

The Construction of History in the Folds of a Family
History in the Novel *Song Lost in West Buenos Aires*
by María Rosa Lojo

Zulema Moret
Albion College, Michigan
Translated by Laura Kanost

Writing History in the Framework of the Postmodern Novel

The narrative work of María Rosa Lojo, particularly her novels *Canción perdida en Buenos Aires al Oeste* (*Song Lost in West Buenos Aires*) (1987), *La pasión de los nómades* (*The passion of the Nomads*) (1994), *La princesa federal* (*The Federal Princess*) (1998), and *Una mujer de fin de siglo* (*A Fin de Siècle Woman*) (1991), demonstrates a specific preoccupation with the rewriting of history from new perspectives related to the postmodern narrative. A noteworthy example of such rewriting of history is Marguerite Yourcenar's innovative project in writing *Memoirs of Hadrian*, in which the narration of the Roman emperor's life is displaced to a foundational space in counter-history. The hero is "seen from inside, from his subjectivity," and the modern novel's primary level of adventures and heroic actions is displaced to a secondary level or perspective.

From other places, other novels produced in this century and inscribed in postmodernism, such as *Beloved* (1988) by Toni Morrison, refer to the value of memory, or "re-memory," as that author affirms. Lidia Curti offers an insight on this novel by the American author:

Re-memory is the re-making of history, deconstruction but also reconstruction of a particular cohesion to be found in the modes of everylife, in the minute rites marking it, in the magic-ritual perspective through which to look at great events, from within a complex network of female ties tying one generation to the other. Re-memory gives freedom. . . . (Curti 98)

This group of novels that articulate private history along with public history includes novels from the Spanish American tradition such as *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*) (1982) by Isabel Allende or *Arráncame la vida* (*Tear my Heart Out*) (1987) by Ángeles Mastretta.

At this crossroads, the novel that will occupy this analysis is constructed, for in *Canción perdida en Buenos Aires al Oeste*, the polyphonic structure and the variety of strategies utilized demonstrate the process of revision of concepts such as Aristotelian mimesis and verisimilitude, proposing what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction.¹ This process of the deconstruction of history appears in the interstices of private history in the novel in question. As Hutcheon² reminds us, genre boundaries lose their comfortable differentiating space in order to hybridize fiction with other genres such as history, biography and autobiography. Through the process of intertextualization, a series of discourses appears in Lojo's novel, although it should be clarified that even *Canción perdida en Buenos Aires al Oeste* continues to be a novel of interiors, of strongly framed subjectivities, due mostly to the constant presence of death.

The Novel as a Polyphonic Construction:

The different registers of the voices that configure each chapter serve to organize the private history of a Spanish family who immigrate to Argentina, their exile provoked by the *franquismo* present in Spain in the 1940s. This history is orchestrated through a series of remittances and re-significations in the voices of each of the characters. The opening chapter introduces Miguel, one of the sons of Juan Manuel Neira and Carmen Albarracín, both Spaniards living in Argentina. Through the first person singular, Miguel introduces us to two elements that are fundamental to

the construction of Lojo's novel: the closed spaces of the paternal house and its climate of violence and death, as well as revealing himself in an autobiographical anecdote, not without a tone of skepticism and sadness. Miguel is the lonely man, who says "siempre he querido a la gente que me dejó y he dejado a la gente que me quiso" 'I have always loved the people who left me and left the people who loved me' (37). In the following chapter, a letter to Miguel from Alberto Kruger, whose parents are German, allows us to become acquainted with Alberto's life and his relationship with Miguel's sister Irene, who is the only adult daughter in the family group, and is in a conflictive relationship with her father. Later, there is a letter written by Luis, the brother killed in the Malvinas/Falkland Island War, addressing his sister Irene, asking her to let him stay with them for a while: "si me quedo en esta casa me voy a morir, y no con una muerte de persona, que dentro de todo sería tolerable, sino con una muerte de cosa, con una muerte de papel amarillo, de casa vieja" 'if I stay in this house I am going to die, and not a human death, which after all would be tolerable, but rather the death of a thing, a death of yellow paper, of an old house' (71). The paradox is that Luis wishes to leave the paternal house as a sort of salvation, only to be tossed by the authoritarian Law of the Dictatorship to his death in an absurd and terrible war. Once again, the technique employed is the letter.

Chapter 4 introduces the voice of Irene, who, through a structured monologue, reflects in an ontological and existential way on her life and her writing:

Separación, orfandad, desapego de un cuerpo donde éramos entregados a un mundo que no cuidaría de nosotros. Temor a un cuerpo tercamente más sabio, capaz de preocuparse por sí mismo y para sí mismo, sin consideración alguna hacia esa otra criatura acorralada y perpleja que llamábamos "el espíritu."

Separation, orphanhood, indifference of a body where we were delivered to a world that would not take care of us. Fear of a body that is stubbornly wiser, capable of worrying about itself and for itself, without any consideration for that other cornered and perplexed creature that we called "the spirit." (83)

Irene's character is constructed in opposition to her mother, who is full of life. Her voice explains the title of the book as a lost song, a song that is full of pain, a myth that gives shelter to Eurydice and Orpheus in the mists of time. Irene sings and tells stories and saves herself by writing, and so remains spatially outside the family house. Her marriage with Alberto, condemned by her father, saves her and displaces her from the violence that permeates the family history. The text places a strong lyrical quality in Irene's voice:

... existen el error y la desdicha, la locura y la condenación, ¿por cuánto tiempo?, que han devastado el centro de tu casa nativa, la mal fundada, porque no fue el amor quien dibujó en el aire aquel círculo mágico.

... error and unhappiness, insanity and condemnation, have existed (for how long?), have devastated the center of your native house, the one founded in evil, for it was not love that drew that magic circle in the air. (85)

In this chapter, two intercalated stories in the marvelous style, "La verdadera historia del anillo de oro" 'The True Story of the Golden Ring' and "Invocaciones a la dama del espejo" 'Invocations to the Lady of the Mirror,' reinforce the magical code interwoven around the daughter figure.

The next chapter deals with a cassette tape which the maid, María, found in the third drawer of Carmen Albarracín's dresser, addressed to her daughter Irene but never sent. The tape includes the facts of Carmen's life story, her origin, her childhood, her loves, her relationship with her husband. As a justification, a repayment of a debt that we know cannot possibly be repaid, Carmen addresses her daughter, and, through a confession, she confirms and declares her love and the pain caused by the obstinacy of her husband, who has condemned the union of Irene and Alberto Kruger.

Juan Manuel, the father, and María, the Spanish maid, tell their respective stories through first-person narrations, monological forms which serve as a counterpoint to the other epistolary and confessional intercalations. Thus, we learn about

each character through his or her own narration, but also through the narrations of others. The narrative is embroidered with patterns of preference and refusal, love and hatred, enmity and forgetting. These characters are united not only by their blood relations, but also by the presence of death. For the father, all that remain are the ineffable memory and mourning of his dead son, resentment of the life he has led, and the particular nostalgia that old people feel for the past: "En este clima de mierda nada crece como debe crecer. Donde yo me he criado . . ." 'In this damn climate nothing grows like it should. Where I grew up . . .' (18), the father expresses opposite a chestnut tree.

Thus the family house reproduces the relationships of silence and death that structure the military dictatorship. Like one polyphonic body, the voices speak or keep silent about death, confess the impossibility of salvation, and display their vulnerability and uprootedness.

Official History/Family History: Crossroads and Intersections

We have referred to the consideration that writing about history is just another discourse, shaped by rhetorical strategies as well as the historian's ideology. From the reflections of Foucault and White, we know that the lines that separate history from fiction are not as clear as before. On the other hand, feminist criticism has contributed to the so-called "new historicism" by urging us to keep in mind the global culture of an epoch in order to reconstruct it textually. In this light, the history of everyday life, the recounting of the lives of the subordinates to those in power, takes on a special significance (Mora 105). During and following the military dictatorship in Argentina, a series of narrations have arisen which attempt to speak when the public circulation of discourse seems to be blocked. As Sarlo emphasizes,

La narrativa de estos últimos diez años se escribe en el marco de la crisis de la representación realista y de la hegemonía consiguiente de tendencias estéticas que trabajan (incluso con obsesión) sobre problemas constructivos, de representación de discursos, de relación entre realidad y literatura o de la imposibilidad de esta relación.

The narrative of the past ten years is written in the framework of the crisis of realist representation and of the following hegemony of aesthetic tendencies that work (even with obsession) on constructive problems, of the representation of discourses, of the relationship between reality and literature or the impossibility of this relationship. (41)

In effect, Lojo's novel articulates a counterpoint of discourses that revise a series of metaphysical and ontological concepts in a necessity to explain the value of life, death, dreams and failures. Names such as Cervantes, Sábato, Hegel, and Ricoeur reverberate through Alberto Kruger's letter. Each chapter begins with a series of epigraphs³ that complete, further, or corroborate aspects related to each character. (Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas, Francisco de Quevedo, Rainer María Rilke, Antonio Machado, and Alvaro Cunqueiro, among others).

Among the various discourses linked to history are:

1. The father and mother, Luis Miguel and Carmen. Their history is linked to *franquismo*, the father's anticlericalism and the mother's pure Catholicism. The country of the Other is a space of conflict and resistance, and it repeats the history lived previously in their native Spain in an explicit system of duplication. This discourse speaks to us of immigration, of generational clashes (which the *sainete criollo* would stage so well), of the frustrations related to the expectations formed by immigrants who arrived in Argentina in search of peace and work.

2. Alberto, the paradigm of the son of German immigrants. His letter reveals an idealistic identification with Albert Schweitzer and a social commitment related to his work as a rural doctor in the province of Misiones. Characters with German names parade through his narration: Teodoro Kuhn, Gertrudis Hauffer, Albert Krieger. He is the idealistic fighter, committed to the lives of others and to his own.

3. The second generation, formed by the sons and daughters born in Argentina. In Miguel, cultural uprootedness and skepticism unite. A lonely man, he flees from love and emotional commitment, because though the link with his family has been created in coldness and possessiveness, he cannot leave that prison of love, not even through professional autonomy or the profound loneliness that marks his life. The three siblings repeat or

invert the family behaviors and weave the figure of the exile, the uprootedness, the disterritorialization surrounding their existences: territorial displacement in the case of Irene, who moves away to Misiones with Alberto; affective displacement in Miguel, who is unable to remain in caring relationships and takes frequent trips to the interior of the country; and the displacement obliged by external circumstances, culminating in the death of Luis. Within the order of their private lives, the three siblings repeat the exile and uprootedness their parents experienced in their departure from Spain, and the impossibility of ever returning to themselves, to their home.

Gloria de Cunha-Giabbai proposes the term “intra-historical novels”⁴ to refer to all those novels which do not refer to the great events but are rather:

. . . obras cuyos personajes son anónimos, como la gran mayoría de los hispanoamericanos y sus actuaciones nunca llegan a destacarse como para que hubieran merecido la inscripción en la galería de la historia oficial. Estas obras revelan las pequeñas y cotidianas hazañas para sobrevivir de unos seres al verse sacudidos por el impacto del oleaje de la historia del dominador

. . . works whose characters are anonymous, like the great majority of Spanish Americans, and their actions never stand out enough to merit inscription in the gallery of official history. These works reveal the small and quotidian feats which some beings achieve in order to survive when they are shaken by the sweeping impact of the history of the dominator. (Da Cunha-Giabbai 18)

In a way, the siblings represent, along with Alberto Krieger, this whole group of beings “shaken” by official history. At this point, we ought to refer to the mentions of the history that operates over the lives of the characters. Fundamentally, the lives of the Neiras are marked by Luis’s death in the absurd Malvinas/Falkland Island War. But Miguel has personally suffered from the presence of repression, through the disappearance of his friend Laura: “Empezamos a tener ausentes (y te hablo también de Laura, aunque te duela), y lugares que no podríamos recordar sin escalofríos, y escuelas o patios de infancia que no deben ser mencionados nunca, para poder vivir” “We began to have missing persons (and I’m talking about Laura, too, even though it may

hurt you), and places that we couldn't remember without shivering, and childhood schools or playgrounds that should never be mentioned, in order to be able to live' (34). Another story linked to the kidnappings that happened during the military dictatorship is the one narrated by Luis:

Fue tan rápido, mientras estudiábamos en la pieza de Eduardo, arriba y abrieron la puerta. Sí, el padre mismo abrió la puerta, luego sonaron los tiros y Federico, el mayor, gritaba llorando, hijos de puta, y al final también él se calló. Ni siquiera huellas del coche quedaban cuando bajamos, y ahí estaban los dos. El viejo había muerto en el acto.

It was so fast, while we were studying in Eduardo's room, upstairs and they opened the door. Yes, the father himself opened the door, then the shots rang out and Federico, the oldest, wept and screamed, bastards, and finally he too was silent. Not even tire tracks from the car remained when we went downstairs, and there the two of them were. The old man had died in the act. (73)

We see clearly how the buried violence that operates on the Neira house is nothing more than a metaphor for the unspoken violence in the larger house that is Argentina. Both houses are linked by similar systems: the law of an authoritarian father, the suffering/masochism of the feminine figure of the mother, and the wide range of answers stated by the children regarding the lives they have chosen to live.

Vigilance and order are reinforced by the presence of the maid, who in this sense strengthens the power of the system, keeping things in their place and discourses in their exact space. Numerous novels attribute to the maid this function of perpetuating the patriarchy as a part of the social system. Another excellent example of this function can be found in the novel by Ana María del Río, *Oxido de Carmen* (*Carmen is Oxide*, 1986), contemporary with Lojo's novel published in 1987.

The temporal setting corresponds to the 1980s, a present from which the past and the value of memory are organized.

Objects as Signs of Private History

We know that in everyday life, many objects are united inseparably with memory. Studies of subjects' individual belongings show that objects are used to establish a link with the past which helps to maintain identity, and that this link becomes stronger as the individual grows older. In his essay "Artefactos, memoria y sentido del pasado" ("rtifacts, Memory, and Sense of the Past"), Alan Radley remarks:

Dada la importancia que la psicología concede al recuerdo como "suceso interno," no es de extrañar que gran parte de su atención se haya dirigido a los objetos como "disparadores" del recuerdo de ciertos hechos o experiencias. Desde que Proust escribió sobre el efecto que la magdalena produjo en el pobre Swann (¿ha habido alguna otra merienda tan llena de recuerdos no deseados?)

Given the importance that psychology concedes to the memory as an "internal event," it is no wonder that a large part of its attention has been directed towards objects as "triggers" of memories of certain events or experiences. Ever since Proust wrote about the effect that the madeleine produced in poor Swann (has there ever been another lunch so full of unbidden memories?) [sic]

Lojo's novel is populated by objects. When the mother becomes old, she spends long periods of time shut up in her room: "Ella está arriba, encerrada en el cuarto matrimonial de doble espejo, el de las cortinas pesadas, el del cofrecito de palo rosa, el del crucifijo barroco, de tenso ébano" 'She is upstairs, shut up in the master bedroom with the double mirrors, the one with the heavy curtains, the one with the little rosewood chest, the one with the baroque crucifix of tense ebony' (48). Objects are linked at times to a secret practice of the private, as is the case with Irene's intimate writing in her personal diary, revealed to us by her husband Alberto: "creo que Irene se ríe un poco de mí y de todo el mundo llenando de notas secretas sus grandes cuadernos Arte, que ya pasan de la media docena" 'I believe that Irene laughs a bit at me and at the whole world, filling her large Art notebooks, which already number more than half a dozen, with secret notes' (57). In other circumstances, objects weave an unnamed family

genealogy, and in the case of Irene as well as her mother, these texts remain secret throughout the novel, bolstering the closed and cloistered air of the family house:

Antes de salir por última vez de aquella casa revisé el escritorio. Encontré algunas cosas de íntima importancia, testimonios de esa vida ignorada que fluía por debajo de las insignias, de las máscaras. Cartas de mi madre a mi padre, cuando eran novios. Cartas de mi abuelo a mi abuela, una foto pequeña de la hermana mayor, muerta de tisis en la infancia. Y lo peor: fragmentos increíbles de un diario personal, escrito en distintas épocas de su vida.

Before leaving that house for the last time, I checked the desk. I found some things of intimate importance, testimonies of that ignored life that flowed underneath the insignias, underneath the masks. Letters from my mother to my father, when they were dating. Letters from my grandfather to my grandmother, a small photo of an older sister, who died of tuberculosis in childhood. And worst of all: incredible fragments of a personal diary, written in different stages of her life. (110)

Letters and diaries speak to us once again of the private and secret selves, the feminine selves that populate the novel. In this way, objects reinforce narrative zones echoing from the characters' pasts and their most intimate desires.

Finally, it is fitting to reflect on the function of the family in the framework of the novel in question. How does the family group operate in its closed and suffocating structure? Who can escape this stigma, this symptom, without paying the price with their own life? In her essay "Prevención de la violencia familiar" ("Prevention of Family Violence"), Mabel Burin reminds us how the family reproduces the systems of production of the capitalist system in which it emerges, and how the relationships or bonds between its members are masked replicas of this patriarchal system of domination:

Las problemáticas de la violencia familiar no sólo se generan debido a vínculos afectivos conflictivos que enlazan a los miembros de una familia, sino que existen también relaciones de poder y de subordinación dadas por valores de la cultura patriarcal

The problems of family violence are generated not only because of conflicting affective bonds between the members of a family, but also relationships of power and subordination given by the values of patriarchal culture. (Burin 401)

The father's situation of exile conditions his children's inability to settle down, their resentment towards the past. The rancor, the lack of affective gratification reproduces itself and multiplies in the family relationships, which serve as a backdrop to the circumstances in the country chosen as a place of refuge. But under these social and political circumstances, the text exhibits Juan Manuel Neira's challenge to divine law, to the other Father, the one he renounces as a republican atheist and against whom he rebels, saying:

Estoy vacío y arrasado. Mi única posesión es haberme destruido. Porque he perdido ya todos los bienes. Una mujer que amé y aborrecí, un hijo que . . . un hijo sí, de mi carne y de mi sangre; pero fue mejor que muriese, tal vez, no hubiera resistido el desengaño de vivir. He perdido, sí, voy a nombrarla, por qué no, si esta noche no puedo negar nada, o casi nada

I am empty and devastated. My only possession is having destroyed myself. Because I have now lost all of my assets. A woman I loved and detested, a son that . . . a son, yes, of my flesh and blood; but it was better that he died, perhaps, he wouldn't have withstood the disappointment of living. I have lost, yes, I am going to name her, why not, if this night I can deny nothing, or almost nothing. (123)

The pains accumulated in a past that is never elaborated profoundly prevent Juan Manuel Neira from expressing his feelings, and gender construction accentuates the impossibilities. As a man and as a father, Neira is the paradigm of patriarchal construction, while at the same time he is in the position of being a foreigner, of having had to leave his country, with the untellable loss that this means.

Thus the novel carries out the mending function of the song, the troubadouresque function of exhibiting feelings, hybridizing the quotidian epic of some beings at their own expense, as their discovery of happiness shows itself throughout the pages as a very

difficult task to complete, a mission of inner, emotional growth, which remains truncated along the way.

Notes

1. "It is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure" (Hutcheon, *Poetics*105).

2. With respect to analyzing the new treatment of history, she takes as her subject the study of the popular comic book *Maus*, by Spiegelman, a book which takes place in the years of the concentration camps in Poland, during the Nazi regime. This essay is titled "Postmodern Provocation: History and 'Graphic' Literature."

3. Gerard Genette, in the wide weaving of textualities that he studies, highlights the importance of the paratext in the resignification of a text, and this term can be understood as a vast range of relationships: "The titles, subtitles, prefaces, epilogues, warnings, prologues, marginal notes, footnotes, endnotes, epigraphs, notes on the inside cover, on the dust jacket, and many other types of accessory, autographic or allographic signs, that create a (variable) setting for the text" (11).

4. Let us recall that this concept of counterhistory was originally formulated by Unamuno.

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