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Reviews

Ferré, Rosario. *Sweet Diamond Dust*. New York: Available Press, 1989. 197 pages. Translated by the author from *Maldito Amor*, 1986.

Sweet Diamond Dust does not convey the cultural potency contained in its original Spanish title, *Maldito Amor* (cursed love). Tradition and history are the backbone of the text, and what better voices to provide us with the perfect frame than Puerto Rico's national poet José Gautier Benítez (1851–1880) and composer Juan Morel Campos (1857–1896) to both of whom this text is dedicated? *Maldito Amor*, also the title of a song-and-dance tune written by Juan Morel Campos, has a musical form that goes against the rigid structure of previous Puerto Rican dance forms. *Maldito Amor* introduces us to the musical strand which will baste the history, tradition, poetry, and popular culture of a changing nation floating on the perilous waters of uncertainty much as Vinteuil's *Sonata for violin and piano* provides us the socio-cultural tempo of Swann and Odette's love affair in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. *Sweet Diamond Dust* does not give the Anglo-Saxon reader the same prompting of cultural cues with which *Maldito Amor* provides the Hispanic reader. However, *Sweet Diamond Dust* does present a realistically "material" point of departure for the novel and appropriately illustrates the state of flooding of a country swallowed up by the white deluge spouting forth from its sugar mills:

> Today all that has changed. Far from being a paradise, Guamaní has become a hell, a monstruous whirlpool from which the terrifying funnel of Snow White Sugar Mills spews out sugar night and day toward the north. (7)

Even though it lacks the sentimental register, this title is even more befitting of the situation as it evolved in the twentieth century, evoking in a clean-cut manner, the different facets of the socio-economic changes the country has undergone. It provides us, from our first approach to the text, with the bottom line: a question of economy.

The story/history of Guamaní and the De la Valle family takes place in the early twentieth century, twenty years after the "northerners" defeated Spain in 1898. The Spanish-American War is never mentioned as such, the American settlers are always referred to as the "northerners," and Puerto Rico is named only once as the Caribbean island where the fictional town of Guamaní is located and which, in earlier times, was "a Spanish outpost for the discoveries in the New World, the magical frontier between the Taínos, the Caribs, and the Spanish conquistadors . . ." (76). The narration is strongly anchored in history through innumerable references to Puerto Rico's historical events and real-life characters, such as poets, composers, artists, and historians. The events in this fictional history-telling take place at a time when a changing of the guard is under way. The "northern" banks, having replaced their Spanish counterparts, are refusing loans that the Spaniards and Guanameños need to continue running their sugar mills and are thus buying up all the mills and taking over the sugarcane industry. The country is in turmoil as the islanders adapt to a rapidly shifting economy and an even faster pace of changing cultural values. The island is presented as a non-place; in the words of nineteenth-century Puerto Rican impressionist painter Don Francisco Oller, "Puerto Rico is not a land but a landscape" (42). A landscape in constant transformation, its inhabitants' sense of identity is rendered problematic.

Rosario Ferré leaves no stone unturned and through five narrators—a lawyer, two servants, and two aristocrats—reveals and orchestrates a profusion of elements ranging from oral tradition to recorded history, from the privileged circles where Eleonora Duse and Anna Pavlova were household names to a bitter class struggle, from the island's culinary delights of African, Arab, and indigenous origins to carefully suppressed racial issues. The author succeeds in bringing together all these dispersed fragments of a shattered national identity and in creating a cultural continuum capable of capturing the esthetics of the unequal and combined development so characteristic of Third World countries, where so many different stages of humanity's historical development are juxtaposed. Ferré skillfully rearticulates the dismembered body of national culture rendering whole the diversity of her country's identity.

History exists through memory, and in *Sweet Diamond Dust*, it is with the subversion of the last narrator that the triumph of memory redeems national identity. The main narrator, Don Hermenegildo Martínez, a notary lawyer, is in the process of writing the story of Guamaní, which is presented as his-story, taking the form of a "biography of Ubaldino De la Valle, Guamaní's patrician statesman" (25). He asserts his authority by placing himself in the privileged position of the narrator located at the end of history and looking back. He indulges in Marquesian rhetorical devices,

such as the prolepsis: "It was thus that Ubaldino de la Valle, our gallant political leader and patriot, was born" (15); "Titina, the De la Valle's immortal servant, Guamaní's last slave; Titina, the timeless one" (25). He also moderates all other versions of history except the last. Gloria Camprubí, a proud mulatto who has served the De la Valle family for years, subverts Don Hermenegildo's authority by totally discrediting his biography, calling it a "sentimental romance," a "romantic novel," accusing him of lying and basing his story on a corrupt politician who practiced "a series of forgetting exercises, to weaken his memory as much as possible" (83) in order to believe that history really began in 1898, with the arrival of the "northerners." Gloria speaks with the authority of those who remember, as one of the people who lived the true history of Guamaní, a story of social injustice, poverty, illiteracy, epidemics, and death. As she holds up a torch, ready to burn the De la Valle's sugar mill and home, along with Don Hermenegildo and his manuscript, she claims her right, and the right of the oppressed, to the authorship of history:

> Facts have a strange way of facing down fiction, Titina, and if Don Hermenegildo's aborted novel was to have been a series of stories that contradicted one another like a row of fallen dominoes, our story, the one we've taken the authority to write, will eradicate them all, because it will be the only one in which word and deed will finally be loyal to each other, in which a true correspondence between them will finally be established. (82)

As she sets the torch to the property which she was to inherit, and to all the foundations of a false history, she sings out in a newly-recovered voice.

With *Sweet Diamond Dust* Rosario Ferré, author of *Papeles de Pandora*, and *Fábulas de la garza desangrada* among others, has achieved a skillful synthesis of the historical novel and the new Latin-American narrative. The three stories that follow it (*The Gift*, *Isolda's Mirror*, and *Captain Candelario's Heroic Last Stand*) based on the lives of the descendants of the novel's characters, usher the reader to the immediacy of contemporary socio-political situations and propel us into the future: the last story is narrated from an unspecified point in time after 1998 when, once again, identity becomes a problematic issue. The flip side of Gloria, Captain Candelario, refuses to choose. Be it a self-defeating prophecy or an exhortation to take a stand, Rosario Ferré's book is an invitation to reopen and reexamine all the myths, truths, and tragic beauty in Puerto Rico's cultural and political heritage. In doing so she dares to question the most postmodern of sacred cows: the unbridgeable gap between discourse and history.

—Ivette Romero
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