultural nationalist discourse in Puerto Rico. Some of these connections are established through patriarchal relations of power (Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*, Jacobo Morales's *Dios los cría*), others through consumption and the offer of services (Carmen Lugo Filippi's "Pilar, tus rizos"), or through a discourse of rights, whether explicit, as in the factory and in Luisa Capetillo's defense of workers, or implicit, as in that of citizenship and female emancipation in the house or in the beauty salon (Paco López's "Ligia Elena" or Mayra Santos-Febres's "Hebra rota").

Second, these four spaces represent a series of different, yet related, configurations of alternative families and relationships between women, different possibilities for alliances. Not all relationships in these spaces are of solidarity. Some are of power and domination, as as those between Isabel and her servants in *The House on the Lagoon*, or between Isabel la Negra and the women that work in her brothel in Manuel Ramos Oters's short story "La última plena que bailó Luberza." Others enable the construction of solidarity and resistance, even as they remain mediated through the exchange of services, as in Lugo Filippi's "Milagros, calle Mercurio" or they are only temporary, and could only provide a tentative shelter, as in the case of the relationship

between Doña Kety and Yetsaida in “Hebra rota.” Simultaneously, some of them are effectuated through maternal figures (“Hebra rota”) or through a broader political dedication to a combination of causes, as in Luisa Capetillo’s and Dominga de la Cruz’s emphasis on women’s and workers’ rights. Part of what makes this variety of relationships possible is that, even though the spaces of the house, the factory, the beauty salon and the brothel are subject to constant changes, interactions and negotiations with others spaces, they are permanent enough to allow for the development of these relationships of solidarity and alternative families.

Finally, the four spaces are connected through yet another thread, that of women’s work, whether salaried or unpaid, skilled or unskilled, productive or reproductive, domestic or in the workplace. In some of the texts, women’s work is used to support and help build the cultural nationalist model, as in the case of José Artemio Torres’s documentary film *Luchando por la vida: las despalilladoras de tabaco y su mundo*, in Efraín López Neris’s *Life of Sin*, or in Jacobo Morales’s *Dios los cría*. In others, the representation of women’s labor is used in a subversive manner, with the objective of proposing a different set of social and gender relations, and an altogether different national model. This is the case of Luisa Capetillo’s writings, of Rosario Ferré’s depiction of Isabel la Negra, and of the intersection between emotional and physical beauty services in “Milagros, calle Mercurio.”

What I intended to show through the analysis of the house, the factory, the beauty salon and the brothel was the complex ways gender and sexuality are constructed, limited and enabled by the configuration of the everyday spaces in which they exist, and by the

negotiations between individual spaces and axes of power and liberating creativity. The coexistence of these is only possible if, as feminist geographers have argued, spaces are understood not as static, but as flexible, malleable, and always in transformation. The agency that the female characters of the novels, short stories and films claim enables the analysis of space in these terms, and consequently, the understanding of national discourse and identity not as a cohesive and immutable state, but as a dynamic process.

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