The Love Of Neighbors: Rosario Ferré’s Eccentric Neighborhoods/Vecindarios Eccéntricos

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_Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vencindarios_  

excéntricos

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Abstract

Rosario Ferré’s position in one of Puerto Rico’s most important families and her status as one of the island’s most prolific and most vocally feminist authors render iconic her critiques of Puerto Rican “free association.” But as they struggle to disengage the binary structures of postcolonial patriarchy that constrain them, the women of Eccentric Neighborhoods walk in on possibilities rarely admitted in Ferré’s extensive body of work: English, statehood, and desire between women. The appeal of the titular eccentricity of places and people in Eccentric Neighborhoods is a new order of decentralized parity and plurality, a Caribbean feminist democratic ideal. In Eccentric Neighborhoods, statehood promises productive egalitarianism where domestic partnerships mirror public enterprises that escape the decadence of the plantation elite, whose dreams of independence have devolved into nostalgia for patriarchal power. Statehood should realize a hybrid space where center and ec-center, English and Spanish, old wealth and new enterprise, men and women, coexist in differentiated complementarity. Eccentric women in eccentric neighborhoods can escape colonial patriarchy, but what if they step into the disorder of radical antiheteronormativity where the attraction of parity devolves into that of similarity and down a slippery slope to indistinguishability?

Daughter of the governor, one of Puerto Rico’s premiere feminists, and one of its most prolific novelists, Rosario Ferré pens iconic literary critiques of Puerto Rico’s “free association” with the USA and paints compelling portraits of women...
who resist Puerto Rican patriarchy. For many years, Ferré’s novels bound the freedom of women with the independence of the island. But as they struggle to disengage the binary structures of colonial patriarchy that constrain them, the women of Eccentric Neighborhoods (1998) / Vecindarios excéntricos (1999) walk in on possibilities rarely admitted in Ferré’s extensive body of work: English, statehood, and desire between women. In the convergence of linguistic, national, and erotic (re)configurations in Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excéntricos an ideal of intersectional complementarity appears, a nonhierarchical order of mutually inclusive possibilities.

This essay examines three strands of possible complementarity in Ferré’s novel: the complementarity of Spanish and English, the complementarity of Puerto Rico and the USA, and the complementarity of homo- and heterosexuality. Ferré’s practice of rewriting her own books exemplifies what linguistic complementarity might achieve: a space where Spanish and English exist not mixed together, not first and second, but in conjunction. The titular eccentricity conveys the spatial configuration of decentralized parity and plurality. Eccentric neighborhoods, connected by their distance and difference, are a strange figure of statehood, if an apt one. In Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excéntricos, statehood promises productive egalitarianism where domestic partnerships mirror public enterprises that escape the decadence of the plantation elite, whose dreams of independence have devolved into nostalgia for patriarchal power. Statehood as it is imagined by Ferré might organize equality in diversity, but it leaves open a door to a dark room, where languages, monies, and bodies mix and match haphazardly in anarchic, orgiastic undifferentiability. The treatment of desire between women in Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excéntricos reveals a fantasy of separation and a fear of disorder that might undergird complementarity, or that might be what it most radically rejects. The second half of this essay focuses on the one scene of explicit sexuality between women in which I read a deep fear that while eccentric women in eccentric neighborhoods can escape colonial patriarchy, they risk stepping into the disorder of radical antiheteronormativity where the attraction of parity devolves into that of similarity and down a slippery slope to indistinguishability. In what follows, I will attempt to answer some of these questions: What kind of a danger is desire between women? What allows it to emerge? To what or whom is it dangerous? What does it threaten? What does it enable?

I approach Ferré’s text from the perspective of both queer and Caribbean studies. At the same time, I refer to desire between women rather than to queer desire, in Ferré’s work, because of the gendered specificity Ferré depicts and because, as convinced as I am of the salience of queer in Caribbean studies, I remain wary of obscuring the fact that, as Omise’ke Natasha Tinsley writes, “queer is only one construction of non-heteronormative sexuality among many” (6). The formulation “desire between women” emphasizes imagination or longing, giving affect as much importance as action. It also leaves undefined how exactly

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1 For discussions of Ferré’s feminism and the ways she connects it to Puerto Rican independence, see Helene Carol Weldt-Basson.

2 The spatial metaphor of eccentric neighborhoods extends what Jessica Magnani calls the “colonial ambivalence” in the metaphor of marriage that Ferré employs to articulate Puerto Rico’s national status in other novels. For analyses of marriage as a metaphor for statehood in House on the Lagoon, see Elena Machado Sáez, Irene Wirshing, and Jessica Magnani.

3 My formulation of these question as well as my attempts to answer them are informed by the many theorists who have asked them, or versions of them, in other contexts. Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judith Butler, Maria Lugones, Susan Stryker, and M. Jacqui Alexander are among the most influential here.

4 Thomas Glave, Lawrence LaFountain-Stokes, and Omise’ke Natasha Tinsley articulate, incisively and elegantly, the intersections of these two fields.
desire between women might be expressed. The variations “eroticism between women” and “sexuality between women” highlight the bodily and the physical, but eroticism, in particular, leaves purposefully open the range of senses and sensations in question. All three formulations are somewhat vague and wordy, and all three are conjoined by “between.” What exactly passes between women for desire, eroticism, and sexuality defies simple definition or singular nomenclature, and it always involves not only women but all that passes between them.

M. Jacqui Alexander’s analysis links desire between women to a threat to the (post)colonial Caribbean nation when she writes:

Women’s sexual agency, our sexual and erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state. They pose a challenge to the ideological anchor of an originary nuclear family, a source of legitimation for the state which perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society. Erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation (64).

Ferré might offer, in complementarity, a conceptual link between erotic autonomy and national identification. She might find a genealogy on which to anchor the nation that does not rest on the nuclear family but on the eccentric neighborhood.

Weaving personal relationships with public projects, Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excéntricos attempts to offer a variation on the national romance and on a story that Ferré has told many times. At the turn of the last century, as Doris Sommer establishes in Foundational Fictions (1991), romances provided not only an allegory for national consolidation but the very site where new Latin American and Caribbean nations were imagined into being. In the national romance, a particular kind of family is made into a particular kind of nation and vice versa.\(^5\)

Even, or perhaps especially, as it imagines politically independent nations, the national romance solidifies what María Lugones identifies as the heterosexualism of the colonial legacy.\(^6\) Ferré’s work, and this analysis, asks what happens when we pursue other national romances.

As Elvira Vernet, the narrator of Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excéntricos, traces three generations of her family tree, examining more than a century of their intimate, political, economic, and social development, she retells the history of Puerto Rico’s troubled emergence from colonial domination. The story progresses toward statehood for Puerto Rico and emancipation for women, but it is wracked with the expenses at which any progress is obtained.

Establishing Puerto Rico’s colonial origins, Elvira traces her maternal line, the Rivas de Santillanas, back to her Corsican great-grandfather, Bartolomeo, and her paternal line to her French great-grandfather. In 1898, Elvira’s paternal grandfather, Chaguito, helps to negotiate the Spanish surrender of Puerto Rico to the USA. Technically, Puerto Rico becomes a possession of the USA, but for Chaguito, as he writes to his mother in Cuba, “I’ve become an American, a free man” (154).
Elvira’s maternal family, part of the island’s plantation elite, is more ambivalent about Puerto Rico’s attachment to the USA, but even for them it marks the advent of modernity on the island. Moving to the town of Guayamés in 1898, Elvira’s maternal grandfather, Alvaro, finds that “with the arrival of the Americans on the island, the quality of life in Guayamés had improved greatly: streets were paved, there was running water, a sewage system and storm drains had been installed” (8). This establishment of 1898 as the year when Puerto Ricans become Americans and Puerto Rico becomes integrated into the US infrastructure makes the subsequent acts and amendments revising Puerto Rico’s status less important in the novel than tornadoes, trade policy, and changes in the sugar industry and construction. Various characters’ pro-statehood political activity occupies much of the novel, but the 1917 Jones Act establishing Puerto Rico as an “organized but unincorporated” territory of the USA and granting citizenship to Puerto Ricans is not mentioned.

Political and economic endeavors are primarily the terrain of the men in Elvira’s family. Her grandfathers, Chaguito and Alvaro, and their respective sons love strong, passionate, smart women, but once marriages are settled and daughters are born, like Abuelo Chaguito, they make clear their belief that women “should get married, have children, and take care of them” (190). Elvira’s mother Clarissa fights to maintain a position in running the family’s plantation and joins Puerto Rico’s women’s suffrage movement. Sexuality serves as the site for a certain resistance to patriarchal rule for Celia, whose entry into a convent is described as a strategic use of celibacy, and for Sigilinda, who becomes a nudist. But as they progress into married life, the women give themselves over to conforming to their husbands’ expectations and wills. The marriage that brings together Elvira’s parents in 1930 subsumes even Clarissa’s identification as “Puerto Rican before anything else” under the strident Vernet devotion to statehood as the best future for Puerto Rico (224).

*Eccentric Neighborhoods/Vecindarios excéntricos* details a fictionalized political history of Puerto Rico through the 1960s, which, aside from minor name changes, makes one substantive revision to events outside the novel: in the story, by 1945, Puerto Rican parties are presenting candidates for governor to Puerto Rican voters, three years before Luis Muñoz Marín actually became the first democratically elected governor of the island. The slippage of a few years may itself be insignificant, but it allows the elision of the 1947 shift from a Puerto Rican governor appointed by the US president to one elected by Puerto Ricans. The novel comes to a close at the end of the 1960s, referring to the first plebiscite where Puerto Ricans voted on maintaining Puerto Rico’s commonwealth status but never having mentioned the 1950 Public Act 600, which allowed Puerto Ricans to draft their own constitution and establish Puerto Rico as a commonwealth of the USA (in Spanish, “Estado Libre Asociado” / “Associated Free State”). These minor shifts and lacunae downplay the limits that the USA has placed on Puerto
A plebiscite is scheduled for November 2012. The plebiscite will contain two questions. The first will ask if voters want to maintain Puerto Rico’s current status as a commonwealth or change the status. The second will list three options for change: statehood, independence, or “sovereign free association.”

Ferré’s comparison of the bilingualism of a Puerto Rican state to the coexistence of two languages in Hawaii reveals some potential flaws in her argument. Hawaii has two official languages, however, according to the 2000 census; almost 75% of Hawaiians speak English only at home. Hawaiian-language instruction is only allowed in Hawaiian public schools in limited forms, and no Hawaiian-language newspapers have been in print since 1948. For more detailed discussion of bilingualism in Hawaii, see William Wilson.

Perhaps most explicitly, linguistic tensions played out in the first half-decade of Puerto Rico’s association with the USA in regulations about the language of instruction. In 1901, the Department of Instruction of Puerto Rico was created under the control of the US Federal government, and English was imposed as the language of instruction in Puerto Rico. In 1915, the commissioner of education allowed that Spanish be the language of instruction through grade four, and that instruction be in both Spanish and English in grades five through seven, and in English only after that. In 1934, Spanish was reinstated as the language of instruction throughout all public elementary schools, with English as a second language starting in first grade. Two years

Rican autonomy, facilitating the idea of a complementary partnership in statehood although perhaps also reminding of the fictional quality of that complementarity.

Ferré’s personal history coincides with that of her characters. Like Elvira’s father, Ferré’s held the governorship of Puerto Rico from 1969 until 1972. In 1972, Ferré famously defied her father’s pro-statehood stance in an open letter detailing her pro-independence position. But in 1998, the same year Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excénticos was published, she ended an op-ed piece in the New York Times, “Puerto Rico, U.S.A.,” with the declaration that she would “support statehood in the next plebiscite.” Ferré’s support for statehood arises in part from her belief that statehood no longer entails “losing our language and culture,” ensured by her perception that “bilingualism and multiculturalism are vital aspects of American society” and by a shift in the US position on language, which would allow a Puerto Rican state to maintain Spanish as an official language.

Linguistic tensions, evident in the different connotations of the terms commonwealth and Estado Libre Asociado, underline the relationship between Puerto Rico and the USA and play prominently in Puerto Rican politics. The defense of the Spanish language figures prominently in the platforms of the Puerto Rican Independence Party and the Popular Democratic Party (which back maintaining commonwealth status), while the pro-statehood New Progressive Party embraces English. The coincidence of Ferré’s shift to writing in English first with her shift to supporting statehood seems to reinforce this division. Elena Machado Sáez reads Ferré’s use of English for and in House on the Lagoon (1996) alongside her political statements to argue that Ferré favors not English but bilingualism. Ferré’s writing in both English and Spanish, her comments on translation, and the thematization of language in Eccentric Neighborhoods/Vecindarios excénticos propose a bilingualism very different from the Caló or Spanglish advocated by many of the Chicanos and Latinos with whom Machado Sáez sees Ferré trying to ally herself. Caló and Spanglish belong to the aesthetic and ethic of mestizaje that, as Suzanne Bost writes, “highlights the fusion of differences ... the mixtures, negotiations, and frictions that define American history” (188). Ferré may, as Bost argues, valorize racial mestizaje in Puerto Rico, but in Ferré’s bilingualism Spanish and English coexist but rarely mix or overlap; it is a complementarity that would eliminate hierarchies but maintain separations.

Ferré achieves bilingualism not by writing any single book in Spanish and English but by writing each book first in one language and then in the other, in what might be called translating. Translation, however, is inherently hierarchical, for, as Lawrence Venuti writes, “asymmetries, inequities, relations of domination and dependence exist in every act of translating” (4). This is not to say that monolingualism or an absence of translation does not also involve wielding power through language, but it allows discussion of the particular hierarchies of translation and of possible ways to move between languages that minimize, acknowledge, or reconfigure those hierarchies. The “fundamentally ethnocentric” nature of translation derives, for Venuti, from translation’s work of
Gayatri Spivak’s consideration, for domestication. “Foreign” texts are translated into “domestic” cultures, a process of assimilation (11). When Ferré writes in English first, she troubles the distinction between domestic and foreign to some degree, but that is precisely what renders the choice to write in English first a political one that is connected to statehood, to making English a domestic language of Puerto Rico, and rendering Puerto Rican literature domestic in the USA. But Ferré insists, in a 2000 interview with Bridget Kavanagh, “I don’t translate my work; I write versions of it” (64). She claims a right to be domestic in both Spanish and English, and, at the same time, for both Spanish and English to be foreign, the untranslated other.

Ferré’s versions exemplify complementarity. Versions insist on nonassimilability, on difference, on proliferation. Because they are not equivalent, the English version cannot replace or stand in for the Spanish or vice versa: both are necessary. As complements they also destabilize ranking systems based on notions of priority and primacy. The completeness that Ferré’s two versions of the same story offer is not one of filling in the gaps or supplying the missing piece. Nor does it require that the only complete understanding comes from reading both the Spanish and the English versions of the story because either one is insufficient or incomplete on its own. Rather, their complementarity simply insists that one is not enough: you need to know of the other although you may not necessarily need to know the other.

If Spanish and English do not stand as first and second, original and copy, domestic and foreign in Ferré’s work, they escape binary hierarchies. Binary hierarchies are powerful because they organize not just one pair but an entire cultural system. If one pair in the binary hierarchy can be rearticulated into complementarity, the entire system can, and perhaps must, follow. The understanding that one is not enough linguistically leads to complementary bilingualism that both allows and is allowed by eccentric statehood. And if the nation is a romance imagined in language, a newly imagined nation with a newly imagined language structure can and will have a newly imagined erotic structure. It will certainly be one with complementarity between men and women. The possibility of complementarity between women too has been less fully conceived by Ferré. Desire between women might be hardest to fit into the model of complementarity, the entire cultural system. If one pair in the binary hierarchy can be rearticulated into complementarity, the entire system can, and perhaps must, follow. The understanding that one is not enough linguistically leads to complementary bilingualism that both allows and is allowed by eccentric statehood. And if the nation is a romance imagined in language, a newly imagined nation with a newly imagined language structure can and will have a newly imagined erotic structure. It will certainly be one with complementarity between men and women. The possibility of complementarity between women too has been less fully conceived by Ferré. Desire between women might be hardest to fit into the model of complementarity and might be the most radical version of it.

The possibility of desire between women has long haunted Ferré’s work. Since “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres” / “When Women Love Men,” in her first collection of short stories Papeles de Pandora (1976) / The Youngest Doll (1991), Ferré has consistently included subplots revolving around women of different classes and races whose relationships with the same man leads them into a complex set of doublings and pairings. These relationships offer compelling critiques of how patriarchy and misogyny render women instrumental and indistinguishable. The rich white women have been unhappy in their marriages because they were oppressed by the obligation to be morally upright. The
poor dark women were oppressed by the obligation to sexually service those underserviced husbands. When the husband/lover dies, emptying the place of the oppressor, we might find a complementarity where the rigid opposition man/woman gives way to gender equality, allowing a union of equals. Suggestive as they are, the relationships between the wife and the “other woman” consistently figure any desire of the women to have one another through a desire for the absent man. And marking these is a stark division between rich, white, bored, sexually repressed, dissatisfied white women and poor or working-class, black or mulatta, sexually self-possessed, exploratory, and fulfilled women. Though they may need one another to be complete, it is clear which half each one brings to the union. Oppression gives way to repression, and the suggestion the women may have repressed desires for one another remains just that, as heterosexuality and hierarchy remain intact.


Mary Jane Treacy argues that in many Latin American
In this I differ from Fernández-Olmos, who finds that the "possibility of a union by the lines of division and equality is rendered suspect" (293). Clotilde allies herself with Titiba against the patriarchal Catholicism of Roque's family. With Titiba at her side, Clotilde can insist on Roque's cremation in death as they had in life (292). Clotilde with a proposition: "Titiba asked her if they could share Roque Vernet one day accepted an invitation to a bridge party at the house of Rosa Luisa Sheridan, the wife of a distillery owner. Not everyone in the national imaginary and its work to contain or disavow eccentricity (as difference from the norm). The power of "central control" looms as many eccentric women struggle with the ways that they are still judged by the center. The predictability of the location of the houses in the outskirts and the eventual marriages to man or to God of almost all of the eccentric women suggest that while their eccentricity may not be plot-able in the most usual patterns, it can be contained within traditional plot structure.  

The national romance does not plot desire between women, at least not yet. Desire between women parallels the other eccentricities in Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excéntricos, highlighting the nonheteronormative quality of eccentricity, and also remains separate from them, eccentric even to the eccentric, both locationally and figuratively. The scene in which Clarissa encounters a room full of women erotically engaged with one another appears buried in another scene; it covers barely one of the novel’s 340 pages, and is never mentioned again. The gratuitousness of the scene, its lack of development or placement within the story line, begs questions about what it is doing, whereas the novel’s interest in the eccentric lends a particular significance to the very fact that this scene appears so far from the center of the characters’ lives and of the story line.

By the time we get to the scene in question, Elvira has recounted the life stories of her maternal and paternal grandparents, uncles, and aunts, and detailed her mother’s childhood and early marriage. Clarissa has set aside her educational and career goals in favor of marriage and motherhood, raised a family, and supported her husband, Aurelio, through a successful business career that took full advantage of American policies. With the children grown and Aurelio embarked on a busy pro-statehood political campaign, Clarissa is at somewhat of a loss. It is at this point that “Mother one day accepted an invitation to a bridge party at the house of Rosa Luisa Sheridan, the wife of a distillery owner. Not everyone in La Concordia got invited to Rosa Luisa’s parties, but Mother belonged to the...
Biasetti makes a similar claim that in La casa de la laguna Ferré renders central the marginal. Benitez-Rojo’s passing reference to the disappearance of the center in the Caribbean machine offers another view of the paradox of center and eccentric in and as the Caribbean: “the notion of polyrhythm (rhythms cut through by other rhythms, which are cut by still other rhythms) – if it takes us to the point at which the central rhythm is displaced by other rhythms in such a way as to make it fix a center no longer, then to transcend into a state of flux – may fairly define the type of performance that characterizes the Caribbean cultural machine” (18). Fátima Rodríguez and Laura Eugenia Tudoras argue that eccentric in Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excéntricos refers to the USA and Europe, whereas Puerto Rico is the center defined by these “ec-centers.” Eccentricity in the novel is certainly polyvalent, and the USA and Europe help to position Puerto Rico and the characters, but I maintain that Ferré focuses on eccentricity in – perhaps even as – Puerto Rico.

Rosa Luisa Sheridan’s home, where the party takes place, is located in Las Bougainvilleas, the same neighborhood that all of the Vernet brothers moved into in 1948. Its eccentricity comes not so much from its geography (it is “the most elegant district in town”), as from the extravagance of its homes, “lined up next to one another on Avenida Cañaífusta like four ornate chariots” (239). Rosa Luisa’s home is not, however, on Avenida Cañaífusta but occupies some other unspecified street, for while the Vernet homes, made of cement, are aligned with the states, Rosa Luisa’s is supported by the rum distilleries, “which stood on the outskirts of La Concordia” (255).

Aware that political, social, and economic change has slowly eroded the plantations, most of the “sugar barons” have either left the country or decided to “live it up as best they could with the last swigs from the bottom of the barrel” (256). But the eccentric Clarissa married into the enterprising Vernet family, eschewing the old aristocracy of plantations and their mixed or missing political affiliations for the new enterprise of industry and statehood. Clarissa’s choice keeps her apart from what is figured in the novel as the decadence of her peers, although it also leaves her profoundly isolated.

The excesses of the “sugar barons” include excessive drinking, expensive architecture to accommodate the excessive drinking, and wild parties that facilitate extensive infidelities (256). The wives of these men flock to Rosa Luisa’s parties. Like their husbands, these women enjoy excess. They find their sexual options, however, restricted: “Female infidelity was not permitted – shooting your wife if you caught her in flagrante was a sport husbands practiced successfully – and ladies were forced to socialize only with other ladies” (256). It is not clear from the passage whether ladies turn to one another to avoid the prohibition on infidelity or the possibility of discovery. If it is the former, the novel renders sex between women not parallel to sex between a woman and a man, incapable of constituting an infidelity, so that the women being together is something that they do in place of marital infidelity, a sort of next best thing; whereas, if it is the latter, the novel suggests that the women find a way to commit marital infidelity under the cover of their husbands’ inability to imagine that is what they might be doing.

Rosa Luisa’s last name, Sheridan, suggests that like Clarissa she has allied herself with the USA. The game used to designate her parties is so essentially English that it can only be named in that language – the Spanish version reads “decidió asistir a la merienda bridge en casa de Rosa Luisa Sheridan” (335, emphasis in original). And Rosa Luisa is among “La Concordia’s well-to-do ladies, who do their shopping in Miami and speak a Spanglish peppered with honeys and darlings” (247). While Clarissa’s turn to statehood figures as part of a deliberate and morally upright embrace of progress and equality – political, economic, and social – that an American decentralized order might offer, Rosa Luisa’s represents a space where
anything goes, where nothing is eccentric any more, and where the destabilized norm unleashes mutually inclusive, unranked possibilities that are not the hallmark of equality and opportunity but rather of indistinguishable proliferation and unproductive chaos. If you gamble, even in so restrained a manner as at a bridge game, you might get taken in, and if you gamble on decentralized egalitarianism, you might find that there are no controls to help pull you back once you walk through that door.

Everything has its chaotic underside. On the brink of its loss of power, the plantation patriarchy is both over regulating and devolving into decadent debauchery. Clarissa’s turn to Aurelio, enterprise, and statehood, however, is less fulfilling, and less functional than she had hoped. The old order does not even promise equality in marriage, but, in spite of its best intentions, the new order might be equally unable to deliver, so that even the promising alliance of statehood becomes one more way for the (neo) colonial male power to use the resources of the colony/woman and then move on. Clarissa’s sister Lakhmé discovers this early on in the novel. Her first husband, Tom, “was the perfect American husband” (77). The Spanish version even more explicitly identifies Tom as representative of the American husband in general, specifying “Tom era el marido perfecto, como suelen serlo a menudo los americanos” (99). But Tom does not have the nerves necessary to survive “the severe wounds that he had suffered in combat during his stint in the Pacific,” and, as soon as the dowry is gone, he dies; the perfection of an American marriage may work better as an ideal than as a reality (77). Clarissa, rather than marrying an American marries a Puerto Rican who embraces statehood; however, Aurelio’s exemplary economic, political, and lifestyle choices create a family life that may look good but is beset with inequalities and dissatisfactions.

Clarissa and Aurelio serve as the contrast to the “sugar barons” wild excesses: “the exception to the rule [of wild parties] was our house at 1 Avenida Cañafístula where Father and Mother would have had their heads chopped off before allowing a bar. Whenever they gave a party, they stopped serving drinks at midnight” (256). And while Aurelio has ample opportunity, he remains chaste outside of his marriage bed. It would appear, then, that Elvira’s parents represent a moral ideal highlighted by the horrors of the decadent society that surrounds them. However, despite Aurelio’s fidelity, Clarissa is so wracked with jealousy that she becomes filled with the “bad temper” that her priest warns “can also be a path of red-hot bricks that leads to hell!” and Elvira, their daughter, is so consumed by an Electra complex that she plots her mother’s downfall: “When Father’s political campaign intensified and Clarissa was too tired to accompany him, he asked me to stand beside him on the platform when he spoke. I was eighteen [sic] and this made me feel important. Father needed me, I told myself, and my presence in this world made Mother’s just a little bit less necessary” (252). In the model pro-statehood family, gender equality does not function, and solidarity between women does not exist.

Peter Brooks’s Reading for the Plot (1984) unveils a profoundly ideological, normal, and universal plot structure that moves inexorably from a beginning of (unsatisfied) desire though a middle period of searching to a reproductive end in (heterosexual) marriage, childbirth, and death. Any potential undoing of the narrative (of) progression in its detours and backtracking is always already recuperated in the final dénouement that not only straightens out but also explains as necessary any kinks in the scheme.
Clarissa tries to move outside the family, looking for a different kind of egalitarian productive alliance with other women. She tries to count as her “good friends” the members of her “sewing club, Las Tijerillas,” who “didn’t have a college education and didn’t belong to La Concordia’s sugarcane aristocracy” (247). But Clarissa comes back to Rosa Luisa “probably because she was bored,” for while the other women in her sewing group can only spare one day a week from their busy schedules of housework and child care, Clarissa has servants, nurses, and gardeners galore (255, 248). Her other distractions are limited because there are so few of them and additionally, in the Spanish version, because she is so attentive to what is “bien visto” for “las damas como Clarissa” (332).

Clarissa finds herself, like so many of Ferré’s aristocratic female protagonists, deeply dissatisfied with the life of a married woman of means that offers no intellectual stimulus, no productive or creative outlet, and no sexual satisfaction (246). But instead of the working-class black mistresses to envy and/or emulate that other Ferré protagonists find, Clarissa stumbles on Rosa Luisa and her friends:

She got there late, delayed by a dental appointment, and found the front door ajar. She stepped in, pushing it fully open with her umbrella and calling out for Rosa Luisa. Soft music wafted out from the bar. Instead of the elegant little card tables she was expecting, with ladies shuffling the deck and betting in low voices, she saw a group of women dancing and others lying on cushions strewn on the floor. They were kissing and rubbing slowly against one another, and they were so drunk they didn’t even notice Clarissa standing there. She turned and ran out of the house, her face flaming. (256–57)

Clarissa and the other eccentric women in Elvira’s family strike the balance, with more and less success, between repression and eccentricity. If she is not eccentric, if she cannot run off into the Río Loco at times, Clarissa will implode. But if she gets stuck in the river, if she lets the repressed return fully, Clarissa recognizes in this scene, she will become forever enmeshed in eccentric disorder. Eccentricity for Clarissa is not so much a way of escaping order as an escape valve for the sorrow that builds up from performing the repressions required by order. Clarissa’s late arrival at Rosa Luisa’s party and the specification that she was delayed at the dentist’s, that place where deeply hidden rot is uncovered, laid the ground for the return of the repressed. In this state of disarray and openness, when she finds the door to the dark corridor slightly ajar, Clarissa follows the sound of the music. Hesitant, Clarissa tries to maintain a certain distance by pushing the door with the tip of her umbrella, but of course the repressed returns on its own in those moments when our defenses might be a little low without our even knowing it. This one is pretty deep, down a corridor through which not articulated language but only the indistinct sound of music can pass.

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19 Clarissa’s husband never has an affair. Elvira learns of her paternal aunt Clotilde’s arrangement with Titiba from her paternal aunt Celia, and there is no mention of Clarissa having any knowledge of it.
Because I am reading this scene closely, and because I find a difference between the English and Spanish versions of this scene, I will here refer to both versions. The difference has to do with the depth and complexity of the repression of desire between women, as if it were more complicated to access in Spanish than in English, as if perhaps in a separate but equal state, repression might be more manageable, or less necessary. Specifically, where the English text reads: “She stepped in, pushing it fully open with her umbrella and calling out for Rosa Luisa. Soft music wafted out from the bar,” we find in the Spanish, “la empujó con la punta de la sombrilla y la puerta se abrió sola; llamó a Rosa Luisa en voz alta pero no le contestó nadie. Escuchó que estaban tocando música al fondo del pasillo y se dirigió hacia allí” (256, 335). While the English version suggests that Clarissa by her strong and conscious action brings something to broad daylight, with wide open doors and lungs, the Spanish describes Clarissa using only the tip of her umbrella, after which the door opens on its own, emphasizing Clarissa’s loss of control and suggesting the presence of subconscious forces. The Spanish text adds the specification that no one answered Elvira’s loud call, putting in doubt how clear anything was to anyone. The description of the origin of the music in English is specific and clear, whereas in Spanish “al fondo del pasillo” indicates the depth or end of a passageway not a specific and known room, and this confusion is emphasized in the Spanish narration by Elvira’s action, heading toward there to end up who knows where.

In both versions, the sexuality between women that Clarissa walks in on does not mirror the men’s coupling with their mistresses. For the men, parties are often covers, and their party rooms are always fitted with back doors “where the gentlemen and their paramours could make a discrete exit” (256). The women, on the other hand, engage erotically at their parties, just inside “the front door ajar” (256). Leaving a party with a single paramour ensures that, even in their affairs, the men are perfectly heterosexual. The women not only are with one another, they do not pair off. Instead, Clarissa finds an orgiastic “group of women dancing and others lying on cushions strewn on the floor. They were kissing and rubbing slowly against one another, and they were so drunk that they didn’t even notice Clarissa standing there” (257). The transitive quality of the verbs adds to the confusion about how many women were touching how many at any one time, whereas the specification of the degree of drunkenness suggests that they themselves were not attending to details of who was where when. This is the chaos of no center at all, in which social orders and bodies become disarticulated.

These women seem to have found a different way around the problems of colonial and neocolonial patriarchy than Clarissa, or any of Ferré’s other women. They find room for pleasurable disorder. Not only do they enjoy the eroticism of the orgy, they enjoy other chaotic mixings as well. Rosa Luisa and her friends seem able to enjoy a disordered hybridity that emerges from the destabilization of binaries such as English/Spanish, man/woman, and heterosexual/homosexual. This is the flip side of complementarity, what might happen to complementarity if it did
not or could not make the tenuous case for the intactness of each version, if the complements began to freely associate as so many constitutive parts that could mix and match, recombine and disarticulate at whim. Is this what Clarissa flees, her face bright red?

Clarissa’s face flares up similarly once before in the novel when her priest warns her about the flames of hell awaiting if her “bad temper” went too far. Perhaps, like her anger, Clarissa understands the sexuality between women as a sin to which she is, almost overpoweringly, drawn. It remains ambiguous whether the problem then is one of sin and its attractiveness or one of the labeling of so many attractive things as sin. Clarissa never talks to Rosa Luisa again, and the narrative never mentions her or her parties again. The question of what is so terrifying about the women together remains, not only for Clarissa but also for Ferré, integral to the question of what women want and where they can get it, and to the possibilities to which a destabilization of ordering systems – political, social, economic – might give rise.

Engaging in sexuality between rich white women is not part of what the eccentric pro-statehood family does. It might be part of what the family misses about what everyone else does. Sexuality between women might satisfy or at least occupy some of the notoriously unsatisfied and under-occupied women in Elvira’s family. We do not know if the women at Rosa Luisa Sheridan’s parties are satisfied. We do know that the parties are regular and that invitations are highly sought after: “Not everyone in La Concordia got invited to Rosa Luisa’s parties, but Mother belonged to the sugarcane aristocracy of Guayamés and Rosa Luisa considered her one of her own” (255). Here, being “one of her own” seems to refer to being upper class. But once we realize, with Clarissa, that this is not the kind of bridge party she imagined, and that no one thought it important to inform her, we understand that “one of her own” must also refer to being open to sexuality between women. It is not that entertaining sexuality between women should replace “upper class” as the referent, but that the two become synonymous. The implication is that all of the women of Rosa Luisa’s class engage erotically with one another.

Perhaps Rosa Luisa’s party is the center that Clarissa rejects; perhaps Rosa Luisa and her friends are the eccentric in relation to which Clarissa’s life becomes quite normal; or perhaps Clarissa’s world is eccentric, and the party eccentric to the eccentric, which would render it insignificant if it were not for the fact that the eccentric is the paradoxical center of this novel. Desire between women is dangerous precisely because it must be maintained and disavowed, especially at the moment when other delicate balances – such as between independence and statehood – are in flux. Desire between women is necessary either as the exception that proves the rule of heterosexuality or else as that which keeps in question what exactly the rule is, what is “in” and what is “out” of the norm, leading either to an impasse or else, as I prefer, to a realization that the categories themselves (normal-abnormal, central-eccentric, homosexual-heterosexual),

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K. Valens Rosario Ferré’s Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vencindarios excéntricos
and neat categorizations are the ultimate targets, intentional or not, of the representation of sexuality between women in *Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excéntricos*.  

*Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vecindarios excéntricos* shows that sexuality between women, were it allowed, might complement sexuality between men and women, and its very rendering impossible the placement of desire between women makes the categorical imperative at the basis of any divisionary model impossible to achieve. The disruption of hierarchies of importance, even of circles or spheres that might organize the central and the eccentric, destabilizes any model that sees the homo as simply an alternative, because the model of the alternative actually reifies the norm by its dependence on it to be an alter. We end up with a chaotic collection of mutually inclusive, unranked possibilities: so dangerous, precisely because it is a deeply compelling possible exit from heteronormativity. There will be, there are, extensive outside conditions that limit or enable the possible – for Clarissa the opinion of the Catholic Church looms large, but so does a hetero reproductive imperative to carry on a family tree in a particularly mappable way (extending the tree at the front of the novel) and to maintain a political system that preserves heteropatriarchy. A radical political shift, like that to statehood, might enable the shift to a democratic feminist ideal, as might statehood itself. But we end in a chiasmus that draws outlying, eccentric poles into a center and sends them back out the other side. Desire between women enables the very things that it threatens and threatens the very things that it enables: repression, equality, freedom, chaos.

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**Works Cited**


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Rosario Ferré’s Eccentric Neighborhoods / Vencindarios excéntricos


