

**The Quest for the Fountain of Youth:
The search for liberation in Rosario Ferré's
*The House on the Lagoon***

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**Abstract
Resumen**

Key Words: Puerto Rico, Rosario Ferré, *The House on the Lagoon*, gender studies.

Palabras Clave: Puerto Rico, Rosario Ferré, *The House on the Lagoon*, estudios de género.

*Cuando se acerca el fin, escribió Cartaphilus,
ya no quedan imágenes del recuerdo; sólo
quedan palabras. Palabras, palabras
desplazadas y mutiladas, palabras de otros,
fue la pobre limosna que le dejaron las horas
y los siglos.*

(Borges, “El Inmortal”).

I. The Nationalistic discourse

Each nation has a need for finding its true origins, and for an “epic foundation” as a way of understanding its historical evolution as a nation and the present outcome of this evolution. It is even more evident if it is a nation which is under the control of another one and needs to find a way to express what this lack of freedom makes them feel. But, according to Pacheco, these national symbols are used and manipulated by the political systems so to legitimate their own ideas and concerns. It is this “present ideological perspective” what finally determines the authenticity of this past account which has been told, and not the events that are shown in this

discourse since they have been chosen just to get this purpose (8). Taking the past evidences, the oppressors create their own spaces of oppression, according to the idea they want to convey, so as to legitimate their own reality and to vindicate their domination over the nation. It is what the oppressor wants the nation to believe that will determine the official discourse this nation will know and not other one. Once this discourse about the epic foundation of a nation has become the only known discourse about it, it becomes part of its tradition and it is accepted as the unique truth about the foundation. Thus, this search for a background in the official discourse instead of helping people from a nation to recover their sense of identity, it leads them to believe in a tradition that enhances their situation of oppression.

Once the material has been selected and combined in order to construct the discourse, the plot structure imposed on the sequence of events creates a meaning for this message that enhances the situation of manipulation and oppression (White 222). There are two kinds of discourses that will determine the knowledge that the future generations will have about their origins: the historical discourse and the epic discourse.

On the one hand, although historians claim that what they tell is the unique truth about the past they are dealing with, the many interpretations that we may find about an event, and the fact that in a same discourse, of the so-called historical, the historians place in doubt the source from which they have taken the evidences they are dealing with, makes us think about the truthfulness of these accounts. Although many historians claim their discipline follows a scientific method, nowadays the truthfulness of the past account is questioned by the fiction writers for whom the representation of a past event is just another form of art (Hackett-Fischer, 109). For them, since the historical account of an event is made out of a linguistic interpretation of it, it is just another kind of discourse which expresses the writer's concerns and ideas about the fact he/she is writing about. Since there is no way to compare this interpretation with true past, so it is impossible to

demonstrate that what is told in a discourse is the truth. One of the most important authors who deals with the philosophical discussion on history as not being able to give a true account of the past reality is Louis O. Mink. In his essay “Narrative form as a cognitive instrument”, he argues that it is by means of narrative that we interpret the reality, but that in this process of narrativization we impose a structure on past reality that it didn’t have. According to him, though the historical narrative as “historical it claims to represent, through its form, part of the real complexity of the past, but as narrative it is a product of imaginative construction, which cannot defend its claim to truth by any accepted procedure of argument or authentication” (219).

This “imaginative construction”, which is determined by the concerns and ideas of the person who is interpreting the event, is expressed in such a way that it is thought to be part of the event itself. Since it is impossible to compare the interpretation with the true past, there is only an alternative to end up with the idea of the unique truth claimed by the historical discourse; that is, to compare it with another interpretation of the event. As long as there is not an alternative interpretation of this event and an interpretation is not placed in doubt, the one which claims to be the true representation is admitted as the unique truth (Ankersmit 242). By means of the fictional discourse the oppressed people have been able to convey an alternative to the absolute truth claimed by the historians by incorporating into their discourses the gaps, absences, silences that we can’t find in the historical discourses. Challenging historical discourse means to challenge the oppressor and to assert themselves and their necessity of liberation since it can’t be justified/vindicated by alluding to the past.

On the other hand, in his comparative study about the epic and the novel, Bakhtin defines the epic as a kind of discourse which deals with the “world of “beginnings” and “peak times” in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families” (13). As such, the epic creates a national tradition which is established as the absolute truth about the beginning of this nation.

Since the content of this epic narration is placed in a past that is inaccessible to the people who live in the future of this nation, it is impossible for them to challenge the meaning given in this discourse. Being told from the reverent point of view of a descendant who, by means of this narration, claims it as the “absolute past”, this genre is considered to be in a powerful position with respect to any other discourse which may deal with the mythical foundation of a national history. The epic structure gives the fact with which it deals as well as the idea it transmits a sense of completeness, conclusiveness and immutability, thus as long as the national discourse has the epic form, it will be impossible to challenge its power. It is the novel that ends up with the homogeneous voice of the historical discourse and the epic by giving a place to polyglossia and the language of indeterminacy (12).

II. *The House on the Lagoon: the demystification of Puerto Rico’s epic foundation*

Rosario Ferré is a Puerto Rican writer whose writings show her preoccupation with the political and social situation of her island, especially of women who live there. She takes as a background for her literary production the historical discourse about her country so as to show what has been silenced in the many interpretations of the events that constituted Puerto Rico’s past. She makes use of her own language, the language of the oppressed which appears as a result of a historical situation of racial and gender discrimination, to subvert the oppressor’s language. Her language is the language of literary discourse by which her sense of identity can unfold. In this essay I want to focus on her novel *The House on the Lagoon*, the first novel of the author written in English, in which both preoccupations are linked in such a way that it is impossible to analyze the one without the other. In this novel, she denounces the colonial oppression suffered by the island and its inhabitants highlighting the situation of oppression of Puerto Rican women. As such, they have been victims of a double oppression both because they have been forced to

cope with the patriarchal system which limits their lives and because they are living in a country which has been submitted to a colonial rule since its foundation. It is the female Puerto Rican's perspective of Rosario Ferré, which lets us have access to the private places of the history of the island, that will determine the alternative meaning of the foundation of Puerto Rico given in *The House on the Lagoon*.

The House on the Lagoon is based on the story of two families, Quintín Mendizabal's and Isabel Monfort's, who merge when they get married. It is Isabel who, fed up of playing the role of the perfect wife, decides to write a novel which weaves the many stories about Puerto Rico, her family and her husband's family which either she has been told or she has witnessed. From the beginning, Isabel, the narrator, tells the reader that it is a fictional account of those facts, told just in order to show another view of the events according to her own interpretation.

Isabel tries to subvert the oppressor's discourse by recovering the historical and mythical material which has to do with the foundation of Puerto Rico, and by rewriting it from her own perspective as a way to think about the lack of freedom of Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican women. By means of it, she tries to demonstrate how Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican women's quest for their own identity, which is hidden behind the oppression, has been searched for wrongly. For her, the story of the oppressed Puerto Rico began when the island was conquered by Juan Ponce de León. Because of it, she uses some of the legends told about the Spanish Conquistador as the founding stone for the plot of her novel. By fictionalizing these stories, Ferré blames the figure of Ponce de León for the past and present situation of Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican women.¹

Juan Ponce de León was a Spanish Conquistador who set the first Christian establishment on Puerto Rico, and was appointed governor of the island. There are many agreements concerning the most important events about the Conquistador and his conquest, but there are also many disagreements among the different interpretations. There is one version in which Ponce is

introduced to us as a pacifist man who carried out a pacific conquest (Díaz-Soler 99), whereas there is another historical version in which he is introduced as a violent man who conquered Puerto Rico in a violent manner. According to Vivas Maldonado,

los españoles trataron severamente a la población de Puerto Rico. Para el trabajo en las minas, la construcción de las casas y la agricultura, los españoles se sirvieron de la labor forzada de los indios. Los emplearon de manera servil, sin atender a los derechos de aquella raza que era dueña de la tierra y la que tan cordialmente les recibiera' (109).

According to the novel, since Puerto Rico was conquered by the Spanish Conquistador to the moment the story in the novel is narrated, the people from the island have been searching for their own and their island's identity stolen from them by the Spanish and North-Americans. For many Puerto Ricans the struggle for this identity is related to the search of the political independence of the island. In the novel it is the female narrator of the story who stands for these people. But in this novel the independence is not only a matter of politics but of gender.

In order to see how the historical discourse which deals with the foundation of Puerto Rico has been fictionalized in *The House on the Lagoon*, we have to take into account two concepts: traditionally, the historical discourse has been uttered by the dominant voice, and this dominant voice has been associated with both the colonizer's and the male voice. Historical discourse has been characterized mainly by stating their interpretation of a fact as if it were the real truth about the fact narrated. As the unique view of the matter, historical discourse has been traditionally characterized by the use of a "unique narrative voice" (Domínguez, 55).² Rosario Ferré goes against this vision of the historical representation of the past as the absolute truth. What she does is to take a fact and to start making questions about it in order to show the realities that this homogeneous voice of the historical discourse has silenced. She does it to express her

need for finding new spaces—now textual ones—which talk about her origins in a way which helps her to establish a background for herself which fits in what has turned out to be her present (de la Fuente, 70). Ferré feels she has to go back to the beginning to find her independence as a woman and her nation's independence.

Ponce de León's story becomes in this novel the story line of the fictional story narrated by Isabel. The story in *The House on the Lagoon* is mixed with Ponce's story as if they were just one event encoded in two different versions. The process of the conquest is metaphorically spread in several different ways: in the foundation of the family and the house they inhabit; in the oppression inflicted upon women; and in the search for identity and liberation. Each of the main characters of the novel, Buenaventura, Quintín, Rebecca and Isabel, features, in some way, one or more of Ponce's characteristics: his noble lineage; his violent attitude towards oppressed people; his conquest; his relation with Florida; and, especially his search for the Fountain of Youth. There are two characters that stand for Ponce de Leon himself: Buenaventura and Quintín, father and son; and there are two main characters that stand for the native people who inhabited on Puerto Rico and Florida before his conquest: they are Rebecca, Quintín's mother, and Isabel, Quintín's wife.

In *The House on the Lagoon*, **Buenaventura** is the symbolic representation of Ponce de León. Actually, he represents what, according to many historians, was the beginning of his story as Conquistador of Puerto Rico. He represents the meeting point of many stories related to the Conquistador: Ponce de León was one Spanish conquistador of noble lineage who, looking for the same promised paradise which led many Spanish Conquistadors, decided to embark on one caravel across the Atlantic Ocean. His representation in Isabel's story is a man proud of his lineage, since he is a descendant of Spanish Conquistadors. The fact that Isabel talks about Buenaventura in a way which makes us think that he wasn't a man worth trusting, and that he is

depicted as being proud of his lineage, says a lot about Isabel's viewpoint about the Spanish Conquistador's story. For Isabel, Buenaventura has to be blamed for the violent attitude of Quintín, Buenaventura's son and her husband:

He didn't want to be like his father, his grandfather, or the rest of his ancestors, he added, who were descended from the Spanish Conquistadors. They all had a wrathful disposition and, worse yet, were proud of it, insisting that rashness was a necessary condition for bravery (Ferré, 5).

If we take into account that for Isabel violence is an inherited characteristic, Buenaventura's ancestors are also seen as violent people. Reading about him, we discern Rosario Ferrer's idea that it has been due to the violent conquest carried out by Ponce de León that Puerto Rico is in this situation.

According to some historical accounts, Ponce de León was commissioned to establish the first settlement on the island by another Conquistador called Nicolás de Ovando. Furthermore, after the settlement Ponce gave the name Caparra to "the bay and the harbour". Maybe what made him call this place so was his interest in recalling the Spanish village of Cápera in Cáceres where Ovando was born (Díaz-Soler, 99). Another of Buenaventura's characteristics is that he is from Extremadura. Again, he is very proud of being from there because "Extremadura" was the place "where the Conquistadors were born" (Ferré 53).

Although the island wasn't yet colonized, when Ponce de León had an eye on it, it was already a place known by the Spanish Conquistadors, but like Buenaventura, he was the founder of a new story. Whereas Spanish Puerto Rican story began with the former one, the story told in Isabel's novel began when the latter one got to Puerto Rico. Ponce first got to what he considered a moist place and went looking for the most suitable land in order to build his first house, a humble one, on the island. This humble house meant the beginning of the first Spanish settlement

on the island (Díaz-Soler 99). Buenaventura got to “a forgotten stretch of land” with “a spring nearby” in which “a stone fountain built around it had been maintained by a caretaker” (Ferré 9). Buenaventura found what he considered to be the most suitable place where he built “a modest cottage precisely at this site, where the mangrove swamp met the private beach of the lagoon” (Ferré 9). At this point it is this stretch of land that becomes the Puerto Rico of Isabel’s story.

The way he conquered this stretch of land is shown to be a mysterious one.

One day the caretaker of the spring was found dead, lying by the rim of the fountain, from a mysterious blow to the head. A small item appeared in the morning papers, but nobody paid much attention, and the event was soon forgotten. The residents in Alamares didn’t need water from the spring any longer (...). Soon after that, Buenaventura moved to the caretaker’s house and nobody seemed to mind (Ferré 11).

In this way, since Buenaventura is the symbolical representation of Ponce as conquistador, Rosario Ferré shows the many gaps in the historical discourses about the conquest of Puerto Rico. Again in this historical version the native people’s feelings and experiences are not represented. Ferré also denounces this fact through Isabel’s voice when she talks of the fact that the caretaker was found dead and that this had no repercussion outside Isabel’s island. Therefore, we see her critique to the fact that ordinary people, the colonized people, have no place outside the fictional discourse, since the outside of her island is precisely this, the historical discourse from which the fictional one is derived.

The second step of Ponce de León’s settlement is represented when the new House on the Lagoon is built. Ponce was commissioned by Ovando to settle with his family and two hundred more people in this stretch of land. When he got to the island, there was a new building made of stone which acted as “a house and a fortress” for Ponce de León’s family (Díaz-Soler 100). In

The House on the Lagoon it was Buenaventura, once married with Rebecca, who commissioned an architect to build a more suitable house for him and Rebecca, “more suited to our social standing” (Ferré 43). Once the house was built, the problems between them became more explicit. The violent attitude of Buenaventura is explicitly acknowledged when he beats his wife, Rebecca when she was playing Salomé in front of her friends:

...Rebecca appeared on stage and began her dance. She took off each of her seven veils and was almost stark naked, except for the golden goblets, when Buenaventura’s Rolls-Royce arrived in front of the house and he walked up the stairs with several of his friends. When he saw Rebecca, he didn’t say a word. He simply took off his cordovan belt, livid with rage, and flogged her until she fell unconscious to the floor (Ferré 65).

It is his violent attitude that, according to Isabel Monfort, is the main cause of the situation of oppression which she and Rebecca before her have to face. As Buenaventura dominates Rebecca, and Ponce de León dominated the native people of Borinquen, Quintín tried to dominate Isabel, but she knows how to free herself from this oppression. At the beginning she decided to write a novel to interweave her memories with her husband’s, but in the process of writing the novel she realizes that there are a lot of gaps and lies in what her husband tells her. So she began to pay attention to other people’s stories like Petra, the African servant or Rebecca. Quintín felt betrayed and tried to avoid her publishing it.

III. Searching for the Fountain of Youth

The most important legend associated to Ponce de León was his search for the Fountain of Youth: a spring which gave people eternal youth and immortality. There are some historical interpretations which deny this legend. According to Díaz-Soler, there isn’t any reference to the

Fountain of Youth in the writings that Ponce de León himself produced (138). For him Ponce's concern was to find an island called Biminí maybe in search of wealth and renown, but which has nothing to do with a Fountain of Youth. But the bulk of the interpretations about the Conquistador talks about his fixation on finding a place where he could achieve the eternal youth and the immortality. At Ponce's time there were several stories which were widespread among the native people of the Americas. One of them spoke about the existence of a spring which had the power to restore the youth and strength of those who drank it. Spanish Conquistador thought that this spring was placed on an island called Biminí (Vivas Maldonado 14) and there Ponce de Leon's decided to go and look for it. It was looking for this place when he got to Florida where he was hurt by an arrow to death. In spite of the fact that he found death looking for the fountain, which could make him immortal, maybe it was there where he really found his Fountain of Youth. Although he didn't really find the spring he was looking for, the fact that he discovered Florida is what made him be remembered after his death. Germán Arciniegas talks about what this myth meant for Ponce de León, and what happened to him once he discovered Florida:

Con todo si encuentran los españoles en La Florida la juventud. No como la buscan, sino en unos indios flecheros, [. . .] Ponce de León lo experimenta en sus propias carnes, y regresa a las islas con una pierna flechada: por esa herida entra la muerte y se lo lleva. Ocurre con las fábulas como con todo lo que es enredo; una vez que se echa a rodar el cuento, no hay poder humano que lo detenga. Pasan apenas unos meses, y de las desventuras de Ponce de León ya nadie hace memoria: solo flota en el aire que hay una tierra encantada en La Florida.' (95)

Maybe he didn't acknowledge this fact, but Ferré seems to have acknowledged it and she makes the male characters of her novel pay for it: she makes them die as disappointed as Ponce

seemed to die. For Ferré the Fountain of Youth represents the search for the freedom and immortality, but not the kind of freedom which Ponce was looking for. It is not physical freedom; it is not the fact of being free from death that makes you be free, but the symbolic freedom. For her the only way of getting freedom is by being immortal in the memory of the future generations. This is only achieved if one is faithful to the truth, and goes against the oppression.

For Isabel the problem of the lack of freedom of the island is due to the fact that people there are looking in the wrong direction: they are looking back to their origins and these origins are based upon the oppression. Rebecca declares that “every woman should be a republic unto herself!” (Ferré 97). In her study of how women claim a place for them inside the historical discourse, Pilar Cuder affirms that often the wish for freedom from the patriarchal domination and the wish for the freedom of the island are associated (486). Rebecca is only an example of the many female characters that appear in this novel and which, feeling oppressed by their situation both inside the political and the familiar system, try to express their feelings in the best way they can convey so as to find their own place in their world. Like the island, Rebecca is also looking in a wrong direction, her looking for her Fountain of Youth makes her feel oppressed: her obsession in beauty and youth. At the beginning of the novel, she was a dancer and a writer, but as the novel progresses she quits doing these activities which made her happy so as to please her husband. Now she feels disappointed and is mad looking for something that really fulfills her needs; but she is following the stories that are also told about the true Fountain of youth for women, that is, youth and beauty. Petra, the African servant, makes her know, that it is just another tale told by Spanish Conquistadors which led people to live a life based upon a lie.

Rebeca should have gone on dancing and writing poems, [...] “Maybe then she wouldn’t be so tiresome, asking silly questions like what’s the secret of youth”.

Petra, in spite of being older than Rebecca, didn’t have a single frizzy white hair

on her head, and Rebecca wanted to know why. “Ask your husband,” Petra said, [. . .] “It was Ponce de León, the Spanish Conquistador like Buenaventura, who went to Florida looking for the Fountain of Youth. We Africans never grow old” (Ferré 215).

Again, it is the Spanish Conquistador’s discourse which is to be blamed for her obsession and her self-oppression.

Ponce was hurt by the native people he found on his way to his Fountain of Youth. In his search for the Fountain of Youth Ponce arrived at an unknown coast of Florida where the native people welcomed him with arrows. He didn’t die there but began his last crossing back to Puerto Rico, though he died before arriving there (Díaz-Soler,141). It is remarkable that she, trying to run away from Ponce de León’s story, takes refuge in Florida. Buenaventura and Quintín won’t have a different end. With Quintin’s death, the presence of the Spanish Conquistadors on Isabel’s island gets to an end. According to Isabel, his death is the punishment on the Mendizabal family for stealing Puerto Rico’s Fountain of Youth. It was water that led Ponce’s search and that led him to his death. Buenaventura also died in water and follows his fountain of youth to his death. It is water that ends with Buenaventura’s story because it was on stolen water where the house was built:

I had no right to build my house over a public fountain. My whole life was built on water, and water should be free because it comes from God.” When Petra brought Buenaventura out of the bath, he was dead. (...) Rebecca had forbidden it. She sat praying in the cellar in her high-backed wicker chair, making sure that Buenaventura’s soul arrived safely in the Underworld, following the route of the spring to its source. (Ferré, 258-259).

The curse with which Isabel has punished Buenaventura doesn't end with his death, but it is inherited by Quintín. Trying to run away from the house once it has been set on fire and being worried trying to stop Isabel when she is leaving him, he is injured by his ancestor's house:

Quintín was facing me, about to strike me again. He never saw the iron beam approaching. It hit the back of his head, and he fell forward into the mangroves. I cut the engine, slowed the boat, and looked on with an almost surreal awareness. Quintín lay motionless off the starboard side, floating facedown in the water, half lying on the mangrove roots. Then I saw the crabs moving slowly toward him (Ferré, 407).

He goes with Isabel on a boat which is driving her out of the oppressive memory of the Mendizabal family and, like Ponce de León, he dies among water, hurt by his Fountain of Youth.

Quintín tried to find his Fountain of Youth in the House on the Lagoon itself. His purpose was to turn it into a museum in order to be remembered after his death and, with him, his family of Conquistadors:

If he could never be an artist, at least he had managed to put together a magnificent collection of works of art. Maybe he still had time to turn the house on the lagoon into a museum, into a shrine of art. That way, he would always be remembered, and so would his family, as the founders and donors of the Mendizabal Museum. The House on the Lagoon, Pavel's masterpiece was a landmark on the island. To turn it into a museum would be relatively easy. All he had to do was start proceedings to create the Quintín Mendizabal foundation, which would make it all possible after his death (Ferré 326).

He knows that this museum would mean that the memory of his family would be kept forever, as he wants it to be kept. But he tried to focus his search for the Fountain of Youth upon a place of

oppression as was the house itself and that is what leads his life to this tragic end. But it was just a physical death. What causes his spiritual death is Isabel herself. Quintín knows that Isabel's novel about his family was a threat so he tries to persuade her to get rid of it. But he didn't get it and she gets to hurt him with her poisoned arrows: her written words.

Finally, Isabel gets to free herself from Quintín and the house, which is the symbol of the familial colonization, along the river. Isabel, like Ponce, gets to Florida. In her search to demystify the Puerto Rican origins, she comes back to the place where Ponce de León's story ended as the only possible way to heal her bounds:

It wasn't until a year later, when the peace of Long Boat Key finally healed my bounds, that I returned to The House on the Lagoon. I know publishing it may have dire results, but a tale, like life itself isn't finished until it is heard by someone with an understanding heart (Ferré 380).

It is where one story ends that the other begins. She knows that she has to go back to the house in order to finish with her mission, that is, in order to publish her novel:

She knows that the only way she can find her liberation is through letting her story be known by the world so she can, if not discover the truth, at least discover that everything is not as it seems to be. That's the only way to be immortal. With it, Rosario Ferré demonstrates how both the liberation of women and of Puerto Rico have been searched for following the wrong direction. On the one hand, men have been looking for it following the route of the oppression, which Ponce de León began. On the other hand, women have allowed men to lead them to follow their same way. For her, the true Fountain of Youth can only be found in the written word which springs up from the Fountain of Imagination.

1. In order to show it, I want to compare the fictional discourse of *The House in the Lagoon* with many of the historical discourses about Ponce de León's life which actually we can have access to

2. Según Antonia Domínguez Miguel, las diferentes técnicas utilizadas por las autoras latinas “responden al deseo de las autoras de hacer problemática la representación de la mujer en la literatura y en la historia, que tradicionalmente procedía de la subjetividad de una sola voz narrativa (eminente mente masculina), hasta ahora soberana en la literatura y la historiografía” (Domínguez, 54-55).

3 There are many interpretations about this obsession both in historical interpretations and literary ones. There are even adaptations of Ponce's search for the Fountain of Youth and its implications: Olga Nolla's *El Castillo de la Memoria*, Borge's “El Inmortal”,

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