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LADIES OF PROVIDENCE: THE ABSENCE OF MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHERLAND IN IRENE VILAR'S *THE LADIES' GALLERY: A MEMOIR OF FAMILY SECRETS*

Resumen

En este artículo, se ofrece una lectura de The Ladies' Gallery: A Memoir of Family Secrets de la autora puertorriqueña Irene Vilar, no solamente como una crónica de los sucesos trágicos en la historia de una sola familia sino como metáfora por la lucha de una isla entera contra los efectos violentos y traumáticos de los procesos colonizadores y modernizadores. Intento mostrar como las memorias de Vilar encuadran dentro del campo más amplio de trabajos realizados sobre los problemas de la memoria colectiva en Puerto Rico, particularmente en cuanto a la experiencia de la mujer durante los años posteriores a la Operación Manos a la Obra.

Palabras clave: Irene Vilar, memorias, esterilización, emigración, nacionalismo

Abstract

In this article, I offer an analysis of Puerto Rican author Irene Vilar's The Ladies' Gallery: A Memoir of Family Secrets, not merely as a non-fictional account of a single family's tragedy but as a metaphor for an entire island's struggle with the violent and traumatic effects of colonization and modernization. I aim to show how Vilar's memoir forms part of the larger body of work done by intellectuals on the problems of collective memory in Puerto Rico, particularly as these questions relate to women's experience during the years following Operation Bootstrap.

Keywords: Irene Vilar, Memoir, Sterilization, Emigration, Nationalism

In the San Juan Cathedral, with her child on her lap and a Puerto Rican flag draped around her, *Nuestra Señora de la Providencia* sits smiling at her child while hundreds of devotees seek her for consolation, and thousands of tourists file by to snap her picture. Carried centuries ago from Italy to Spain and from Spain to Puerto Rico by colonists, she has been replicated and carried off to the U.S. mainland by islanders heading for the metropolis. With the flag covering her it is not difficult to realize that *La Providencia* is the island's patron. It may not be this Catholicism-nationalism conflict that makes her so meaningful a symbol of Puerto Rico. The eyes of the child on her lap are closed, his head is flung back over her knee and his arm droops down towards the floor. The adult's destiny is already written onto the child's body; the infant reclining is already dead. *La Providencia*, the childless mother, is in many ways Puerto Rican identity's ideal representative. This deterritorialized mother's body, with the lifeless child on her lap, is an object of interest not only for a Catholic

Nationalism, but for the flashing, and watchful eyes of the U.S. imperialism.

Irene Vilar's *The Ladies' Gallery: A Memoir of Family Secrets* is an attempt to reconstruct the voice and the body of the Puerto Rican women in order to change the course of history. José Sanjinés has discussed Vilar's use of the memoir as a form of self-communication in which the addresser and addressee of the message are the same person (170). What distinguishes self-communication from other forms of dialog is that it "serves a function in helping a writer elucidate his or her inner state, and . . . result[s] in the reorganization of the writer's personality" (173). The aim of this sort of writing is homeopathic, helping Irene Vilar to transform her personality, a form of self-diagnosing psychotherapy aimed at keeping her from the asylum (177). While Sanjinés's study of the text is elucidating, particularly his study of the way repetition works at various levels of the memoir, his analysis does not account for the fact that Vilar's narrative voice is not in dialog merely with herself but with history, her mother and her grandmother. There is a collective element of Vilar's memoir, meant not to save just herself but to remember and realize an absent mother and nation that have previously been presented only as absences in Vilar's life.

Irene Vilar's reconstruction of her family's history, rather than merely a personal undertaking, should be thought of as a much larger project of writing the Puerto Rican experience after the 1898 American take-over. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones in his influential book, *La memoria rota*, argues that Puerto Rico's long history with Spanish and United States imperialism has resulted in the traumatic fragmentation of Puerto Rico's cultural memory. Juan Flores has pointed out that, "a people's memory and sense of collective continuity is broken, not only by the abrupt, imposed course of historical events themselves but by the exclusionary discourses that accompany and legitimate them" (52). In his book *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, he engages Díaz Quiñones's proposal and continues the type of memory work that *La memoria rota* began. To undertake this kind of work Flores realizes that "[i]t is not enough to point to the break and glue the pieces together by mentioning forgotten names and events. The seams and borders of national experience need to be understood not as absences or vacuums but as sites of new meanings and relations" (51). The sites of some previous breakage or destruction need to become sites of creation. Many have undertaken the work first suggested by Díaz Quiñones by looking at the role of narrative dealing with the trauma of colonization: Raquel Ortiz Rodríguez's wittily titled "Memory Ricanstruction," Juan Flores's *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, and Rubén Ríos Ávila's *La raza cómica* have explored the ways in which Puerto Rican culture has attempted to approach and overcome that traumatic moment through art, music and literature respectively. What these works have in common is their insistence on the necessity of a hybrid language (visual, linguistic or literary) to underwrite and dismantle a monolithic, and colonial History (Ortiz 107-108, Flores 51-52, Ríos 20).

The Ladies Gallery is unmistakably the work of a broken and fragmented memory. On a structural level, it is divided principally into two sections: a narrative present, written by a teenage Vilar who is recuperating from a suicide attempt in a psychiatric hospital in Syracuse, New York and a narrative past: the story of her family, particularly that of her mother and grandmother. If the first part is characterized by an introspective style like that typical of a diary, the second is a more hybrid text composed of memoirs, photographs, newspaper articles, testimonies, police reports, history books, and anecdotes. The sections are even visually distinguishable, the former being written in italics. Rather than interrupting the text, the fissures and synapses that abound become sites of meaning.

Irene Vilar's writing does not pretend to glue the pieces of memory together again, but instead strives to hold the pieces close enough together as to reveal a relation between the events of her life and those in history which may have otherwise remained hidden. For example, the story of her grandmother, Lolita Lebrón's childhood, is interwoven with a history of coffee cultivation in Puerto Rico, and the events of the day Lolita opened fire on members of U.S. Congress in an act of nationalist defiance of U.S. colonization are interwoven with a history of sugar harvesting. In many respects, Vilar's writing is less mnemonic than it is metonymic. Lolita's biography loses some of its epic qualities, and stands in for a larger, cyclical and natural history of insular colonization and economics.

The aim of Irene Vilar's text is to disarm the force that has fragmented and continues to fragment both the memories and bodies of the women in her family. In the prologue Vilar states: "I am the product of repetitions. Of family secrets. . . ; usually it is the untold family story a child is destined unwittingly to repress, or to repeat. We inherit secrets the way we inherit shame, guilt, desire. And we repeat" (4). What is repeated across the generations of women is a series of abandonments and suicides. The story of family secrets, and the untold traumatic history must to be written if it is to be overcome; forgetting that is not an option since it will merely allow the event to repeat itself. In a chapter of *La raza cómica* called "La histeria de la historia," Ríos Áviles reminds us that in order to escape the repetition of the trauma one must give it its full weight: "lo principal consiste en desapropiarlo de su lugar en la Historia, donde figura como un metarelató. . . y devolvérselo al relato, al cuento a través del cual el sujeto intenta sitiar el fondo inarticulable de sus obsesiones" (20). Similarly, Vilar knows that, in order to break a past trauma's hold on the present, one must revisit the unnamable moment, and then relate, not only its place in History at large, but also its role in a personal story.

Irene Vilar finds the point where the personal and the historical overlap at the site in which motherhood and motherland merge. Her grandmother Lolita Lebrón opened fire on the U.S. congress wounding four people, with the result that Gladys, Lolita's daughter, would be raised without a mother. Gladys too

would abandon her daughter by committing suicide. Irene would witness her mother throwing herself from a moving car as a young girl. Irene didn't know who her grandmother was until a teacher had given her a book about her called *Lolita Lebrón: La prisionera*: "On that day," Irene writes, "politics became something intimately tied to family history, to the family secret" (147). Even on her mother's funeral day, a private mourning would become a public spectacle. As the crowds showed up to catch a glimpse of Lolita, who had been released from prison to attend the funeral, Irene writes: "It's a matter of historic moment. . . . Amidst all that grief and confusion, Lolita never lost sight of the fact that her personal tragedy was a moment in the collective epic" (170).

The revolutionary movement in history has already been told and belongs to the "memory of the remembered" (we could only think of the countless writings of Pedro Albizu Campos and even Lolita Lebrón's own testimony before the courts and her "Mensaje de Dios en la era atómica" written to President Eisenhower). But there is another memory for Ríos Ávila that still needs to be explored. Flores argues that the most notable absence has been the voice of the emigrant (50), muffled on "the battlefield in the ongoing struggle for interpretive power," which makes up the real fabric of society hidden behind "emotionally charged catchwords like *family*, *symphony of progress* and *cultural affirmation*." (50). These italicized catchwords belong to the rhetoric of the period known as *Operation Bootstrap*, an economic plan, as Irene Vilar herself puts it, "calculated to undermine Puerto Rico's agricultural economy" (5) that was implemented from the 1940s to the 1960s. While *Operation Bootstrap* required the modernization of Puerto Rico to attract U.S. investment, it most notoriously tried to control Puerto Rico's population. About one-third and one-half of the island's population—lured by the promise of work, wealth and fearful of the island's high rates of poverty and unemployment—set off to urban centers like New York and Chicago.

While Díaz Quiñones and Flores have done an excellent job bringing the emigrant subject to Puerto Rican consciousness, their definition of *emigrant* continues to be partial, since it continues to silence another set of emigrant voices. Irene Vilar reminds readers that there are at least two lives at stake at every departure or abandonment: "*Someone goes and someone stays*" (67). This phrase is repeated throughout her text, becoming a refrain that demands interpretation. Looking for the emigrant, Díaz and Flores board what Luis Rafael Sánchez has called "*La guagua aérea*." Sánchez situates the comic-tragic look of Puerto Rican identity on a plane between Puerto Rico and the United States, in the air, like a floating island. By getting on the "proverbial air bus" (Flores 51), Flores only choose one side of the equation: he went in search of those who have gone. What is overlooked, however, is the second figure of Vilar's equation: those who stay.

The emigrant is not the only figure in the text that should be understood as possessing a dual identity. The duplicity of *Operation Bootstrap* also needs

to be examined. There was another operation occurring during the time of mass emigration known as "*la operación*," a literal operation performed on women as a means of population control as well as a way to generate a female workforce whose pregnancies would not then become an inconvenience for employers. In her documentary on sterilization programs, Ana María García shows that the process of tubal ligation, by which approximately one-third of Puerto Rico's female population had been sterilized, became known simply as "*la operación*." In it, García attempts to give voice to the untold stories of those women, silenced and whitewashed by the rhetoric of progress. García does not merely allow those women to narrate the events of their sterilization, she also let their voices blend with other discourses of the time: pro-sterilization politicians and feminists movements, American newsreels about overpopulation, primary school textbooks that illustrate the perfect two-child household and Puerto Ricans that were born in New York. Laura Briggs's article "Discourses of 'Forced Sterilization' in Puerto Rico," offers a comprehensive look at the many discursive battles that occurred around the Puerto Rican women's reproductive organs that led, not only to her sterilization, but also ultimately to her silencing even by feminists. After undergoing "*la operación*" motherhood became impossible—both physically and discursively.

How can we tell the story of the emigrant and of the childless mother's body when she is characterized precisely by her lack of voice, and her absence from History? The mother and the motherland are only present to Irene Vilar as absences, and as such, may be thought of as ghostly figures in Avery Gordon's use of the word, and as such "have a determining agency on the ones they are haunting" (201). These ghosts are the unhappy subjects of modernity—or in the case of Puerto Rico, of Operation Bootstrap—that continue to repeat themselves in the present as they struggle to be heard: "They say it's always that way with the dead, but that every so often they reappear, come up to the surface for a while, like those underground rivers" (Vilar 171) and as Gordon argues, "all these ghostly aspects of social life are not aberrations, but are central to modernity itself" (197). Irene Vilar uses a number of techniques that allow her to dialogue with the emigrant and the childless mother, making them more visible and audible, so that both, she and the reader, may listen to them and finally lay them peacefully to rest. Among her techniques are the use of fictional tropes to draw nearer to the emigrant and the use of objects steeped in meaning that act as surrogates for the absent maternal body.

By bringing the person who goes and the person who stays into focus, we realize that it is not just Puerto Rico's memory the only one that has been broken; it is also its language, its familial bonds and its body as well. The narrative tells of a number of literal geographical displacements. In the prologue to *The Ladies' Gallery*, Vilar tells us that the patriarchs of the family were men from Spain who decided to stay on the island upon falling in love with Puerto Rican women. This, immediately, puts Puerto Rico as a feminine space, the

place of the maternal body. It also alludes to colonization not just as a political act but also a sexual one. *The Ladies' Gallery* is more interested however in the displacements of the maternal body that are required by imperial plans of modernization. A young Lolita Lebrón gets involved with a man named don Paco Méndez who after Operation Bootstrap in the 1950s "monopolized land transportation and advocated staunchly conservative, pro-American views" (5). Rejected by her lover, and symbolically rejected by *Operation Bootstrap* of which he is a harbinger, Lolita is denied "legitimacy" in modern society. In that moment, Lolita and her descendents are introduced to a life of displacement and loss: "It's the typical scene of a mother who hands over her daughter; it follows all the rules of melodrama: the abandoning mother and the abandoned daughter, separating with the promise of coming together again, knowing that it's always that way and that there's nothing to do but choose between abandonments. *Someone goes and someone stays*" (66-67). The scene repeats itself some years later, when Lolita returns from New York, and then leaves a second child in Puerto Rico and returns to New York. She would eventually see her daughter again, only not under the best of circumstances: "She would return, yes, thirty years later, but not to get her daughter but to bury her" (118).

The mother and daughter relationship is conceived as an exile that repeats itself in Gladys's relationship with Irene. Gladys, tired of her husband's infidelity, convinces him to move to Newark, New Jersey in hopes of improving her marital life. Things only continue to get worse, and Gladys conceives a fourth child. The emigrant couple decides to return to Puerto Rico for the birth of their youngest daughter: "At the end of a long scream I was born and for a few days it looked as though everything was really beginning all over again. . . . At times I'd like to think that birth was the anchor that slowed her down, but again, perhaps it was the sudden wind that finally cast her off" (129). Of course, Vilar's memory of her own birth is a fictionalized account, what is important, however, is that the birth is conceived as a parting, as an act that once again sets Gladys sailing. The bond between mother and daughter is always broken, it only exists as a severed relationship.

Irene's final separation from her mother comes on the night when the eight-year old witnesses the tragic scene of her mother throwing herself from a moving car:

When the door opened, a deafening wind came in. I was tugging. No! No! I was tugging in my direction with all my strength, all of my body, as if obliging her to choose. Finally, I didn't feel any more resistance and I was left with a piece of black lace in my hands, and I hated her. She'd done what she wanted to do. She'd left me. (159)

Once again, the mother-daughter relationship is comparable to an act of emigration: someone goes and someone stays behind.

As the young girl tries to make sense of what she has witnessed through the

creation of a fictional narrative, it becomes less clear who is who in the equation: "for a child of eight, death must have been one of those unfinished stories that imagination completes by adding the most fitting ending. . . . But death wasn't an end, it was a farewell. Mama was staying behind in the Seboruco cemetery and I was going home" (171). In Irene's writing it is not she who is left behind, but her mother: Irene gets to be the abandoner and not the abandoned; though the two continue to intermix, and it becomes less clear and less important who stays and who leaves. In fact, leaving and staying become synonymous:

During that first year after Mama died, I was in a kind of exile. I would wake up in the homes of almost all my uncles, I changed schools four times, and when I got back to Palmas Altas, I changed mothers. . . . In my case, Mama had "gone abroad" to see a famous doctor because she had an incurable illness. (177)

The death of the mother, her leaving, is experienced by Irene as her own departure to another land. The mother leaves Irene, but Irene leaves her motherland, like a kind of exile. Both the nation and the maternal body are thus lost. In a second version of Gladys's suicide, this one given in a deposition to the police by Irene, the events that lead to her mother's death are different. Speaking with the inquisitive officer she says: "Like I already told you, sir, my mother was sleeping up against the car door and all of a sudden the door opened" (161). In one version the mother throws herself from the car, in the other the mother is thrown. Which to believe? Each version has been given by the same author.

It is interesting to note that this is not the first time in the book that the State has been concerned with locating disappearing mothers. Like Irene after her mother's death, Gladys was also interrogated by the police as a young girl when her mother was arrested in D.C. for her acts in Congress. Irene writes of her mother's experience:

The police go into the house and ask to see the daughter. When was the last time she saw her mother? The girl says she only met her once, when she was eight, and that her mother had brought along a brother and left him there with her. She had wanted to go along, but. . . . And as she apologizes to the policemen for being an orphan, they come closer, and ask more questions. (150-151)

Abandoning mothers must be controlled, and being a motherless child becomes a matter warranting police interrogation. Gladys even apologizes before representatives of the law for being motherless. The narrative that the State produces fails to get at the complexity of abandonment as experienced by the children left behind. The newspaper and police blotter reduce the event to a set of indisputable facts and happenings (160-161), devoid of the emotional and literary complexity of Vilar's version.

Irene's birth and Gladys's death are just the beginning of a long set of exiles that the author would experience. Her moving from house to house

would continue throughout her adolescence: "In less than five years she would go through an experimental school in New Hampshire, to a nun's school in Spain, and from there, passing through Puerto Rico, to an American university. Then she, too, would get to want to be somebody" (203). Exile becomes an identity-forming process; just as birth was an exile, Irene would develop it into adulthood through a continuous chain of exiles and territorial displacements. In Valencia, she symbolically comes to represent exile. It is in Spain where she meets an uncle who went into exile during the Spanish Civil War:

Exile separated him from the rest of the family—or joined him to it. . . I was America, and for those of his generation, America was the epitome of diaspora, the exile that had gone before, the exile of so many Spaniards who, for one reason or another (usually economic), had to go away, leave their country, emigrate. . . It's always the same. Someone leaves, someone is left behind. (224)

Irene literally represents America, while America represents diaspora. The young girl and her country represent the impossibility of a homeland. Here, as well, exile which it is assumed to be usually forced, is emigration, a more willfully imposed displacement.

We could say that Irene is the epitome of diaspora not only because she is American. Throughout the work, Irene—and the Puerto Rican subject, in general—becomes associated with the Jewish diaspora. Figures of political persecution or imperialism, both groups are forced to negotiate a world without either a motherland or maternal language. Vilar is quick to establish this symbolic connection in her prologue, where she recounts the scene in which she is introduced to her maternal grandfather and realizes that his story, like her own, is "but the remnant of an untold story, of forced conversions" (5) of a "tormented people" (5). Exile, it is clear, is the defining trait of all members of the family. The grandfather also links the family to an early persecution of Jews in Europe. Just as exile and emigration earlier had become synonymous, the Jews underwent a forced conversion, as opposed to a willful change of religion. Like the Puerto Rican emigrant that Flores and Díaz Quiñones claim has been left out of discourse, so in the family's Jewish last name is "the remnant of an untold story." While living in Spain, Irene totes around a copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which she tries to get her cousin Mariluz to read. She is at first unable to believe that her cousin is not familiar with the story (232-233). Anne Frank's and Irene's writings are both quite similar, in that each can be seen as the private account of a larger Historical moment: in Anne Frank's case WWII and in Irene Vilar's, U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico. Her shock at finding out that Anne Frank's story is unknown to her cousin, and it becomes a moment in which she realizes her own story is one that remains unknown as well.

Many years later in New York, Irene comes to know many other women in the psychiatric hospital who appears in her text. One is Madame K. All we know of Madame K is that she is Jewish and that her husband was in

Auschwitz. As Madame K begins to progress, she becomes harder to communicate with: "for some days now Madame K. hasn't spoken to me in English. When she asks me to go somewhere she speaks a language I don't understand, . . . She thinks she is going to Israel. Where? To Israel. That's what she says the few times she speaks English" (173). What is interesting besides Madame K's wanting to go or return to a recently created homeland, is the linguistic breakdown that begins to occur as she also struggles to find a native language. Linguistic hybridity, according to Juan Flores, is one of the defining traits of the Puerto Rican emigrant's experience and must be utilized if their story is to be told:

Remembering in Puerto Rican today inherently involves a dual vision, a communication where languages bifurcate and recombine. Puerto Rican memories are mixed-code memories, lodged at the points where English breaks Spanish and Spanish breaks English. The act of memory defies uniformity; it undermines the privilege typically accorded either of the sundered fragments—English or Spanish, *acá* or *allá*—over the living relation between them, as evidenced in the rupture itself. (51-52)

Languages are broken repeatedly throughout Irene's life. Not only she is the girl forced to move repeatedly between English and Spanish, but she is also between two clashing Spanish dialects when she moves to Spain and is confronted with relatives who speak differently than she. Her family in Spain also resides in a polyglot region, and the family is noted for "mingling Castilian and Valencian words. This linguistic hybridity is reflected in *The Ladies' Gallery* which was written in Spanish but only published in English (Unger). In many ways the book itself is the joint work of both author and translator, a dual text whose linguistic plurality is related to emigration. The first title given to the Spanish manuscript—*Las sirenas, también, cantaban así*—comes from a quote from Franz Kafka's "The Siren," which appears as the epigraph in *The Ladies' Gallery*: "The Sirens, too sang that way. It would be doing them an injustice to think that they wanted to seduce; they knew they had claws and sterile wombs, and they lamented this aloud." The Sirens are an explicit metaphor for the women throughout the text. As figures from *The Odyssey*, they are associated with the travails of exile. Kafka's quote, however, converts the sirens into victims rather than aggressors, without denying their lethal character.

By establishing a relation with Kafka, Vilar invites us to think of Puerto Ricans as people without a nation and a language comparable to Jews. Kafka wrote extensively about literature problems and mother languages. While the quote can be seen as alluding to the problem of being nationless and languageless, it also introduces another historical "omission," forced sterilization. Kafka's sirens are sterile—like thousands of Puerto Rican women during *Operation Bootstrap* period—and as such, they become a literary trope by which Vilar is able to give voice to those women that motherhood is not an option—including

herself, her mother and her grandmother, whose physiological capacity to have children is not the roadblock to motherhood. While Vilar does not directly discuss which one of them was victim of *la operación*, there are many allusions to it throughout the work, the earliest one referred to American painter and poet Pamela Djerassi Bush, who after undergoing tubal ligation, killed herself. Several years after Irene's birth, Gladys had to undergo a hysterectomy: "Around that time they'd discovered a tumor in her uterus. 'They cleaned me out,' she told her friend Soraya" (150). As Briggs argues, if the operations were good or bad is unresolvable. If we consider the complexity of sterilization, we can read Gladys's comment upon the loss of her reproductive capacity in two ways: "They cleaned me out," can be taken as a lament that the doctors had deprived her of something, as though she was using the expression in a way that people would think her house was robbed. On the other hand, knowing about Gladys's various unhappy experiences with motherhood, the operation could literally have been a cleansing, an act of ablution. Vilar's text, like Briggs', is asking us not to see her "operation" as exclusively positive or negative but with all its complexity and ambiguity.

Similarly, Irene is ambiguous about her body. She repeatedly states that along with her family history, her body is the only thing she possesses (47, 321). Nonetheless she is more than willing to dispatch with one part in particular: "*The womb is something that I'd have thrown into the garbage if I could*" (278). While Irene doesn't want to deal with motherhood, she is desperately searching for a mother. This is troublesome since Motherhood and Motherland are mutually inaccessible. Just as her own birth pushed her mother to the shore, depriving Irene from a mother and a country, we see the same effect when Vilar herself is pregnant for the second time: "*Back in my room, when the lights go out, I touch my belly and I can't repress my disgust. I feel the invasion in my stomach*" (176). The word "invasion" evokes the "invasion" that led to the military occupation of Puerto Rico by the U.S.: "Since 1898, America, its flag, its government, its rules, its language—the English language—had been the measure of life in Puerto Rico. 'Ya somos yanquis,' said the criollo Ramón Castañar . . . as the American soldiers landed on the southern beaches" (6). To become a mother in the colonial context is to lose nation, language and autonomy, and as she lays in the psychiatric hospital, Irene feels the troops arriving.

Motherhood and Nationhood are inextricably bound up in the text. Not only Puerto Rican women got sterilized in order to be "good Americans" (Briggs, García), but the Nationalist Party too had investments in Puerto Rican women's reproductive organs. The party continually established the relation between Puerto Rico and the maternal body. Vilar quotes party leader Pedro Albizu Campos as saying:

The brazenness of the Yankee invaders has reached the extreme of trying to profane Puerto Rican motherhood; of trying to invade the very insides of nationality. When

our women lose the transcendental and divine concept that they are not only mothers of their children but mothers of all future generations of Puerto Rico, . . . The Puerto Rican mother has to know that above all she is a mother. . . (47-48)

If Americans were robbing Puerto Rico of its children, the Nationalist party was just as responsible for taking away motherhood. Perhaps this is an example of the ways in which Puerto Rican nationalism is not the Other to the American Imperialism but its counterpart, as Ríos Ávila argues. Throughout the work *Independence and Revolution* become tied to motherhood and its loss throughout the work. The obvious example is Lolita's sexual relations with party members in New York which ultimately lead to a second pregnancy and her decision to abandon her children: "The Nation is mother," writes Irene, "and Lolita who may have had trouble in being a mother before, now would not hesitate to die for that Nation" (95). Party politics denied the children a maternal figure in hopes of providing them with a homeland, which Lolita would insist was more important (96). Ominously, Lolita claimed that her children, "when they grow up, they'll do the same thing I'm doing now" (93).

While they may not have grown up to become the political figure that Lolita became, her children, did somehow repeated her actions. Gladys began having affairs with men from the Nationalist Party to get back at her husband for his infidelities. These relationships, however, only resulted in Irene losing her mother to the party the way Gladys lost hers: "This goes on until she has barely anything left to give in exchange. In each casual encounter she's left a piece of her flesh, and that means there is less of her, no matter the layers of makeup" (151). Relations with the political party literally took the maternal body away from Irene, little by little, until her mother became a mere artifice. The Independence leaders claimed that "mother is nation" (48), and as a result, Irene has neither.

In college, Irene has a relationship with Iván, a political supporter of Latin American unity, which results in an unwanted pregnancy. Upon learning that she is pregnant for the second time, Irene decides to abort the pregnancy. After going back and forth about whether or not to have a doctor perform the abortion, she overdoses on pills to provoke an abortion. Though it seems that she has made a decision to abort the fetus, in the following section of the book called "Miscarriage," a gurney bound Irene has the fetus removed from her uterus. Was the loss of the pregnancy a willful act or not? The back and forth play with the "abortion" and "miscarriage" lead to some ambiguity. Miscarriage—unintentional—and Abortion—intentional—come to describe the same act, much like the words exile and emigration did earlier. Words come to always mean their opposite. Abortion for Irene does not even have a stable definition: "To defend abortion is absurd. It brings with it an equal dose of life and death, . . . a birth can be like a death and a death like a birth, it depends on the side of life one wants to be one" (320). Binaries are always blurry for the Puerto

Rican colonial subject especially when the supposed difference in meanings between words is a question of autonomy or choice. There are no choices for the colonial subject especially when it comes to motherhood and motherland. After all, how can Vilar have an abortion when she herself is stillborn: "a mythological woman: the one born motionless" (52).

Agency in Vilar's work is both a choice and an obligation: "I knew what fate is. You make a decision, and that leads to other decisions, and one fine day that is your life. But you can escape the fate that others . . . want to impose on you. . . The question is whether or not you want to make up your own expression. And say it. . . one can always edit oneself, one can always abort" (320-321). There are ways of breaking the course of events just as Vilar breaks the birth cycle that brings Lolita, Gladys and Irene by together having an abortion. Abortion also becomes a literary act resulting in the production of a narrative allowing her to play with the meanings of words, an act that somehow allows her to escape her colonial dilemma. The fictions that Irene creates blurs the distinction between certain binaries—not just fact and fiction—to create a language free from the binary language that has been used by imperialists to divide the world into black/white; barbarous/civilized: "a writing that maps and labels, describes, examines, and yearns to possess" (89). In doing this, Vilar is linguistically able to complicate the notion of agency when writing history. Did Gladys fall or fling herself? Did Lolita lead the men up the stairs of Congress (92) or was she pushed by the "colonial past of America" (88)? The question of agency becomes a non-issue. All that matters is that there is no mother. Even the long and arduous debate followed by Laura Briggs as to whether the tubal ligation operations and other sterilizations performed in Puerto Rico were "forced" or "coerced" becomes irrelevant for Vilar. Vilar alludes to this fact when she talks about Lolita's first pregnancy: "Did she want that child?... Or did she simply not know how to avoid it. . . there was no alternative but to 'choose' motherhood...or infanticide" (71). A lack of autonomy in motherhood is part of the colonial project which insists that motherhood and motherland cannot be freely chosen.

The question of motherland is also a problem for Puerto Ricans since the island is considered a "freely associated state," though the United States reserves the right to decide unilaterally what happens on the island. In the colonial context in which Puerto Ricans live nowadays, "autonomy" becomes an empty signifier and Puerto Rico becomes a non-subject. Vilar remarks how even U.S. tourist ads rob the Puerto Rican subject of his personhood, turning him into an inanimate object: "an illusion of magnificent landscape where people are absent. Put a Puerto Rican in the picture and you kill the ad, the appetite. You return the island to her lingering status of non-we, non-nation, non-human" (74). The non-nation is lifeless and preserving it is the non-mother Lolita, "she safeguards the corpses that make up the nation we never had" (322).

Because official narrative and national myth are unable to provide a space

for the maternal body, Vilar tries to find a space outside of official documents, such as police reports, newspapers, and medical reports that declare the three women crazy. Her fiction becomes a space in which the absent mother and nation can be kept in the present even if only as ghostly absences. For example, Irene says of her own mother, "Before the psychologist declares her a casualty, hiding her behind a diagnosis, I prefer to write about her as lost, *an empty nest that was once inhabited*. . . Mother has died, therefore I am. Not a nation, it is true, but a presence that remains. A book" (322-323). Other types of documents usually hide things behind fact but literature creatively brings things to into existence, even if they never were.

Memory, as Vilar defines it in the text, is "a young troubled woman looking for the past" (21), like herself: broken, lost, and filled with absences. The young girl, obstinately searches for the lost maternal object, although she is unsure of what that object is. Memory is not able to supplement the traumatic loss by itself and finds its attempts frustrated. There are two principal problems that Vilar continually comes up against. First, there is its lack of object: "A missing mother—and one of whom no photographs remain" (29). Vilar, as we have seen, recurs to fiction which "invents, draws circles that never end" (29), as a way to fill memory's gaps. Another problem that Irene has when she is trying get it altogether, is that the mother sought is not one but plural and amorphous: "a faceless mother who is constantly changing" (30).

Irene cannot grab hold of her mother because Gladys keeps changing. She has to find something else: "What you're looking for isn't in the pictures, Irene, nor in the body nor in the hair that was burning yesterday in this yard. It's in the wigs, in those things that give you the illusion of being someone else every day. It's in what you've never had..." (30). If the mother is not in the maternal body, she needs to be sought out in the world of objects. Just as Lolita is the watch-keeper of the cemetery of a nation that never was, so Irene becomes the keeper of a mother that never was. She begins collecting the scraps of that mother on the day of Gladys's death. When Gladys falls from the car, Irene is left with a piece of black cloth in her hand. Jumping out of the car she looks for her mother's body: "she sees the turban floating in the ditch, the broken hand mirror, the gold purse, the high-heeled sandal... a strip of artificial eyelash" (158-159). All that remains of the mother are *only* things, and it is from these things that Irene will reassemble her mother. The young girl understands early on that her role is to watch over her mother's things, though she's not sure whether or not this is for keeping her alive or remind her of her death.

Those objects belong neither to the world of the living nor to that of the dead, thereby they allow Vilar to bridge the gap between the two, and commune with that which is no longer present. Even in life, Gladys lives in a world of objects: "Sometimes I think that the anisette, the cigarette, the makeup, the eyelashes, and the wigs were a kind of game. Playing with death, maybe. But I don't know whether the point was to kill herself or to tell herself that she wasn't

dead yet" (141). The objects that Irene clings to once filled some emptiness in Gladys's life: in turn Gladys's mother, Lolita, also becomes available to Gladys only through objects as seen in her obsession with fashion: "Now makeup is all there is. . . I wonder if making up and putting on wigs was a custom of the seventies or simply her way of protecting herself from all the women she carried inside her: the daughter, the wife, the mother, and, toward the end of her life, the Puerto Rican nationalist" (140). Clothing, wigs and makeup bring Gladys closer to the mother that she never had, a way to overcome the body's limitations. Not only do objects allow Gladys to draw nearer to her mother by becoming Lolita, they also stand in for the mother-daughter relationship that the two never had. One birthday, Irene receives a dress from Lolita in prison: "[Mama] took the dress out of the box, and, standing in front of the mirror, held it against her body, pulling it down and adjusting the folds and the waist as if it were really for her" (142). The dress, in that moment links the grandmother, the mother and the daughter.

Lolita had only been known to Irene for many years as an object. First, as a yellow dress and years later as the subject of the biography given to her by a teacher. The book is not just about her grandmother, it *is* her: "And that was how the grandmother of the yellow dress turned into the grandmother of the book with black covers" (145). Just as the teacher keeps *Lolita Lebrón* on her shelf, the others beg for objects belonging to Lolita to keep as relics, as though Lolita was a saint or patron of Puerto Rican nationalism. Nationalism becomes a fetishized object in the form of a flag which also unites mother, daughter and granddaughter: "The first time I saw Lolita was on the day of my mother's funeral. She had grabbed me and sat me on her lap, all the while wrapping me in a Puerto Rican flag" (268). The flag is all that binds them, at once a stand-in for both the nation and the daughter-mother that are absent.

The day of her mother's funeral, Irene also learns that it is impossible to have her mother, even if the maternal body is physically accessible. Irene approaches the casket and touches her mother's face: "With the forefinger of my left hand I drew a line from her forehead to the top of her nose until I ran into something like hardened modeling clay. Her nose gave way under the pressure of my finger and I withdrew my hand, almost with fright" (167). The mother's body evades even the slightest touch and crumbles away. Rather than tend to the maternal body, Vilar needs instead to become her mother's archivist. The archive keeps expanding, to include not only a few photos and wigs, but also text fragments of texts assembled to create the story of her grandmother, her mother, and herself. From these fragments *The Ladies' Gallery*, will eventually be written: *hundreds of voices sprang from hers. . . voices from my index cards—the illusion of a busy life—notes for a diary I would one day turn into a critical book about Three Sirens, or cycles: the Child, the Nymph, the Old Lady, three generations of women in my family*" (13).

The Ladies' Gallery is meant to lay the voices and mother that haunt her

eventually to rest, to keep undesired events from repeating again. This task is all but impossible, since telling the story of motherhood and nation in Puerto Rico is similar to a traumatic failure. As Ríos Ávila states, the trauma, “es el relato de la imposibilidad de su propia narrativa, de la naturaleza de toda narrativa como conato, como retazo, como fragmento. El del trauma es precisamente el relato del fracaso de la fantasía” (39). The grand absentees of Puerto Rico’s broken memory have been the mother and the emigrant, whose homeland was not left, it never was. Vilar’s text resonates with their absence. Vilar, however, is able to use repetition as a possibility for change. Sanjinés points out that Vilar uses repetition to prevent unwanted repetition (168), in which pieces of the narrative repeat themselves into a larger order, a rhythm (173), which results in “the renewal of the self” (174). While Vilar may use repetition to create order, I disagree with Sanjinés, who establishes the result is unity and wholeness. Wholeness and unity are traits of dominant forms of historical memory that Vilar seeks to undermine and the story that she has produced, far from monolithic, is multiple.

Ríos Ávila perceived the risks of telling History’s personal history: “Contar es arriesgarse a producir un parto múltiple, una simiente inapresablemente plural. . . . la repetición es un espejismo del deseo que nunca se parece a sí mismo, que insiste en repetir su diferencia” (101). If abortion is comparable to editing, then writing is comparable to birth, and through “the ventriloquist voice of fiction” (160), Vilar, her mother and grandmother find a space in which they are able to achieve a harmonious plurality.

It’s painful writing about things like this. . . . but even though it’s overwhelming, there’s something about words that makes them seem like souls. It brings us closer. So that I’m Irene and she’s Gladys Mirna. Irene writes and talks about her and sometimes she answers her—with the ventriloquist voice of fiction, of course. The book will end and we’ll go away, she, where to I don’t know, and I...I don’t know that either. (160)

Vilar cannot say for sure what will be the result of this text. As Gordon explains, all knowledge learned from ghosts results in a collective story whose end “is not an ending at all” (208). Vilar’s text allows the ghosts of the past to tell their story, and while it brings with it a degree of uncertainty and repetition, it also offers possibilities for change.

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